Shifting Sands: Narratives of Quality and Compromise in Timely Postgraduate Research Supervision and Outcomes®

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Abstract

A more highly regulated academic environment impacts student and supervisor expectations about the postgraduate research supervision process. Increased pressure on academics and postgraduate research students to build personal and institutional research profiles while undertaking their other designated academic and life roles, coupled with increasing internationalisation of postgraduate research degrees inevitably impacts supervisors’ and students’ supervision experiences. This, in turn, impacts the quality of supervision and students’ work.

The aim of this paper is to generate further debate and research about postgraduate research supervision issues encountered over many years by supervisors, students and support service personnel as they strive—mostly together but often very much individually—to ensure worthy presentation and dissemination of the final research output.

The paper presents narratives from supervisors, students and higher degree research editors in response to the broad research question: What, from your experience, are the major challenges to working effectively to achieve successful, timely postgraduate research outcomes? Issues discussed include: supervisor-student relationships; power differentials; international students; time; personal and professional principles and cultures; supervisor, student and institutional expectations; student and supervisor agency and resilience; policies; feedback; and finance. Discussion takes the form of commentary followed by a brief summary of lessons learned from each narrative, linked to relevant literature on narrative inquiry and doctoral research.

The key stakeholders who have contributed their experiences to this paper with the objective of improving the supervision process conclude that achieving successful postgraduate research outcomes is very much a case of ‘survival of the fittest’.

Introduction

The current performance-based research Higher Education Provider funding and policies, which focus on rapidly developing a skilled workforce for Australia’s growing knowledge-based economy (Edwards, Radloff, & Coates, 2009), have placed added pressure on HDR supervisors and students through greatly increasing the number of HDR students, extending the Australian Postgraduate Awards (APA) scheme to include international students and tightening timeframes for domestic student completions (Australian Government Department of Industry, Innovation,
Narratives on Transition: Perspectives of Research Leaders, Educators and Postgraduates

Science, Research and Tertiary Education, 2012). The authors of this paper feel it is particularly timely, in light of these changes, to raise issues of concern that have been frustrating them for many years but have remained silent, hidden under the weight of the day-to-day work of progressing thesis completions.

The narrative research presented herein arose from conversations between an HDR thesis editor and supervisors, students and other editors over an eight-year period. It focuses on issues that commonly cause concern for all three roles in the HDR process, regardless of the different individuals involved over that time. The narratives highlight the emotions and dilemmas experienced while working to achieve timely, high quality HDR completions. The authors’ desire to raise these issues for discussion stems from their commitment to developing better HDR practices within an environment of constantly changing government and institutional policies.

Method

The authors adopted a ‘critical events’ approach to narrative inquiry (Webster & Mertova, 2007) to discover the thoughts and experiences of students, supervisors and editors about their roles, dilemmas and power-differentiated positions. They thought this was the most suitable strategy for “try[ing] to make sense of the [HDR supervision] practice from the perspective of the participants” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 16) by providing a catalyst for reflection on past and present practices to inform future practice (Schön, 1983). The main author also felt that narrative inquiry fitted well with the way some HDR editors work with students and supervisors as an unofficial source of support and a friend. Talking and working together, rather than editing in isolation, opens a multidimensional view of the HDR project and its end product. Narratives work their way into editor-supervisor-student consultations, enabling the editor to understand the students’ and supervisors’ concerns, attitudes and emotions, which inform and facilitate the editing process so that it becomes more than merely imposing “a foolish consistency [which] is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines” (Ralph Waldo Emerson in Cohen & Cohen, 1988, p. 155).

The research proceeded in a somewhat back-to-front manner. Its basis lay in what Webster and Mertova (2007) call ‘other’ data, collected through conversations with various work colleagues and students whilst undertaking HDR work, or in social settings such as having lunch or dinner, or “in the corridor” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Instead of collecting ‘other’ data at the same time as inviting colleagues to volunteer narratives, the authors had been casually generating this data over many years. They had already identified common recurring themes from conversations, largely about frustrations: time; feedback; changing policies; power differentials; international students; personal and professional principles and cultures; supervisor, student and institutional expectations; and finance. When the main author received an email advising her of the QPR conference for 2012, she seized the opportunity to make public this hidden knowledge. She suggested the themes as topics when she invited (by email) other supervisors, students and editors to volunteer narratives for the study, answering the question: What, from your experience, are the major challenges to working effectively to achieve successful, timely postgraduate research outcomes? Thus, although potential narrative contributions were free-form, and submitted as written documents, they were constrained by the themes suggested.

Lorna, Margaret H. and Soon were keen to contribute narratives and be co-authors, as they felt very strongly that their stories should be told. Like the main author, with whom they had positive collegial relationships, they wanted to share their experiences as well as thoughts about future directions for the HDR process. All four authors believe they share an identity as members of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), which consists of HDR stakeholders.
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working toward the common goal of successful HDR completions. However, they are aware that “cooperation and conflict need to be viewed as complementary components of a broader concept of doctoral enterprise” (Cumming, 2008, p. 8). All four also feel they have created a smaller community of practice by taking part in the “mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire” (Wenger, 1998, p. 73) of writing this paper to be presented to a like-minded larger community of practice striving to achieve quality in postgraduate research. All four authors subscribe to similar pedagogies of adult learning (Brundage, 1980; Kolb, 1984), learning as an experiential, social activity (Dewey, 1938; Wenger, 2000), situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), learning through reflection (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Schön, 1983), and learning influenced by the cultures of different communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). All recognize the importance of individual life narratives to learning and relationships, and hold the ideology that collegiality and collaboration are essential elements of all learning and teaching. They also believe that the HDR journey cannot be separated from their lives as a whole; it cannot be placed in a box labelled ‘HDR life’ and worked on in isolation.

