
Postgraduate research supervision in the emerging 'open' universities

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Introduction

It is probably a recurring phenomenon that educators see themselves as being in the vortex of change. Periods of stability seem never to occur; there is always the imperative to respond to change, develop policy, modify practices *and* keep up-to-date. It may be that this is a particular feature of education in that, by its nature, it is concerned with preparing people for participation in a developing social world. However, within all the rhetorical and actual crises of change which educators confront, there always exist those seams of conservatism—and even pockets of outright resistance—which give educationists their reputations for being closeted in institutional structures, practices and values of the past. Of course, the symbols of the past are there for all to see, not just in the sandstone monuments of the first Australian universities, but also in the newest universities' emulation of archaic, élitist, European symbols, such as graduation titles, ceremonies and dress. But the signs of change are also there, not just in the student demographics, but also in the courses and means of study. The 'open' educational discussions and debates of contemporary tertiary education—TAFE and universities—which are constructing new discourses around 'open learning', 'flexible learning', 'minimal campus attendance courses' etc, occasionally connect with social equity ideas, alongside those of efficiency and effectiveness drawn from economic rationalism. The contradictions abound, and postgraduate study and supervision are becoming increasingly enmeshed in them as forms of educational 'openness' invade the élite of university learning and teaching.

University education has expanded into the lives of increasing numbers of young Australians; however, its impact on the lives of older Australians is proving to be even more significant. This is not only through the numbers of 'mature age' persons studying for their first degrees, but also through the numbers of people who 'return' to university to study further courses. This is being lauded from all directions as a sign that Australia is positioning itself to be a 'clever country', able to export its intellectual products and services rather than its coal and woodchips. Universities have been keen to move with this trend and the expansion in postgraduate courses has been a prime indicator. Generally funding levels are higher for postgraduate courses, and research degrees in particular, so the incentives are more than those of increased numbers of students.

The degree to which supervision of research is becoming an aspect of university teachers' work is increasing with the expansion in both coursework and research higher degrees. Although supervision is clearly the dominant 'pedagogy' for research higher degrees, most coursework Masters degrees have a small research component in the form of a 'minor thesis', 'research paper' or dissertation which also calls for supervisory pedagogical skills on the part of the teachers responsible. However, the contexts and means through which postgraduate supervision is being practised in contemporary universities reflects not only the different and diverse needs of part-time — often off-campus — students but also the emerging computer and communications technologies. In these and other ways, as will be argued later, all universities, whether they appreciate it or declare it, are becoming more 'open' universities. Postgraduate research supervision seems ripe for consideration, therefore.

Supervising postgraduate research in 'open' universities

Given the gradual shift towards increasing numbers of part-time postgraduate research students, there are consequent shifting issues of supervision for staff to consider. Some are to do with the contexts and the students, some are to do with researching as learning, and others are to do with the supervision and support provided by institutions.

Despite the selection filters which apply to postgraduate research students entering universities, the broadening of the part-time student enrolment means that a greater diversity of student needs, interests and contexts now prevails. This is especially the case where the forms of entry and forms of supervision are opened to allow students with a broader range of qualifications (often requiring professional experience) and a broader range of social, economic and geographical circumstances. This is something which forms of open and distance education have to account for in their practices (Evans, 1994). In postgraduate research, supervisors may no longer find themselves supervising young students, who are fully committed to their research as they eke out their scholarships until graduation. It is more likely they will be dealing with students as old or older than themselves, who juggle work and family commitments alongside their research, and may well earn more than their supervisors!. The shift in perspective required of supervisors is quite significant and means dealing with students more as colleagues, than as 'students'. The power and authority relations are different and arguably more equal. For example, with younger students supervisors typically ensure their students keep on schedule and on task, knowing that the three-year scholarship is finite; for part-time students, the schedule is doubled and recognition has to be given both to the important responsibilities people have to their families and work, and that, if they have managed their lives well enough to qualify to enter their doctoral programs, they probably know best how to do so for their postgraduate research.

This is not to suggest that supervisors now have an easier time, or can abrogate their responsibilities. Rather, the care which supervisors need to exercise in understanding their students and their students' contexts needs to be more subtle and sensitive. Helping students keep on task remains important, as is enabling them to achieve their goals. However, often it may be necessary to assist students to take a pause in their studies in order to deal with work and family commitments, because this is in the overall best interest of the student (as a person) even if the university's completion rates are consequently worsened.

