How to supervise Ph.D Students

- **Dr. Robert C Clift**

Introduction

Discussions with colleagues over the years have made me realise that many able, formally qualified people are unwilling to take on the role of supervisor for higher degree candidates. Discussions at conferences around the world have indicated that this reluctance is not just an Australian problem; it is world-wide. As a consequence, I have decided to commit my views on supervision and some of my experiences as a supervisor in an attempt to encourage people to take on the task.

I am aware that many universities have established formal registration procedures for supervisors of higher degree candidates. The qualifications for registration usually include some current research activity, a high level of competence in the discipline, that is, a PhD in the relevant area and some knowledge of supervisory skills. These universities offer seminars to assist staff members to acquire and maintain the relevant supervisory skills.

Even though I have provided some of those seminars and participated in others, I am still convinced that more needs to be done to make potential supervisors aware of the nature of the task, of the relevant skills and personal characteristics required. This book is intended to make a contribution to that need.

Everyone is an expert

Even though there is a widespread reluctance to take on the role of supervisor it is a fairly common topic of discussion.

At many points during your work as a supervisor of higher degree candidates, from the first day until retirement, you will receive advice from many quarters. Supervision is a bit like football; everyone is good at it until they start to play. Another similarity to football is that according to the supporters and players, only one code does it properly.

There are many types of unqualified adviser who offer gratuitous advice. When you receive advice I suggest that you do not react angrily but listen until you have been able to assess the authority of the speaker. Questions along the following lines will be helpful in making that

assessment: "How many candidates have you supervised successfully? Perhaps I can benefit from your experience." If the answer is: "A friend told me…" or even worse: "According to the regulations…", you may wish to handle the speaker as you would any person who presumes to give advice without benefit of knowledge.

If the answer is: "None, but my PhD was an unhappy experience because my supervisor did not…", you ought to listen to the story because it may contain some useful lessons. Those lessons may be of two types: one type about the supervisor; and the other type about the candidate.

If the answer to your question is: "Ten (all in your discipline or a related one)", encourage the speaker to expand on those experiences. There is almost certain to be some useful information even if the speaker's ways of operating do not appeal to you.

If the answer to your question is: "Ten (in an unrelated discipline)", encourage the speaker to continue but be prepared to argue about or to ignore those matters which are discipline-related or reflect practices which are peculiar to that discipline.

Those comments also apply to the advice in this book. I have had a long and varied experience but perhaps it is dated, too narrow or shows some other shortcoming. As is said above, note the content and select the bits that seem to be relevant to your problem.

The supervision of higher degree candidates

Let me first explain in general terms what I believe is involved in the supervision of higher degree candidates.

I think that it is the ultimate teaching role; it is a one-to-one relationship intended to draw out whatever abilities the candidate possesses and then to develop those abilities as far as possible. In one sense, it is the easiest of tasks – highly intelligent, highly motivated candidates who either possess a good basic knowledge of the relevant discipline or have the ability to acquire it quickly. However, in another sense, it is a very difficult task – candidates range from those who are more able than the supervisor down to good average. The selection process ought to protect us from those who are not at least marginally capable.

There is another difficulty. We all talk about the need to consider epistemology and ontology, that is, the philosophical views held, consciously or unconsciously, by ourselves and

others which are products of the environment in which we grew up – language, culture, country and so on. However, when candidates may come from any racial or cultural background those philosophical terms have immediate application; they have to be dealt with rather than talked about.

Care must be taken to ensure that the strength of these ingrained beliefs is not underestimated. What is regarded as the classic example, at least in the Christian world, is the drastic treatment of Galileo, the famous renaissance scientist. Galileo, an Italian monk, had published his belief that the earth circled the sun, which, at that time, was contrary to Church doctrine. The official view was that the earth was the centre of the universe. He was excommunicated for his heresy which was almost equivalent to a death sentence.

The primary purpose of the supervisor is to help, lead or push the candidate to conduct and report on a research project that will earn a higher degree. That will involve the selection, design and conduct of a project that will, in some way, add to the store of human knowledge. Although there are different requirements for masters degrees by research, PhDs and DBAs, I believe that the only differences from the supervisor's point of view are the duration of the relationship with the candidate and, sometimes, the intensity of the effort involved. In either case, you, as supervisor, are likely to be pushed beyond your then current knowledge of the topic area and the research method selected which will force you into doing some vigorous homework. That homework is not to master the topic, that is the candidate's job, but to maintain your ability to communicate intelligently with the candidate.

In addition, I believe that a very important function of any higher degree program ought to be to develop the individuality of the candidate. This means that the supervisor must be sufficiently intelligent and tolerant to assist the candidate to develop ideas that may not be personally pleasing.

This reference to individuality highlights a potentially severe tension within the supervisory task. We are supposed to be turning out people who are not only expert in their chosen topics but are also rigorous observers of the traditional rules of intellectual discourse. Some of those rules relate to formal presentation such as the proper referencing of sources, consistency in spelling and so on. These are usually seen as indicators of intellectual discipline and breaches are obvious.

I think that a more important rule is the one about always being meticulous. The habit of being meticulous can often result in an almost tedious concern with detail but there are ways of demonstrating thoroughness without inflicting boredom on the reader or listener. I believe that the material in the following pages will help you to strike a balance between observance of those rules and developing a candidate's individuality. In fact, I have tried hard to achieve that balance; sometimes I go into tedious detail about a point that I regard as important; sometimes I recognise my sources; and sometimes I am disrespectful of authority.

