Best Practices in Online Thesis Supervision: a Systematic Literature Review

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### Systematic Review questions

- Do the needs and expectations of students’ differ when undertaking a traditional doctorate or a professional doctorate? If so, how do they differ?
- Do the needs and expectations of students’ differ when undertaking their doctoral studies online? If so, how do they differ?
- Does good practice exist when meeting the needs of online doctoral students? If yes, what is the nature of this?
- Are there any needs of online doctoral students as yet unresolved? If yes, what are these?
Method of systematic review

**Literature Search**
- Key words
- Databases
- National & International websites & Gateways

**Systematic Review**
**Part 1**
Independent researcher data extraction and critique of all literature retrieved

**Systematic Review**
**Part 2**
Comparison, discussion and agreement between reviewers

**Systematic Review**
**Part 3**
Data Synthesis
Where possible meta-analysis will be used
Findings categorised into themes
Countries associated with the literature

USA
Australia
UK
Sweden
Finland
New Zealand
Japan
Iran
Malaysia
Norway
Iran
Ireland
Turkey
Electronic searching: Total of 526 papers

Post-Part 1 of Review: Reject 389

Post-Part 1 of Review: Accept 137

Data sources between 2000 and 2016
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of evidence</th>
<th>Action Research (n=1)</th>
<th>Case Study (n=16)</th>
<th>Descriptive / Opinion based (n=24)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review (n=16)</td>
<td>Mixed Methods (n=6)</td>
<td>Documentary Analysis (n=1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quantitative Survey (n=23)</td>
<td>Qualitative (n=40) Phenomenology (n=5)</td>
<td>Grounded Theory (n=1) Ethnography (n=2) Discourse Analysis (n=2) Narrative Inquiry (n=2)</td>
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<td>Randomize Control Trial (n=1) Quasi-experimental (n=1)</td>
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Key Words from Literature
1. Nature of Supervisory relationship
2. Supervision is like walking on a ‘rackety’ bridge
3. Matching and supervision as teaching
4. Qualities in effective online supervision
5. Expectations and Ground Rules
6. Challenges in online supervision
7. Community of Practice
8. Feedback at a distance
The complex nature of the relationship calls for supervisors to be confident and flexible in using a variety of strategies in order to address the ups and downs individual students experienced throughout their doctoral journey (Grant 1999; van-Schalwyk et al. 2016). This is even more important for part-time students (Gardiner and Gopaul 2012).
1. Trust
2. Professional to friendship continuum
3. Place of culture
4. Emotional intelligence
5. Impact of power
Metaphor of supervision as “walking on a rackety bridge” (Grant, 1999):

- the structure of the bridge is supplied by the rules and pedagogies which sanction and codify supervision.
- But the dynamics of desire, power and identity mean that the bridge is not static: even with agreements put in place, the bridge can be disturbed in surprising ways, making it hard for both parties to keep their balance.
- Negotiating it requires a certain situational attentiveness . . . both supervisor and student need to be sensitive to the effects of their actions and responses to the other, or someone (most often the student) may fall off” (Grant, 1999, p. 9).
If students are involved in their own match with the supervisor they are more likely to make good progress and to be more satisfied in their own experience. **Moreover match should be based on interpersonal working patterns and research methodology rather than more on supervisor’s expertise and knowledge**, (Ives and Rowley, 2005)
Although the notion of supervision as teaching is not new, the concept of the pedagogy of supervision is just beginning to emerge. They make explicit reference to supervisors facilitating their students to learn and move through the challenges of breaching threshold concepts (places where students get stuck) as evidence that there is a specific pedagogy of supervision and that more research in this area is required (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2016)
Supervisor ensures that assumptions, and expectations are openly discussed and agreement are embedded in ground rules

Supervisor is intrinsically enthusiastic about their topic

Supervisor adopts an educative role

Supervisor cares about them as an individual as well as their research

Supervisor is culturally aware

Supervisor is readily available and always there when needed

Supervisor provides readily understood guidance and approachable when further clarification is required

Supervisor provides advice on their work, sending it back as soon as possible with comments and constructive criticism

Supervisors should provide structure as well as support

(Deuchar 2008; Andrew 2012; Devos et al. 2015)
“Doctoral supervision is about the development of a person and not just the successful production of a thesis”
Cherry 2012, p.9

“Effective doctoral learning depends as much on the quality of the relationship between the supervisor and the student as on the practices in which they engage”
Cotterall 2011, p.423
Important to have a frank and open discussion at the outset so that the potential disharmony can be avoided.

It is advisable to draw up a set of ground rules outlining what each party expects of the other.

From our own experience of supervising online doctoral students, we recommend that these ground rules are periodically revisited and further agreed.
International Students

• Often differences in expectations
• Some may have a passive attitude to initiating the supervisor / supervisee relationship
• Some expected their supervisor to provide close supervision and push/force
• Some supervisors misinterpret student’s passivity as a sign that they do not want to work closely with them (Kim 2007)
Managing Expectations – especially at a distance

- Students will have made their own assumptions and created their own expectations – there may be a mismatch with their supervisor’s. (Deuchar, 2008)
- Supervisors make assumptions too. For example, Sambrook and Stewart (2008) found that there was a tendency for supervisors (in this case DBA) to assume that all students came with a good knowledge and practice based of critical reflection and critical analysis.
- Learning Plans may be useful
Specific Challenges in Supervising from a Distance

- Prompt and responsive emails help to maintain ‘connection’. Also provides written record;
- Regular and planned in advance Skype/Online supervision sessions—reduces the ‘distance’ and provide scaffolding;
- When a problem inside the relationship may arise it is difficult to handle at distance;
- Supervisors’ relationship.
The supervisor is the port where supervisees regularly moor to keep students from “drifting”, but other interventions to prevent drift, like … being part of embodied and online communities also need to be encouraged.

(Andrew 2012, p. 51)
The concept of a community of practice is based on social interaction where participants create an environment (virtual or face-to-face) whereby feelings of isolation are reduced as a strong sense of community develops.

Growing realisation that myths about the isolation of being an online doctoral student are being squashed as a result of the technological advances in the last decade.

“The relationship between supervisor and remote student has become less remote”

(Sussex 2008, p.122)
The Community of Practice

- Tailored professional doctorate online community
- Online Research Clusters
- Virtual Research Presentations by students
- More doctoral programmes especially professional doctorates, are employing a team approach to supervision to ameliorate the potential problems in the continuity of supervision.
- Annual Tripartite meetings
Feedback at distance

- Written feedback provided at a distance (online) can be misinterpreted.
- Sussex (2008) suggested supplementing written feedback with the face-to-face synchronous discussion so that misinterpretation can be avoided and the appropriate level of support and challenge can be used.

» ‘Trust is the seedbed for support’. (Devos & Klein 2015, p. 455)
Colleagues and students have reported that negative critical evaluation in written form can have a more damaging effect on the researcher than communicating the same message by voice” (Sussex 2008, p.133).
Receiving written and audio feedback helped students to have a deeper perception of cognitive and teaching presence online and students felt they learnt more

(Doloriert and Sambrook 2012).
Recommendations for further research

Paucity of literature about everyday practices in the life world of online doctoral students

So plenty opportunity for us to add to the body of knowledge!
"It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end." ~ Ernest Hemingway

Any Questions?

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Thank you!
QUESTIONS

1) Is there something missed in the literature according with your supervisory experience? (Face to face or online?)

2) Do you agree or disagree with some of the findings? Why?

3) What are the challenges you are facing on the way in supervision?
References

References


