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**This Unfathomable Thing Called Supervision: Negotiating
Better Working Relationships with Supervisors**

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This *unfathomable* thing called supervision: negotiating better working relationships with Supervisors

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Supervision has been a 'hot' topic on the postgraduate research agenda in recent years. This reflects the high importance of the supervisory relationship in completion of research theses and completion on time, as well as the dissatisfaction sometimes voiced by students about their supervisory experiences. The varied and complex issues of postgraduate research supervision have now received considerable coverage in the literature (D. & K. Battersby, 1980; Powles, 1988 & 1994; Moses, 1984, 1988 & 1990; Ballard & Clanchy, 1993; Parry & Hayden, 1994; Cullen et al, 1994; Acker et al, 1994). Special attention has been given to reviewing supervisors' current practices and procedures, to improving practice, to initiating development workshops, training programs and so forth (Welsh, 1982; Christopherson et al, 1983; Connell, 1985; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Conrad, 1992; Moses, 1985 & 1992; Nightingale, 1992; Powles, 1993; Russell, 1994; Whittle, 1994; Willcoxson, 1994). Expansive manuals detailing procedures for conducting residential workshop programs on postgraduate supervision, such as that edited by Zuber-Skerritt, have also appeared (1992). In short, there has been extensive scrutiny of the subject in the literature.

The push behind the more 'practical' literature has been to increase the effectiveness of supervisors to supervise. Listening to conference participants detail the various initiatives they have introduced in their respective universities also reinforces my impression of focussed attention on the supervisor. It is important that this push to improve supervisory practice continues. It is also reasonable to ask what students themselves might be able to contribute to this two-way relationship. The question is though, whether students *can* take a more active role in determining what goes on in supervision, given the unequal power relations of which they are often acutely aware, particularly in the early stages of their degrees. Further questions are: if they can, why do so many seem not to? what might be the value for students generally in becoming more active on their own behalf? and what can be done to help them in this ?

These questions have arisen from my advisory work with research students during the past five years. The questioning began, however, with submission of my own PhD and the realisation of how much time I had lost because of my own inefficiencies, often due to ignorance of a procedural kind. Since then, I have heard many completing PhDs express the same view. Only when it is all over do we become aware of how best to proceed, not only with the research and writing but also with a range of academic matters including handling supervision. There is not much comfort in knowing retrospectively. Some of this knowledge might be put to good use in future research projects, but most (there are a crazy few) will never again do a PhD.

It can be argued that developing more efficient procedural, research and writing strategies (often by osmosis) is an integral learning component of the PhD. That is, we learn by doing, which, in a sense, is true. But there is now increased pressure for students to complete within three years which, in turn, accentuates the need to develop procedural efficiency in different

increases in research degree enrolments (*National Report on Australia's Higher Education Sector* 1992). Just when students might be needing more assistance, supervisors are under greater pressure as the PhD becomes mass education.

It can be difficult for newly enrolled research students to identify what they should be focussing on and finding out about in the initial stages of the degree; after all they have not done a PhD before. Their *know-how*, or to dress this up a bit, *procedural knowledge* often proves insufficient in a variety of situations. *Know-how*, *savvy*, call it what we will, is something we all need to operate effectively in our systems, something which takes time to build-up, often a long time. My interest in procedural knowledge (or lack thereof) was sparked by a desire to identify strategies to help students short-cut the circuitous *know-how* route in a variety of situations, including that of supervision. That's one value for students: knowing up front may forestall potential problems that impact on the supervisory relationship.

