

NEGOTIATING THE RELATIONSHIP IN HIGHER DEGREE BY RESEARCH STUDIES – PART 2 – TIPS FOR SUPERVISEES

By

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Abstract:

The increase in Australian nurses undertaking study at the higher degree level has increased the demand with quality supervision. Consequently nurse academics have been required to meet these demands with out necessarily having the level of experience they would ideally desire. Successful completion of a higher degree with be, at the very least enhanced by a positive and constructive relationship between supervisors and supervisees. Despite the importance ascribed to this relationship, there is a paucity of literature providing guidance to supervisors that could assist in the establishment and maintenance of this relationship at a practical level. This paper is the second of a two part series. Based on the author's own experience of supervision it provides some practical advise for supervisors in the following areas: to supervise or not to supervise; identifying the ready, willing and able (or not) in students; negotiating the supervisory relationship, and dealing with problems within the relationship. Tips for supervisees were provided in Part 1 to this paper.

Keywords

Academic supervision
Higher Degrees
Relationship
Research
Supervision

Preface

The decision to write this paper arose from my experience of higher degree supervision, initially as a supervisee, and subsequently as a supervisor. More information about my own experiences is presented in Part 1 of this paper. This is the second of two companion papers, the first presented tips for supervisees. This second paper provides tips for supervisors.

Introduction

As the number of nurses seeking to undertake higher degree studies in Australia continues to increase (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004), so too does the demand for high quality supervision. For many nurse academics (myself included), this has forced them into a senior supervisory role at a much earlier stage in their academic career than might usually be the case for academics of other disciplines.

Furthermore, nurses undertaking higher degrees are more likely to be female, working full time and have family responsibilities (O'Brien & Renner, 2000). A fact likely to be equally true of the nurse academics themselves. The supervisory relationship therefore becomes an important one. The supervisees rely on their supervisors to provide knowledge and expertise related to the thesis study topic. Equally importantly however, they seek guidance in actually getting the thesis completed and of sufficiently high standard to be judged favourably by examiners. Increasingly as I have observed during my 17 years of experience with supervision, nursing students are expecting supervisors to be more strategic in their approach to supervision. For example, to encourage students to disseminate their results during the course of candidature in a number of sources ranging from letters to the Editor, conference presentations to publications in refereed journals.

The supervisor is likely to be an academic with a busy workload and a high expectation that she or he will be active in the areas of research and publication, while at the same time often experiencing a very high teaching load (Worrall-Carter & Snell, 2003). Given the increasing emphasis on research outputs, supervisors may well feel some pressure (either internal or external) to agree to supervising students even when they do not feel it is appropriate to do so.

The importance of the supervisory relationship in higher degree studies is not clearly acknowledged in the literature. Indeed the literature offers very little in terms of guidelines to assist supervisors to make decisions about firstly, whether they are the most appropriate person to supervise specific potential students, and secondly, whether the student has a realistic idea of the higher degree study process and is genuinely committed to the work required for successful completion.

The aim of this paper is to provide some practical guidance to supervisors in five main areas: (1) deciding whether or not to supervise a specific student; (2) determining the ability and capacity of the student to complete the project; (3) negotiating the supervisory relationship; and, (4) developing a strategic approach; and, (5) dealing with problems within the relationship.

TIPS FOR SUPERVISEES

To supervise or not to supervise (assessing the suitability of specific students)

The starting point to answering this question should involve reflection on what you consider your role as a supervisor to be. For example, how important is it to you that you have a solid knowledge of the content area? Some supervisors (particularly those with less experience), do not feel comfortable supervising unless they know the topic quite well and are able to play close attention to how the student selects the appropriate literature and integrates into the research topic or questions. On the other hand, some supervisors consider content knowledge less important, and see them more as facilitators by encouraging students to use their knowledge of the area, supported by literature, to enhance the development of their own work.

Equally the supervisor must consider the importance of methodological expertise for his or her own level of comfort. Some supervisors feel a need to have expertise in both the methodology and the content, while others have a preference for the importance of one over the other. However, from my own experience it is relatively unusual for a student to find a supervisor with both content and methodological expertise. This generally leads to the consideration of more than one supervisor or supervisory mentorship (to be discussed later in this paper).

