Orientations to research higher degree supervision

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Abstract. This study examines the beliefs of supervisors and PhD candidates about higher degree supervision and three other academic domains: research; teaching; and learning. Interview data from 34 participants were categorised into four distinctive orientations to supervision, each consisting of a network (plexus) of beliefs about the four domains. Although each orientation comprised many beliefs, the orientations clearly differed in terms of two broad distinctions: whether the supervisor should direct and take responsibility for the research (controlling beliefs) or should guide the process (guiding beliefs), and whether the focus of supervision should be more upon the research tasks to be completed (task-focussed beliefs) or upon the development of the candidates (person-focussed beliefs). These distinctions, plus the types of interconnections between the beliefs comprising each orientation, support the conclusion that beliefs about teaching are central to each orientation, even though supervision is intimately concerned with research.

Keywords: beliefs, controlling, guiding, orientations, person-focussed, research higher degree (RHD) supervision, task-focussed.

Introduction

Research supervision

University postgraduate education has recently expanded on a global scale, with the numbers of Doctor of Philosophy degree candidates increasing rapidly. For example, at the research site for this study, the first postgraduate students in electrical engineering were admitted in 1986–1987. By 2002, there were 515 postgraduate students, including 394 PhD-by-research candidates. Sustaining postgraduate research programmes in the current climate of increasing numbers and greater accountability (Cullen et al. 1994; McWilliam 2002) places significant pressure on universities. While supervision is not the only factor affecting students’ learning and completion – with, for example, intellectual and social climate being crucial (Conrad and Chipperfield
2004; Ramsden et al. 2004) – it is a major factor in PhD progress. (e.g., Brown and Atkins 1988; Pole et al. 1997; Latona and Browne 2001; Bair and Haworth 2004). Not surprisingly, there are problems with supervision. Students’ levels of satisfaction with their supervisory experiences vary and the quality of supervision offered has been questioned (Zuber-Skerritt and Ryan 1994; Wisker 1999; Ainley 2001; Neumann 2003).

The research response to these issues has centred on matters related to policy and administration (Becher et al. 1994; Holdaway et al. 1994; Martin et al. 2001; Kemp 2002; Pearse 2002) and on details of supervisory praxis (Parry and Hayden 1994; Holdaway 1997a, b; Pole et al. 1997; Brockbank and McGill 1998; Pearson 1999). Despite attempts to define and encourage good practice (e.g., Zuber-Skerritt and Ryan 1994), problems persist. Aspland et al. (1999) have concluded that problems in supervision arise because candidates and supervisors proceed on different assumptions and have different or unclear expectations (cf. Zuber-Skerritt 1992; Hockey 1996; Shannon 1998; Burns et al. 1999). The bases on which people build these different assumptions and expectations have not been fully examined, although some beginnings have been made.

Some scholars have taken an approach that is more theoretical than empirical, designed to challenge accepted understandings of supervisory practice (e.g., Green and Lee 1998, 1999; Lee and Green 1998; Andresen 1999; Johnson et al. 2000). Green and Lee (1995/1998), for example, observe that ‘pedagogy has been an obvious missing category in considerations of postgraduate supervision’ (p. 140). Using Connell’s (1985) contention that supervision ‘is the most advanced level of teaching in our education system’ as a starting point, Green and Lee distinguish between ‘teaching’ and ‘pedagogy’, discussing the complexities suggested by those terms, and raise questions about how teaching and research need to be rethought.

Smith (2001) employed an empirical method to investigate the possibility that a supervisor’s approach to supervision could be viewed as a form of pedagogy that varies with the candidates being supervised. He analysed transcripts of his meetings with two research candidates over a 6-month period, paying particular attention to the knowledge and confidence of the candidate, the different kinds of interactions and outcomes, the power characteristics of the interactions, and whether the candidate’s or supervisor’s interests were being promoted. He concluded that his approach to the two candidates did differ and that two forms of pedagogy were involved, a balance of conformity and risk taking in one case, and ‘dispassionate control’ in the other.