The impact of institutional power on Higher Degree Research Supervision: an observation from both sides of the coin

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This paper presents the reflections of a Higher Degree Research (HDR) supervisor and PhD student after successful completion of the PhD, and presents two sides of the same coin. Each independently wrote their reflections of the ‘HDR (PhD) supervision process’. While the aim of the exercise was to determine, what worked and what didn’t work, the observations of these independent reflections revealed the impact institutional policies and processes have on both the supervisor and supervisee and as such on the nature of academic work.

PhD supervision has a direct impact on the quality of the PhD experience, and timely completions. For academics, institutional pressure to supervise PhD students to secure tenure, for promotion opportunities and to support their research output is very high. These institutional expectations combined with workload models make finding a good PhD student to support their research and publications a priority. For the PhD student finding a supervisor with the capacity to guide them through their own knowledge creation experience and the completion of ‘their PhD’ is essential.

PhD students are encouraged to find a supervisor who is an expert in their field of interest. The focus is on the knowledge base rather than the pedagogical approach to supervision. Such experts often have high numbers of PhD students and little or no time for individual guidance, and little or no tolerance for the student to deviate away from a question the supervisor specifically wants addressed.

The paper starts with introducing contemporary literature on HDR (PhD) supervision practice. This is followed by the individual experiential narratives of the student and the supervisor. Common themes relating to power, institutional policies, and the nature of the academic and academic work as influencing factors are drawn out before conclusions are drawn regarding models of supervision for the future.

Keywords: HDR Supervision; Institutional power; Academic work

Introduction

For many academics supervising HDR students is not only expected once they complete their own research degrees, but becomes an integral part of the ongoing success of their career, and their reputation within their own academic faculty, their institution and the wider academic community. Research and research supervision is still seen as superior to teaching and learning in many traditional academic circles. As such, the institutional pressure to supervise is high, but institutional support for supervision remains low; and most new supervisors have few or no pedagogic models to draw on other than their own experiences of being supervised (Bøgelund, 2015) and whether they emulate or do the opposite.

Increasingly institutions are providing HDR supervision training, but much of this training focusses on compliance and not on developing a supervisor pedagogy (Crane et al., 2016). The authors acknowledge it would be remiss not to note that institutional policies and practices are in large part in response to bigger picture policies, strategies and agenda. Many of these bigger picture policies focus on funding based on research output and outcomes, and higher degree research completions. It is not the aim of this paper to discuss bigger picture higher education agenda, the aim of this paper is to examine the bases of power and its impact on the supervisor supervisee relationship.

This paper looks at how the supervision process is experienced and perceived by both a supervisor and a supervisee (upon completion). Both produced narrative reflections independently and then combined these to draw out common themes and issues to shape future HDR supervision models. Core to the findings and interpretation was the issue of power, and how institutional influences can distort the power relationship between supervisor and supervisee. French and Raven’s (1959) bases of social power is used as a lens for exploring these power issues.

Literature

The PhD supervisor student relationship has a direct impact on the quality of the PhD experience and outcomes, and effective supervision is a contributing factor to successful and timely completions (see for example Green and Bowden 2012). It is not surprising given the importance of the relationship that considerable attention has been paid to different models of supervision (Pearson & Brew, 2002; Hemer, 2012) and the practice of supervision. Supervision is a complex and sometimes problematic relationship, which Lee and Green (2009) argued, requires a specific supervision pedagogy that needs to be flexible and ‘optimally responsive to the changing dynamics of candidature and research practice.’ (p.617). From this pedagogical perspective being a successful academic does not equate to being an effective supervisor. The supervisor as holder of research and disciplinary knowledge is expected to guide the student in their own process of developing new knowledge and becoming an independent researcher (Kiley, 2009).

