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The Politics of Supervising Postgraduate Students: A Viewpoint

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Abstract

Postgraduate research training and research supervision has come under close scrutiny at many UK university institutions. Students today who decided to take up postgraduate studies go through a demanding process. Moreover, postgraduate study has become more complex for universities to deliver because the postgraduate student sector has become more diverse in terms of internationalisation, part time studies and curriculum outline in courses. This paper seeks to critically explore the complex relationships between postgraduate students and their supervisor. It is suggested that both the student and supervisor are on a learning curve that tests each other's ability in the higher education sector.

Key words: Relationship, Supervision, Pedagogy, Postgraduate

1. Introduction

“Doctoral degrees fulfil many purposes. They are the most individually distinct of the academic qualifications available because of their roots in research and the pursuit of knowledge, and their requirement for the candidate to produce work requiring original thought, based on independent study” (QAA, 2011, p. 10).

The above quote is taken from the (2011) Quality Assurance Agency, which defines the characteristics of a doctorate programme in higher education today. Over the last 20 years higher education has experienced increased scrutiny on how institutions run their undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In 1997 the findings of The Dearing Report called for a fundamental change in higher education. From this point forward British universities have seen their student numbers greatly increase (Hill, 2006; Mufti, 2006; Bathmaker, 2003; Ramsden, 2003; Biggs, 2002). However, close scrutiny on postgraduate education came earlier than this following the publication of the 1993 government white paper *Realising Our Potential*. This white paper stressed the impact that research has within British society and a fundamental rethink was therefore needed in respect of how postgraduate students receive research training. This finding is still debated by academics. For instance research that was undertaken by Green and Powell in 2007 recommended some substantial changes to how a doctorate programme should be delivered in British higher education institutions. Green and Powell (2007, p. 7) firstly warn of ‘the diversity of awards leading to lack of clarity of their status and purpose.’ Secondly, they stress ‘the need to develop an organisational delivery structure, which encourages efficient yet accessible provision,’ thirdly, they highlight that there is ‘a need for government and the funding councils to recognise the real cost of delivery of doctoral programmes and training them appropriately,’ and finally consideration should be given to the international impact that globalisation has on the doctorate market.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section will address the modes of reflection on supervising PhD candidates. In order to achieve this educational pedagogy approach, namely, experiential learning has been used. Then following on from this the second section will critically reflect on the supervisor’s professional

development in their supervision practice. Finally, the last section will conclude the paper.

2. Educational Pedagogy Approaches

The concept of pedagogy has always been at the centre of higher education. Moreover, pedagogical approaches are used mainly by educationalists to reflect on their teaching styles. It has been noted by scholars that postgraduate supervision is not necessarily accepted as a form of pedagogy (Eggins and Macdonald, 2003; Rowland, 2000). Paradoxically, however Sinclair (2004, p. 26) has noted that 'pedagogy can be defined generically as the 'how' of teaching which in turn translates as how to supervise.' Hence, there is a school of thought, when it comes to pedagogy supervision, which is 'intervention continuum' that is conceptualised into two schools of thought 'hands off' to 'hands on.' Sinclair (2004, p. 26) has defined these schools of thought as:

"At the 'hands off' end of the continuum, supervisors intervene minimally in the candidature and fewer and slower completions tend to result. At the 'hands on' end of the continuum, supervisors and others regularly intervene in the candidature and more and faster completions tend to follow."

This paper has referred to experiential learning to reflect on the experiences of postgraduate supervision. Over recent years experiential learning has become a fashionable approach to educational pedagogy research (Bevan and Kipka, 2012; Hutchinson and Janiszewski Goodin, 2012; Fowler, 2008; Bear and Wilson, 2006; Brockbank and McGill, 1998). The idea of experiential theory is devised by Kolb who sets out four components of the learning cycle. Fry *et al* (2003, p. 15) have defined experiential learning as being:

"...based on the notion that understanding is not a fixed or unchangeable element of thought and that experiences can contribute to it forming and re-forming. Experiential learning is a continuous process and implies that we all bring to learning situations our own knowledge, ideas, beliefs and

practices at different levels of elaboration that should in turn be amended or shaped by the experience – if we learn from it.”

In this sense this research has found experiential learning to be useful to analyse postgraduate supervision because it allows the supervisor to reflect on their own teaching and research practice. For example the concrete experience allows the teacher to reflect on the supervision at Doctorate level. Then this allows a supervisor to reflect (reflective observation) on the key points that made their tutor such a good supervisor in terms of personal qualities and their relationship with the student. Undertaking a reflective observation has enabled the research to identify (abstract conceptualisation) the main themes that a supervisor must have. Finally, using active experimentation has allowed the research to test their leaning experiences on their postgraduate students.