While Lorna, Margaret H. and Soon talk from the insider perspective of students and supervisors who have undergone the PhD experience, the main author (Margaret B.) does not. She works as a support person who does not have the same emotional investment in the whole HDR process, but believes all knowledge should be shared, particularly in the interests of improving the HDR experience.

The narratives presented here were selected because the authors feel they best “exemplify the nature of the complexity and human centredness of an event, as seen through the eyes of the researcher in collaboration with the people involved in those stories” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 87). All narratives that were volunteered were read with the filter of representing as many different critical events and issues as possible from a diverse range of contributors within the context of the HDR process within higher education institutions. The narratives were also read with a view to extrapolating hidden texts: What is behind this? What is missing? The authors reflected on what they thought each narrative might mean. They used this reflective process to reduce the risk of intersubjectivity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), comment on their interpretation and ponder the lessons learned from each narrative.

All authors feel it is important to keep the narratives as raw data to convey the contributors’ own words and emotions; a warts and all approach aimed at reducing the risk of smoothing the data to “invoke only a positive result” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 109). They believe that turning the raw data into “case narratives”, as used by Cumming (2007) in his research into HDR student experiences in Australia, while reducing the risk of intersubjectivity, removes the immediacy of the narratives and imposes an additional layer of author interpretation in summarising them. Each individual’s story has already been removed from its original context through the contributor’s reflection and telling it in retrospect.

The selection of mostly mature age, female narratives was not intentional. It reflects the main demographic of the colleagues with whom the main author works, the contributions received and the time limitations within which data were sought, collected and analysed for presentation at the conference. A conscious effort was made to include narratives from outside Australia.
The narratives

‘The fittest who survive are those who have colleagues who work and walk with them; collegiality offers fitness’

Supervisor 1 (mature age female academic, Australia)

My view of myself as an educator, who is open to learning from difference, and exhibiting a willingness to share power, was shaken and ultimately transformed when I entered a supervisory relationship with a male student from a very different religious, cultural and political background. I spent the four years of our shared endeavour variously furious with myself for reacting so strongly to my student’s attitudes and behaviours and furious with my student for impinging on my feminist understandings of myself as a professional woman. In particular we clashed over my expectations about the role of supervisor as guide and challenge, as someone to draw out the student’s critical and creative capacities; to enable them to expand their academic, research and language skills while gaining independence, confidence and competence. Yet, I honestly think that the student thought I would somehow ‘do it’ for him. That, as a woman, my role was ordained as subservient. My student felt that he lost face when his work was critiqued by a woman. This threatened the efficacy of the relationship, especially as I came to accept that my often painful 40-year struggle against the patriarchal ideology and practice within my own culture and religion was a more powerful determinant of my reactions than my avowed empathetic liberalism.

The student has now completed and awaits graduation. We both learned that a conversation across such divides requires strategies that are more sophisticated than the bland injunction that those of us from The West (whatever that is) need to know about important religious festivals and practices, and put aside our urge to dominate, making ourselves open to the ‘truths’ of others.

There are some ‘truths’ that cause pain, often mutual pain, that I found I needed to resist to preserve my integrity. After more than a year of strain, my Department enlisted a calm, aware and clear speaking associate supervisor who, as a male, could ‘translate’ my feedback such that the student saved face but could benefit from my close reading of his work and advice about the next stages.

Here I have addressed the disruptive cultural and religious clash that we had to navigate. I have not addressed the language difficulties we encountered or the differences in academic traditions and expectations that were often the subject of our conversations. My Department was less supportive in this area and I found myself alone dealing with a text that required extensive editing to make it accessible to a reader in English. It was here that I learned of the vital skill set and capacities of those with long experience in this area. I was blessed because the editor we worked with saw herself as a support to both of us, enabling us to preserve the student’s thinking and findings while producing a document that conformed to the university expectations about quality presentation.

So my story is finally one of coming to see that the most significant relationships in such situations are with those who will work on the shared project of helping the student learn and successfully complete. The extant model of the centrality of a primary supervisory relationship is just not strong enough to meet the student’s and the university’s goals.
Commentary

In the context of the HDR supervisor-student relationship in the institutional setting, this supervisor appears to have learned more than her student during the HDR process. The critical event of working with a student whose cultural, religious and political narratives resulted in behaviours that caused her to question her lifetime of personal narratives, particularly those based on strong feminist ideologies, from which she has created her identity, forced the supervisor to undergo a four year period of painful self-reflection. The supervisor’s narrative resonates with the supervisory process as a battleground; a far cry from her stated ideology of her role as a guide and critical friend, and her implied ideology of the student’s role of collegial reciprocity and appreciation of her critical interest. The “general understandings” the supervisor would expect within the HDR context – the “social or cultural beliefs and assumptions that are pervasive within a given community” (Schatzki, 2002, pp. 77-86, in Cumming, 2007, p. 116)—are missing. While this supervisor’s narrative highlights that she was working across all three roles students expect of HDR supervisors—“thesis orientation”, “professional orientation” and “person orientation” (Murphy, Bain, and Conrad, 2007, p. 211)—the student only wanted their thesis completed; they did not want to engage in professional or personal development.

The narrative hinges on the supervisor’s need to maintain integrity in the supervisor-student relationship, and personal integrity, which appears paramount to her self-narrative of the supervisor’s role. It acts as the catalyst for the supervisor seeking departmental support with supervision of this particular student, who does not fit any of her pedagogical assumptions. Her determination to stick with the student despite a culturally and linguistically generated communication chasm between them demonstrates commitment to the student and the supervision role, and resilience in seeking support from the department and elsewhere to ensure the student completes their thesis. Cumming (2007) found that HDR students felt their greatest support, after that of their supervisors and peers, came from people ‘beyond the academy’ who had expertise in areas they needed. The supervisor in this narrative demonstrates similar agency, seeking expertise from outside her department in areas beyond the scope of standard departmental support.