However, in practice, supervision is based on and influenced by institution-, discipline- and project-specific requirements as well as the expectations and perceptions of the supervisor (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Bøgelund, 2015; Grant, et al., 2014). These influences create a tension for both the supervisor and student to make the relationship work. Institutional and discipline requirements that have a direct impact on supervision include academic workloads, research output expectations and completion times, and usually tied to funding and promotion models. Given these tensions, the relationship requires careful selection where inherent responsibilities and power are clearly negotiated and recognised (Neumann 2003; Pyhältö et al., 2015). Apart from research related compatibility, for example as research topic and methodology, the relationship requires trust, open communication and consider individual traits including culture, age, gender and even class (Neumann, 2003) because these can lead to mismatches (Carter et al., 2012).

The supervisor supervisee relationship is idiosyncratic and distinctive, and it changes and evolves as the developing researcher’s student identity and self-efficacy shifts from becoming to being an independent researcher (Jazvac-Martek 2009). In conceptualising the supervision relationship Lee and Green (2009, p626) note that supervision brings overtones of ‘overseeing’ and looking over “the production and development of academic knowledge” and identity. Gardner (2010) notes that process of supervision has connotations of power and power differentials – of those who have and those who have not. The supervisor is both the holder and broker of discipline knowledge and institutional gatekeeper and have an impact on the students’ ability transition toward successful completion (Lee, 2009). Although this power that is not always explicit it is nevertheless present and facilitated by institutional policies and expectations and support, what French and Raven (1959) identify as reward, coercive, legitimate, referent and expert power over the student.

Hopwood (2010, p.105) defined the PhD as “infused with power, desire and tensions, constructed and contested” as students struggle to exert their agency within these institutional confines that can leave students feeling incapable of reporting difficulties because they feel inferior (Jazvak-Martek, et al., (2011) and fear becoming orphaned (Wisker & Robinson, 2012, p.12) or exposed as unworthy (Woolderink et al., 2015). Applying the French and Raven power sources, the PhD supervisor-supervisee relationship can be mapped as follows:

**Figure 1: Supervisor-supervisee relationship mapped to French and Raven (1959) Bases of Social Power**

Figure 1 summarises the nature of the supervision relationship as currently evidenced in the literature. The expert and legitimate power bases are as would be expected. Some candidates have a supervisor with referent power which can further tip the balance between coercive and reward bases more towards the coercive as the candidate feels a sense of obligation to yield to the referent power. Coercive and reward power are opposite ends of a see-saw as the same activity can be undertaken from either base of power. For example, helping a candidate write a conference paper for the candidate to deliver is utilising a reward power base; putting the supervisors name on it and giving it a slant that suits the supervisor is coercive.

The element deficient in the literature that became evident in the narratives is the impact of the institution and institutional practices on the academic supervisor, and how these play out in the utilisation of power on and over the candidate.

On being supervised: A PhD student’s experience

As a recent PhD graduate this reflection on being supervised is somewhat broader than most PhD graduates as my PhD research itself was on the lived PhD experience. Though my research did not set out with a focus on supervision it would have been remiss of me not to include at least a chapter about supervision experiences, particularly as it featured very strongly in the experiential narratives of my research participants. It is also worth noting that for two years prior to starting my own PhD, I was part of a national funded research project developing a toolkit for HDR supervisors who were new to supervision.

Consequently, the argument presented in this reflection includes the views expressed in my own lived PhD supervision experience, my knowledge of HDR supervision pedagogy and institutional variances and the findings of the lived experiences outlined in my PhD research as I cannot ‘un-know’ this. It could be said that this experience and intelligence informed and impacted my experience, and I have no doubt that it has.

My journey toward a PhD began at a public university upon completion of a Master’s Degree when one of my lecturers recommended that I undertake a PhD and consider becoming an academic. Before committing myself, I spent some time as a sessional lecturer and was refining a PhD research topic to embark on with my previous lecturer, and now Program Manager, who continued to direct and recommend research projects; and for whom I would spend considerable time reviewing and writing up literature reviews. For almost six months I wrote up reviews for projects that supported the research interests of my Program Manager and PhD Supervisor to-be in which I had little personal investiture. Whenever my interest grew in research areas not aligned to my prospective supervisors’ research, I was steered away from these projects.

