

EXPECTATIONS IN POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION: PERSPECTIVES FROM SUPERVISORS AND DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the postgraduate supervisor and postgraduate student is commonly described in the literature because of the interesting and sometimes even complex dynamics involved in this process. However, the literature is not always very explicit about the specific expectations of those involved. The findings of a qualitative case study, completed at an American research intensive university (Indiana University, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA) are communicated in the article. Despite the complexity of the research supervision process, the expectations associated with the supervision process remains a unique experience of collaborative learning. A commitment is required from each of the role players to communicate expectations initially and continuously. Furthermore it was noted that an environment should be created for students in which they are respected as colleagues.

Keywords: Expectations; postgraduate research supervision; postgraduate supervisors; postgraduate students

1. BACKGROUND

The purpose of the postgraduate research supervision process is for the doctoral student to prepare a thesis and in the process, develop research skills and become a contributing member of the academic community. Ideally, this transformation should take place in a collaborative learning environment (Friedrich-Nel and Masalla 2010). However, a review of the literature in this area illustrates a different picture. Wisker, Robinson and Shacham (2007) refer to the lonely process of supervision and doctoral work, Green (2005) talks about 'unfinished business', while Grant (2005) calls the postgraduate supervision process an uncertain practice. Again, Sambrook, Stewart and Roberts (2008) emphasise the complex relationships between the involved parties.

Although some postgraduate supervisors provide their students with specific outcomes to be attained as well as communicate their expectations, this specific arrangement may not be common practice. Additionally, students are not always provided with an opportunity to articulate and transfer their expectations. There is also the assumption that the parties involved should intuitively know the process as well as know the outcomes to be attained.

Although the relationship between the supervisor and postgraduate student is commonly described in the literature by a number of authors, the literature is not always very explicit about the specific expectations of those involved. The voice of the supervisor is more prominent in the literature although more recently studies to capture the voices of students have emerged. To emphasise how much uncertainty is associated with the supervision process, Grant (2005:337-338) indicates that she commonly hears the following questions from students at supervision workshop sessions: 'What can I expect from my supervisor, what does s/he expect from me? How often should we meet? Exactly what is supervision, assisting or directing?' Interestingly, she mentions that even the supervisors, in particular those who are new to the process have questions, namely: 'What are my responsibilities? What role should I take at different levels of study e.g. how much intervention? Who/what is being supervised — the student or the research? How do you keep a student on track?' These questions do not have simple one sentence answers and sadly, according to Grant (2005) are not routinely addressed by the parties involved in the supervision process. This again demonstrates that the supervision process is clouded with uncertain practices, creating opportunity for misunderstandings and miscommunications between the supervisor and the student.

The purpose of this article is to share and discuss the findings of a qualitative case study on the expectations of the postgraduate supervisor and the doctoral student, completed at an American university.

2. LESSONS FROM THE LITERATURE

2.1 The expectations associated with postgraduate supervision

While the primary aim of doctoral education is to assist the student to prepare the thesis, additional goals are articulated in the literature (Hill 2011). These include assisting the student to develop research skills and to become a contributing member of the academic community. In order to meet these goals, the student needs to be exposed to the academic environment and be provided with adequate preparation. The student has to gain discipline specific knowledge to become a lifelong learner. The student has to learn the necessary social skills to be a successful academician and be able to communicate research results at conferences and other academic meetings.

In the traditional supervision model, also referred to as the apprenticeship model, a student is supervised by one or more supervisors. More recently several additional supervision models have been described. One of the reasons why additional models are used is that different types of doctoral degrees are available, necessitating a change in the way in which students are supervised. Another reason is that supervisors are becoming more innovative in response to the desire to accommodate larger numbers of students.

Regardless of the type of degree or the supervision model used — the supervisor's input and assistance in the timely and successful completion of the thesis remains important (Brew & Peseta 2004).

