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Negotiating the Relationship in Higher Degree by Research Studies – Part 1 – Tips for Supervisees

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The number of Australian nurses undertaking higher degree studies is increasing considerably. The completion of a Doctor of Philosophy or Masters by Research project involves the investment of considerable time and other valuable resources on the part of the student. The successful completion of the degree will depend largely upon the relationship established between the supervisor and supervisees. However, somewhat surprisingly, there is very little information to guide students in the selection of a supervisor(s) or how to effectively manage this relationship. This paper, the first of a two part series, is based on the author's experience of supervision from both sides of the fence. It provides practical tips for supervisees in relation to: selecting the right supervisor; finding potential supervisors; contacting potential supervisors, meeting potential supervisors, entering into a supervisory relationship, and dealing with problems within the relationship.

Keywords

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Preface

Seventeen years ago I commenced a Master of Education. Since then I have completed a Masters and a Doctor of Philosophy, I have supervised four PhD students and seven Masters students to completion. I am currently supervising a further three PhD students and one Masters student. There have also been others who have started and not completed. I have also been the co-ordinator of higher degrees at two universities. Having now experienced higher degree supervision from many perspectives, I am (in my opinion) sufficiently enlightened to be amazed, and some-what perturbed, by the lack of preparation for both roles in this important relationship.

My experiences, and subsequent reflection on them, lead me to consider the importance of articulating the knowledge I have gained through my own exposure to higher degree supervision. This is not intended as a definitive text. Through their own unique situations, others will certainly have different views, they may disagree or have additional information to contribute. I would consider this as a strength of, rather than a limitation to, this work.

This paper is presented in a non-conventional style. Although there is some reference to literature, it remains by and large a personal account. I do not apologise for that. How often have we gone through particular circumstances or situations to come through at the other end thinking: "I wish I had known that before I started?" How often do we also find that our problems are not unique, and that may of our colleagues have not only had similar experiences, but they have developed many creative strategies that would have been useful "if only I had known".

This, the first of two papers, presents tips for the supervisees, while the second concentrates on supervisors.

I chose my supervisor because of his knowledge of the methodology I had selected, and because he had taught some coursework subjects I had completed. It proved to be a good decision. He was a thorough and diligent supervisor, who questioned and challenged me in a way that helped me to shape and formulate my ideas into an argument. The relationship was not without conflict, but it was the useful kind, that encouraged me to look at my work differently, and particularly to consider it as would some-one with far less knowledge of, and interest in, the subject of my research.

I kept that same supervisor for my PhD and did not at any stage regret my decision. However, I suspect that it was at least partly a matter of good luck rather than good management. I suspect this is the same for many students. Indeed I was shocked, when during my time as co-ordinator of higher degrees, students would contact me to express interest in a masters or PhD and ask who will be my supervisor? My responses to potential students formed part of the impetus for this paper and will be considered within.

Introduction

Higher degree studies are becoming increasing popular for nurses (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004). Initially this trend was attributed to nurse academics seeking qualifications in order to be of equal standing to colleagues from other disciplines (Roberts 1999). A review of the literature suggests that this trend is changing, and many students are now committed to careers within the clinical domain (McNett, 2006; Melies & Dracup, 2005; O'Brien & Renner, 2000; O'Sullivan, Carter, Marion, Pohl & Werner, 2005).

A greater emphasis on evidence based practice and research consumption is leading to a greater expectation that nurse clinicians and senior managers are increasingly required to contribute to a broader research agenda (O'Brien & Renner, 2000). Higher degree studies may well provide an opportunity to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to become research active. Surprisingly, the nursing literature tells us little about why nurses obtain higher degree qualifications, however it seems reasonable to assume that career progression and enhancement would be one motivating factor.

While nurses may enthusiastically embrace higher degree studies, they potentially face many barriers to achieving the desired outcome. Nurses are more likely to be female, studying part time in conjuction with a full time job, and have additional family responsibilities (O'Brien & Renner, 2000). These barriers, while significant, can also be perceived as strong motivating forces that spur nurses with a determination to succeed.