3. Professional Development in a Supervision Practice

“It is important to establish systematic and clear supervision arrangements. These include: the need to provide students with opportunities for access to regular and appropriate supervisory support; encouragement to interact with other researchers; advice from one or more independent source (internal or external); and arrangements that protect the student in the event of the loss of a supervisor” (QAA, 2004, p. 14).

The above citation is taken from the Quality Assurance Agency guidelines and demonstrates what constitutes as good practice in postgraduate supervision. Over recent years there has been much academic debate on the qualities of postgraduate research in an ever changing university sector (McCallin and Nayar, 2012; Ferguson, 2009; Beer, 2009; Scott, 2000). Now more than ever before there is closer scrutiny on how universities supervise their students. Conrad (1999, p. 13) has argued that there is a need to establish clear guidelines on ‘providing high quality research supervision.’ Furthermore, Kandiko and Kinchin (2012, p. 5) noted that there are five key approaches to supervision:

1. 'Functional: where the issue is one of project management;
2. Enculturation: where the student is encouraged to become a member of the disciplinary community;
3. Critical thinking: where the student is encouraged to question and analyse their work;
4. Emancipation: where the student is encouraged to question and develop themselves;
5. Developing a quality relationship: where the student is enthused, inspired and cared for.'

Reflecting back on the author's PhD journey this greatly impacted on the way that the author teaches and undertakes their research. Whilst undertaking a PhD an academic advised the author the key to success in a career in teaching students in higher education is simply, "*To be a good lecturer, first of all you need to be a good researcher.*" This advice has been instilled to the author's philosophy of teaching because the research the author undertakes both informs and strengthens the authors teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

The author of this paper has been a university lecturer for several years. The writer teaching and researching in the social science discipline, with expertise lying in sociology and politics. Over the last six years the author has been involved in postgraduate research supervision at both masters' and doctorate level. The supervisor has enjoyed working with postgraduate students because it allows both engagement in research and watching my students' progress through their studies. When reflecting on the authors (author's) postgraduate supervision practise there are two key two elements: (1) writing skills; and (2) examination. The following paragraphs will discuss these elements in more detail.

3.1.1 Writing Skills

The importance of writing to a good standard in postgraduate studies is established (Evans, 2011; Kamler and Thomson, 2004; Scheyvens, 2003; Rowland, 2000). The transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies is one of the fundamental changes in attitude to study that needs to be reached. This transition approach, which influences the success of a student undertaking postgraduate studies, is the

ability to critically think and to write in an academic style. Dowling *et al* (2012, p. 300) have argued that:

“Writing is central to the performance and demonstration of an academic identity, and to the doctorate. It is through writing that scholarly identities are formed, with the text putting the work and the self in the public domain. Writing is central to scholarship and a demonstration of research competence. Written work conveys the scholarship and scholarly identity of the researcher...”

3.1.2 Examination

There is certain criteria, which must be met to undertake the role of an internal/external examiner at a higher education institution. The University of Reading (2012, p. 3) have argued that there are clear distinctions between the requirements of internal and external examiners when examining a doctorate thesis. As the guidelines note: ‘The external examiner will usually be a member of academic staff from another University (either within the UK or elsewhere), but can be from a non-academic organisation...’ and ‘the internal examiner will be a member of Reading academic staff who has broad knowledge of the subject area concerned.’ Grabble (2003) has argued that when appointing examiner for a viva the Department must be justified in their selections. There are certain procedures that an internal/external must follow if they wish to take part in the viva process. The professional/academic attributes are divided into four parts:

1. 'Be fully cognisant with standards for the award of research degrees in the subject in comparable institutions;
2. Have significant experience and knowledge of research in the subject area within which the candidate is working;
3. Command authority in the field and the respect of their subject community;
4. Have played no personal part in the research undertaken by the candidate.'

(Cywinski, 2013, p.6)

Additionally, there is a specific way of examining a PhD thesis. Bourke and Holbrook (2011) have noted that reading a PhD thesis is a challenging situation and thus can

have an impact on the viva process. It is recommended that a thesis should be firstly approached by reading the abstract, introduction and conclusion. Reading these sections will allow the examiner to establish if the student has actually achieved what they set out to achieve. Then it is advised to read the thesis in its entirety quickly. Finally, make notes of points that need clarification and check for grammatical errors. This way of examining the thesis will enable the examiners to write their independent report.

4. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the supervision experiences with PhD students. Experiential learning was applied to critically reflect on the supervision practise. Experiential learning as a pedagogical education process had four key stages which were followed: (1) Concrete Experience; (2) Reflective Observation; (3) Abstract Conceptualisation; and (4) Active Experimentation (Fry *et al*, 2003). As it was discovered in this research the supervisor has a considerable amount of expertise on postgraduate research supervision and this has allowed them to contemplate their personal development. There are two skills that are key to both the supervisor and the student they are: Writing Skills (1) and; (2) PhD examination.

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