What is implied, but not stated, is that the supervisor is determined not to fail either herself or her student. She has never before experienced the position of being unable to guide or control the supervision process. While she hints that the student should not have been admitted to the HDR program, she does not elaborate on his academic background or enrolment details. As Cumming (2007) found, some students can circumvent the standard rules and regulations of admission to HDR. Perhaps the supervisor does not elaborate this point because she feels uncomfortable questioning the institutional HDR enrolment process without having the facts of the student’s case.

Lessons learned

While this narrative raises questions about the efficacy of the single supervisor model, supervisor and student cultural ‘fit’, clarification of ‘orientations’ at the beginning of the supervisory relationship, the motivation level of each to complete the HDR process, commitment to the supervisor-student relationship, understanding of HDR conventions in particular institutions, and institutional processes for accepting HDR students, it also provides some solutions. Identifying and reflecting on problems in supervisory practice and the HDR process, and being proactive in addressing those problems, can surmount seemingly unsurmountable chasms. Seeking and gaining strategic support from both within and outside the institution in the form of co-supervision and an editor led to successful HDR completion for
the supervisor, student and institution, and a transformational learning experience for the
supervisor.

Even if the student had had access to institution-led writing programs, would he have attended?
What is not told in the narrative is that he knew the editor who worked on his text, having been
in the adjacent room when she worked at the institution. Their relationship had been purely one
of exchanging daily pleasantries about his family. He was happy for her to work with the
supervisor, co-supervisor and him to facilitate his completion. It is possible he saw the editor’s
role as subservient and, therefore, acceptable.

‘A dose of Australian policy wouldn’t go astray’

Supervisor 2 (mature age female academic, Canada)

I was asked to supervise an international student from an African nation. He came from an elite
and traditional family and had come into conflict with a male supervisor who said the student
was not doing the work as directed. It was a very difficult situation for the student. In my
assessment, there were power differentials, cultural differences and also gender issues. I did not
have any difficulties ... but I was the Dean ... but others did experience problems. The difference
here, compared with Australia, is that there is a panel of supervisors, not one supervisor, and a
chair. I was the chair.

The other issue for students here is the lack of financial support. I have first-hand appreciation
of that! When financial support is provided, students are expected to work as a Teaching
Assistant (TA), whereas Australian students have a choice. This TA work involves work not
related to their academic study.

Time is not an issue here. It takes over five years to complete a doctorate. There is a lot of
coursework and the comprehensive; a lot of hoop jumping. I think they are taking far too long to
complete. I don’t think you need more than three years to do a doctorate.

Commentary

Supervisor 2 constrained her narratives to three of the topics suggested by the main author,
possibly reflecting her desire to participate but lack of time to elaborate due to her position
within her institution. While the first narrative relates a critical event, the second two are more
comment rather than narrative. However, the main focus of her narratives is the difference
between aspects of the HDR process in Canada and Australia.

The critical event raises some of the same issues identified in Supervisor 1’s narrative. Culture
and gender appear to have created problems in a supervisor-student relationship, and
interfered with the HDR practices and process. However, Supervisor 2, from her powerful
position of Dean and Chair of a panel of supervisors, reflects that perhaps her position is a
reason why she does not have a problem supervising a student about whom other supervisors
have complained. Perhaps the student, himself in a powerful position in life outside the
institution, respects her status. What is not stated is that Supervisor 2 is a highly experienced
supervisor and examiner. To use one of Gayle, Speedy and Wyatt’s (2010, p. 21) metaphors, she
is a “gatekeeper” of the “oasis”; the “community of academia”.

Having experienced both the Australian and Canadian systems, Supervisor 2 feels that HDR
students (and their families) in Canada carry a huge financial burden. The tone of her comments
about a system whereby students must work as Teaching Assistants in areas not related to their academic study to receive financial support implies that this adds little to their HDR learning experience. However, one of the participants in Cumming’s study (2007, p. 100), advocating that students work across disciplines, believes that “a key part of the doctorate is working in a zone where knowledge is free...You are a graduate of your university, not of your discipline”.

Supervisor 2’s comment about time, which you will see is a major issue for Student 1 in the next narrative, implies that the length of time allocated for full time HDR completion in Canada is far too long. Having worked in both systems, her evaluation is that the Australian timeframe is sufficient.

Lessons learned

Similar issues occur in HDR regardless of the supervisory structure or the institution’s location. A supervisory panel system, implemented as a strategy to address these issues, can offer greater flexibility in meeting student and supervisor needs than the single supervisor system. Whilst there appears to be greater financial support for HDR students in Australia and the Australian Government’s HDR policy may be a good thing, we should not become complacent; there is a need to constantly question, listen to stakeholders’ narratives and evaluate HDR systems to improve the HDR experience and its outcomes.

‘I was powerless’

Student 1 (mature age female academic; international student)

For students of the PhD journey, achieving one’s goal can feel like a lifetime’s worth of education in just three years. Despite the quality of supervision (or lack of) from my Principal Supervisor (PS), I went on to complete my research and amazingly did it within the stipulated time. I attribute this to the fact that I, the student, was myself a high achiever, independent and hard working in the first place; and that I had a Co-Supervisor (CS) who was a critical person and able to guide me in intellectual research matters. I also owed my PhD completion to my editor who was there for me always with support and encouragement. Here is my story.