A chance meeting with another senior academic led to my appointment as the Research Officer on a national HDR Supervision project. This role exposed me not only to a new discipline but a range of senior academics across several institutions that shifted and solidified my own research interest outside the scope of my would-be supervisors’ interests, and I identified another academic willing to supervise my nominated PhD research. This shift in my focus of PhD, despite seeking to retain the would-be supervisor on the team, resulted in the loss of employment as a sessional lecturer.

Fortunately, my contract with the funded project was extended and I did not incur any financial hardship because of my choice of research and supervisor, despite losing my sessional lecturing employment. Not long after my candidature confirmation, my principal supervisor moved to another university. Institutional policy held that an external supervisor could not be the Principal Supervisor and as a result the supervisor was appointed adjunct associate supervisor and my then associate supervisor appointed to principal supervisor. The change in appointment resulted in a directional shift toward this new principal supervisor’s research focus. A focus that was not the original intention of the research and for which I had received candidature confirmation. This ultimately led to the demise of my sense of efficacy and belonging. Consequently, I left the university and stopped working on my PhD for almost 12 months until my previous principal supervisor contacted me and facilitated the transfer of my PhD enrolment to another university which did not have a policy excluding external supervisors from holding a principal supervision role. I was back on track.

Being supervised by an external supervisor meant I had no allegiances at the university. In other words, my supervisor was not part of the system and I was not that someone’s PhD student. While other PhD students gathered, and collected, based on their HDR supervisors or supervision teams, my neutrality meant I was welcome anywhere. Observing my PhD colleagues and the narratives from my research participants highlighted how the kudos and power of the supervisor, within the institution and beyond, was both a benefit and a drawback for PhD students. Being someone’s PhD student could lead to sessional academic work and other perks. However, being someone’s PhD student could also encumber the students’ ability to exercise personal agency about their research, whom they collaborated with or sought advice from and for some this curbed their ability to develop as independent researchers. For me, no one questioned what I was doing, and my supervisor did not pressure for publications, assuring me that I would publish as and when was appropriate in the research process.

Without doubt institutional priorities and academic workloads impact on the supervision practice and the lived experiences of PhD students. Academics are expected, while often juggling teaching and administrative duties, to regularly produce papers, research output and secure research funding to maintain academic currency and be considered for promotion review. Consequently, academics often rely on recruiting and using PhD students to support their ongoing production of papers and research output. Whereas with an external supervisor who was not under institutional pressure to perform, I was not expected to support another person’s research interests or to publish outside the realms of what I was doing, and when I was ready to. My research clearly indicated that for many PhD students, the publication push can detract from the PhD thesis production and for some compromised their ability to meet the timely completion expectations of the institution. Achieving timely completion creates a tension for both supervisor and student and as a result many supervisors end up directing the students’ research to ensure a completion instead of guiding the development of an independent researcher who completes when they and their work is ready.

The issue of time extends beyond timely PhD completions; there’s also the time supervisors allocate to their PhD students. Supervisors are expected to regularly meet with their students, provide timely and constructive feedback and guide the student to become an independent researcher. In my research, most participants reported that their supervisors were too busy to provide them with adequate time, feedback and guidance. As a result, much focus was on finding ways to be less of a burden to their supervisor to receive the time, guidance and feedback they so needed to progress their research.

Notwithstanding my early research, supervision and institutional changes, I successfully completed my PhD within the institutional set timeframe. Being externally supervised provided a cloak of invisibility removing some of the pressures of the institution, but it also meant I did not receive the perks attributed to a supervisor’s power or kudos in the institution to contribute to my academic career, nor was I exposed to opportunities to collaborate and be introduced into the academy. With the growing number of PhD students and reduced number of tenured academic positions, I do note this may disadvantage me in the longer term.

On supervision: A supervisor’s experience

For younger academics, the pressure to supervise to secure tenure in their academic career is intense. The PhD itself may move you from lecturer to senior lecturer, but there are no real promotion opportunities beyond that without research supervision completions. This ensures a minimum career length of a decade prior to an application for Associate Professor, and even that is cutting it tight.