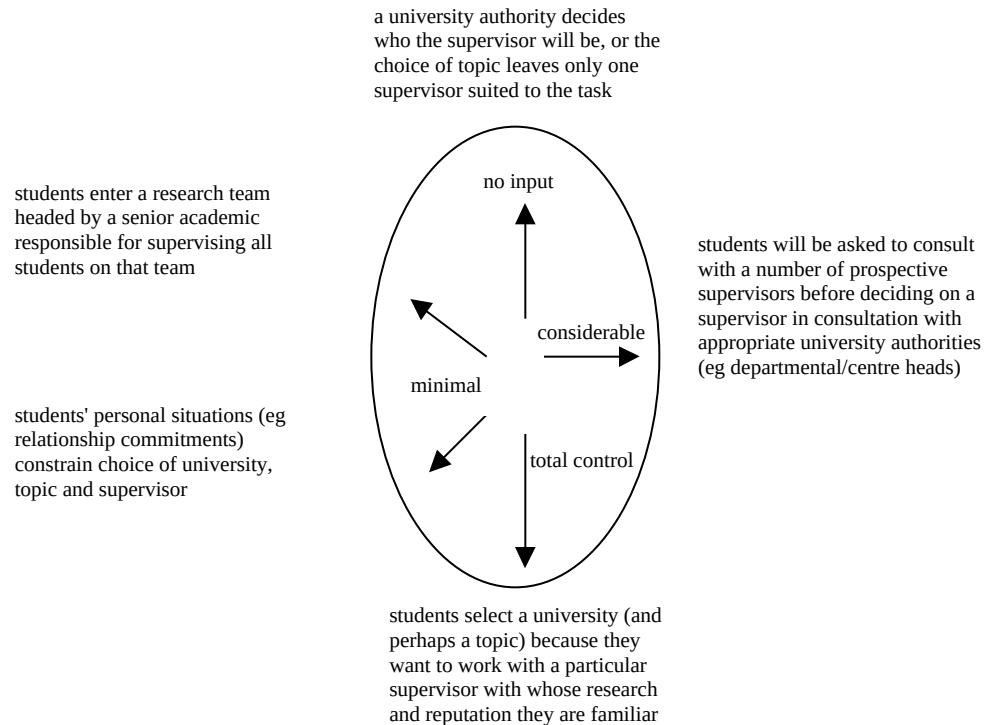
There are of course different levels of procedural ignorance about supervision and supervisory relationships (eg the different situations of international students, Australians transferring from one university to another, those transferring from one department or centre within a university to another, those continuing in the same department.) More specifically, an Australian student continuing to a PhD in the same department in which she has done a four year honours degree has advantages, in terms of procedural knowledge, over an international PhD student who is studying for the first time in a western (Australian) university. As well, some PhD students will have experienced prolonged, pure research supervision previously (Master Research); others, like those coming through honours into a PhD program, will not have. While most newly-enrolled PhD students (international and Australian) will have had some past experience of supervision, that experience is rarely adequate to handling the new supervisory situation before them.

Supervision tends to remain somewhat *unfathomable* to many students, something that they are subject to, or something that happens to them. Few of the many research students I have worked with see the supervisory relationship as a collaborative activity that can be negotiated, one in which they can have input in defining its terms, which is not to deny that many supervisory relationships work very well. That is another value for students: in learning to negotiate, they can begin to think of themselves as partners (not necessarily equal) in a supervisory endeavour in which their levels of dependency and self-reliance will fluctuate throughout the degree. The status of junior partner is not necessarily a handicap, and may be an advantage at times.

Negotiating in this context refers to students compromising on less important matters regarding supervision and persisting with those they consider essential to their well-being as researchers. Of course to know what to compromise on or persist with requires some prior knowledge of what supervision might entail. How can students proceed with confidence if they are unsure what to discuss with supervisors or potential supervisors? The remainder of this paper addresses this gap in procedural knowledge. It suggests some information needs of students and questions they need to answer or have answered to strengthen their negotiating positions. My objective is to get students thinking about supervision, so that do feel able to act. Students' sense of powerlessness may decrease as they become more knowledgeable about what questions to ask of themselves and others in the process of negotiating. Perhaps too they may be able to forestall finding themselves in some potentially unattractive supervisory situations where the inequality of existing power relations could prove intimidating.