I understand and recognize that post graduate supervision is a process involving complex academic and interpersonal skills, and the supervisor-supervisee relationship is pivotal to the successful completion of a student’s PhD. As an academic and researcher in my home country, and from my experience, I didn’t really expect much with my supervisor from the start. I would think that the responsibility is on me. Also, I am very much aware that PhD students are supposed to be independent, but supervisors must have the essential skills to guide a postgraduate student towards sound proposal preparation, methodological choices, documenting, completion of a quality thesis and publishing their research. I was extremely glad when I was given an Associate Professor (AP) to be my PS. But, I did not feel too fortunate after a while because I felt she was either too busy to be effective in the supervisor’s role, or racist and judgmental in her opinions when dealing with students from other countries. These are strong words but that is how it felt.

After almost a year and a half I realized that something was wrong. Although I met my PS as scheduled on a regular basis, and the PS appeared to know about my research plan and needs, it soon became clear that she knew very little about the appropriate research design methodology for my subject. Despite regular scheduled meetings and discussing the research design, including
being informed about the choice of my research methodology, I had to change the methodology. I had wasted a year and half reading, writing and working on the wrong research design. Also, I expected my PS to have a supportive and professional relationship with me but I found this lacking.

The ‘failure’ of not getting through a PhD award after the stipulated time frame can be devastating for a student and I started to worry. I requested a CS right from the first year, but my CS only came in during my final year. I did not think I could voice my frustration openly or in writing because I was an international student fully supported by the EIPRS. I thought it would certainly affect my student report; having a negative report from my supervisor would have an impact on the scholarship and funding to continue studying in Australia. Although I was bitter about my experience and frustrated, I understood that the supervisor was in a position of power so I had to remain silent and not raise any negative comments about the supervision until the last day to sustain this postgraduate-supervisor relationship. So, I had to adjust myself at her level in each supervisory meeting, which ended with further frustration and disappointment.

The experience was a heavy feeling. My PS’ insufficient knowledge of the relevant field, research methodology and lack of constructive criticism and feedback had a profound effect on me. I frequently wondered, ‘Am I going to complete my PhD journey successfully in the given time frame with this kind of supervision? A quality research thesis is important while time is a factor for me’. I worked day and night to impress her by producing high-quality work during my first and second year.

As postgraduate students, during the study, we had to present our research progress a minimum three times. My PS knew that I was presenting at research week. Prior, I had shown her my power point. I was surprised when she did not turn up for my presentation. I thought, ‘She will be there for me and stand by me just like the other PS who are supportive of their students’. How wrong I was! She accepted me as her student but offered little support. I asked myself:

‘Why is my PS’ level of commitment and interest in me lacking?...Is it because I’m an Asian?...Is it I’m not good enough?...Each time I visit my supervisor, I have never created tension or had conflicting perspectives during the meeting...my fluency in English is good...and there is no communication problem...there are no disagreements...I never show any sign of disrespectfulness...I am always in time for the meeting...I accepted their comments. I had to...because these were the people that were going to get me through and help me to complete my PhD...why did this happen to me?’

My experience was that my PS did not reflect the behaviour of an ideal supervisor. This had far reaching consequences on my progress and the advancement of research completion within the stipulated time. Even up to my final year, I received what I thought were wrong directions. Finally, when I got a CS, I had to delete previous suggestions.

My experiences with my CS were a lot different. She was an excellent supervisor. I could fix an appointment to call via mobile phone to discuss my research work, even when she was away. She went through the final draft of my chapters and thesis via email and gave me very positive and constructive comments.

I was glad that my PS finally said I could buy my ticket to go home. I could not believe I had reached the light to submit my thesis. After setting the date and booking the ticket, my PS gave me the shocking news that I could not submit. This really worried me. I thought, ‘My family back home is expecting me. What about the ticket I have booked? It is not cheap and who will refund the money to me? And if I have to change the date, I have to pay more just to change the date.
Why the sudden decision? My working institution did not support me to study and I have to go back to work.’ As it was the end of my study journey, I didn’t want to dispute her statement. I feel that, deep down, as a student, I was powerless!

Commentary

Student 1’s highly emotive narrative, even in retrospect, highlights the complexities of the HDR experience in a context far from home. It gives the impression that the whole experience was one huge critical event made up of many smaller critical events. Emotions conveyed include powerlessness, disappointment, confusion, frustration, and fear (of speaking up, failure, and racism). Negative issues, exacerbated by her international student status and responsibility to fulfil the policy terms of her international student scholarship, include: a perceived lack of support, commitment, and encouragement from her principal supervisor; power differentials between her and her principal supervisor; lack of a collegial supervisor-student relationship; the tight timeframe; prevention from going home and back to work; time away from family; and meagre finances. Positive issues include the appointment of a dedicated co-supervisor who provided collegial support, caring support from outside the institution (editor), and achieving her goal of completing her PhD on time.

Despite being highly self-motivated, fiercely independent and determined to succeed, Student 1 felt constrained from speaking up about her worries about supervision and progress, and marked time for the first half of her candidature. This fear of speaking up may have been due to the way things are done in her home country as much as her fear of losing her scholarship. Only now that she has completed her HDR journey does she feel she can openly express her ‘truth’ about her experiences. As Supervisor 1 did in her narrative, Student 1 reveals that “the nature of research higher degree supervision is not always the clear, straightforward process that ‘how-to-guidebooks’ might have us believe” (Harbon & England, 2006, p. 91). Supervisors supervising students undertaking research in fields with which they are not familiar is a pertinent issue.

Ironically, this student’s perception of ‘ideal’ supervisor characteristics bears a remarkable resemblance to Gayle et al.’s (2010, p. 26) supervisor, whom they describe in their narrative play as “our reader, our guide, our politically adept ambassador”; characteristics displayed by Supervisor 1 in her narrative, but which her student did not appreciate.