While content area and methodology are relatively tangible concepts, the supervisor must also consider the less tangible issues such as whether or not the two are likely to be able to work together effectively. It is important to acknowledge that some people just don't work particularly well together. I am sure you need only think about your own professional (and even personal) life to recognise the difficulty you have experienced in working with some people as compared to the relative ease in working with others.

Unless you know the potential student well you may have limited knowledge about them and the way they work, making it difficult to determine the likelihood of compatibility. However, as a starting point it is important you understand your own working style. It might sound silly but sometimes we are so busy working, we don't stop to think about how we prefer to work. Some people thrive on deadlines, while others find them highly stressful. These two factors alone can be the source of considerably conflict. For example (and one I am sure we can all relate to). A lover of deadlines will tend to only become truly motivated when the deadlines becoming close. At this stage he or she may become totally engaged with the process and muster so much energy that it leaves those who fear deadlines feeling totally bemused. The deadline lovers may indeed get the work done on time, it may be of a high standard, even brilliant. When the lover of deadlines works on his or her own or with like minded people this may not present a problem, they understand each other and have faith that it will all work out in the end.

However, create a partnership between a person who loves deadlines and one who is totally stressed by them. The deadline stressed will want to start the process as soon as possible, probably divide the overall goal into distinct parts with a defined timeline attached to each. The reaction of the deadline lover is likely to be one of feeling stifled, he or she doesn't respond well to pressure (other than deadlines which seem far away at that time) and may need time to consider the project in his or her head before launching into activity. This approach will clearly affect the deadline stressed who clearly does not have the same faith that things will just work out.

While such partnerships can work particularly well when the two parties respect and respond to the strengths of the other, they can also cause major stresses, particularly in a supervisory relationship, where the stress levels can be particularly high and the relationship is based on power differentials rather than equality.

To recognise your own style and how this impacts on your ability to work with others, I would encourage you to consider the following questions:

- How are you affected by deadlines? Do you find them motivating or stressful?
- Do you tend to set your own deadlines or be guided by those decided by others?
- Do you consider yourself to be a highly structured and organised person or do you prefer work in a more spontaneous manner?

Once you have a greater understanding of your own approach, you will be better able to determine whether there are particular students you would find it difficult to work with. By asking yourself, how are you able to work with people with different styles and approaches to you? You will better understand whether or not you are readily able to work with students who have a different approach to yourself.

So how then do you find out more about the approach of potential students to work of this kind? My first piece of advice would be to ask them, and if they are not able to answer this question easily I would suggest you give them some time to think about it, perhaps using the three prompt questions as a guide. When offering this advice to colleagues some of expressed discomfort in asking questions of this type, because they appear too intrusive. My approach to overcome this is to be direct and honest with the student, something to the effect of: "it is important that we find whether or not we can work together effectively, to do that I need to know more about your working style and how you might work with others who have different styles." Most students have appreciated this; remember the effectiveness of the working relationship is at least equally important to them.

Once the student is able to articulate their working style, I suggest you disclose yours to them, and proceed to discuss where potential areas of conflict might emerge and whether or not these are insurmountable. Sometimes a discussion of this kind is enough for either of you to realise where the areas of conflict might emerge. However, at the very least it creates the basis to discuss how the relationship might work, if indeed the idea of working together is mutually acceptable.

If at this stage there is still a mutual sense that the relationship would work effectively, it is an appropriate time to ask students their expectations of supervision. This can be a difficult question to answer (although it may be easier if the student has completed a masters thesis), but it provides a good opening for you to present your expectations. The following provides some examples of the types of issues you might cover in this discussion:

- Frequency of formal supervision
- What you provide in terms of guidance, feedback on written work
- Time you require to provide written feedback on work (e.g. required one week before supervision)
- Expectations of students, such as deadlines, discussions of progress.
- Dealing with conflict