There is always a shortage of experienced supervisors, so developing new supervisors to gain experience is important for institutional continuity. Unfortunately, as many Universities offer more senior staff early retirement or redundancy, they are not negotiating retainers to cover supervision. Being able to supervise PhD’s does not feature strongly in retention selection criteria as it is expensive in terms of hours’ allowance against fees generated; and once people have retired they are expected to give up their time to supervise for free, as a gift back to the institution that has just ended their career.

It is unfortunate for Universities that they are required to take PhD students to underpin the research status of the institution, and that the funding associated with the candidates is only released on the successful completion of the thesis. This makes student retention vitally important to the institution but it remains a low priority in terms of HR reward recognition.

For new supervisors, the pressure to take on ‘any student’ they are offered is strong. Equally, being new to the game, they are unlikely to be able to read how successful a candidate is likely to be from early meetings, and hence are more likely to take on more problematic students than the more experienced supervisors would select. Combined with a lack of supervision training and experience, the supervision process is more likely to go awry, and the PhD is more likely to have an unsatisfactory outcome.

Having survived these early year experiences through team supervising in a relatively unique setup in a Doctorate of Education program, I moved to Australia to join a university business school. Here I found the process of supervision quite different to the UK. It was more of a competitive sparring process between academics than it was about the students or the research. At the PhD presentation days, supervisors would overtly criticise each other through the questioning of the presenting students, and supervisors were fiercely protective of their territory. This territory not only covered the academic subject area, but also the students themselves. They were ‘their PhD students’ and hence were not allowed to engage in conversations with other academics as this was seen as directly undermining them. This ego driven process did nothing to serve the student or the research process and was counter-cultural to my previous experience in the UK where a ‘problem shared was a problem halved’ and we all openly discussed our students and encouraged them to seek conversations about their research as widely as possible.

Paradoxically, the desperation to have students complete and be seen as ‘their work’ leads to an isolationist view of supervision. This in turn is more likely to lead to non-completion of students as they have not engaged more widely in the academic community and developed a sense of academic belonging. Also, the burden on the supervisor is so much greater than the burden of the open community, where success and failure are more shared.

Moving to a university in the private sector the pressures were similar but different. The need for completion was strong and so the impression was that the supervisor had to be more directive to get the completions. The more directive I saw supervisors get, the more the students pushed back. After all, it is the students PhD, not the supervisors – or is it? This is a question I find myself asking often in Australia. Broader national policies shaping institutional policies impact upon academics and drive their behaviour, including the need for publications and building a body of research without sufficient time allocations, that PhD students are utilised more as research assistants than researchers in the making. The supervisors’ agenda seems to be the dominant agenda, driven by their niche in the institution that they protect and defend like a mother does a child.

Moving on from academia changes your status back in the university, and affords you the title of ‘external supervisor’. Being fortunate enough to be paid for this role where I am at present, I continue to supervise PhD students. Is it wrong to expect this payment? I don’t think so. It is a fixed fee which in no way reimburses my time for the work, but affords me a sense of being valued rather than taken for granted. It also instils commitment and professionalism because it is a ‘paid job’ rather than something voluntary, and hence the ‘paid work ethic’ steps in rather than the ‘hobby ethic’.

Being outside of the institution has freed me from many of these institutional pressures and I have no research agenda that I need to contribute to. My agenda is simply to support the candidate in reaching completion. I have no pressure to publish so am not concerned at the pace at which my students publish – they can publish when they are ready. I have no agenda in having my name on their publications; something I have always been strongly against anyway (unless I have directly contributed beyond supervision to the writing of the article). And my focus and commitment is to the student – not the institution, not the department or faculty, not my career prospects, nor the research agenda – simply to the student.

As a supervisor, I have found this liberating. I enjoy the supervision process more. I have an objectivity that allows me to step back and look at the students’ work in isolation rather than placing it within an institutional research context, and as such my students’ PhD is definitively their PhD. I see my role as simply guiding the student to a successful completion. No more and no less. Being external has removed all political, cultural and career noise that acts as a distraction and allowed me to be truly student-centred.