The unstated narrative within Student 1’s story centres on visa issues. ‘Other’ data known to the authors through conversations includes this student’s need to return overseas for data collection, and again for family duties when her father died. She had to take a short intermission, then had to reapply for her visa; a process that traumatized her because she thought she would not be able to complete her candidature. Coping with institution and government protocols at a time when she was grieving almost caused her to give up.

Lessons learned

International students face added pressure to complete their HDR candidature on time due to fear of losing scholarships, visa restrictions, and need to return to family and work. Therefore, it is imperative that supervisors are aware of the restrictions on international students in relation to gaining extensions of time for completion.

Supervisors and students need early mutual clarification of the amount of commitment they can put into the HDR journey to avoid the disappointment experienced by Student 1. While student
expectations of supervisor commitment in this narrative appear to vindicate Pearson’s (1999, p. 188) argument that “for students, the PhD candidature is their major focus, while for supervisors the student is only one of many responsibilities”, we argue that PhD students have equally pressing life responsibilities. The PhD cannot be separated and treated discretely from life as a whole; it is one part of the whole, not the whole.

‘The shifting sands of supervisor selection; they come and they go, but I’m still here!’

Student 2 (mature age female academic, Australia)

How I set about getting a supervisor for my PhD was informed by my experience of higher degree supervision when undertaking my Masters research and thesis. This experience can only be described as little or no supervision under the guise of an adult learning model – students having the opportunity to undertake and direct their own ‘journey’ (education experience).

Meetings with this supervisor were not offered as a one-to-one encounter when feedback and direction were provided but took the form of monthly group meetings of four to six students with the supervisor. We were all mature aged students working full-time and studying part-time, so these meetings were held in the evenings. It could be argued that one of the benefits was the support that came from the other students. As part-time students, who were not often on the campus, the opportunity to form a sense of camaraderie was limited. However, the downside to this form of supervision was that it was not uncommon for the ‘time’ to be taken by one or two students who were having difficulties. I frequently came away with a sense that, while their concerns had been addressed and their work advanced, my work or concerns had not received adequate attention. In order to progress my research, I relied more heavily on the support and ‘informal’ supervision provided by a friend who had a PhD and was experienced in higher degree supervision. This contributed to a ‘disconnect’ with my ‘formal’ supervisor. He was essentially my supervisor in name only. When I sought advice from him his little knowledge of my work to that point meant he was either unable or unwilling to help.

After successfully completing my Masters studies I decided to embark on a PhD. I had had no choice in who was allocated to supervise my Masters work and I perceived I had been largely left to my own devices; a situation which I think had negative consequences with respect to the time it took to complete my research and write the thesis. I determined that if I was going to successfully complete a PhD it was necessary for me to choose a supervisor who would take a different approach. I had a question that I wanted to explore arising from my Masters’ work and an idea of the theoretical underpinnings I thought would inform my PhD work. I identified individuals in the academy who had published work in this area and arranged meetings to discuss my ideas and ask what they could offer in the way of supervision if they accepted me as their student. I also talked with other students. As a result of these undertakings I found a person who was not only prepared to accept me as a PhD student but was someone I was reasonably sure had an approach to higher degree supervision that would facilitate my successful completion of a PhD in a timely manner.

This supervisor was supervising several PhD students. Some were linked to funded research projects and others were like me – part-time students working full-time in paid employment. The supervision style employed was a combination of fortnightly one-to-one meetings, at which feedback on written work was provided and ideas explored and discussed, and monthly group meetings at which students discussed their current work. These group meetings were more structured and more theoretical than those I had experienced in my Masters course such that they often became discussions around the strengths or limitations of particular theorists and
published works pertaining to the theorists. However, the interplay of distressing issues in my workplace and family responsibilities meant that my research proceeded slowly. When, as a result of restructuring within the school, my supervisor accepted a voluntary retirement/redundancy package, I was not in a position to complete my work before he left the university. I had to find a new supervisor.

Whereas in the beginning of my PhD studies the style and level of supervision had been a significant factor, this was no longer the case. The issues in my workplace had not been resolved and it was expedient that I shift my PhD candidature into the school in which I was employed as an academic. The person who had the knowledge and expertise of the methodology I was employing and some understanding of my research area was a colleague with whom I taught and had had conversations about my work. She agreed to become my supervisor. However, as our relationship had already been established as colleagues teaching the same topics, it was not possible to clearly establish a supervisor-student relationship. Again, as was my experience in my Masters studies, the primary style of supervision was group meetings. This group had been established for some time, with established norms and relationships that were not accommodating of a new member. For some time I attended these meetings feeling like an outsider. Furthermore, when I met with my supervisor as a student, mostly on an ad-hoc basis, it was difficult to quarantine PhD work from work around teaching. Teaching-related matters often derailed the supervisor-student discussion. This student-supervisor relationship was further complicated when she became my workplace supervisor. Furthermore, changing PhD supervisors led to a change in the theoretical direction of my work and necessitated going back to the literature to grapple with new ideas. So, instead of a sense of progress, I felt I was stagnating or even going backwards. A second supervisor, also from within the school, had been appointed but it was essentially in name only; neither of us initiated contact.