Selecting a supervisor

Not all students will have equal say in who their supervisor will be. some of the main factors affecting the degree of input are outlined below:



The degree of input may have little to do with whether or not a supervisory relationship works well. It is nevertheless useful for students to be aware of some of the constraints and opportunities inhering in their different personal and academic situations. It's also useful for students to recognise institutional constraints implicit in some of the supervisory relationships outlined above. The type of relationship they enter may, for example, constrain options for resolving serious conflict should this arise, as would be the case where there is no other member of staff able or willing to supervise the topic. It can also be difficult to move from one research team to another, but not impossible if the move is initiated early on because a student's research interests have shifted. All research students can benefit by doing a minimal amount of research before they undertake to study at any university. This could involve asking (in person, by post, fax or email) for information on the dominant research interests of a department or centre as well as the specific research interests of the staff of that department. They could also ask if there is a current staff publication list they might have. As many departments, faculties and universities now have home pages on the internet, which contain a substantial amount of information aimed at attracting research students, this is another useful research resource.

By such methods, students could determine the appropriateness of the fit between their own general research interests and those of the department they are thinking to enter. They should also be able to see whether or not replacement supervisors would be possible if their first choice were to prove unsuitable (or leave) once they were on course. The questions behind information gathering here are: am I choosing the best university given my research interests (assuming choice)? do I feel sympathetic to the dominant research interests of that department (could be important in terms of topic choice, empirical or theoretical foci and so on)? is there

Whether or not students know who their supervisors will be before they begin their degrees may depend on such factors as whether they have identified and refined their topic. If they are in a position where they will be expected to find their own supervisor once on course while also sorting out their topic, they will need to do further research on staff interests—to speak to as many likely supervisors as possible, weighing staff interests and temperaments against their own, while generating enthusiasm for their proposed research in potential supervisors. They may need to approach a number of senior departmental staff to help identify the best people to contact. Other PhDs in the department who have been on course for some time are also a useful source of information on who is interested in what around the place.

It is certainly desirable that there be a reasonable fit between students' research interests and the knowledge base and interest of staff members to supervise. But finding a content fit should not be a student's sole consideration in selecting a supervisor. Difficulties over ownership of knowledge may arise if the research interests of a student and supervisor are too closely aligned. Or it may prove more important for a student to ensure methodological or theoretical compatibility, or that the supervisor has broad understanding of disciplinary research issues and procedures, rather than expertise in the substantive content. Some very independent students do manage to progress well with supervisors who are not content specialists in their research fields, though this may not be ideal. There is also the case where a student may wish to diverge from the topic and/or methodological directions of a department they hope to enter, and could benefit by discussing up-front whether or not this might cause them problems. The point is that there are important choices to be made in selecting both a supervisor and a university for higher level research.

Clarifying supervisory needs

Before students can know what they want from supervision they first need to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses as researchers. Self-assessment is the first step in assessing others, in this case supervisors. Questions such as those below can help students begin to identify their supervisory needs. Being aware of the extent of supervision desired can be important when talking through the relationship with a supervisor or potential supervisor. Having this awareness can help students to determine whether there is likely to be a reasonable fit of expectations between themselves and the supervisor, what they might need to compromise on, or whether it might be better to look elsewhere for a supervisor so as to forestall long-term problems due to an obvious mismatch of expectations. At the extremes, this mismatch might involve a student desiring close direction and guidance at every stage and the supervisor expecting a highly independent role from the student; or a reverse situation where the supervisor expects to monitor closely the research and writing while the student wants to work very independently.

• What are my research strengths and weaknesses as I see them?

(eg capacity for self-organisation, setting goals, time management, independent research, motivation etc-be honest!)

• What level of guidance or direction from my supervisor do I hope for in terms of:

- the literature search?
- reading for and defining the topic?
- developing research methods or experimental procedures?
- organising and processing data?

- presentations you might be asked to do as part of your postgraduate studies?
- producing papers for conferences or for publication?
- computing skills? statistics? data packages?

