

## Promoting excellence in research student supervision at the University of Canberra

Following the presentation by Duncan Nulty at the *2007 Evaluation Forum* — “Promoting excellence in research student supervision: A framework for collecting, organising and using evaluation evidence” — I thought Forum participants might be interested in University of Canberra policies and practices around evaluation and excellence in research student supervision. Following are three examples.

The first example is an extract from the document *Higher Degrees by Research: Policies and Procedures (Gold Book)*. Supervisory statements at UC seem quite similar to the supervisory excellence report proposed in Duncan’s paper. The second example presents a set of principles agreed by the University Research Degrees Committee to provide a framework for effective supervisory practice. The third example is a table of sources of evidence of effectiveness as a supervisor that I include in our workshop program *Beginning Postgraduate Supervision at UC* (completion of this program is one of the requirements for new staff working towards supervisor registration).

Please contact me if you would like additional information on these examples or would like to continue to discuss excellence in research student supervision. I would love to hear from you: phone: 02 6201 5385 or email: [coralie.mccormack@canberra.edu.au](mailto:coralie.mccormack@canberra.edu.au).

### 1. Supervisory statement at the University of Canberra

**4.3.2.10** The Supervisory Statement provides a pathway to UC registration for experienced supervisors. The purpose of the Supervisory Statement is to fulfil one of the conditions for registration as a supervisor at the University and to provide an opportunity to reflect on supervisory practice.

**4.3.2.11** In general, the Supervisory Statement will be used by staff newly appointed to UC with previous experience of research supervision. It would also be appropriate for an adjunct or non-UC staff member experienced in research supervision in another organisation or environment who seeks to chair a supervisory panel at UC. (Appointment of a non-UC employee to chair a supervisory panel is not normally recommended – see section 4.6.3.)

**4.3.2.12** Prospective UC supervisors with prior experience but no specific training for the role should develop a Supervisory Statement setting out their approach to supervision and evidence of supervisory effectiveness. The Statement should outline:

- (a) the individual’s approach to supervision and the rationale for this approach (eg roles played as a supervisor, means/methods of supervision, ways to resolve issues and dilemmas etc);
- (b) an outline of effective supervisory practice from the individual’s supervisory experience (eg current research student load, number of successful completions, student publications, conference presentations and prizes, students’ later careers etc);
- (c) insights gained from self-evaluation of supervisory practice (eg feedback from students, mentors or other members of a supervisory panel, personal reflections, thesis examiners’ comments); and
- (d) possible future directions, areas of focus or development (see 4.4.3.3 on professional development opportunities).”

Source: Higher Degrees by Research: Policies and Procedures (Gold Book), Part 4, pp. 8-9 available at: <http://www.canberra.edu.au/research/policies/goldbook>

## **2. Principles of effective research student supervision at the University of Canberra.**

The following principles were developed from an analysis (undertaken by Dr Coralie McCormack and Ms Gay Landau) of supervisory statements submitted by experienced UC supervisors as part of the registration process (see above).

### **Effective HDR supervisors:**

- Are interested in, and have enthusiasm for, the practice of supervision.
- Are familiar with, and ensure students are aware of, institutional requirements.
- Clarify personal conceptions of learning and research, help their students clarify their conceptions, and openly discuss these conceptions throughout candidature.
- Initiate action to clarify the expectations, roles and responsibilities of the supervisor and student at the beginning of candidature.
- Adopt ways of working with students that open to each student opportunities to develop their own ideas and to critically reflect on them.
- Develop a working relationship to which students feel they have something worthwhile to contribute.
- Use a range of supervisory styles that align with the student's needs and learning style, the stage of candidature, and the disciplinary context.
- Support students to develop a learning plan which meets their research and personal/professional needs.
- Initiate and maintain regular contact with the student.
- Provide adequate academic support and appropriate pastoral guidance.
- Ensure students become part of their discipline/departmental community of practice.
- Familiarise students with the requirements of thesis writing, facilitate the writing process by encouraging students to write early and often, and provide constructive, supportive and timely feedback.
- Carefully guide the student through the final production of the thesis and the subsequent examination process.
- Engage with emerging issues in their field of research, and with the literature on the scholarship of supervision, to improve their supervisory practice.
- Regularly reflect upon, and periodically evaluate, their supervisory practice.

