

Higher degree research supervision: a question of balance

Gilah C. Leder
La Trobe University

Introduction

What might be some reasons for pursuit of higher education?

One: *A love of learning.*

Two: *The wish for mastery of a skill.*

Three: *For economic betterment.* (Mamet, 1993, p. 33)

Substantial modifications have been made in recent years to Australia's higher educational system. A unified higher education scheme has replaced the binary system which had evolved over time. Amalgamation of existing institutions has led to the formation of fewer, larger, multi-campus universities. Market forces now often act as a powerful influence for the introduction of new courses and research activities. The proportion of Australians completing secondary school, and the demand for tertiary places—both undergraduate and postgraduate—have increased dramatically. For example, the number of students enrolled in PhD studies increased from 7,035 in 1983 (Castles, 1990) to 13,623 in 1992 (Castles, 1995). The rise has been particularly striking for females. Their enrolment almost tripled over that period: from 1,897 in 1990 to 5,123 in 1992 (compared with 5,138 and 8,500 for males in 1983 and 1992 respectively). Thus supervision resources are being increasingly stretched. At the same time, Marginson (1995, p. 67) argued, "rising needs for education coincide with declining returns from education, and this is one of the sources of claims about declining standards". To date, there has been considerable effort to preserve the high standards of doctoral work long associated with Australian universities.

Despite the undoubted period of turbulence in the tertiary sector, the requirements for satisfactory completion of a doctoral dissertation¹ (as well as those for a masters-by-research degree) have remained largely unchanged, in Australia, as well as in many other countries². The notion that a doctorate constitutes a distinguished achievement in the acquisition of knowledge continues to be an integral part of the program. The high status commonly accorded to the doctorate, and to research, has also been maintained. It is difficult to find an Australian university which does not include 'a strong commitment to the conduct of high quality research' in its management plan, an endeavour frequently assisted by the research efforts of postgraduate students. Long before criteria such as the percentage of staff with a doctorate, the percentage of staff supervising research postgraduate students, various categories of research endeavours, and completion rates of PhD students came to be listed among the 'performance indicators' used to judge and rank institutions, Schweitzer (1965, p. 11) wrote:

Educational authorities came to recognize the desirability for the university professor to be a research investigator as well as a teacher. Original work became a part of university training. The performance of original research became a requirement for almost all doctor's degrees.

Emphasis on original work, and on a substantial or significant contribution to knowledge, are recurring themes in the regulations governing PhD examinations in Australia and elsewhere. For example:

The degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at Monash signifies that the holder has submitted a thesis that the examiners have declared to be a significant contribution to knowledge, and that demonstrates the candidate's capacity to carry out independent research (Higher Degrees and Scholarships Section, Monash University, 1991, p. 5).

Recommendation for the degree [PhD] will be made only after the acceptance of a dissertation, which must be a contribution to knowledge and the result of independent work, expressed in satisfactory form (Stanford University, quoted in Boyer, 1973, p. 17).

The need for comparability of local degrees with those from overseas institutions has also been made quite explicit:

Examiners are invited to judge a thesis at the highest contemporary standard for European and North American Universities ... The candidate must make a substantial contribution to learning (The Australian National University, quoted in Montgomery, 1980, p. 15).

From conception to birth

"Oh, hell." I failed. Flunk me out of it. It's garbage. Everything I do. "The ideas contained in this work express the author's feelings." That's right. I know I'm stupid.... I know what I am, Professor. You don't have to tell me (Mamet, 1993, pp. 14-15).

Just what is involved in not merely starting a PhD but completing a significant and original piece of research and reporting the findings in a well presented and scholarly manner?

In the apprenticeship-like quality of many supervisor-student relationships the supervisor's research preferences and prejudices can constrain the scope, perspectives, methodology and directions of a student's work. According to Thorley and Gregory (1995), students who are dissatisfied with the limits imposed in this way are quite likely to opt out of the process. Much has also been written in the American context about the hurdles to be overcome by students if they are to move from A.B.D. (All But Dissertation) to PhD graduate. Vivid phrases used by Madsen (1983, pp 1-6) to describe those who fail to complete the doctorate they started include: 'too soon adieu', 'too much enthusiasm, too little focus', 'too hard to please', 'too casual', 'too compulsive', 'too long in transit', 'too much independence', and 'too little appreciation of the scholarly tradition'. In other words, he argued, successful completion of the thesis requires students to remain at university until their thesis is submitted, to become autonomous learners yet heed advice, read widely without losing the focus of the research question chosen, limit the scope of the project, write early enough and in sufficient quantity, and be prepared to polish and refine that writing - but not indefinitely. These steps assume the support and guidance of a supervisor.