• **What level of critical input from my supervisor do I hope for during the writing of the thesis in terms of:**

- overall organisation and layout of thesis?
- structuring of individual chapters (eg Literature Review)?
- ideas and their development?
- presentation details (referencing and bibliographies; grammar; expression; graphs and tables etc)?
- final proofreading and editing?
- English language support? (international students)*

* This is important and needs to be discussed early in the supervisory relationship. Second-language students may be able to get outside help from study skills or language and learning centres. They should visit these as early as possible in their course to see what help is available. These students do need to know **early on** if they will be given assistance with language and writing, as well as the final editing of their theses.

Approaching supervision

Having reflected on their own needs, students might then ask: **what is the university's position on supervision?** Some universities will have formulated guidelines (possibly as a Policy Paper) on supervision. If there is a handbook of postgraduate studies, they will find such information there. If they are having difficulty finding out whether such guidelines exist or where they are located, they could ask a departmental head or secretary, faculty offices, the postgraduate student organisation or the Dean of Students. These guidelines may have no formal status as rules, that is they cannot be enforced. Nevertheless, it is useful for students to know the university's position on the mutual roles and responsibilities of students and supervisors, and to discuss these with the supervisor.

When meeting with a supervisor, students could enquire about any **future study leave or extended absences planned by the supervisor during the course of the degree.** It is not always possible for supervisors to predict these, but it is worth asking if there are any long-term plans that may leave them without supervision. Whether this is known or not, they can ask if alternative, appropriate supervision could be arranged if necessary, within or outside the university.

At the same time, students might ask about **the regular commitments of the supervisor as regards research/teaching/supervision/administrative load?** Very heavy commitments are bound to affect time available for research supervision. If a student's style of working is highly independent, this might not matter. But where there is a need for close supervision and considerable guidance, heavy responsibilities on the part of a supervisor could signal difficulties in the relationship.

It may be that both student and supervisor agree to very informal arrangements about meetings, though most students seem to prefer otherwise. A **regular meetings schedule** therefore needs to be negotiated in advance. If students are in a laboratory situation, there are likely to be daily meetings, but not otherwise. Even then, lab meetings are not a substitute for

comfortable with the suggestion that they can ‘drop in anytime’, the complaint being that most times the ‘drop-in’ is not suitable because the supervisor is too busy. While supervisors can be very busy, students should not have to feel guilty because they want to discuss their work. Further questions for students to ask are:

- will the frequency and duration of meetings change during the course of the degree (which means there will be a need to re-negotiate the schedule)?
- what are the supervisor’s expectations of how these meetings should proceed? (ie will students be expected to set the discussion agenda? will this be negotiated between student and supervisor? or what?)
- will there be opportunities to meet *informally* —as part of becoming socialised into the discipline?

Students should keep a concise record of dates of meetings and what transpires in them. This is useful not only to survey the progress of meetings, but if disagreements or disputes should arise (see below).

Finally, in some cases (as at ANU), students will have a **panel of supervisors**, not a single supervisor. In this situation, they need to think about the following questions— perhaps talking some over with their principal supervisor: what criteria should be applied in selecting advisers? what use might be made of advisers on the panel? should drafts of the written work be given to all members of the panel or to the principal supervisor only? what should students do if there is disagreement among panel members about their research design and procedure or if they get contradictory feedback on written work? will the full panel meet on occasion? if so, who will organise these meetings, and what might be the likely reasons for them?

Overviewing the degree

Students should ask their supervisor or prospective supervisor, or some other appropriate authority, to outline for them **general departmental expectations of all research students in the department at various stages of the PhD degree** (eg producing research proposals, progress reports, mid-term reviews (or any other reviews), departmental seminar presentations and/or attendance, conference attendance and/or presentations, compulsory coursework, anything else). Once they have this overview, they can ask for more detail about the processes involved, as, for example, those of the mid-term review (eg what is the purpose of the mid-term review? what does this consist of? if papers are to be produced, how long and in what depth? who will these be given/presented to? if interviews are to take place, with whom and for what purposes?). A student’s department or university may not have mid-term reviews, but it is likely to have some formal or semi-formal method of assessing whether the research is proceeding satisfactorily.