The function of the postgraduate supervisor is to guide the postgraduate student in the research process and to assist the student in becoming an 'independent professional researcher and scholar in his/her field, capable of adapting to various research arenas' (Pearson and Brew 2002; Wisker, Exley, Antoniou & Ridley 2008). Kumar Mallan and Adkins (2011) talk about the guided experience, referring to the support and guidance that the student needs to receive while preparing the thesis. Grant (2001) also indicates that the successful outcome depends on 'good supervision'. To attain the required outcome an agreement should exist between the student and the supervisor working towards a common goal, namely the production of a thesis of high quality (Halse and Malfroy 2010). As such Waghid (2007) concludes that the supervisory process is 'a critical friendship' that focuses on trust, respect and imagination.

A number of studies capturing the voices of students have recently emerged. Although many of the studies focus on the expectations, needs and experiences of international students, it is still worthwhile to take note of the lessons learned (Hopwood, Alexander, Harris-Huemmert, McAlpine and Wagstaff 2011; Leonard 2010; Middleton 2010; Seddon 2010; Starflied 2010; Trigwell 2010). The main message is that students require assistance, they need infrastructure, and they need to be introduced into the research community (Conrad 2003).

2.2 The challenges in postgraduate supervision

Adkins (2009) expresses concern about the mismatch in expectations between postgraduate supervisors and students regarding respective responsibilities; in particular when factors such as the quality of supervision, completion rates and student satisfaction are considered. In contrast, Lizzio, Stokes and Wilson (2005) expect that students are self-regulated and find their own direction in the supervision process.

Backhouse (2009) identifies the challenges postgraduate supervisors face, such as the increasing academic demands, preparedness to provide postgraduate supervision and human and other resources available. Malfroy (2005) warns that unequal power relationships between the supervisor and the student may exist and suggests that a trusting and positive environment should be established so as to counteract the disjunction in expectations between the supervisor and the student.

Conrad (2003) points to a number of student challenges such as student independence, their level of responsibility, preparedness to conduct and complete research and the growing number of postgraduate students.

Sambrook et al. (2008) indicate that receiving feedback and constructive criticism may not always be simple and well accepted by students. For this reason these authors recommend that this matter is clarified at the beginning of the postgraduate process.

3. METHODS

A qualitative study exploring the perception of postgraduate supervisors and doctoral students was conducted with an American university (Indiana University in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA) as a case study. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Protection of Human Subjects approved the study (IRB 1104005134 dated 26 April 2011). Postgraduate supervisors and doctoral students from various schools at the university participated voluntarily in structured interviews. The participants responded to an invitation to participate in the study at a university wide Graduate Affairs committee meeting. Additional participants were contacted following referrals from supervisors and students. Interviews were scheduled at a time and venue convenient for the participant, according to an interview schedule. During the interview the responses were captured electronically and verified with the interviewee at the conclusion of the interview. Following the steps by Denscombe (2007), the qualitative data were investigated for common themes that emerged and grouped accordingly.

4. FINDINGS

The findings communicated in this paper focus on the perceptions of supervisors on what they expected from their doctoral students, while the perceptions of the doctoral students captured their expectations of the research supervisors. Additionally students also responded to a question on their perceptions of what they think was expected of them. In the next section the findings of the postgraduate supervisors are presented, followed by the student responses. Direct quotes from the participants are used to illustrate the findings.

4.1 Research supervisor expectations

The responses of the postgraduate supervisors were grouped according to three themes that emerged from the findings, namely the personal and professional qualities expected from the students, expectations regarding knowledge and skills on the research process and the expectations regarding the final outcome of the research process. The personal qualities expected from the students were to be problem solvers, disciplined, innovative, engaged, reflective, motivated and comfortable in discussing their own issues with the supervisor. The response of one of the supervisors, to emphasize the above, is captured below:

High expectations in working independently – how to work on their own, and when they have a question they can come and ask me any time – the student who does not do that have a hard time working with me. I will always be there to help the student but they need to take the initiative first. I sometimes have to take a more corrective and active action when I do not see progress. I tell them that I need them to be independent and work first by themselves. I discuss the expectations with them and I tell them to talk to current students to find out how it is working with me because I am busy and I travel a lot so we need to work around my busy schedule – this way I attract the right kind of student to work with me' (F23)