My supervisor gained an appointment at another university interstate. I decided I had already lost time because of the changed theoretical aspects and it was prudent to transfer my candidature to that university. I perceive that this created a new set of issues, particularly as my supervisor sought to establish herself in her new position. My perception is that I was part of her ‘old’ life and the fact that we had not established a regular meeting structure or student-supervisor relationship, combined with the geographical distance, led to infrequent contact. I felt that again I was essentially steering my own course. One way to counter this was to travel to the other university every month to a pre-arranged meeting. However, these meetings were not fruitful; it was too easy to slip into a collegial relationship and get caught up in matters not associated with my research. The data I collected lent itself to another change in the methodology and it is my perception that my supervisor lost interest in what I was doing. Her priority was given to competing interests such as grant writing. This perception is informed by the lack of feedback on written work and, when feedback was forthcoming, there was a time delay which often meant I had moved on in my thinking or writing. This became a problem as the thesis submission deadline drew nearer, with instructions and suggestions that required considerable work being conveyed at the ‘ninth’ hour. This created considerable stress and angst, and I seriously considered not finishing. However, I had come too far to give up.

Commentary

Student 2’s chronological narrative of HDR through both Masters and PhD completions in her place of work is punctuated by starts and stops attributed mainly to the student being orphaned by a series of supervisors. It portrays the complexities of the supervisor-student relationship as a series of critical events which lead the student to debate the value of students choosing their supervisors as against supervisors being allocated by the institution. Reflecting on her Masters
experience, she recognizes her need for a strong supervisor to keep her on track. Like Supervisor 1 and Student 1, Student 2 demonstrates agency by researching supervisors’ credentials and seeking peer support to target a supervisor in her field of PhD study. Having achieved this, she suffers the negative impact of workplace upheaval and family responsibilities, as well as her chosen supervisor leaving. Undeterred, she demonstrates determination and resilience to move her study to a new discipline and seek a new supervisor. Upon discovering that having a colleague as a supervisor has many pitfalls – confusion between work collegiality, friendship, the supervisor-student relationship, and the PhD supervisor also being her workplace supervisor – she begins to question whether it is all worthwhile. In the process, she has experienced several different supervision styles, none of which seem suitable, had to change her methodology, which has meant going backwards, and has begun to feel like an ‘outsider’. Her narrative resonates with Wisker and Robinson’s (2010) research with HDR students who have lost their supervisors. She experiences “stuckness”, which “impacts negatively on self-esteem [and] confidence, and may lead to attrition or delay in completion (Kiley & Wisker, 2009, in Wisker & Robinson, 2012, p. 60). This is demonstrated by the student not contacting an interim supervisor when her supervisor takes up a position at another institution. Once again, the student gets back on track, making the decision to move her candidature to her supervisor’s institution. However, again she experiences disruption through her supervisor having ‘moved on’. Just as Student 1 felt, Student 2 now feels that her supervisor has no time for her. Again she feels she is going backwards because she must change her methodology. Eventually, despite lack of feedback, she pushes on and completes her PhD, because, like the student in Wisker and Robinson’s (2010, p. 61) Case 1, she has “the drive to finish...the Ph.D. no matter what”.

**Lessons learned**

Regardless of whether a student chooses a supervisor or the institution allocates a supervisor, critical life events beyond the student’s or supervisor’s control can impact on the supervisor-student relationship, the supervisory process, and the whole HDR experience.

At the end of the day, however, students are the masters and mistresses of their own HDR destiny.

Students who are ‘orphaned’ by their supervisors need additional institutional support.

**‘I like being treated as an equal’**

**Student 3 (young female student, Canada)**

I get along really well with my supervisor, having worked with her during my MA and now for my PhD. I think the only potentially problematic issue for the relationship is defining friendship-supervisor boundaries. She is not much older than me, and given our shared research interests we have a lot of things in common. We are friends on Facebook, and as a cohort of students we have gone out dancing and to other social events. I’ve never felt that being friends outside of academia is an issue and I certainly respect her opinion and value her feedback. From a pedagogical perspective, I enjoy that having this friendship deconstructs traditional student-teacher power relations, making it a more equal relationship. However, on occasion, I do wonder if she feels that she is able to be completely honest and critical with me about my work because of the relationship. I also wonder about the role gender plays, especially within my supervisor’s cohort of graduate students. Often it is only the female students who go out with
our supervisor, with the male students declining to come, or not invited. Has the closer relationship between us women created opportunities that the male students do not get?

In spite of these questions, I enjoy our relationship, even though it may be atypical for a student-supervisor relationship. Recently, she asked me to collaborate with her on an article, and we worked very well together. It was a truly collaborative experience and I felt she valued my opinion as an equal in a way that I have found other academics do not. I find that I am able to appreciate her opinion and perspective, while at the same time feeling like an equal.

Commentary

Student 3 appears to have the ideal, openly collegial relationship with her supervisor that students 1 and 2 were seeking. While not stated, it may be supposed that this provides Student 3 with the intellectual stimulation and confidence needed to fully participate in the HDR experience. Perhaps age played some part in this student-supervisor relationship, with both being young, highly social and technologically savvy females who connect by social media (Facebook), which enhanced their communication with each other both within and outside the student and supervisor roles, and the higher education institution. This narrative resonates with the collegial relationship shared between the students and the supervisor in Gayle et al. (2010), where they meet to share their lives, openly discussing families and relationships.

However, even Student 3 questions whether their friendship might impact the supervisor’s honesty with feedback, and privilege her over other students, particularly the males, who do not enjoy the same social relationship with the supervisor.

Lessons learned

Is there such a thing as the ideal supervisor-student HDR relationship?

Students and supervisors are different, and supervisor-student relationships are different. A supervisor-student relationship that works for some people may not work for others.

Stepping back and reflecting on the supervisory relationship and process can enhance it further or address issues not previously considered, such as ethical boundaries.

‘I need this back next week!’

