Conflict resolution mechanisms between postgraduate mentors and their mentees

Andrew Dietrich Möwes
University of Namibia

Abstract
This paper examines different supervisory approaches. The discussion has been limited to two approaches, namely the master/apprentice approach and the laissez-faire approach. This is followed by a documentation of the typical problems that arise between supervisors and research students. These problems include: conflicting or unrealistic expectations of each other, poor feedback, tensions or conflicting perspectives from within the supervision panel, supervisor's lack of knowledge and experience in research and supervision. Each problem is followed by a discussion of possible conflict resolution mechanisms.

Introduction
The relationship between supervisors and students is an important one. It is important for both the final success of the student as well as for the success of the lecturer. Although the relation between supervisor and student can be rewarding, it can also be complex and difficult at times. The complexity and difficulty of the relationship are caused by the fact or possibility that students have never been in supervisory positions, and usually are unaware of the pressures of the University lecturer's job. Moreover, the lecturer has not been a student for a number of years, and that period of time may result in the lecturer forgetting the pressures on the student. These are situations which can easily result in the misunderstanding in the relationship between the student and the lecturer (Olivier, 2004).

There are large variations in this relationship because of differences between disciplines and academic departments, and differences of style amongst supervisors. An added element that determines the nature of the relationship between supervisor and student is the fact that students themselves differ so much. They differ in terms of their degree of independence and expertise in research, maturity, motivation and commitment to postgraduate studies (Mouton, 2001).

Some students are able to articulate their needs and expectations clearly from the beginning, which may assist the supervisor in meeting the student's supervision needs, while other students are less clear about the direction of their studies, what they require and how to articulate their needs. The latter usually need more guidance and support and they are only able to work independently much later in the research process (Olivier, 2004).

This paper starts with an examination of supervisory approaches. I decided to limit the discussion to the master/apprentice approach and the laissez-faire approach, and then carry the theme through a discussion of typical problems that lead to conflict between supervisors and research students. Thereafter, the focus narrows more specifically to conflict resolution mechanisms.

Andrew Möwes is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Educational Psychology and Inclusive Education at the University of Namibia. He holds a PhD in Specialised Education which he obtained from the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. He offers courses for both Postgraduate and Undergraduate students in the areas of Advanced Research Methodology, Advanced Special Education, Inclusive Education, and Guidance and Counselling. E-mail address: amowes@unam.na

Supervisory Approaches

To supervise literally means to "oversee". In the case of academic supervision, it means to oversee the successful completion of the postgraduate thesis (Mouton, 2001). Different approaches can be followed when overseeing the research process, and these approaches can also contribute to conflict.

A particular set of values and beliefs is used by the supervisor which governs the approach adopted. It is important to note that neither of the supervisor's belief sets is perfect in themselves. Each has significant advantages and disadvantages. A supervisor for example, might believe that a certain approach could work well for a specific student, however, due to the student's educational background or other factors, that approach could have negative implications on the student. It is important for the student to have a good grasp of the advantages and disadvantages of each particular type of supervisor belief sets in order to cope with the inevitable problems that will arise. Toncich (2006), has suggested the following advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches: "The masters/apprentice approach to supervision provides a more systematic approach to imparting the rigours of research to the student. The key disadvantages are that the student becomes dependent upon the supervisor and inherits both positive and negative research traits. Overall the potential for high creativity is reduced by the process" (p. 66). Not only does a supervisor who is too controlling prevent students from becoming independent,but he or she also inhibits their capacity to judge critically and to use new information astutely (Nias, 1993; Cryer, 1996).Supervisors are advised to encourage students to greater independence by offering them some insight on the process of self-criticism.Likewise they should share how they, as academic and supervisors, have learned to evaluate and take responsibility for their own work.

"In the Laissez-faire approach the obvious advantage is that what the student learns through experiential self-learning may be far more powerful as a research tool than rote learning derived from drilled research procedures" (Toncich, 2006, p. 67). The student could achieve a greater depth of knowledge in their specific field of study (Grant & Graham, 1994). The disadvantages are that the overall risk of presenting research, which is unacceptable to peers, for the research may be of poor quality, and that the student may develop incorrect research practices without sufficient supervision.