Discussion

Although written independently, the impact of the institution and its bases of power were evident in both the supervisor and supervisee’s reflections. The pressure exerted on academics to conform to the publications outcome requirements is represented more as coercion than reward – the only reward being you don’t lose your research active status. The coercion is related to individual status, expertise recognition and peer regard and acceptance. Unfortunately, none of the bases of power are utilised in a positive, encouraging and supportive manner. The power is exerted negatively with the threat of loss of power being the driver for behaviour.

The resultant impact on the academic’s behaviour is somewhat predictable. Many dig trenches to defend their territory and ward-off anyone who looks like they might cross the threshold. Rather than adopting a welcoming approach to their knowledge base being explored and expanded, they take a defensive approach, guarding their knowledge base as if they owned it themselves to the exclusion of others in the institution. It could be said that the academic ego becomes increasingly inflated in such a hostile environment. An environment where humility is regarded as weakness that opens one up to attack. This is not beneficial to a novice researcher whose PhD is likely to pivot and change as they find their own path through and understanding of research, knowledge and truth(s).

According to Universities Australia Higher Education and Research Facts and Figures November 2015 report, the number of PhD students who successfully complete a higher degree by research has ‘more than doubled’ (Universities Australia, 2015, p.39). Whereas establishing the number of PhD students who do not complete is somewhat more difficult to pin down although Bourke et al (2004) suggested that over 30% of PhD students do not complete (Bourke et al., 2004). Many PhD students set out on their own knowledge discovery journey, only to encounter HDR supervisors who have their own needs and agenda and steer the students down a path that meets their own requirements rather than those of the student. It raises the question: whose PhD is it anyway? Not an easy question to answer. Many supervisors hold the view that the PhD student is ‘their student’ and they have ownership over the students’ work – a view often supported by institutional reward and recognition practices. As the student struggles for their liberty, the supervisor should allow them to go their own way or the studies will most likely end prematurely. It takes an incredibly strong PhD student to stand up to a supervisor and go their own way against the supervisor’s wishes, and then complete. External supervisors have no vested interest in any outcome other than the student’s completion – so the PhD is very firmly the student’s, they own it and can take it where they want. The supervisor’s responsibility is simply to ensure it meets the PhD criteria on submission.

**Figure 2:  Current institutional impact on supervision process (adapted from French and Raven, 1959)**

The utilisation of a positive institutional power base would realise academics being supported and supporting each other, offering additional advice and guidance to each and each other’s students to help them develop as novice researchers, and developing broader expertise and contribution within the whole academic community. The negative power base currently reflected in this paper and illustrated in Figure 2. is one of supervisors undermining each other and PhD students being used as research collateral rather than developed as researchers in the making. Re-visioning the application of the power bases in a positive manner shifts the institutional influence on the alternative positive application of Bases of Power to supervision process outlined in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Alternative positive application of Bases of Power to Supervision process.**

Conclusions

While a shift from the practice in Figure 2 to Figure 3 may appear to be dependent on a change in national policies, a shift could be initiated by subtle changes in institutional practice. For example, the introduction of mentors for new supervisors as a ‘rewarded’ role after demonstrating best practice supervision pedagogy to be considered, or where there is low supervision capacity for the inclusion of an external supervisor on supervision teams. The establishment of open forums for discussion of supervision practice and supervision difficulties as means of ‘sharing the load’ (Roxa & Martensson, 2015). As well as clearly articulating the principle that the PhD is owned by the PhD Student and not the supervisor and ensuring this is practiced with supporting policies.

In summary, the negative impact bigger picture national policies and agendas have on individual supervisors can be reduced by institutions acknowledging the power imbalances these generate and putting in place a clear framework of supporting policies, processes and systems. These initiatives will shift the supervisor’s experience to one which is less pressured and more rewarding in the longer term and support the development of independent researchers. We propose this requires a process of subtle changes focussed on a bigger picture outcome rather than a quick fix to an immediate problem. Intention is everything here – it is the start of a culture change. Not only do the issues raised in this paper address the identity of academics and the nature of their current work, but they also impact upon the value of higher education in wider society.

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