Understanding students' contexts is not just a matter of the practicalities of supervision, it is also a matter of recognising and addressing the autonomy of the students as researcher-learners. The research problems which they address for their studies are likely to be of personal and/or professional significance to them. Empowering or enabling students to make sound choices in their research, in order that they may achieve their personal and/or professional goals, is a perspective which has been addressed more broadly in the literature of professional education (for example, the work of Schon (1983; 1987), adult education (for example, the work of Boud and colleagues eg Boud, 1981; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Boud & Walker, 1991) and open and distance education (see for example, the work of Morgan, 1993, Evans and Nation, 1992, and Nation, 1991)). It seems, however,

that the literature has rarely addressed these matters in terms of the supervision of part-time, off-campus students. Morgan has discussed the theoretical underpinnings of using project-based work, something which is becoming more prevalent in professional courses offered through open and distance education (Morgan, 1984; Morgan, 1987). Project-based work can be seen as analogous to some of the supervisory and learning features of postgraduate research. It encompasses some of the elements of negotiated curricula and outcomes, learner autonomy and personal and professional relevance which have parallels with postgraduate research. Although the degree of negotiation is likely to be different across disciplines, it is possible to argue that postgraduate research students exercise a good deal of autonomy in shaping their research topics, methodologies and outcomes. Given the points made previously about the different backgrounds, interests and authority of part-time students, such students are likely to be more assertive about exercising their autonomy.

Emerging supervisory practices

The burgeoning numbers of part-time, professional postgraduate students in Australian universities presents an invitation to develop new ways of structuring research degrees and also new ways of supervising and supporting the research conducted. Clearly, there are the previously mentioned personal and professional contexts which need to be taken into account in terms of managing supervision, but there are also possibilities of turning these aspects into advantages. A simple example of each may help.

As most part-time students need and wish to study at home for a major part of their work, this creates problems in terms of providing personal, contiguous supervision. It also creates difficulties in terms of access to the library, laboratory and to the 'postgraduate community' on campus. However, every full-time student on-campus presents their own problems for the university. They need desk space to work, some need laboratory and computing facilities, and most make substantial demands on the library. The development of computer communication facilities can provide part-time, off-campus students with opportunities to email, participate in 'conference' discussions with their peers and colleagues, interrogate library catalogues and databases, and retrieve documents. Such computer-based approaches can create a 'virtual' community of postgraduate students where the walls between departments, disciplines and faculties are invisible. Supervision supported by email communication allows both supervisor and student to be more independent in terms of their physical and temporal spaces. Such approaches are qualitatively different from the traditional supervision experience; however, there is sufficient research in computer-based uses in open and distance education (Mason & Kaye, 1989) to suggest that, rather than these approaches being a 'second best' means of supervising and supporting postgraduate research, they may represent a better means, and one into which on-campus students might well be integrated².

The second example relates to making a virtue out of the professional and work contexts of the students. The workplace of the students is often the site of the research, or is related to the research. This means that some of the resources required for the research are provided by and through the employer, rather than the university. The cost savings can, therefore, be diverted into mediating the supervision process and supporting the student at work (perhaps in the ways outlined in the previous example). The task is to blend the requirements of the degree with the needs or requirements of the workplace. The advantages in terms of relating research, theory and practice together are substantial. It is here that new forms of research degree might well be required. Instead of the traditional PhD thesis, other forms of research product might well be counted towards the degree, together with a smaller thesis. Several universities are considering or have implemented doctoral degrees which involve forms of coursework, somewhat akin to the North American approaches. However, if there is one big lesson which distance education has taught the education community over the past two or three decades, it is that quality course material development is expensive and only becomes feasible if there are sufficient

numbers. Likewise, another lesson from the distance education literature has come from the critiques both of 'Fordist' assumptions which flow from mass educational practices and of the 'instructional industrialism' which arises (Campion, 1992; Campion, 1991; Evans & Nation, 1989a; Evans & Nation, 1989b; Evans & Nation, 1992).