Research students that may have concerns about one particular value set or any other set are well advised to have discussions with potential supervisors prior to the commencement of a research programme in order to avoid potential conflicts during the course of research. Students and supervisors that are brought together, despite misaligned belief sets, tend to endure a more difficult relationship than those who see eye-to-eye on the research learning process. Given that it is unlikely that supervisors will change their beliefs sets, it is important that research students understand their potential supervisor's perspectives and decide whether or not they will be able to cope with these once research is underway (Mouton, 2001; Bak, 2004; Toncich, 2006).Clearly, the alliance between the research student and the supervisor needs to be a two-way relationship. It also needs to be based on the based on an alignment of beliefs or, at least, a genuine respect for one another's belief set.

Problems between supervisors and research students and possible solutions

In this section the objective is to document the typical sorts of problems that may arise between supervisors and research students. Perhaps, by understanding the nature of these problems and recognizing that they are relatively common in many research projects,

research students may come to recognize that most can be resolved through a self-disciplined-approach to professional practice. In many instances simply recognizing that supervisor versus student problems are natural consequences of two- to three year one to one relationships between individuals, cast together through technical circumstances, and assists in developing a more mature approach to tackling the solution (Toncich, 2006). Many of the problems between supervisors and students tend to arise because of the misalignments that naturally occur between supervisors and students. Students and supervisors are frequently brought together through the machinations of university departments and common research fields, rather than through factors that may create a good working relationship. It is thus important that both parties need to understand the circumstances under which these relationships are formed and recognize the limitations of such relationships.

Conflicting or unrealistic expectations of each other

Students face problems when there is poor communication with their supervisors about what each person expects from the other. The consequences include misunderstandings between parties, time wasting, and frustration of one or more parties (Olivier, 2004).

The common problem produced by a mismatch of expectations about the appropriate degree of direction is not easy to solve; however, one thing is clear that expectations need to be articulated before they can be reconciled. Students new to research may not realize that this form of learning is quite different from course work and that it requires more independence and much less certainty about knowledge (James & Baldwin, 1999). The answer does not lie in a one-way explanation of the supervisor's expectations of the student. Of course the supervisor has more experience and more understanding of the nature of the research, but the relationship is a partnership which requires a sharing of perspectives and views continually throughout the supervision process.

It is important to provide a structured opportunity for such an exchange of views about how the partnership is going to work. This might start with relatively straightforward matters such as how frequently students should submit something in writing and how often meetings should be held (Rau, 2004). The supervisor should also be explicit about what he or she is able to provide for the student, such as advice on the literature search, the selection of a method, practical help, assistance with securing funding, the loan of equipment such as a tape-recorder, gaining permission to access certain sites, and honest and timely feedback. The supervisor may have very clear views about what is desirable, but will also need to take into account the student's circumstances and preferred working habits. At the same time the student need to be clear about what the supervisor cannot provide for him or her, for instance language editing (correction of grammar and spelling), advice on how to use certain software, literature advice on a certain aspect of the topic, and so on. If a student, for example need help with statistical analysis which his or her supervisor cannot provide, the student could arrange to meet with someone who can assist, or enroll for a statistics course. It is important that the student take the initiative for many aspects of the thesis and his or her own academic development. Relying on your supervisor to provide it all will lead to frustration and a probable breakdown in the supervision relationship. It is a matter of negotiation, although the supervisor obviously has greater experience (Wisker, 2001; Bak, 2004; Olivier, 2004).

Some of the areas in which expectations need to be articulated and negotiated are: the extend and nature of direction from the supervisor; the degree of independence of

the student, procedures for consultation, the submission of written work, the nature and timing of response from the supervisor, the appropriate role of the supervisor in editing and how ideological differences are going to be handled (Bak, 2004; Olivier, 2004).

Poor feedback

Feedback which conflicts with previous feedback given, too little feedback, delayed and infrequent feedback and too much negative feedback relative to encouraging and positive comments are all problematic to students. Because of the very personal one-to-one nature of the student versus supervisor relationship, students are extremely reluctant to speak out even when subjected to poor supervision. Once this unique relationship is damaged, repair is usually impossible and the professional future of the student may be jeopardized. Part of the difficulty in providing feedback is that there is often a mismatch between the student's and supervisor's expectations. For this reason, good supervision requires that supervisors provide students with realistic times for the provision of feedback and then ensure that they adhere to the timetable that has been agreed. Students should be encouraged to provide written material in a way that allows relatively rapid feedback.