However, as I am reporting on what I have been doing rather than on what other people have suggested ought to be done, the "reference" is often the worst possible one, "in my experience". That experience has been over forty years' involvement with honours and higher degree candidates. Over the past fifteen years my work has been almost solely with higher-degree-by-research candidates.

The diversity of the task

Yet another difficulty with the supervisory task is the almost infinite variety relating to discipline, language, the skills required for particular research tasks and the personal characteristics of the parties involved. Obviously, it is unlikely that an accountant would possess the range of technical skills required to supervise a PhD in engineering or vice versa. However, I do not believe that the possession of a particular technical skill is the most important issue – particular skills can be learnt or bought – the real issue is the development of the skills in the candidate. In other words, I think that the supervisor's role is one of management, not of working in the trenches with the candidate.

I am sure that my overall philosophy about supervision will keep cropping up in the following pages but my commitment to individuality must limit its influence as supervisors are also individuals. Individuality means different reactions to problems and people so, at best, I can only say that although the topics with which I deal are of the greatest importance, my ways of dealing with them are just one possible example, even though those ways have proved to be successful.

I have already drawn attention to the potential diversity in the relationship. Although in all disciplines the relationship lasts for several years, in some disciplines, particularly the natural sciences, contact may be close and continuous, almost in the nature of work-place supervision.

In other disciplines, particularly in the social sciences, contact may be intermittent as it involves meetings to discuss unsupervised work done by the candidate.

Other potential sources of diversity are the policies of different universities and the practices of specific disciplines.   Some universities appoint a single supervisor; others appoint two supervisors; and still others use committee or team systems.

In the first case, the authority relationship and responsibilities are clear. Where there are two supervisors, authority and responsibility may be shared equally, one may be designated senior or principal supervisor or one of them may be a trainee.

As I have had no experience of the committee or team systems I do not know how they operate but I believe that the material in this book is relevant to all supervisors.   Those working as members of committees or teams will be subject to the additional problems of committee or team dynamics.   There is a substantial literature on the different structures but it seems to indicate preference for rather than evidence that one system is inherently better than the others.

As my experience has been in the social sciences, mainly in the business disciplines, this book is directed primarily at academics in those disciplines.   Even so, I am confident that much of the material is relevant to the role of supervisor in all disciplines.

Some of the costs

Later in this book I will convey a lot of information about the workload attached to supervision but it is appropriate to give some idea here.   I think that my usual commitment for each full-time candidate is about two hours every two weeks for meetings and much the same for relevant reading and administrative tasks.   The work is rarely that demanding in the early stages of the candidature as there is little reading to be done.   Then it increases dramatically when work begins on the literature review; it falls away during the data collection and analysis stages. Towards the end the work becomes heavy because drafts of the complete thesis are being written, read and corrected.

I have never logged the time actually spent with or on behalf of a candidate but I believe that an average of two hours per week is about right.   Of course, some candidates will make you work hard because they are working hard.   Other candidates will give you more worry than work because they are not performing as they ought.

Some universities build an allowance for supervision into their formal work plans, others do not.   I know of one university which allows 15 points out of a normal load of 100 points for supervision of PhD candidates; another allows 10 points; and yet another allows none but expects staff to supervise higher degree candidates.

Some of the benefits

I like supervising higher degree candidates and, currently, I have no other university duties so there are no competing demands.   However, I realise that most academics have to do other things: teach undergraduate students; mark papers; and attend committee meetings to name some of them.

I believe that the greatest benefit is participating in, even influencing, the discovery of new knowledge and the development of the next generation of academic leaders. There is great job satisfaction.   A more pragmatic view of that benefit is that you can always be an informed participant at conferences.   Another benefit is that supervision, especially successful supervision, is a very positive entry in your curriculum vitae.

Plan of this book

There are many topics of potential interest to people contemplating taking on the role of supervisor, some of them affect all disciplines but there are others which may be relevant to only a few disciplines, even only to the business disciplines.

It is clear that the generally applicable matters pertaining to university administration of higher degrees ought to be considered first so the next chapter is entitled Forms! Forms! Forms! Many of the other topics discussed in later pages are inter-related and may have to be managed simultaneously. However, for purposes of exposition they have to be considered separately so it is necessary to impose an order on them.   As far as possible inter-relationships have been noted when discussing each topic so the chapters can be read out of order.

The topics/matters considered in my imposed order are:

Getting to know your candidate   (Ch 3)
Identifying a topic (Ch 4)
The proposal (Ch 4)
Identifying gaps in skills (Ch 5)

The literature review (Ch 6)

Research questions and methodology (Ch 7)

Ethical considerations (Ch8)

Getting access to resources (Ch9)

Data collection (Ch 9)

Analysis of data (Ch 10)

Publications arising from the thesis (Ch 11)

Writing the thesis (Ch 12)

Where possible I have used examples drawn from experiences with candidates in the past.   Even though I am proud of my dealings and relationships with past candidates, those examples are just examples, they are not prescriptions to be followed uncritically.   The wide-ranging diversity of the supervisory task could well mean that my solutions were successful in unique circumstances; they may not work as well in other circumstances.   On the other hand, of course, diversity may be more apparent than real, for example, if the candidate is weak in some area of the basic discipline, the weakness is the problem not the fact that the discipline is computing or pharmacy rather than accounting.

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