Knowing some key dates can be useful in trying to set up a **rough time-management plan** early on. In many situations of PhD research, it is very easy to lose track of time while focussed on particular tasks. Yet it is important to try to keep sight of the course as a whole if time is to be managed effectively. As poor time-management can stress both students and supervisors, it’s a good idea for students to discuss the setting of long and short-term goals with their supervisor, working back from rough dates for submission of pieces of work throughout their degree. Research is indeed a very unpredictable endeavour, but this is no reason not to attempt a rough time plan that will be subject to adjustment throughout the

Identifying and using the full resources of the university

Key information here involves students finding out about their **resource entitlements**, and whether or not there is a departmental policy on this so that equity is ensured within the department. To find out their entitlements, students can ask their supervisor, departmental head, or a director of postgraduate studies about the departmental practice on allocation of room space; office furnishings; access to facilities and resources- lab equipment, computers, services on the computer (eg e-mail, the internet, data packages--ask who pays for these); stationery; photocopying; phone; conference or field work funding; or other facilities and resources they hope to be able to access. By identifying early on their entitlements, students can ensure that they are accessing all resources available to them from the outset. Some students have reported that they were not informed of their full resource entitlements in their departments, only to discover much later that they had 'missed out.'

I do not yet know of any Australian university that has produced a policy guaranteeing equitable resource entitlements across the university. Students are therefore subject to the entitlement practices of individual departments, with some being much better off financially than others, and students bearing the consequences. Those students dissatisfied with their resource situation could be directed to other bodies or people within the university for help in addressing their resource needs. For example, a student may have shared access only to a departmental computer but feels the need of his/her own computer in the final writing stages. The department may not be able to oblige but there may be a source on campus for cheap hiring of computers (at ANU, the Graduate School.) If on a scholarship, the fee for hire could be taken from scholarship money allotted to thesis production.

Just as the resource issue can strain the supervisory relationship, so too can over-reliance, given supervisors' frequently heavy workloads. Students can help here by using fully the **educational support services** available to them within their university. These may cover health and counselling services, academic support (including maths, statistics, language and writing), library, computer and information technology support, career counselling, support for students with disabilities, international student support, financial and legal advice (perhaps assistance), the services of the postgraduate students' association, and any other services. Making full use of these services when needed can ensure that students get expert advice and assistance from across the university. A university counsellor, for example, is trained to assist with a range of personal problems that may be affecting academic progress. Students should mention to their supervisors any difficulties preventing progress, but they don't need to rely on them for assistance with every problem.

Students can also exercise initiative in consulting with **other students, post-docs, academic and technical staff**. There is a mass of expertise, general knowledge and knowledge of various kinds that students can draw on within and outside departments, and many do. I often advise students to do just this--talk to other students and academic staff (over tea or coffee is one likely venue), as well as supervisors, to get a range of viewpoints on such matters as efficient methods of sorting and recording the mass of research data.

Resolving conflict

Many supervisory relationships work well, but not all do. The main problem areas seem to be:

- academic disagreements

If there are tensions or difficulties in the relationship, a student should **do something quickly**—not let the problems escalate. While I do not think students should have to shoulder the responsibility for resolving problems, it is in their interests to take action if the supervisor does not. The supervisor may of course be unaware that the student is experiencing difficulties. To resolve problems, students can

- **talk to their supervisor initially (if they feel able)**

In preparing for this discussion, students might first try to identify precisely what it is they are unhappy about—think the problem(s) through. They could then make a list of any problems in point form, noting beside each point what they consider would be a solution to the problem (if they can see one). The next step would be to arrange a meeting with their supervisor, giving him/her a copy of these points and keeping a copy for themselves. At the meeting, points would be discussed one by one. By identifying clearly problems (as they seem them) and possible solutions, the discussion with the supervisor is more likely to remain focused—not become diverted to other matters. A conversation of this type will often lead to quick resolution of problems.