Navigation menu:
Welcome
Home
Journal Abstracts 1994 to present date
Overview of Drogo Research
Editorial Board Members
News and views from around the World
Students Section
Carers - Information on Serious Mental Illness
Internet Links

Nevertheless, time and organisational skills are sure to be a factor and one that is likely to be the cause of some struggle and conflict throughout candidature. While there are no easy solutions, the problems can be exacerbated or minimised by the partnership with one's supervisor or supervisors. The supervision relationship is one of the most important relationships in a person's life time. It can last for six years or more and it can determine the degree of comfort or difficulty in which one completes a major and significant project.

It is therefore a choice that should not be taken lightly and yet I would suggest that most people give more time and consideration to purchasing a washing machine than they do to choosing a supervisor. In the following section "tips for supervisees" I provide my ideas on the following: how to select the right supervisor; how do I find potential supervisors; contacting potential supervisors, meeting potential supervisors, entering into a supervisory relationship, and, dealing with problems within the relationship.

TIPS FOR SUPERVISEES

How to select the right supervisor

To answer this question, the student must first ask: what do I want from my supervisor? This can be very difficult, particularly in the absence of prior supervision experience. However, it is an important consideration. Some useful questions to ask are: how important is it that my supervisor has a good knowledge of the topic area? How important is expertise in the methodological approach I am using? Is it important that supervisor is a nurse or is knowledge of topic and/or method more important than discipline? Are you prepared to study via distance or would you prefer to be able to meet with your supervisor regularly face to face? Your answers should help to point you in the right direction to begin the search.

How do I find potential supervisor/s?

If you have not already done so you will need to conduct a literature search on your chosen topic. This should identify the 'experts' in the topic area. Firstly it is likely that you will eliminate international experts (unless you are prepared and eligible to study overseas). You are then in a position to consider each person according to your answers to the questions in the previous section in order to prepare a 'short list'. University web sites are also useful sources, most Schools and Faculties will have lists of staff cross references according to subject and methodological interests. With this approach it is recommended that you conduct a literature search by author. It is likely that you will grant more consideration to a person who has demonstrated their scholarship in a particular area through publication.

If methodology is also an important consideration you can access some of the papers written by each potential supervisor to gain a greater understanding of their methodological expertise. This will also give you a good feel for the type of work each person does and other factors such as writing style, which might also be an important consideration.

It is possible that you will not find one supervisor with knowledge of the subject matter and methodological expertise. If both of these areas are important to you, you may need to consider one or more additional supervisors. Indeed many higher degree students prefer two supervisors regardless. The opportunity to receive more than one perspective is important to some, while others prefer the consistency and predictability that is more likely to occur with a single supervisor. This is an important consideration that will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Contacting potential supervisors

Contact details should be readily available on publications and web sites. I suggest that in the first instance you contact potential supervisors by telephone. If you live locally you might request a face-to-face appointment. However, it is quite likely that the supervisor will ask for a brief overview of your proposed research before meeting. In this case it is recommended that you seek clarification about the size and structure of the document requested. Keep in mind that this piece of work will be your introduction to potential supervisors, it is important that it is well written, clearly outlines your proposed research and demonstrates some knowledge of the subject area. The proposal does not need to be extensive, but to give a potential supervisor confidence that your aims are realistic and that you are able to present written information clearly and succinctly. It is advisable to also send a current curriculum vitae with your proposal.

If the potential supervisor requests more information or suggests modifications to your proposal, ensure you attend to comments thoroughly but also that you return the work in a timely fashion. If there is a lengthy delay, supervisors may conclude that this is likely to be a pattern in the way you work, and that a delay in modifying a short proposal document, this is likely to be exacerbated in relation to a full thesis. This alone can be a reason for declining to provide supervision.

Meeting potential supervisors

If and when potential supervisors indicate interest in providing supervision, you should make an appointment to discuss meet with them, face-to-face if possible, but telephone will suffice if distance is an issue. You should arrange to meet with all of the supervisors who you believe meet your criteria in terms of subject area and/or methodology.

It is important that you are prepared for this meeting and you recognise it as a two way interview. Just as the potential supervisor will want to gain a sense of whether or not she or he can work effectively with you. You will need to feel comfortable that you can work effectively with this supervisor. Knowledge and expertise are only one part of a solid supervisory relationship. You need to be able to work together for a lengthy period of time.