Coursework doctoral degrees in Australia have mostly (entirely?) been on-campus part-time courses. Yet as we have seen, the major need is for courses which relate to the needs and contexts of professional people and this usually means that forms of regular on-campus study are impractical for most. (Summer schools and other occasional on-campus encounters are usually less of a problem, and have some distinct advantages). So the advantages of offering research degree courses off-campus are obvious; however, the relatively small numbers of students (in comparison with undergraduate courses) and the diversity of the research interests makes it unlikely that developing good quality course materials will be viable. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the research field in any discipline is arguably where the 'cutting-edge' changes occur, and so any course materials would need to be in a form where they can be revised readily; again, this reduces the viability.

The task becomes one not of developing coursework components, but rather to structure research degrees in ways which enable the students to complete a 'portfolio' of research tasks which relate to and contribute to their thesis (which consequently is smaller than for the traditional PhD)³. In some instances, these research tasks could be directly related to research being conducted in the workplace as part of the employee's responsibilities. The supervisor would need to negotiate with the parties concerned to ensure that the university's, the student's and the employer's interests were met. Issues concerning ethics, commercial confidentiality and public interest may need to be negotiated appropriately. However, the potential for useful research and good university-industry partnerships is evident.

Opening universities?

Postgraduate research can be seen to be 'opening-up' many possibilities for the future of Australian universities. What is often argued as the fundamental distinction between universities and other educational institutions is their involvement in research. However, the expansion in numbers of universities, and the demands for accountability of public expenditure, means that universities' entitlement to research funding is being challenged. Postgraduate research, especially of the kind which is related to professional and industrial contexts, holds out the prospect of universities sustaining their case for research funds. Not only can they argue that they are contributing to research and research training which is proving to be professionally and industrially beneficial, but they are also likely to develop a sympathetic and 'well-placed' alumni lobby group from their postgraduate students. As universities become more 'open' to the possibilities, they are moving with a flow which has historical and international comparisons.

For nearly two decades, Australian governments have formally eschewed the establishment of an Australian Open University, despite the fact that many 'developed' and 'developing' nations have made the opposite decision. The principal reasons for avoiding establishing an Australian Open University were concerned with the high establishment costs, the likelihood of interstate disputes over the selection of a location, and the negative consequences for the many institutions (mostly regional) which relied on forms of distance education to remain viable. (Open universities' educational practices are principally those of distance education).

Since the turn of the twentieth century, Australia's social and economic development has been linked to forms of distance education (Bolton, 1986; Evans & Nation, 1993a). Despite the absence of an open university, distance education in Australian education—not just higher education, all forms of formal and non-formal education and training—has become increasingly prevalent in the past two decades. Johnson makes the point in terms of higher education:

In 1975 there were just over 17,000 external students in Australian higher education (8891 in universities and 8366 in CAEs), a little over 6 per cent of the total enrolment of some 270,000. They were eclipsed as a proportion by part-time students at 28.6 per cent in universities, 31.9 per cent in CAEs. By 1982 the numbers and proportions in the two sectors had risen to 15,497 (9.3 per cent) in universities and 24,801 (14.7 per cent) in CAEs—almost a doubling of numbers in universities and trebling in CAEs in eight years, while total enrolment had risen only to some 334,000, an increase of about 25 per cent. External studies or distance education was the fastest growing mode of study in higher education (Johnson, 1996, in press).

The establishment of the Distance Education Centres (DECs) within the Unified National System was intended as a concentration or 'rationalisation' of distance education infrastructure in Australia. However, in the 'non-DECs' there was an increasing adoption of forms of education more akin to distance education than to 'traditional' classroom education. In order to avoid attracting the attention or wrath of the DECs and DEET, the nomenclature was changed. 'Distance education' and its derivations, 'off-campus', 'extension studies' or 'external studies' were unmentioned. Instead, 'flexible learning', 'mixed-mode', 'open campus' and similar terms were used to represent institutional practices which were closer to forms of distance education than the classroom.

Within two years, the foundation upon which the designation of the DECs had been built began to crack and crumble. Since 1993. Australian universities are no longer divided into DECs and non-DECs: it is open slather again.