As professionals, students were expected to work hard, be committed and matured as a researcher, be an independent scientist and be able to accept constructive criticism. Regarding the research process, supervisors expected students to identify a research problem, formulate the research question, and design the methodology. They were expected to read the literature, make time to write, have innovative ideas and be in a scholarship mode. The responses of two of the supervisors are captured below:

'My approach has changed over the years – currently I tell my students I expect one publication – although many students exceed this expectation - one student graduated with 6 publications! Good for the career of the students and future research grants to have the publications. But more so I expect them to become an independent scientist and mature as a researcher, identify a research problem, design questions and a methodology to answer questions and develop an hypotheses, student become more mature in this way. Students develop in awesome scientists working in prestigious lab positions and that makes me very proud! To help them to develop into something better – I cannot do that for them – I can help foster them - my job does not end when they graduate – I keep contact with them and ask about work and family' (F16)

'Be able to develop research ideas and do research, how to solve problems, publish and present results at conferences and get the results published' (F12)

The expectations of the majority of the supervisors who participated in the study were that they wanted the students to complete the proposal and the thesis and obtain the degree. Supervisors also expected students 'to keep in touch' by e-mail or text messages to keep the supervisor informed about progress. Supervisors also expected students to publish and present the results of their research at academic meetings. They also expected the students to work hard, to learn all the time, to accept constructive criticism and feedback, be dedicated and committed during the research process, do their best and successfully obtain the degree.

The responses of three of the supervisors are captured below:

'Expect them to be in the lab working in the project – main role is to get the project done, to be up on the latest literature in their field, ...'(F6)

'...Ph.D. students are very well aware of what is expected of them along the way--to demonstrate a mastery/superior level of expertise in their chosen discipline/area' (F5)

'I explain the process that we will be following and how I will be giving the feedback. I discuss this on an ongoing basis and sometimes refer back to discussions – i.e. remember when we discussed AB...I discuss with them what I expect, that is to work hard, to learn to accept constructive criticism, be committed during the research process, do their best, work hard and keep eye on the price namely getting the degree. I also expect the students to acquire the skills and attributes of a successful colleague – turn them into productive, happy contributors' (F22)

4.2 Student expectations

The students expected research guidance and mentorship from the supervisors. They required assistance on the project, how to maintain focus, and how to manage the project. They wanted their supervisor to be a soundboard for ideas and responses. Students also needed guidance from the supervisor on their presentations.

'Guidance on the process. I do not ask her questions about my specific research method ... but she does a lot of cheerleading for me. That helps me along. She is an approachable person and always makes me feel better – gives me a pep talk. I have also asked her to help me find work' (S4).

'Guide me through my research project, help me avoid crucial mistakes in the design of my study' (S13)

Students expected timely and constructive feedback from the supervisor. They expected their supervisor to adhere to agreed upon timelines and to respect their work.

'Timely feedback on content – within one week or sometimes faster however I realize that there are busy schedules that may hinder the time limit. If I wait too long I cannot remember and lose my connectivity with the work. Busy schedules and jobs sometimes impede the ability of the supervisor to give feedback timely ...'(S1)

'Timely feedback – as student I know I cannot expect her to give work back fast – so it is communicated when I will get the work back (e.g. will tell when she can do the work and give back to me).

Helps me better articulate what it is I am trying to research. Important to communicate – I have anxiety when I send the work – I have questions like ? am I on the right path with the work and will my writing be clear enough - she understands that anxiety. Lots of communication, being timely, helping me to narrow my research topic' (S10)

'Need feedback on my work, to help me prepare for the defense and leadership from the committee' (S8)

The students indicated that they required their supervisor to provide leadership and to treat them as professionals and with respect, and to act as a mentor and thus be supportive. They wanted the supervisor to provide guidance on their careers. They also expected the supervisor to be professional and transparent and to understand the student growth and development that accompanied the research process.

'Respectful of me and my work - not belittle me or my work. Constructive criticism so that I and my work can improve. Available for support' (S1)

'To teach me everything he knows about the topic and all relevant information around the topic, everything that is important for me to know about the research that I am doing' (S12)

'At different stages I have different expectations' (S9)

The students were clear that they required guidance and/or support from the supervisor throughout the research process. The students also indicated that they valued the feedback from their supervisor to shape their work.