In preparing for your meeting think again about what you want from your supervisor, but this time more in terms of style and structure. The following is a guide to the type of questions you might ask:

1. How often would we meet formally for supervision?
2. What can I expect from you in terms of guidance, feedback on written work?
3. What is your usual time frame in providing written feedback?
4. What are your expectations of me as a student?
5. Do prefer to work with specific deadlines or do you expect the student to self-pace?
6. How would you let me know if you were unhappy with my progress?
7. How would you deal with other issues of conflict with me if they arose?
8. What resources and supports does the department and university provide (this question might be directed to the co-ordinator of higher degrees rather than the supervisor)?

These responses will help you to decide if the supervisor has the type of style you can work with. Some students like consistent and fixed deadlines and expect to be called to account if they don't meet them. While others like to work at their own pace and find imposed deadlines unnecessarily restrictive and possibly even disrespectful. You will also be better placed to judge whether the type of supervision on offer is consistent with your needs, in terms of frequency of contact, provision of supervision.

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.

Entering into a supervisory relationship

Once you have decided on your preferred supervisor and she or he has agreed to take on this role, you enter into what might be called the nitty gritty stage. Specific considerations might include: formalising the arrangements you discussed in the 'interview', deciding on one or more supervisors, discussing intellectual property issues and developing a structure for thesis completion.

One or more supervisors?

As discussed above, this decision depends on two main points. Firstly, whether one supervisor is able to provide all of the expertise you required, and secondly, whether you would prefer the diversity of perspectives and interaction of more than one supervisor. It is also important that you seek information about the policy of the university where you plan to study. Most universities require that arrangements for supervision include a contingency plan should the sole or principal supervisor be unable to continue in this role. Other than that the choice is between you and the supervisor, many supervisors prefer to work with others or may actively mentor new staff.

The inclusion of one or more additional supervisors should be a matter for discussion between yourself and your principle supervisor. You may have an idea of some-one you feel would compliment the team, but it may be that this person and your supervisor do not work together well. Academics are just as prone to conflict and relationship difficulties as no doubt are the people you work with. Your suggestions should be welcomed, but you may need to concede to the better judgement of your supervisor in some instances.

If one or more additional supervisors are selected, it is important to set the ground rules, from the outset. For example, if a supervisor has been selected on the basis of expertise in a particular methodology, will his or her involvement be restricted to advising on that area, or will she or he have the right to comment on all aspects of the research and thesis? Furthermore, how will meetings be conducted? 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.

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

Intellectual property refers to ownership of the work developed during the higher degree process. In the case of the thesis itself ownership is generally clearly stated in University policy. As a general rule the university owns the final thesis, which, for example, would preclude the graduate from publishing the thesis unchanged without permission of the university. However, the graduate is acknowledged as the author and is able to publish and otherwise utilise the work provided the university where the work was conducted is acknowledged.

The grey area where problems frequently emerge is in relation to conference presentations and journal articles that arise from the research work either during the students' candidature or following completion. Students and graduates often believe that as the person who conducted the research and ultimately wrote the thesis, he or she has exclusive rights to authorship. Some supervisors might agree. However, those who have completed higher degree students will probably freely acknowledge the extent to which input from the supervisor has impacted on the thesis that is submitted for publication. Supervisors spend considerable time working with the student to conceptualise the research question(s), develop the most suitable methodology, suggest areas of literature. Furthermore, supervisors spend considerable time reading and re-reading drafts of the students' work, making extensive comments, and often suggesting alternative ideas or frameworks. This is generally considered as a contribution to intellectual property and for many supervisors this represents their right to authorship.

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.

Many students feel overwhelmed that within a defined period of time they will be required to submit a thesis of between approximately 20,000 to 100,000 words depending on the type of degree they have undertaken. For these students it can be very useful to break the final product into a number of defined steps and put time lines against these. Again it is important that you work with your supervisor in setting time lines as students often have unrealistic expectations of the amount of work they will be able to achieve, and often don't recognise the delays that may be experienced along the way (for example in obtaining ethics approval).

It is important to set realistic and achievable time lines that provide sufficient motivation without leaving students feeling overwhelmed. Falling behind timelines can be very distressing and it is far preferable to be ahead of timelines if you are able to work faster, than it is to feel you are not achieving as expected. However, it is important to view timelines as a guide and a reference point rather than as absolutes. Students may not be able to meet timelines for a number of reasons including unforeseen issues that emerge within one's professional or personal life, or because of delays in the research process that might be difficult for the student to overcome, such as difficulties in recruitment.