The process

I don't want to fix you. I would like to tell you what I think, because that is my job, conventional as it is, and flawed as I may be. (Mamet, 1993, p. 54)

Despite the increasing diversity of research questions asked in doctoral theses, theoretical frameworks selected and methodologies used, there is considerable consensus about the supervisor's role (see, e.g., Connell, 1985; Landvogt and Forgasz, 1994; Mauch and Birch, 1989). Help is needed in: defining the topic, 'designing' the project, gathering material, writing up, working through drafts to a final product, selecting examiners, and encouraging dissemination of the completed work through conference papers, journal articles or a book. Induction into the wider research community can also be facilitated through inclusion in the supervisor's established networks. Successful transition from conception to birth of a thesis requires a carefully balanced partnership between research student and supervisor, with rights and responsibilities on both sides beyond those commonly listed in university handbooks. An ideal association based on mutual respect between supervisor and candidate might arguably contain the elements summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The supervision process

THE SUPERVISOR'S ROLE

- Offer guidance with the research topic and program. Given the continuing knowledge explosion, this is increasingly challenging. Research has become a huge, multi-purpose enterprise.
- Offer guidance on ethics considerations and requirements, where appropriate.
- Provide information about the size, scope, and standard of a PhD. Despite the apparent uniformity of standards across universities and disciplines, there are considerable variations in acceptable research procedures and methods of reporting.
- Facilitate access to, and if necessary funding for, essential resources (Email, photocopying, relevant sources—books as well as colleagues...). The increasingly complex technologies available place taxing demands on both supervisor and student.
- Provide support: personal at times of stress or success, with scholarship or part-time research position applications, opportunities for work, references.
- From the outset, encourage drafts of work as it develops. Provide constructive feedback, positive as well as critical. Use the now mandatory annual progress report as an early warning of unsatisfactory progress should this be necessary.
- Encourage attendance and presentations at conferences and use these occasions to provide introductions to others in the field.
- Be honest about the thesis being ready/not ready for submission.
- Be thoughtful about the selection of examiners.

Some American universities use the descriptor *mentor* rather than *research adviser* (Mauch and Birch, 1989). And indeed, the relationship between supervisor and candidate formed over the extended period of the supervision process contains many of the elements also described as part of the mentoring process. Jacobi (1991) compared definitions of mentoring in three different fields: higher education, management, and psychology. Commonly agreed functions included: support and encouragement, guidance, facilitating access to resources and opportunities, providing information, protection, sponsorship, stimulating the acquisition of knowledge, and (intentionally or not) being a role model. The essence of the mentor/supervision process has been described as one

which requires intense devotion ... concentration and absorption to the exclusion of other things. Generally it involves an intensive, long-term, one-to-one relationship of a sensei (teacher). Above all, it

requires persistence—hard work, self discipline, diligence, energy, effort, competence and expertness (Torrance, 1979, p. ix).

Many higher degree students indicate that they are reasonably satisfied with the quality and effectiveness of the supervision they receive. However, surveys of students' views about postgraduate research supervision (e.g., van der Heide, 1994; Johnston and Broda, 1994; Montgomery, 1980; Sloan, 1993) also indicate that in reality the relationship often falls short of the ideal portrayed in Table 1 and is considerably more complex.

The process revisited

My limited experience as a supervisor has taught me that it [supervision] is a more difficult art than undertaking investigation on one's own behalf.... It is a profoundly personal affair, probably interpreted in as many ways as there are supervisors; ranging from the professor who calls his unfortunate students from their beds for a 3 am. lab consultation through those who demand a written report every week ..., to the supervisor whom C.P. Snow described in "The Search" who put his head in the lab door each week, said "Things going well?", didn't listen to the answer, and retired (Neales, 1967, quoted in Ibrahim, McEwen and Pitblado, 1980, p. 18).

What issues are commonly named by students as presenting difficulties? Representative grievances, identified in three studies, are summarised in Table 2.

The obstacles and experiences of marginalisation identified in the surveys summarised in Table 2 are exacerbated for part-time research students who have to juggle their studies with pressing demands of other duties. Supervisors in faculties such as education and social work, which attract many mature-age students often with well acknowledged expertise in their own field, face the additional challenge of balancing the needs of research novices with the expectations of those used to being treated as competent professionals.

The greater difficulties apparently being experienced by some females are also noteworthy. Female higher degree students, it seems, are more likely than their male counterparts to feel overlooked, neglected, and unsupported by staff—particularly in informal settings.

Discrepancies in male and female staffing ratios in most universities, especially at the senior levels, are well known. In many science and engineering departments, in particular, the opportunity to work with a female supervisor remains relatively low. Jacobi (1991, p 511) concluded that cross-sex or cross-race mentorships often experienced problems 'ranging from mild to severe'. Schroeder and Mynatt (1993, p 568) found that

women with female major professors perceive their interactions more positively than do those with male professors. Specifically, support was found for the hypotheses of more concern for student welfare and for higher quality interactions when the major professor was female.