Determining the ability and capacity of the student to complete the project

There is little more frustrating for a supervisor than a student who does not complete, or who takes an extraordinarily long time to do so. At times this cannot be foreseen or avoided due to personal or professional problems or even issues with the research itself. However, from my own experience it is often due to accepting supervision of a student who is unlikely to complete. Sometimes this is avoidable as indications that the student might have difficulty completing have been evident sometimes even before she or he has enrolled in the degree. An early indication of both ability and capacity can be gleaned from the initial research proposal the prospective student is required to submit. There tends to be variation between institutions as to the type and length of proposal required before a student can be admitted, some are very brief (100 words or less) and provide little opportunity for you to understand what the student plans to do or how it will be done, let alone an opportunity to judge the quality of the work.

Irrespective of the requirements stipulated by your institution I would strongly recommend you request a proposal of approximately 1,000 – 2,000 words and request it within a specified time frame of between two weeks and one month. This document will serve two main purposes: firstly it will give an indication of how seriously the student takes time lines and secondly it will provide insights into the students' ability to commence higher degree studies.

Let us take the first point first, it might seem somewhat harsh to dictate timelines to students before they have even commenced formal study, but if a student has difficulty completing this task in a timely fashion, how likely is it that they will complete a masters or PhD thesis within the required timeframe? Of course mitigating factors may come into play but they would need to be justifiable. Excuses like 'busy at work' are not particularly convincing for me. Unless there is a specific and unusual event that has been occurring, I would remain concerned. Not that I doubt that people are busy at work, but I don't consider this as a situation likely to change and therefore if the student can't complete a proposal while being busy at work it is unlikely that he or she will be able to complete a PhD in a timely fashion.

Discussing the issue of conflict resolution is important. Conflict can arise in a supervisory relationship and can be very disconcerting for the student in particular. If the matter is raised tactfully the potential supervisor should not be offended, and if she or he is this might give be indicative of how she or he deals with conflict, and might sound some alarm bells for the student.

Negotiating the supervisory relationship

This stage should involve formalising the details discussed prior to accepting the student for supervision. In addition, issues for discussion should include: the supervision team, intellectual property issues, and developing a structure for thesis completion.

The supervision team.

The composition of the supervision team should be to the mutual satisfaction of both supervisor(s) and supervisee. However, it also likely that the university or department will some specific guidelines. Increasingly there tends to be an expectation of at least two supervisors to cover for periods of absence of the principle supervisor. Beyond that you will have your own views and preferences about working with other people and the particular people you feel you are able to work effectively with. The most important factor is that the student is provided with a supervision team with sufficient substantive and methodological expertise for adequately support during his or her studies. Often this requires more than one supervisor. In addition you and the student may benefit from the different knowledge, expertise and approach of more than one person. Potentially supervision creates an opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration, which will not only strengthen the team, but may have some additional benefits for supervisors in facilitating cross-disciplinary research.

If you decide to include one or more supervisors to compliment the team, it is important to clearly delineate and articulate the respective roles of each member. Relationships with co-supervisors can vary from being a fully fledged member of the team, to being called upon only when specific methodological expertise is required. Any agreed framework is perfectly acceptable, but it is important that it involves a shared understanding.

Points for discussion should include how meetings will be conducted and structured. Will all supervisors be present at all meetings, or will the student meet primarily with the principle supervisor? I would suggest that the choices must be restricted to the two aforementioned and would strongly advise against the student meeting separately with each supervisor. Even with the greatest will and desire for co-operation, this may lead to a lack of clarity regarding expectations for the student and for the supervisors.

Finally, there are times when decisions may need to be made regarding a student's performance or progress. Ideally this should be discussed within the supervisory team, however, ultimately there needs to be one person who has, and recognises that she or he has, the responsibility for making decisions. This should be clearly identified between the supervisors themselves and clearly conveyed to the student. It is a fact of life that some students fail to meet the expectations of higher degree studies, and some-times to avoid the associated consequences, the student may seek to play off one supervisor against the other. This can be minimised by informing the student of how decisions are made and clearly identifying the senior supervisor who holds the ultimate decision making power in matters related to progress and performance.