In some ways, the 'flexible learning', 'mixed-mode', 'open campus' and other such practices can be seen as a basis for the emergence of forms of open education in Australian higher education. Once traditional teaching practices are loosened and more socially and educationally diverse learner-centred practices are constructed, the door of the academy is likely to continue to swing open still further until postgraduate research is exposed. Add to this the external pressures for courses and means of teaching and learning which suit the needs of industry and the professions, together with the ratcheting strains to find non-government sources of funds, and one can see universities becoming more 'open' in other respects as well. The title 'Doctor' becomes a marketable commodity and, hence, opening-up new ways of obtaining a doctorate becomes a challenge. The 'traditionalist' cries of 'declining standards' are drowned by the 'rationalist' chorus of 'professional (market) relevance'.

Of course, another influential venture which occurred during this period was the rise of the Open Learning Agency (OLA) and, to a lesser extent, the Professional and Graduate Education (PAGE) consortia. OLA commenced as a parasitic (literally) organisation living principally on host DECs, rather than on non-DECs (with one exception). Although OLA's rhetoric could well be seen as more congruent with some of the non-DECs' rhetoric of the time, the reality was that it was a vehicle for the DECs, especially Monash, to extend their distance education influence still further (King, 1993). Nowadays, OLA's hosts have become more numerous and diverse; however, the organic consequences of sustaining this parasite and PAGE are unclear.

Certainly, one feature of the rise and fall of the DEC designation, the non-DECs' renaming of their practices, and the growth of OLA, is not indicative of the decline of distance education, but rather the opposite: the repositioning of (all) universities as more than classroom-based teaching organisations. The universities' claims under the 1993 and 1994 Quality Reviews, and the CAUT grant applications over a similar period, emphasise how many, if not all universities, and particularly some sections within them, are looking to develop their teaching along lines which sound more and more like distance education. Distance education institutions have generally sought to use communication technologies—post, audio and video broadcasting or taping, telephone and facsimile, and computer communications—to 'deliver' their courses and to improve the interactivity of their educational practices. Nowadays, every university seems to have a toehold on an educational future with computer and communications technologies.

'Diversity', 'choice' and 'flexibility' are the watchwords; no 'Quality' university can be without them. From young first-year undergraduates through to final year PhDs, a 'Quality' university offers diverse curricula and flexible approaches to teaching, learning and supervision.

In this sense, all Australian universities are (becoming) 'open' universities. However, as Harris demonstrated with the Open University of the United Kingdom, the openness in (declared) open universities is limited by forms of closure (Harris, 1987). Some of these forms of closure derive from the traditions of university life which pervade even these new forms of university, while others are to do with the educational technologies and administrative structures which are deployed. Hence, the shift in Australian universities towards openness can be expected to be gradual, constrained and possibly outweighed or countered by drifts toward closure in other respects. (Maybe one could hypothesise that closure in terms of a reduction in academic staff autonomy outweighs forms of openness for students. However, this is not to say that it is the case, nor that one is necessarily a corollary of the other).

A few years ago, Nation and I argued that we were witnessing a form of convergence between distance education and mainstream education brought about through the (re)construction of (new) educational technologies (Evans & Nation, 1993b). Others before had seen distance education shifting from the 'margins to the mainstream' (Campion, 1988; Smith, 1987); we were arguing that a reformation was occurring which saw both forms of education 'converging'. A weakness with the convergence argument, however, is that it implies zooming into a point, whereas the current practices seem to show educational institutions venturing into an open educational space. There is a diversity within the open educational space which needs to be recognised and which convergence (implicitly) denies; indeed, divergence is more the descriptor. Universities are becoming larger and more diverse, part of the enlargement is of a virtual kind as educational spaces become less confined by institutional walls and, as has always been the case for distance education, delimited only by means of communication, language, culture and time (and imagination?).