It is inappropriate to conclude simplistically that same-sex student-supervisor relationships are necessarily preferable to mixed-sex ones. Yet in some cases it may be more problematic for students to obtain, from a supervisor of the opposite sex, the (emotional) support needed at times of stress and the yearned for collegiality.

Contemporary literature (e.g., Garner, 1995; Mamet, 1993) has vividly documented the subtle sexual or power-related issues that can emerge when there is a lengthy relationship between two individuals in an academic setting. What safeguards should be taken to minimise misunderstandings between student and supervisor and equalise, as much as possible, the power able to be exercised by either? What messages, real or imagined, are conveyed by closing or keeping open an office when a student comes for a consultation?

"I leave it up to the student," he said. "If I shut the door, it's a statement of my power. It may seem intimidating.... But if the student shut the door and I opened it, it would be saying, 'This is a fraught situation, a fraught relationship'" (Garner, 1995, p. 154).

Should Carol's transformation from a timid student³ to an assertive

Table 2: Selected students' perspectives

Ibrahim et al (1980)	van der Heide (1994)	Johnston and Broda (1994)
Excessively high standard demanded by the supervisor, given the time limits for doing a PhD	Few students felt part of the faculty	Inadequate preparation for the independent and autonomous work now expected
Perception that funds attracted for higher degree students are not spent on them	Difficulties with selecting a topic and research methodology	Inconsistent 'rhythm of work' (13)
Being used to supplement publication record of senior academics	Female students have more difficulty in finding a supervisor	Sense of isolation, particularly for those engaged in postgraduate research in education
Being used as cheap teaching resource in undergraduate courses	Males were generally more satisfied than females with the supervision process	Uncertainty about acceptable access to other staff
Supervisors were perceived to be inactive in initiating or maintaining a relationship with their own and other students	Insufficient help in solving problems encountered	Tensions in relationship with supervisor - guidance v. prescription; too much direct v. insufficient support
Insufficient help in framing the research question (arts/humanities students)	Insufficient effort by supervisors to foster interactions	'Sink or swim' approach adopted in some disciplines
Insufficient contact with supervisor (arts students)	Had difficulties in resolving 'problems between my supervisor and me'	Status within the faculty - a perception that postgraduate students 'are there under sufferance ... they are a bit of burden' (p. 10)
Insufficient knowledge by supervisor of student's topic		Difficulties with changes in power relationships with supervisor and other academic staff

accuser⁴, so skilfully and believably depicted by Mamet (1993), be dismissed as mere fiction or be used as a warning to academics to remain reserved in dealings with students, and particularly with those of the opposite sex? Does it depict the only or optimum strategy for challenging the pervasive and continuing male dominance embedded in universities? Does it challenge students and (university) staff to reflect on the costs to others of power wielded without responsibility? Might a more sensitive, less self-centred figure have fostered a better relationship with his student and have prevented the developments harmful to both?

Students should not need to fear sexual harassment in the still male-dominated university environment. Supervisors must not take advantage of their more powerful positions. Work done by students must be owned by them. Contributions to joint projects must be properly acknowledged. There should be no pressure, whether explicit or implicit, to extract personal favours. But students can also attempt to exercise power improperly. False reports of inappropriate behaviours or demands for unacceptable intimacies have grave repercussions for the staff member against whom they are made. Yet the fear of being misunderstood or misrepresented should not be used by a supervisor as a justification for creating a dysfunctional distance between supervisor and student of (most commonly) the opposite sex.

Much has been written by those concerned with schooling about the impact of the social context in which teaching and learning occur. Supervising higher degrees similarly does not occur in a vacuum. It is naive to ignore institutional customs and hierarchies which mould the power structures in the supervision process. It is inappropriate to abuse them. Nor is it possible to ignore societal expectations and values against which the words and actions of supervisors as well as students

are measured. It is all too easy to lose perspective at times of stress or when the work does not progress satisfactorily. Supervisors and students have a shared responsibility not to abuse their power.

Concluding comments

Somewhat cynically, it can be argued that the emphasis on closer monitoring of the progress and completion rates of higher degree students has ensured that the supervision process is attracting more intense attention from administrators, staff and students. More optimistically, we might hypothesise that the greater scrutiny has been fuelled by increased sensitivity towards students' needs, and recognition of the competing and complex demands on their supervisors.

Supervision issues including and beyond those previously discussed (e.g., Connell, 1985) have been surveyed in this paper. The growing number of students, part-time as well as full-time, embarking on doctoral studies is placing considerable pressures on human resources available for supervision, with some inexperienced personnel being drafted prematurely. The increasingly complex demands of technology and the continuously enlarging knowledge base are further challenges to be faced by supervisors as they advise their students about locating research data bases, about research design and methodologies, and on appropriate standards for a doctoral thesis.