'Talk through ideas, help put things in perspective and in a proper frame to be supportive of my ideas and also non judgmental and truthful about my ideas – will give an honest opinion' (S5)

'Needed guidance in terms of research focus, guided me through the proposal and the research, guided me through the experiments, when he gets invites to write chapters he includes me in that and congress presentations, I benefitted from the relationship and gained experience in presenting and writing' (S7)

4.3 Students' perceptions on the expectations of the supervisors

The students indicated that the supervisor expected them to adhere to pre-arranged dates and deadlines, and to be flexible and be able to adjust to constructive inputs on their work. Students said they had to grow and develop through the research process, to present their research at conferences, and to provide only polished work that appears professional and of good quality to the supervisor to read. They had to keep the supervisor informed about their progress, and report and communicate progress while respecting the supervisor's time schedules. They had to set goals and show consistent progress with the project, work hard, and write.

If required, they were expected to seek assistance to improve on necessary skills (i.e. written communication). The responses of several of the students to inform the above are captured below:

'To meet deadlines; To be respectful of the supervisor and the time schedules; To adhere to the comments on the constructive feedback, to submit my work timely and submit professional looking work of good quality' (S1)

'Keep the supervisor informed about my progress, where I was in the process and provide him with materials only when it is ready (not too early when it is not yet ready). I once had the experience where I misunderstood the communication with my supervisor and I send information too soon. He was not happy ...' (S2).

'I will do the work, add value to the topic, and get the work done' (S5)

'Work hard and get my time lines right and finish experiments and write my papers on time and read about the literature in my research – that is my responsibility. Make sure my project is right' (S7)

'I am expected to report my progress and communicate committee members on my research' (S9).

'Become an independent researcher - to be independent how to design research, write a grant, at least two publications but I had three' (S11)

'Expect to learn and know as much as possible about the topic, how to do research, how to criticize other's work, what should you do and not do, what is right/wrong' (S12)

4.4 Actions taken to clarify uncertainties

Should they not follow what was expected, students asked and re-asked. Both the supervisors and the students indicated that communicating expectations had to be a constant and ongoing process. Expectations may also change as the research process and the project developed. The supervisors indicated that although the expectations were communicated in several ways, repeating the expectations throughout the research process was important. The responses of the students are indicated below:

'Sometimes I needed to make changes. I had to look for more information and decide how to do the next step, sometimes argue with my supervisor if I do not agree' (S11)

'I think so – when I had questions I asked – when I received feedback I went back and looked up and then asked for advice on my findings' (S12)

'Schedule a meeting with my supervisor to ask and discuss what is not clear to me, Most of the time I get the answer to my questions/problems. Not always easy' (S13)

'Call a meeting, have an agenda or a question, discuss the agenda or questions and then they will discuss where things stand and my progress, usually not in my presence' (S14)

'I had to ask a lot of questions to get clarifications. A lot of learning by doing – sometimes overwhelming for me but I managed' (S15)

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this case study are congruent with the literature published in this area. There is also a great deal of congruency among the students and the supervisors. The research supervisors who participated in the study had high expectations of their students. They expected the students to take the responsibility of their studies, to keep in touch and by doing so keep the supervisor updated about their research progress. Communicating the expectations was ongoing and not a once-off event. In fact both the supervisors and the students mentioned that communicating the expectations was ongoing - a constant reminder or clarification. Hopwood et al. (2011) indicate that most of the time there is intuitive knowledge about the doctoral process and a lack of explicitly explaining expectations. For that reason Moriarty, Danaher and Danaher (2008) point to the relevance of discussing and clarifying the expectations at the beginning of the research supervision process. The research supervisor thus has to assist in establishing an educational environment and to scaffold opportunities for the student to develop reasoning skills, critical thinking and to gain confidence in challenging the supervisor. This action may sound simple, but taken into account the diversity in background and educational development of the postgraduate student cohort currently registered for doctoral studies at universities, research supervisors may have to employ specific actions so as to attain this goal.