Openness vs excellence

The principles underpinning most open universities internationally, and OLA and some of the DECs in Australia, is that their foundation or first year courses should be 'open entry' or have some relatively 'open' pathways into them. As 'open university' postgraduate courses have become available, they have usually had the same 'closed entry' requirements as similar courses at other universities. However, in the case of research degrees, often the open universities have reverted to traditional competitive approaches, especially in terms of full-time students and scholarship holders. Therefore, in the area of postgraduate research, the DECs and non-DECs in Australia followed a similar path. As mentioned previously, the pressures to open-up new forms of postgraduate education which serve the needs and interests of a broader range of students have been quite strong. The 'professional' faculties have perhaps faced less pressure the most. Not only have the members of the various professions become more highly qualified over the years, but the demands to have postgraduate qualifications on/ from those who teach in the faculties, and from those who occupy senior positions in the professions, have increased likewise. For example, now MEds and MBAs are plentiful, while EdDs and DBAs are emerging as the new growth area.

The traditional approach to doctoral degrees in Australia—derived from the British colonial heritage—is that they are entirely research degrees. In other parts of the world, for example North America, the traditional doctorate has been one of coursework and research. In Australia, the 'traditional doctoral students' were generally on-campus, full-time, and had recently graduated with Honours. Of course, a probe beneath the surface of such traditions shows that some universities award doctorates, especially to their staff, in ways which accommodate the 'learners' needs. Indeed, such traditional approaches

include forms of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning—or really RPR: Recognition of Prior Research!) which would do an ‘open’ TAFE proud! In addition, for some years, traditional and more ‘open’ universities have been dealing with increasing numbers of part-time students, especially in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Education faculties. As the requirements for attendance have been loosened, the PhD has become a *de facto* open-campus course, even at those universities that would declare themselves to be teaching on-campus.

With the higher DEET funding given to research students, opening the academies to part-time research students who prefer to do most of their work at home or in the workplace has a considerable benefit. However, the provision of appropriate supervision and support for postgraduate students becomes an important concern if the quality of postgraduate research is to be sustained and enhanced, and the potential for an accumulation of weak or unsatisfactory theses is to be avoided.

Bourdieu’s study of French universities reminds us that the academies are structures for the reproduction of power and for the identification and selection of the élite (Bourdieu, 1988). Harris makes an interesting connection between this work, and also Bourdieu’s critique of taste (Bourdieu, 1986), and the ‘active learning’ approaches in higher education, especially those approaches which use the ‘technical fixes’ of the learning package for independent learning. Harris argues that

...academic institutions need a public professional or collegiate view of themselves which stresses calm, rational debate, objectivity, and a disinterested commitment to effective pedagogy, quality and openness(es). Yet they also need a ‘backstage’ less public organisation with a more political structure of authority, managerial controls (of various kinds), a system of power and its distribution (Harris, 1994, p 200).

The development of ‘open’ approaches to higher education, especially in postgraduate study, lays bare the tensions between the élitist traditions and open pretensions. Lasch’s stomping critique of contemporary American and transnational élites might lead one to the conclusion that, in fact, the new ‘open’ approaches are nothing more than a contemporary form of meritocracy producing a new élite which has less social and community concern than the previous élite order (Lasch, 1995). However, the tensions still exist between those with an affection for their view of traditional approaches to postgraduate education and those who are wedded to opening the academies to new forms of postgraduate student, together with the financial and other benefits which accrue.

Conclusion

The increasing openness of universities to students’ needs and contexts, especially for those continuing their studies part-time, is gradually affecting the postgraduate research supervision in those universities. There are significant opportunities for new kinds of good quality research degree which are conducted off-campus, with supervision mediated using forms of communication technology. However, it is important to develop supervision practices which relate to the emerging contexts of students and educational institutions, and to see these practices as framed by dialogue reflecting the professional and personal autonomy of the student.

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Footnotes

1. I speak from experience here. My first PhD graduate is 17 years older than me, and all my current doctoral students range from around my age up to twenty years older than me. Although I am on Level E, one of my students earns more than I do and most are on salaries equivalent to Level C. Without exception, the balancing of work and family commitments with their research is their most enduring problem.

2. The Graduate School of Education at Deakin University is developing just such forms of computer-based support for its postgraduate students. It has assisted in the development of the University’s new *Interchange* system

through a specific project on the EdD program which provides the sorts of services discussed here.

3. This challenge has been met by the Doctor of Education course at Deakin University. Although there are some supporting 'course materials', the course is structured around a sequence of related research tasks which are typically completed in the professional context of the student. The final examination is of a portfolio of such projects and a thesis. See Brennan & Walker, (1994) for an explanation of the evolution of this course.