- **seek outside help**

If students do not feel they can talk to their supervisors, or the meeting fails to resolve problems, then they need to get outside advice on what to do. Some possible sources of advice are: the departmental head (but they may prefer to talk to someone outside the department); language and learning support services; the Dean of Students or Faculty Deans; their postgraduate student organisation. Perhaps they could talk to a few different people before making any final decisions about what to do.

If students decide that their best course is to **change supervisors**, they might be helped by considering the following:

- Σ Changing supervisors *is* disruptive. If students are in the early stages of their degree, the disruption will be least. But if they are in the last year of the degree they might need to think carefully about taking this course of action, whatever the present difficulties.
- Σ Students could get some outside advice on **how best to proceed** with the change. This is particularly needed when producing letters/documents giving reasons why they want to change. Even if a relationship has broken down because of personality conflict, students would do best to focus on the negative impact of this on their academic work. It is better to **detail advantages for their academic progress in changing supervisors** than to focus on personality problems.
- Σ It will help the process of change if the student has already consulted with another staff member who is willing to be the new supervisor. If no other staff member were qualified and willing to supervise the research, change might be difficult to arrange.
- Σ If students are looking for a new supervisor in another area of their university, they need to be sure the terms of their scholarship (if they have one) will allow this type of transfer. For example, if the scholarship is being funded by a specific department (not the government or university), it might be difficult, perhaps impossible, to transfer to a different department or centre because of financing.
- Σ If students are international students on a scholarship, they will need to take particular care that in making such a change they will not be contravening the terms of that

with appropriate government and academic authorities before taking this step.

In dealing with problems of supervision, students may be worried about speaking out, expressing criticisms or seeking outside help, because of being seen as troublemakers, and of the unknown (but suspected) repercussions to follow. If they have these concerns, they can ensure confidentiality when discussing their problems with university staff. At the beginning of any meeting, they can ask for assurance that what they have to say will remain confidential, that nothing they say will be repeated, and that no action will be taken without their prior approval.

Students may feel intimidated by unequal power relations between themselves and their supervisors in trying to sort out problems. But it does not reflect well on the university, the department or the individual supervisor to have lengthy completion rates or students dropping out. Everyone wants them to get through. That is a power all students have from the moment they come on course.

Negotiating the supervisory relationship

In advising new students on supervision, I am particularly concerned to help them become active negotiators on their own behalf. To assist them in this, I provide a handout of questions of the type covered in this paper, which we discuss and expand on if appropriate. This handout concludes with the suggestion that they might like to take the following steps:

- Step 1:** decide what your supervision needs are and what you would like further information about
- Step 2:** initiate discussion with your supervisor or prospective supervisor
- Step 3:** be prepared to **negotiate** (ie compromise on less important matters and persist with those considered essential) in discussing with your supervisor or prospective supervisor what you want from the relationship.
- Step 4:** be willing to **re-negotiate** the relationship as the need arises during the course of the degree

Conclusion

This paper, I hope, complements the work being done to improve supervisors' practice. If we keep tackling from different angles the problems shadowing supervision, then we are at least making progress towards the basic hope of every student (and supervisor): a productive working relationship. Other researchers involved in graduate education may improve on the insights afforded students in this paper. While all students approaching supervision can benefit by thinking about the questions covered here, these questions constitute only a basic set. Because of students' diverse informational needs, many more questions are often generated when actually advising them on how to proceed with supervision.

In encouraging research students to become more active in negotiating the supervisory relationship, we are assisting them to become professionals. We are helping them to become more independent and self-sufficient, and alerting them to the importance of developing interpersonal communication skills, particularly the skill of negotiation. That is another value.

relationship is as complex and variable as human nature itself; it is not easy to fathom. When it works well the collaboration is exciting and productive despite the pressures to which the relationship is often subject. Some of these pressures are embedded in institutionalised power practices that are often very worrying to students, particularly where supervisors will have enormous influence on their future employment and career prospects, as sometimes happens. This is not in itself a reason to be intimidated into silence, but it is perhaps a sound reason for proceeding with caution in supervisory matters as students soon come to recognise. Being cautious though, should not prohibit students from becoming more active on their own behalf, as regards supervision or anything else.

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