Timely feedback is important in maintaining the momentum of the project and helping it stay on course. The means by which feedback is provided is more of a personal matter for individual supervisors- formal sessions, chats over lunch, email, phone, fax – but the nature of the feedback is not. Postgraduate students may be understandably sensitive about their development of ideas and draft work can conceal a mass of insecurity and doubt. Not surprisingly, students react adversely to criticism that is delivered unsympathetically or without suggestions for how they can improve their work (Kumar & Stracke, 2006).

What students value in feedback is confirmation of their success (it's easy to overlook the things that are going well), unambiguous identification of problem areas, and suggestions for how to tackle them (James & Baldwin, 1999). Feedback should help students to become more aware of what they are doing and how they are doing it. Receiving feedback gives students an opportunity to change and modify their work in order to become more effective. To be more helpful, feedback needs to be given in a concerned and supportive way and to include both positive and negative observations.

Tensions or conflicting perspectives from within the supervision panel

If there are disagreements among supervisors, students can receive conflicting advice. Having to manage the relationship between supervisors who do not get along with each other is a substantial problem for students. This could result in student's being delayed or in some instances drop out of the program. In order to prevent the supervisor and co-supervisor from giving conflicting feedback, it is a good idea for a list of division of tasks to be drawn up. The student, supervisor and co-supervisor must be clear about who will be responsible for what. In cases where the supervisor and co-supervisor disagree, a discussion needs to take place and a decision needs to be made about how the student should progress. Supervisors and co-supervisors should maintain frequent contact and should copy each other on all e-mails going to the student. In this way, the risk conflicting advice is minimized (Bak, 2004).

It may sometimes happen that, halfway through thesis, the supervisor leaves for another job or go on sabbatical. If the supervisor goes on sabbatical, he or she should try to arrange for contact via e-mail with a clear work agenda drawn up before departure. It is also important for the student to keep a record of the work agenda in cases where the

88

supervisor has to go on sabbatical or where a new supervisor is appointed. If, however, the supervisor leaves to take up a position elsewhere and is unable to see through the completion of the thesis, a new supervisor may need to be appointed. It is the faculty's responsibility to make its best efforts to attempt to secure alternative supervision for the student, and to help the student complete the program in as timely a fashion as possible. The change of supervisors also increases the risk of different advice and a different thrust to the development of the thesis. Depending on how far the student has progressed, a new supervisor may suggest radical changes. In such cases, it is imperative that open and honest communication be maintained. Without open and honest communication it is very difficult to identify the nature of and reasons for shortfalls perceived by the student. Both parties should be open to criticism, and willing to listen to each other and to talk openly.

Supervisor's lack of knowledge and experience in research and or supervision

 The old assumption that "if a person can do research, then of course they know how to supervise is not true. In fact good supervision requires special talents which not all researchers display" (Rudd, 1985, pp. 79-80). However, poor supervision often comes from a lack of awareness of details of which are seldom discussed with colleagues. There is thus a need to train supervisors. Firstly,training alerts supervisors to the issues that they must address and suggests which they may use. Secondly, it initiates networking between staff, which results in an exchange of ideas about techniques and procedures. It is also imperative that independent training sessions on supervision be presented at various levels throughout the year for potential and new-to-supervision supervisors. Experienced supervisors should be encouraged to also attend the training so that using interactive activities, their experiences can be shared with others (Robins & Reeves, 1996).

 The problem of supervisors not being up to date with the field means supervisors will be unable to help solve problems and advice students. This is particularly problematic for students who also lack access to those who do maintain a current knowledge of the literature. If supervisors have no expertise in the field surrounding the student's research, student's morale drops and supervisor interest in the research diminishes, thereby creating a downward spiral. The likelihood of a student achieving a positive outcome is dramatically reduced (Toncich, 2006).

 In some areas, being out-of-date with the field means supervisors are ignorant of the optimal techniques and theories that exist (James & Baldwin, 1999). This has implications for the quality of research that can be performed.