Editor 1 (mature age male, Australia)

In working with higher degree students I sometimes wonder if anyone has read their thesis from beginning to end. Frequently I receive a request with only one week to do a thorough edit. This is not enough time to edit a thesis in accordance with standards for thesis editing (standards C, substance and structure; D, language and illustrations; and E, completeness and consistency) as stipulated in IPED’s ‘Guidelines for editing research theses’ (IPED, 2010). By the time I have reached a middle chapter, I realize there is no way the thesis will be submitted by the requested date. This is extremely frustrating. They are stressed and so am I because I cannot deliver a high quality job in time. Any request for a final edit with a turnaround time of less than three weeks is unrealistic. It doesn’t allow enough time for me to do a good job, for the student to do corrections and for the supervisor to have a final read before the thesis is submitted. Then there
is the issue of the terrible state of the writing in some theses. So many corrections need to be made that the document is almost unrecognizable after I’ve finished marking it up.

I see no merit in compromising quality for the sake of getting the thesis submitted ‘on time’. I know there are end-dates that have to be met, but there must be ways of ensuring that date can be met without the final panic.

Commentary

Editor 1’s narrative can be summarized as focusing on three major issues arising from a series of critical events involving students and supervisors expecting the impossible: time, ethical application of editing standards, and poorly written documents. The editor’s dominant emotion—frustration—pervades the narrative, bordering on rage. Yet, if “research cannot be separated from writing” (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 11), why do supervisors not use “writing-oriented supervision practices?” (p. 157).

Lessons learned

Supervisors and students need to be aware of the editing process and how long it is likely to take. Editing time should be incorporated in the overall supervision plan.

‘The line in the sand keeps shifting’

Editor 2 (mature age female, Australia):

‘Should I become friends with my clients?’ Probably not, but it is difficult not to when working with students and their supervisors because we all end up sharing the PhD journey to achieve a high quality output.

Confidentiality? A supervisor might say something to me in confidence about a student, or vice versa. Students often talk about their fear of complaining, fear of questioning the supervisor’s advice and fear of asking questions if they don’t understand something. They also bemoan difficulties they encounter with their visas or admit to feeling disconnected from, disinterested in or not really understanding their HDR work because they are analyzing and writing about someone else’s data. Some students doing a thesis by publication query whether they are being used to enhance their supervisor/s’ research publications profile while beginning to build their own. Supervisors confide in me about communication barriers and thesis writing issues, or stresses in the supervisor-student relationship. My dilemma is that sometimes I have heard something from either the supervisor or student that could be beneficial to both if shared. But...no.

Where do I draw the professional and personal ethical lines in the sand when editing an HDR thesis? Working with highly stressed and sometimes distressed students, supervisors who consider they can do no more with the student, and documents with such poorly written language and structure that I have no idea where to begin or end pushes me to personal and professional ethical limits. (Poor writing is not confined to students for whom English is not the first language). How much input from me is too much? Sometimes the only way to work on such a document is to sit with the student and talk them through it.
I sat with one student each evening for a month, explaining the editing process as I did it. Initially, when I asked her what she was trying to say she would tell me very clearly, but when I asked her to write it down the meaning vanished. This is when I had a conflict between my professional editing ethics and my personal principles of helping people – in this case my desire to help teach her how to write in English so that her written text said what she wanted it to. So, for the first week, as we sat at her computer, I would ask her to tell me what her text was supposed to say and I would type her narration into her document and cross out the jumbled text that had been there. ‘Track changes’ is the best invention! No, this wasn’t editing. ‘Should I be typing for her?’ The second week brought a revelation. At the Monday session the student typed the words herself as she spoke them to me. I was mind-blown at the speed with which she had picked up the writing conventions in English. For the rest of the month she rewrote and I edited until her thesis was completed to a very high written standard. I had moved from typist, translator and English writing teacher back to the editing role. I had also become a friend. I wonder, could there be oral thesis submission now we have such great technology? Conversations between students, supervisors and examiners?

My initial reservations about breaking ethical standards evaporated because the first week of typing had enabled the student to learn how to write what she meant instead of trying to translate individual words into English and put them together on the page. I was also in consultation with her Primary and Secondary Supervisors throughout the whole process; again a situation removed from just getting the document, editing it and sending it back. As an editor of HDR theses, I believe the comments editors add to students’ texts enhance the overall HDR learning experience; students learn to write better. Hopefully they will pass on their writing skills to their students.

I think the job of editor for HDR theses is invaluable for ensuring quality published outputs and as an added neutral support for students and supervisors. Professional objectivity lets me work non-judgmentally whereas supervisors and students have so much invested in the HDR process that they may make subjective judgments that affect timely, high quality completion.

Commentary

Editor 2’s narrative demonstrates her reflection on the editing process as an ethical minefield. She expands the ethical quandaries of working with HDR students and supervisors from purely editing ethics to the implications of forming collegial relationships, issues of client confidentiality, providing emotional as well as professional support, and viewing the editing process more as a learning experience for the students than a standard editing job. Although the narrative focuses predominantly on the editor working with an international student, her acknowledgment that many other HDR students have difficulties writing to expected academic standards suggests the need for the expansion of strategies such as writers’ circles for second language research students (Behrend, 2010) to all HDR students.

Lessons learned

Collegial working relationships between supervisors, students, and outside support people such as editors can benefit the HDR process by becoming part of HDR practice.

Editors are more than wordsmiths.
Summary

The narratives confirm the influence of many of the factors Kiley (in Hopwood, Boud, Lee, Dahlgren, & Kiley, 2010, p. 87) identified as impacting “the doctoral curriculum”, including ‘candidate characteristics’; ‘supervisor/s characteristics’; ‘candidate and supervisor learning and research experiences’; ‘government policies’; ‘university policies’; ‘research culture’; and ‘institutional protocols’. While Kiley includes ‘Examination’, this is not an overt focus of the narratives. However, it is implied in students’ fear of failure, and students’ and supervisors’ demonstrations of resilience in their determination to complete their goal of completing each HDR journey.