The results of the case study also showed that in addition to guidance on research, the student participants also expected constant communication and feedback from their supervisors on their work. Watts (2010) argues that aspects such as communication, planning, and empathy from the supervisor will guide the student in addressing their academic problems. Poulos and Mahony (2008) and Carless (2006) reported on the perceptions of students concerning the relevance and impact of feedback. Students indicated that feedback should be directed at making changes to have the required impact. Feedback should also be timely and credible. Although these aspects were confirmed by the students and supervisors who participated in the case study, maintaining ongoing and effective communication and feedback to and from the student may be a challenge and may also require a commitment from all involved.

The importance of creating a trusting environment in which the student feel safe to ask questions and even challenge the supervisor was highlighted by the findings. As such Grant (2005) emphasizes that guidance should be motivating and instill trust and respect. Malfroy (2005) outlines that a collegial relationship needs to exist between the student and the supervisor in which the student is viewed as a professional.

Because there are potential uncertainties on the expectations between supervisors and students, these authors propose as a solution a collaborative process of knowledge sharing as well as using different models of supervision.

Although the term 'research supervisor' or 'postgraduate supervisor' is used in this article, it is important to note that several roles and responsibilities are associated with this term. Some of the roles and responsibilities – also identified in this case study - are to be an advisor, counselor, mentor, to provide support and encouragement and to be available when assistance is required. To eliminate confusion, a logical starting point may thus be to clarify the terminology as well as the associated roles and responsibilities for the supervisor and the student.

Students who participated in the study provided evidence that they approached the supervisor with confidence. Where necessary they will ask and re-ask for an explanation or clarification. The students also had the confidence to respectfully remind the research supervisor that the feedback was due. Although the students respected the busy schedules of their research supervisors, these actions point to their active roles in the research process. As much as the research supervisor has a responsibility to communicate with the student, communication has to be a two-way process to optimise the timelines of the research process so as to assist the student in the timely completion of the studies.

Although postgraduate research supervision may be identified as an uncertain process, there is evidence of changes and emerging approaches in the literature. As such Hemer (2012) proposes a model of 'supervision over coffee'. Additionally, Manathunga (2007) provided a mentoring relationship as a solution to address possible unequal power relationships with the student. Finally Erwee, Albion, Van Rensburg and Malan (2011) say that the ideal situation is for supervisors to regularly participate in professional development sessions to discuss aspects such as the expectations of students.

6. CONCLUSION

In this article the expectations of the postgraduate research supervisors and doctoral students from an American university were presented. The literature communicates the expectations of both these groups; however, the voices of the students are still vague. It is important to entertain the expectations of both the groups so as to change or adjust postgraduate supervision practices and in doing so attain the goal of assisting the student in successfully and timely degree completion. The opinions of the supervisor and the student also pointed to additional expectations. The supervisors expected personal and professional qualities of the students. The students expected supervisors to provide guidance and support in addition to research. These aspects align with the literature on the roles and responsibilities of the postgraduate research supervisor.

The context of the university where the case study was performed, the availability of postgraduate supervisors, their preparedness, and the preparedness of the students who participated in the project may be unique. However, the lessons are still of value when translated to the local context. The fact that the voices of both the supervisors and the students were captured adds value to the study. Repeating the project to capture the voices of supervisors and students in the local context will add more value to the findings.

The ever changing postgraduate supervision environment may require supervisors and students to clarify and discuss their expectations on an ongoing and regular basis. It is also important that supervisors create a safe environment for students in which they can grow and develop and in which they are free to challenge the supervisor. Additional attention should be given to explore the effect of the possible unequal power relationships as well as actions required to avoid such situations. Supervisors may need to explore alternative models so as to ascertain that the outcome is a successful project linked to a doctoral graduate with the desired qualities. Students on the other hand need to become familiar with the expectations, and take the responsibility to prepare in advance for their role as a successful doctoral student and as an emerging scholar.

Despite the complexity of the research supervision process, the relationship between the supervisor and the student and thus the expectations associated with the process remains a unique experience of collaborative learning. A commitment is required from each of the role players in this relationship to communicate expectations upfront and ongoing so that a safe environment in which critical thinkers and problems solvers are nurtured and respected is created.

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