Discussing intellectual property issues

As academics, supervisors are generally in tune with the concept of intellectual property; they usually know the university position in relation to higher degree work. Furthermore, they generally have a clear idea of their own views and expectations regarding the intellectual property associated with higher degree students, particularly in relation to the authorship of publications subsequently arising from this work. However, students may well have little, if any, knowledge of intellectual property and little appreciation of its importance. These very different views can lead to problems further down the track if, for instance, the supervisor expects to be an author on all work related to the research and dissertation.

Whatever the supervisor(s) views, they need to be clarified from the outset with a clear statement (preferably in writing) about rights to authorship and the contribution supervisors will make towards such authorship. Some supervisors believe that through the supervision process they have already provided sufficient support and intellectual input to become authors. My own view is that they have earned the right to participate as an author, rather than the right to be an author. That is, through active contribution to developing a conference paper or journal publication, they have the right to be an author.

The next stage is to determine whether all supervisors should become authors on all papers. This is likely to be determined by the level of involvement. Where all supervisors take an active role, meet regularly with the student, review work and provide written feedback, then one would expect all supervisors to be entitled to authorship, providing they make a substantial contribution to the work developed.

Finally, the order of authors should be determined from the outset. To the uninitiated alphabetical order may seem the logical way to proceed, however, academic convention suggests that the principle author is the one who has had the greatest input into the design, conduct, analysis and write up of the written work. In the case of higher degree work this role is undoubtedly that of the student, who should therefore always be listed as the first author. The principle supervisor will generally be the second author. An exception to this might be when an additional supervisor is included specifically for methodological (or a specific substantive area of) expertise, and it is this area that forms the subject of the publication or presentation. While there is no precise key to authorship, it is important that expectations are articulated and agreed to by all members of the team at the commencement of candidature.

If the supervisor does consider authorship as a right, it is then important to discuss the degree of involvement he or she will have in publications and presentations. The extent to which they are actively involved in writing and structuring the work varies considerably. At one extreme supervisors may feel they have already done sufficient work to warrant authorships, while at the other end of the spectrum some supervisors will use the final product or work in progress and write the paper themselves. The ideal probably lies some-where in between and doubles as mentorship in writing for publication and conference presentation (This issue is discussed in greater detail in Part 2 of this paper).

To avoid problems developing further down the track, intellectual property issues should be discussed prior to an ultimate decision being made regarding supervision. It is important that students feel comfortable with the supervisor's position and that the extent of involvement he or she will have in publications or conference presentations has been ascertained.

Developing a structure for thesis completion.

Supervisors have a very important role in ensuring that students have a realistic understanding of what they need to do to complete successfully and on time. At the beginning of their candidature, it is easy for students to feel they have plenty of time to complete the work. For example a part time PhD student is given a six year time frame to work within. Nurses generally work towards much shorter time lines and six years may seem like such a long way away that it could lull them into a false sense of security.

This can be overcome at least to some degree by presenting students with an overview of each step in the process including:

- Research and ethics approval.
- Confirmation of candidature.
- Completion of draft literature review. Conduct of literature review
- Data collection.
- Data analysis.
- Draft of individual chapters.
- Submission of first draft.
- Submission of final draft.
- Printing and binding of thesis for submission.
- Submission.

Your expertise as a supervisor is very important here. Unless they have been actively involved in research before students may be of the view that obtaining research and ethics approval is a simple and straight forward process and expect the application to go through with no problem at the first attempt. Furthermore, because the research is of considerable interest to them, they may believe participants will be lining up to be involved, and therefore not account for the recruitment difficulties that are quite likely to occur. It is important not to leave the student feeling daunted and disempowered so early in the process, however a realistic idea of some of the problems that may be encountered and a contingency plan will help to avoid despondency further down the track if and when the student encounters difficulties.

Each stage of the process should be accompanied by an expected completion date. These dates should be referred to in supervision meetings and used as a barometer to determine progress, identify any problems and if necessary to develop strategies to overcome difficulties and keep the student on track towards timely completion.