The complexities of the supervisor-student HDR relationship and the whole HDR process are repeated throughout the narratives, and also feature in the HDR literature. Hence, while they are not new, they reinforce the importance of continually striving to seek strategies to better address them. In dot point form, common HDR experiences and concerns in the narratives include:

- conflict (cultural, ideological, personal, professional);
- personal and professional integrity;
- working the HDR experience into the whole of life experience – it is not a separate entity;
- student and supervisor diversity – characteristics;
- language and HDR writing issues;
- agency and resilience in the face of adverse critical events;
- value of supportive relationships within and outside the institution;
- power differentials;
- the emotional element of HDR experiences;
- specific issues for international students;
- ethical issues in collegial relationships (including for, and with, editors);
- supervisor allocation and selection systems;
- supervisory styles;
- need for planning and clarification of HDR practices and processes.

Paramount is the importance of productive supervisor-student HDR relationships, which require supervisors and students to identify and address any issues they may have with power differentials, personal characteristics, professional principles, cultural, social and religious beliefs, time constraints and differing expectations from the supervisory process. It is interesting that these issues arise whether the system uses one main supervisor per student or a panel of supervisors. While institutional policies outline supervisors’ duty to provide “intellectual support, procedural knowledge and at times emotional support” to their HDR students (Flinders University, 2012, for example), the students and other support services also have a duty to ensure the process works.

The narratives indicate the importance of a mutually-agreed and clearly explained supervision plan from day one, outlining the supervisor’s HDR ideologies and ‘orientation’ to the supervision process; a schedule for regular supervision meetings; type of supervision (group or one-to-one); dates for students to submit work to supervisors; dates for supervisors to return feedback to students; and an end date for the completed thesis (not the last day of the candidature), allowing time for editing, student and supervisor final corrections, printing, binding and submission. This end date should be approximately eight weeks before submission date. Adopting a project supervision matrix for the “learning and teaching process; developing the student; and producing the research project/outcome as a social practice” (Maxwell &
Smyth, 2010, p. 409) has the potential to enhance the overall HDR experience for supervisors and students.

Manathunga (2006, in Leggatt & Martinez, 2010, p. 605) maintains that if HDR students are not “self-motivated and able to raise questions and problems with their supervisor early”, this is a “warning sign for non-completion.” Students have a duty to ask questions because supervisors may “assume knowledge the … student does not have” and forget that the “student [may be] struggling to learn the material for the first time” (Berrett, 2012). Supervisors need to be constantly aware that “it’s hard to know what it is like for someone else not to know something that you know.” Lack of this awareness is “the chief driver of bad writing … and bad teaching” (Pinker, in Berrett, 2012). Only the student in Supervisor 1’s narrative appeared to lack motivation. While Student 1 was afraid to raise issues with her supervisor during the first eighteen months, after this she became courageous through desperation to achieve her PhD.

The most consistent qualities demonstrated throughout the narratives were the resilience, persistence (fitness), and agency of supervisors, students and editors to achieve timely HDR completions. Seeking solutions outside the student-supervisor relationship required collaboration with colleagues and relevant services, and serious questioning of compromise for the sake of completion: compromised professional and personal standards, ethics, beliefs and principles; compromised professional and personal relationships; and compromised quality to fit time constraints. This questioning led to a shift in the way work was done while minimising compromise.

The narratives from Students 1 and 2 raised serious questions about supervisor commitment to the HDR supervision role. Non-spoken assumptions could be made that perceived lack of commitment could be due to supervisors having too many HDR students. Spoken assumptions were that HDR supervision was a low priority.

The issues raised by students and supervisors point to the need for greater supervisor development in readiness for learning how to interact with students from culturally and ideologically diverse backgrounds; how to perform different supervision styles with different students; and how to plan their time to ensure they provide sufficient commitment to HDR students.

It would seem that students also need greater preparation for understanding their commitment to their HDR role, and understanding of the supervisor’s role.

Time, an issue previously synonymous with international students because they must return home within the specified three years, is now an issue for domestic students in Australia. The Canadian comparison provides food for thought re time, expense, and panel supervision.

**Conclusion**

In light of the issues discussed in this paper, there is now a greater need to nurture student and supervisor motivation for undertaking HDR, and to develop their ability to devise and adhere to a well-planned and managed, mutually-agreed teamwork approach to the supervision process to ensure survival of more than just the fittest. At an institutional level, providing additional support for supervisors’ development will be critical for helping them learn to deal with emotional work, to take each student and their topic as they come, and to confront personal challenges with a nonjudgmental mindset. Perhaps adopting the Canadian system of a panel of supervisors could provide support for individual supervisors, but may or may not be in the best interests of students. Expanding research networks across the world depends in some part on the experiences of HDR students who return home after completion. Ensuring they have a
positive experience so they are willing to maintain links can open the door for future collaborative research and therefore greater institutional research output.

Finally, the word and the act ‘supervision’ imply a punitive power differential. Could replacing it with the term ‘supervisor’ make for a more collaborative HDR working environment?

**Limitations**

The stories provide glimpses only of random experiences of HDR and there are no narratives from examiners. All narratives except one (an editor) are from women. Only one narrative (Student 3) is from a young woman, with all others from mature-aged people. None of the supervisors or students whose narratives appear in the paper were in supervisor-student relationships with each other. No generalizations can be made from the narratives’ content. “All generalizations are dangerous, even this one” (Dumas, in Cohen & Cohen, 1988, p. 149).

**References**


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