### **3. Personal effectiveness as a research supervisor: Sources of information**

The following table presents sources of information from which supervisors can draw to make a case (eg for promotion, for appraisal or for registration) for the effectiveness of their supervisory practices. It draws examples from existing good practice and quotes practices of University of Canberra supervisors gathered as part of the analysis of supervisory statements undertaken by Dr Coralie McCormack and Ms Gay Landau.

Source of information	Practice examples
Students	
Questionnaire-scaled items	Tracking Postgraduate Supervision: Student Evaluation of Postgraduate Supervision (SEPS questionnaire developed by the QUT Postgraduate Supervision Evaluation Project Team: Helen Edwards, Tania Aspland, Jane O'Leary, Yoni Ryan, Greg Southey and Peter Timms in association with the Postgraduate Supervision (PGS) Teaching, Reflection and Collaboration (TRAC) group, Queensland University of Technology).
Questionnaire-open-ended questions	Construct a form for feedback from your student on the supervisory relationship including questions such as: What aspects of my supervisory practice are particularly helpful for you? What aspects of my supervisory practice hinder your research practice? What improvements to my practice as a supervisor would you suggest? As your relationship with your research student is coming to a close you could also construct a feedback form which included these questions and others such as: In retrospect, what could I have done differently to be of greater help to you as a supervisor? Or If we were beginning our relationship over again, what changes would you like to see in the supervisory relationship?
Formal discussions with students	<i>I had two meetings with my postgraduates to discuss my philosophy of teaching and postgraduate supervision. These students provided written feedback on what they want from a postgraduate supervisor, an appraisal of my supervision and what areas I could improve upon. Based upon feedback I adjust my approach to individual postgraduate student needs and the postgraduate group.</i>
Informal feedback from students	<i>I've had very positive feedback from my students which is very rewarding eg. after a recent meeting with a Masters by Research student when we parted she said how much she's enjoyed contact with me in this project, that she appreciates my advice, and that she'd write me a reference is I needed one!</i>
Outcomes for students after graduation	<p><i>Ask them: Past students tell me I am a demanding critic, but that they felt being constructively challenged during their writing and editing process was ultimately on of their most valued formative experiences.</i></p> <p><i>Current employment: Feedback from students has been that their research has enabled them to enter the workforce at a higher level. He is likely to remain a researcher ... and will increasingly head projects ... one of my other successful PhD completions works in a university. The other has taken a senior position in the public service.</i></p> <p><i>A number of my PhD students have gone on to gain senior academic positions.</i></p>
Portraits of supervisory relationship/experience	Student and supervisor complete a portrait (eg using roles, responsibilities, university's statements of effective supervisory practice) individually then discuss together and review regularly. For examples of portraits see Cullen, D., Pearson, M., Saha, L. J. & Spear, R. H. (1994). <i>Establishing Effective PhD Supervision</i> . Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service (available at: <a href="http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/230/230_full.pdf">http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/230/230_full.pdf</a> ).
Quantitative student outcomes	<p>Number of on-time completions</p> <p>Number of students who ask for change of supervisor and their reasons.</p> <p>Number of student refereed publications/presentations at national and international conferences eg <i>I actively encourage critical and creative thinking among my students and a measure of this can be seen through the number of publications in international peer reviewed journals.</i></p> <p>Grade examiners assign to thesis: <i>The examiner's feedback was good in both cases involving some amendments but no substantial rewriting.</i></p>