The following parts of the thesis completion process should be taken into account in the development of timelines:

1. Obtaining ethics approval (one area that often takes longer than anticipated and needs to be obtained before the research can commence).
2. Confirmation of candidature. It is an expectation of most universities that the student formally present some aspects of their work (the content and structure is likely to vary between institutions) for critique to a panel of experts as determined by the specific institutions. This generally occurs within the first year of full time candidature, or part time equivalent
3. Conduct of literature review
4. Commencement and completion of data collection (must be realistic and allow for possible difficulties in recruitment of participants)
5. Data analysis

6. Write up of chapters
7. Completion of first draft
8. Completion of final draft
9. Printing and binding of theses for submission
10. Submission

Some students find it useful to start at the end and work backwards. That is, start with your expected completion date, then consider each of the steps and how much time you are likely to need to complete each stage. Again it important to be realistic and to listen to the advice of your supervisor, remember your supervisor is likely to have supervised a number of students and will therefore have gained a fairly good understanding of how long these stages are likely to take.

At this stage you should also decide on the frequency of meetings, and the expectations that both you and your supervisor have in relation to the meetings. One issue that frequently arises is the time frame for submitting work for consideration. At times students do not fully appreciate the workload of their supervisors, or the time involved in carefully reviewing and critiquing written work. In my own experience students would sometimes email work to me on the day of our scheduled supervision session. This led me to developing stricter guidelines. Like many other supervisors, I insist that students send their work to me at least one week prior to supervision. In return the student has the right to expect the supervisor(s) will have read, critiqued and commented on the written work by the time of supervision. That way the supervision centre can be focused and productive.

Dealing with problems in the supervisory relationship

Like all relationships, particularly those which run over an extended timeframe, problems can emerge in the way supervisors and supervisees work together. This might start off as minor annoyance and may be brushed aside as unimportant by either party or left unsaid with the hope that the situation will improve of its own accord. Supervisors may be concerned about the rate of progress or quality of the work. Supervisees may be concerned about the type or level of critique of work or the time taken to receive feedback or responses to questions.

Whatever the issue, it is unlikely to be resolved if it is not averted and addressed. Particularly as the student moves through stages of the study process that can produce high levels of stress. Both supervisors and supervisees should feel comfortable in raising concerns however minor they may appear to be. From my personal experience the problems usually result from misunderstanding, communication difficulties or differences in approaches to teaching and learning. Generally the problems can be easily resolved and the process itself leads to an improved mutual understanding between student and supervisor.

Where the student attempts to resolve issues by this method but is not satisfied with the outcome, the next step should be to consult the co-ordinator of higher degrees. However, this should only occur after all reasonable attempts have been made to achieve resolution without external intervention. I would also strongly recommend that supervisees should inform supervisors of their intentions. Particularly if it is your wish to continue to work with that supervisor, honesty and openness will be extremely important in finding a way to move forward with the working relationship.

Conclusions

Undertaking higher degree studies is a demanding and time consuming venture. Successful completion of a higher degree will be strongly influenced by the relationship between supervisor(s) and supervisee. However, despite the importance of this relationship, the literature provides little or no guidance as to how to establish a healthy and productive working relationship between the two parties.

The aim of this paper was to provide some guidance to supervisees to assist them in the process of selecting an appropriate supervisor or supervisors to meet their needs in terms of the substantive knowledge area, methodological approach and supervision style. It provides some practical tips on how to find people who might be suitable as supervisors. Importantly it encourages students to be active participants in this process, meeting with supervisors and asking the sort of questions that would help to determine the suitability of the supervisor for both the research topic and to suit the personal style of the supervisee. Guidance is provided on how to establish a relationship that from the outset is based on mutual understanding and provides a realistic plan for the completion of the project, and for dealing with important issues such as intellectual property and authorship issues. Finally the paper provides some tips for dealing with conflict or problems in the supervisory relationship.

As stated in the introduction, this is not intended as an all inclusive guide to higher degree supervision, but rather a beginning contribution to a body of knowledge on this topic. Tips for supervisors is the subject of the second part of this paper.

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