

Research supervisor training: an irrelevant concept or the key to success?

Adrian Eley

The relationship between postgraduate student and his or her supervisor can be a tricky one. Adrian Eley describes some of the problems and explores the need for supervisor training.

The last few years have seen an increase in the number of postgraduate students from the UK and from overseas. As a result, more academic staff have supervisory responsibilities, often to a greater extent than before. This increase has been accompanied by external pressures from funding bodies for successful and rapid completion of research degrees and for early publication of research work in good quality journals. These changes are occurring at a time of increasing pressures on academic staff with regard to their teaching and administrative duties. The combination of all these factors could be bad news for the quality of graduate supervision. If academic staff are to carry out their new or increased supervisory responsibilities effectively, there is likely to be a need for increased staff development, as individuals may need support if they are to successfully supervise and support postgraduate students through a research degree programme. The question is, do we really need more supervisor training, or is this just an increase in bureaucracy that we really haven't got time for?

The supervisor-student relationship is all important!



CARTOON COURTESY IAN GEARY, UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

● What do supervisors do?

The term 'supervision' means many things to many people, depending largely on their own experiences as either student or supervisor or both. Essentially, supervision should be the process of training the student to become a successful researcher and for this to be suitably recognized by the award of a doctorate (or other research degree). The student should not just be regarded

as 'a pair of hands', a means of generating research data for the supervisor to use.

The problem is that to be a good supervisor – a good research trainer – one has to be successful in many roles. As Phillipps & Pugh have described, students expect their supervisors to:

- read their work well in advance
- be available when needed
- be friendly, open and supportive
- be constructively critical
- have a good knowledge of the research area
- structure meetings so that it is relatively easy to exchange ideas
- have sufficient interest in their research to put more information in the student's path
- be sufficiently involved in their success to help them get a good job at the end of it all

It is clear therefore, that the demands on a supervisor can be high and that the supervisor–student relationship is fundamental to the supervision process. Many problems that arise with supervision can be traced back to the two parties' attitudes towards this key relationship.

● Problem areas

Common problems for students

A lack of:

- resources and facilities
- student rights and entitlements
- clarity over supervisory roles
- attention to process (e.g. methodology, evaluation of data, etc.)
- attention to the 'whole person'
- attention to monitoring and support mechanisms

Common problems for supervisors

Students not:

- being independent enough
- producing written work of a high standard
- being honest about their progress
- following the supervisor's advice
- realizing how much work is involved
- making a real commitment to their research

Even the best supervisor will no doubt admit to making mistakes in supervising as each student is different and potentially needs managing in a different sort of way. However, there can be tragic consequences if things do go terribly wrong as shown by the suicide of an American graduate student in 1998. This case highlighted the need to consider a different system of monitoring the quality of a graduate student's supervision. It was also evident that this was not just a one-off case and that others were known.

So if we all know that problems do occur, what can we do about them?

● Solutions

Unfortunately, there are no simple solutions. The nature of academic research inevitably leads to a self-perpetuating system: one generation of specialist researchers trains the next and so on. When students themselves eventually become supervisors they usually have a very limited number of role models to turn to for guidance. If their supervisors were not particularly effective, students may often not have other points of reference to help them develop better practice for themselves. Therefore, if nothing is done to change the status quo, it is difficult to see how things can improve. This is where the idea of supervisor training has emerged from, in an attempt to change bad practice into good practice and break the cycle of new supervisors replicating the processes that they themselves experienced.

Training has been introduced in many institutions to help academics develop their supervisory roles more effectively and avoid or resolve problems in the supervisory relationship. It often takes the form of discussion groups and may include topics such as exchanging good practice, refining the role of the supervisor and finding practical ways to improve standards. However, not all academics consider supervisor training to be useful, or even necessary, and this view seems to be coloured by two main problems. The first is terminological: using the word 'training' in this context may suggest that supervisors are not carrying out their supervisory duties correctly. This can create a negative perception of training programmes, particularly among more experienced staff who have supervised research students and are reluctant to admit that they might need 'training' to do something which they are already supposed to know how to do. Programmes that focus on awareness of current issues and enhancing the development of supervisory skills may stand a better chance of overcoming this natural defensive reaction. Second, there has been the issue of provision. Supervisor 'training' can often be provided on an *ad hoc* basis and the programmes themselves may not be properly thought through. There is a wide variation between institutions, from those which provide poor or in some cases non-existent programmes to those which play an important part in developing graduate education. For example, at the University of Manchester, there is a contractual requirement for attendance at a supervisor training programme at least once every three years. Failure to attend means that the institution will no longer support the supervisor and he/she is ineligible for Research Council studentships.

As mentioned above, although training provision is mixed across universities, help and guidance are provided at national level. In 1994, the UK Council for Graduate Education was established to promote the interests of graduate education in all disciplines in

higher education institutions. It achieves this through a series of activities, workshops, conferences and seminars which often include the topic of research supervision.

● Future prospects

External scrutiny of research supervision is likely to increase. We are already expected to be in a position to meet the expectations of the new QAA Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Programmes. Now HEFCE has put forward plans to assess the quality of research provision and supervision, proposing that failure to meet minimum standards would lead to research studentships no longer being awarded. This further regulatory mechanism in addition to the RAE would greatly increase academic workloads even further.

If we are not unduly concerned about attracting funding or research students, then research supervisor training may well be an irrelevant concept. However, if we want to continue to attract research funding and the best research students, then we have no choice but to enhance our research supervisory skills – and be able to demonstrate that we have done so. Some type of research supervisor training or development programme could help us to achieve this goal. As a first step, if you would like to find out more about this issue, why not come along to the SGM Education Group sessions at UEA in September 2001. There will be two events, including a symposium on *Research Supervision: How to Get it Right* and a workshop on *Problems in the Supervisor–Student Relationship*. Supervisors and students are welcome to attend and I look forward to seeing you there.

● *Adrian Eley is Senior Lecturer in Medical Microbiology, Division of Genomic Medicine, University of Sheffield Medical School, Sheffield S10 2RX. Tel. 0114 271 2335; Fax 0114 273 9926 email a.r.eley@sheffield.ac.uk*

Further reading

Higher Education Funding Council for England (2000). *Review of Research: Postgraduate Student Issues.*

Djerassi, C. (1999). Who will mentor the mentors? *Nature* **397**, 291.

Phillipps, E.M. & Pugh, D.S. (2000). *How to get a PhD*, 3rd edn. Open University Press.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. (1999). *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Postgraduate Research Programmes.*