During initial supervision sessions it is also important to decide on frequency and structure of meetings. Frequency is usually easy to determine, but structure can prove more challenging. As a supervisor your expectations should be explicitly stated. For example, do you require written work to be submitted for discussion at each session? If so, how long before the session do you expect the student to submit it? If this is not stated explicitly, the situation may arise when the student sends work to you the night before, or even the day of, supervision, and is sometimes quite surprised that you haven't reviewed and critiqued it. Indeed sometimes relatively new supervisors stay up to all hours reviewing work because they don't want to let the student down. Not only does this create a dangerous precedent, it does not provide the best conditions for this review process to occur. If you are under pressure or tired you will not do the work justice. For that reason I insist on receiving the work a week before supervision. In return for that courtesy, I undertake to ensure I have reviewed and provided detailed feedback. If possible I send this to the student a couple of days before the meeting so that he or she can read my comments. I have found this process to increase the productivity of supervision meetings, as it enables students to come prepared with specific questions relating to my comments.

It is also important to have an agreed understanding about the presentation and state of completeness of the work. In order to meet the deadline, students have at times submitted work that has clearly been rushed. There is no value in reviewing work that the student knows is not of the standard it should be. Not only is the supervisor's time wasted, continually reading and reviewing the same piece of work (at varying stages of development) can overexpose and therefore desensitise the supervisor to the work. After seeing it so many times it can be difficult to provide effective critique.

Developing a strategic approach

Many supervisors are understandable focussed on ensuring the students successfully complete the higher degree. This is totally understandable but it is important to bear in mind that this is not just a course. This is an opportunity for students to undertake a significant piece of work that can potentially make a contribution to nursing knowledge. It also provides a means to promote one's own career development. However, it is my view that many students do not look at their studies from this perspective. Often they choose a topic they find interesting (which is very important) but without thought as to how it might enhance their career aspirations.

The strategic supervisor will ask the student to consider where he or she wants to be in five to ten years time career wise, and then ask what they think they would need to get there. In response to this question students will often refer to specific skills and knowledge that at times bears no resemblance to their thesis topic. For example, if a nurse aspires to be a nurse practitioner, conducting a study about diagnostic skills and/or medication management, for example, would be considerably more beneficial than a study of the history of psychiatric nursing. Work with the student to find a way to marry career and study ambitions.

Secondly, encourage students to disseminate their findings throughout the research process, rather than waiting until they have submitted. This approach has three main benefits: it enables the student to publish work with contemporary relevance; it provides the opportunity for peer review prior to submission for examination; and, it means that by the time the student completes the higher degree, in addition to the qualification, he or she has publications and conference presentations that add to the curriculum-vitae and enhance the establishment of an area of expertise.

Dealing with problems in the supervisory relationship

As any experienced supervisor can attest to, problems can develop between the supervisor(s) and supervisees, and indeed between supervisors. Such problems can be minimised by having a predetermined plan for how such matters will be dealt with. Given the amount of time and effort invested in supervision, supervisors can understandably feel hurt or misunderstood if the student expresses some concern or even dissatisfaction with the supervision received. It is important to bear in mind the stress students experience in completing a higher degree, and how this stress might influence the relationship between supervisee and supervisor. It might be useful to look back at your own higher degree experience(s) to remind yourself of the stress you felt and its consequences. To avoid hostility from developing or going too far it is important to encourage students to feel comfortable in bringing concerns to you. Most problems can be dealt with relatively easily if they are not allowed to get out of hand.

Conclusions

The supervision of higher degree students is a highly responsible position in which the student depends on the expertise and effort of his or her supervisor to enhance the chances of successful and timely completion. However, despite this the scholarly literature provides little in the way of support and advice as a means to assist and guide supervisors in this role. The aim of this paper therefore, is to provide some practical tips to guide supervisors through this important process. Importantly, this paper does not simply start with the point of enrolment, but rather encourages the supervisor to consider the extent to which potential candidates are suitable for higher degree work.

More specifically the paper provides some handy advice about: deciding whether or not to accept a student for supervision; considering the likelihood that a student will successfully complete the course; establishing a positive and effective working relationship; developing a strategic approach for completion; and, trouble shooting problems within the relationship.

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