 In all disciplinary areas it is important that the topic selected or suggested fall within the area of the supervisor's expertise,and that it is suited to the background and aspirations of the students (Donald, Saroyan & Denison, 1995). In line with the above Brown and Atkins (1988) suggested that supervisors are expected not only to have a knowledge of the subject area , but also to be able to reflect on research practices and analyze the knowledge, techniques and methods that make them effective. It may also be at times that the supervisor has no adequate depth of understanding in both subject area and the methodology to be followed. The supervisor may be an expert on the subject matter, but the student may have selected a methodology which the supervisor is only partially familiar with. Co-supervisors are usually appointed when the content and /or research method calls for specific expertise that warrants the appointment of a specialist in that area. It is important that as a whole, the supervisory team possess the knowledge and skills to advise the student on all aspects of the research (Mouton, 2001).

In order to ensure this, the supervisory team will normally be subjected to a form of vetting procedure by the university to ensure that collectively they have the appropriate background to support the student's research. The system of vetting the supervisory team may be part of the approval process for the student's research proposal. Typically, the supervisors may have to submit details of their qualifications, research expertise and the number of theses which they have successfully supervised (Olivier, 2004).

Conclusion

In the examples described above, the main emphasis has been on managing conflict constructively, and not on trying to reach a utopian state where no conflict exists. The solutions proposed, imply that there is joint participation of parties in reaching the outcome. There is also the assumption that the outcome is at least to some extent satisfactory for all the parties involved. The most straightforward way of viewing the issue of dispute resolution , therefore, is by considering one's professional onus. Ultimately, the research student has a responsibility for achieving the required outcome in a postgraduate programme. The supervisors, peers and university governance bodies are only there to assist in the process. The research student ultimately carries the burden for a failed attempt at a postgraduate research qualification. Hence, when considering the principal source from which the solution to a dispute will arise, one can only look to oneself.

References

Bak, N. (2004). *Completing your thesis: A practical guide.* Pretoria: J.L.van Schaik.

Brown, G., & Atkins, M. (1988). *Effective Teaching in Higher Education.* London:Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn.

Cryer, P. (1996). *The research student's guide to success.* Buckingham: Open Universty Press.

Donald, J.G., & Saroyan, A., & Denison, D.B. (1995). Graduate student supervision policies and procedures: A case study of issues of factors affecting graduate study. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 25, 71-92.*

Grant, B., & Graham, A. (1994). Guidelines for discussion: A tool for managing postgraduate supervision. In Zuber-Skerrit, O., & Ryan, Y. (Eds.), *Quality in postgraduate education.* London: Kogan Page. *(pp.165-177).*

James, R., & Baldwin, G. (1999). *Eleven practices of effective postgraduate supervisors.* Australia: University of Melbourne.

Kumar, V., & Stracke, E. (2006, 20-21 April). *Expressive feedback on PhD drafts.* Paper presented at the 7th Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference. Adelaide, Australia.

Mouton, J. (2001). *How to succeed in your Masters' and Doctoral studies: A South African Guide and Resource Book.* Pretoria: J. L. van Schaik.

Nias, J. (Ed.). (1993). *The human nature of learning: Selections from the work of M.L.J. Abercrombie.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Olivier, P. (2004). *Writing your thesis.* London: Sage Publishers.

Rau, A. (2004). *Supervisor: A Foucaultian exploration of institutional and interpersonal power relations between postgraduate supervisors, their students and the University domain.* Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Grahamstown, Rhodes University.

Robins, J.L & Reeves, P. (1996). In search of quality postgraduate supervision: The need for university-wide support. *Different Approaches: Theory and Practice in Higher Education.* Proceedings HERDSA Conference 1996. Perth, Western Australia, 8-12 July.

Rudd, E. (1985). *A new look at postgraduate failure.* Guildford Surrey: Society for Research into Higher Education.

Toncich, D. (2006). *Key Factors in Postgraduate Research: A guide for students.* Australia: Chrystobel Engineering.

Wisker, G. (2001). *The postgraduate research handbook. Succeed with your MA, MPhil, EdD and PhD.* Hampshire: Palgrave.