Peers	
Form a learning partnership with an experienced supervisor	Become an advisor on a supervisory panel
Talk about supervision with colleagues	Form a mentoring group with other supervisors in your School/Division/Discipline <i>... thanks to a CELTS workshop I made contact with three other supervisors having difficulty with non-very-good students, and we established a mutual support group ... meeting these people was very affirming, as we found how common were our fears of letting down a student who'd put much (but perhaps misguided) energy into a project ... we all eventually got our problem people through.</i>
From interactions with supervisory panel members	<i>Through supervising students in a team environment (supervisory panel) enables me to compare and contrast my own approach to supervision with those of my colleagues. Initially I felt I was too 'hands on' because of my own experiences but now I am very much in favour of a more independent learning approach.</i>
Invitations from peers	<i>Invitations to review work-in-progress seminars by students from other institutions. Recognition of my ability ... is evidenced by invitations for other Australian universities to co-supervise students. Invitations to present to UC colleagues.. Invitations to present and visits from other institutions. I have been invited by ... to present seminars on PhD supervision and other topics related to higher degrees research. My role as a referee of papers ... also informs my supervisory practice.</i>
Attend conferences about research supervision or conferences with a strand about the research student experience	<i>... I went to a conference where I met up with a friend who'd been my Masters supervisor ... I told him of my doubts. He reminded me that ultimately, the thesis belongs to the student, not to the supervisor. I understand this as a truth but it doesn't entirely comfort me. Perhaps I still need a little more distance from my research students.</i>
Thesis examination	I have been an examiner for several theses ... enlightening ... way of comparing the output of UC students of ours with that of other institutions. Thesis examiner comments have been useful in changing my supervisory practice for the benefit of the student. For instance, in 2001 external examiners suggested that students at the MA level had difficulty in conceptualising their research philosophy and arguing effectively for the selection of their approach. As dissertation co-ordinator I was able to emphasise this more in workshops and within supervisory meetings with students. My examination of postgraduate students' work at other universities helps me to establish and maintain standards.

Self	
<p>Reflect on your regular meetings with students</p>	<p><i>Reflection on my supervision comes from regular meetings with postgraduate students to discuss the issue of supervision. I am keen to find out what they like, do not like, and why.</i></p> <p>Checklist for reflection: Immediately after each meeting with your student take time to respond to the following questions. You can review your responses to these questions over time, share them with a trusted colleague, or record them in a journal and share your journal entries with colleagues in a process of collaborative diary writing.</p> <p>At what moment during our supervisory meeting did you feel most engaged with what was happening?</p> <p>At what moment during our supervisory meeting did you feel most distanced from what was happening?</p> <p>What action(s) that anyone took during the meeting did you find most helpful?</p> <p>What action(s) that anyone took during the meeting did you find most confusing?</p> <p>Your student could complete a similar reflective sheet and a discussion of each other's responses could follow.</p> <p>Source: Brookfield, S. (1995). <i>Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher</i> (Chapter 4). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.</p>
<p>Keep a personal diary</p>	<p><i>I reflect on my experience in the light of the key learning areas for research students. For example: My third Master was one whom I over-encouraged. Her rhetoric was large, but she was afflicted with an underlying lack of confidence, and I should have been more demanding with her. Her thesis languished because she returned to fulltime work before it was clearly mapped out, and then had trouble and extended time completing ... I worried a lot over this candidate ... the problematic key learning areas with this student were inquiry and management; I am now more careful about students' overall grasp and planning skills. I'm also a lot more assertive about the importance of time to write, the need for time off work.</i></p>
<p>Statement of effective supervisory practice</p>	<p>Develop a personal statement of effective supervisory practice: <i>I consider that there would be some benefit in my developing a statement of core principles of research supervision as an evaluative tool for the purposes of assessing my own performance and also, at the completion of the student's project, inviting them to assess me against those core principles. Such core principles would include mutual respect for shared academic endeavour of student/supervisor, respecting the student's ownership of the project while offering my professional advice when asked or when it is (in my professional judgement) required and compliance with University policies.</i></p> <p>On-going use of the "Personal Understandings of Research Degree Supervision" sheets begun in this program</p>
<p>Compose a 'Critical Personal Narrative'</p>	<p>See Chapman, V. (2004). Using critical personal narratives: A poststructural perspective on practice. <i>New Directions for Adult and Community Education</i> No. 102, Summer (Chapter 10), Wiley Publications.</p>