Evaluating individual doctoral supervision: qualitative steps and emerging issues

Alison Lee, Jo McKenzie

University of Technology, Sydney, NSW, Australia

In the context of intensifying accountability requirements for academic work, there are increasing pressures on individual supervisors, departments and universities to evaluate the quality of doctoral supervision. Existing evaluation tools are focused at departmental rather than individual level and are mostly quantitative in nature. Evaluation for individual supervisors is usually limited to reflective self-assessment and peer critique from fellow supervising academics. It has been notoriously difficult to elicit sustained feedback from doctoral students regarding their experiences of working with an individual supervisor, for ethical and practical reasons. This paper describes the development of an online survey instrument that draws on qualitative methods to elicit sustained reflective commentary from doctoral students, in an anonymous format, about their experiences of supervision. The paper describes the development and trialling of the survey and illustrates the outcomes of these trials.

A small number of supervisors participated in the trials, using the survey for developmental feedback and, in some cases, to provide evidence of the quality of their supervision for promotion and institutional teaching awards. The trials revealed the potential of the survey for providing supervisors with valuable formative feedback and insight into students’ experiences of supervision. It also raised issues and tensions between the formative dimensions and the use by supervisors of the data as evidence for accountability and for recognition and reward of supervision. The paper will describe these issues, including their implications for institutional policies and procedures.