Lack of emotional support and insufficient social interactions between supervisors and students are commonly cited areas of discontent by students. Inevitable tensions and competing expectations are created by perceptions of the supervision process as a period of apprenticeship, an exercise in mentoring, and

the opportunity to serve as—or be guided by—a role model. As in any relationship between humans, a satisfactory resolution of difficulties encountered requires not merely institutional support and appropriate guidelines but also, most importantly, a willingness by each participant to communicate and discuss issues of concern. Without this attitude, there is a dissipation of efforts more appropriately spent on the research endeavour.

References

- Boyer, C.J. (1973) *The doctoral dissertation as an information source: A study of scientific information flow*, Metuchen, N.J., The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Castles, I. (1995) *Year Book Australia 1995*, Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Castles, I. (1990) *Year Book Australia 1990*, Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Connell, R.W. (1985) 'How to supervise a PhD', *Vestes*, No 2, pp 38-41.
- Garner, H. (1995) *The first stone. Some questions about sex and power*, Sydney, Picador.
- Madsen, D. (1983) *Successful dissertations and theses*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- van der Heide, G. (1994) *Students and supervision: the views of postgraduate research students in education and supervision*. Paper presented at the annual conference of AARE, Newcastle NSW, November 28-December 1.
- Higher Degrees and Scholarship Section, Monash University (1991) *PhD and EdD information handbook*, Clayton, Monash University.
- Ibrahim, E.Z., McEwen, E.M., and Pitblado, R. (1980) 'Doctoral supervision at Sydney University: Hindrance or help?', *Vestes*, Vol 23, pp 18-22.

Jacobi, M. (1991) 'Mentoring and undergraduate academic success: A literature review', *Review of Educational Research*, Vol 61, No 4, pp 505-532.

Johnston, S. and Broda, J. (1994) *Supporting educational researchers of the future*. Paper presented at the annual conference of AARE, Newcastle NSW, November 28-December .

Landvogt, J. and Forgasz, H. (1994) '1993 Supervisor of the year', in *Compass '94*, Clayton, Victoria, Monash University, pp 46-49.

Marginson, S. (1995) 'The decline in the standing of educational credentials in Australia', *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol 39, No 1, pp 67-76.

Mamet, D. (1993) *Oleanna* (Royal Court Writers Series), London, Methuen Drama.

Mauch, J.E., and Birch, J.W. (1989) *Guide to the successful thesis and dissertation*, New York, Marcel Dekker, Inc.

Montgomery, A.Y. (1980) 'The examination of post-graduate theses: A discussion of requirements for post-graduate theses in the department of computer science Monash University', *Vestes*, Vol 23, No 1, pp 14-17.

Schroeder, D.S and Mynatt, C.R. (1993) 'Female graduate students' perceptions of their interactions with male and female professors', *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol 64, No 5, pp 555-573.

Schweitzer, G.K. (1965) *The doctorate: A handbook*, Springfield, Ill., C.C. Thomas.

Simpson, R. (1983) *How the PhD came to Britain*, Dorset, England, Society for Research into Higher Education.

Sloan, M. (1993) 'The power differential', in *Compass '93*, Clayton, Victoria, Monash University, pp pp. 40-43.

Thorley, L. and Gregory, R. (1995) 'A broader education for research students: Changing the culture', in B. Smith and S. Brown (Eds.) *Research teaching and learning in higher education*, London, Kogan Page Ltd, pp 89-94.

Torrance, E.P. (1979) *The search for satori and creativity*, Buffalo, Creative Education Foundation.

Footnotes

1. The convention of some American universities to differentiate between a masters thesis and a doctoral dissertation is not maintained in this paper. Instead, the terms 'thesis' and 'dissertation' are used interchangeably.
2. "The first university doctorates were probably the Doctor of Civil Law and the Doctor of Canon Law awarded by Bologna in the twelfth century for the completion of its courses of study in law" (Schweitzer, 1965, p 6). "The modern PhD'", according to Sloan (1993, p 40), "developed out of the 19th century German Universities' innovation, the 'research thesis', which was the culmination of a period of at least *six years of specialised study under the guidance of a professor*" [emphasis in the original]. In Great Britain, the first PhD was introduced at Oxford University in 1917 (Simpson, 1983), after considerable debate. By the late 1920s, "the PhD had arrived at all British universities: symbol of the modern era of organised training in research—conceived and nurtured in Germany, imported and commercialised by America and finally introduced into Britain in order to wean the latter's students away from the former's universities" (Simpson, 1983, p 159).
3. Carol: I don't *understand*. I don't understand what anything means ... and I walk around, from morning 'til night: with this one thought in my head. I'm *stupid* (Mamet, 1993, p 12).
4. Some meetings later, Carol reads from her notebook samples of behaviour she considers offensive and humiliating, and which she has shared with the committee deciding whether to grant tenure to John, her lecturer.