



Evaluation of a model of dissertation supervision for 3rd year B.Sc. undergraduate nursing students



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ABSTRACT

All English universities now offer an all degree undergraduate nursing programme. Many currently use an individual supervision model to support final year dissertation students, but with increased numbers and limited resources new models of supervision are needed. This study evaluated a mixed (group and individual) model of dissertation supervision to determine its effectiveness for a large group of undergraduate nursing students.

A sample of 3rd year students and their supervisors were selected from one large university. An evaluation survey was conducted using anonymous internet-based questionnaires and focus groups. The data was analysed using Survey Monkey, SPSS and thematic analysis. A 51% (n = 56/110) response rate (students) and 65% (n = 24/37) for supervisors was obtained. The majority of students and supervisors were satisfied with the new model. There was a mixed response to the group workshops and supervision groups. Three themes emerged from the qualitative data: engaging with the process, motivation to supervise and valuing the process. The supervision process is a struggle but both parties gained considerably from going through the process.

In conclusion, a mixed model of supervision together with a range of other learning resources can be an effective approach in supporting students through the dissertation process.

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Introduction

Healthcare professional graduates at the end of their course are expected to demonstrate employability skills such as understanding of abstract concepts; autonomous and analytical thinking; be able to problem-solve and use evidence in decision-making (NMC, 2010; QAA, 2008). The final year dissertation project will develop these abilities. It is, however, often the first time that students embark on an extended piece of work which requires them to work independently and autonomously with sometimes limited and inconsistent support from their supervisor. Often students are not adequately prepared to be effective independent learners (Healy, 2013) Indeed studies have shown there is insufficient focus on the development of these attributes in undergraduate students (Thomas et al., 2014).

This study evaluated a model for supervising large numbers of undergraduate dissertation students in order to both engage and enrich their experience of the supervision process. From 2013 all universities in England offered an all degree undergraduate

nursing programme (NMC, 2010). This change is aimed at helping nurses to be critical and methodical thinkers and to use research evidence to underpin their practice. The completion of a final year project or dissertation (FYPD) as part of an honours degree is one approach that many (Healy et al., 2013) higher educational institution (HEIs) use to facilitate the development of these skills. This dissertation project should essentially be an extended piece of work, have relevance to the student's programme of study, supported by an array of literature and be research or inquiry based. In this institution the dissertation takes the form of a 5–7000 word critical review of a topic in the nursing literature.

Most HEIs in England use the 1:1 supervision model which is manageable with small numbers, but with large numbers and finite resources universities need to reconsider the support of dissertation supervision. This institution decided to commence an all degree programme in September 2011 and this cohort will be the first where all (n = 364) will undertake a dissertation.

Literature review

One of the benefits of a dissertation project is that it gives the students the opportunity to be autonomous learners as they largely

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direct the work themselves. This is often the first time students have been given autonomy over the assessment process and they often find the process both exhilarating and daunting. Indeed Silen (2003 cited in Todd et al., 2006) refers to this process as the period of 'chaos' and 'cosmos'. Furthermore studies (Calvert and Casey, 2004; Todd et al., 2004) have identified that students go through a range of emotions from fear, frustration, diffidence, dissatisfaction, anger through to joy, exhilaration and satisfaction as they become more autonomous learners.

To help students navigate this challenging period most universities allocate each student a supervisor usually with knowledge of the topic area of their dissertation. Although individual supervision is the ideal, it is not without its challenges and many studies (Anderson et al., 2006; Armitage, 2006; Calvert and Casey, 2004) have highlighted the gap between expectation and delivery. Indeed others (Armstrong, 2004, Morrison, 2007) have shown a correlation between dissatisfaction with supervisors and high failure rates (Armstrong, 2004).

Most research on the supervision of dissertation students is largely focused on individual **supervision** of post-graduate courses (Cullen, 2009) with few directly investigating undergraduates. A number of studies (Akister et al., 2006, 2009; Cartney and Rouse, 2006) have espoused the benefits of group supervision and most agree that it is an effective strategy for learning. More specifically this approach has been shown to improve writing, research and communication skills within the group. Furthermore, at an individual level, group supervision can motivate, provide support and enhance personal growth and development.

Though there are many group supervision studies, few have looked at its use with undergraduates. Utriainen et al. (2011) qualitative study did investigate its use with undergraduate health science students and found similar benefits to those described by Akister et al. (2009); Cartney and Rouse (2006) and Kangasniemi et al. (2011). They also discovered that what students valued most from the group sessions were supervisors who were well prepared with a sound knowledge of the supervision process. Challenges such as meeting individual students' needs and attendance issues were also highlighted. Although the methodology used by Utriainen et al. (2011) limits generalisation of the findings, the results provide an insight into students' experience of group supervision. Baker et al.'s (2014) recent mixed method study of group supervision and peer support in undergraduate nursing students supports some of these findings. They also showed that the approach can be used to support dissertation students without adversely impacting on final results.

This study evaluated a mixed (group and individual) model of supervision in order to find out through the views of students and supervisors how effectively students were supported in the dissertation process. It will identify areas of both good practice and areas for improvement. Specifically the study aimed to:

- Ascertain the benefits and challenges of group supervision
- Determine the students' engagement with the module
- The impact of using a mixed approach on the learning experience

Methods

An evaluation survey design using a mixed method of data collection was adopted to achieve the aims outlined above. The model of supervision consisted of both 1:1 supervision and group workshops (Table 1). For the group workshops, the students were divided into groups of 15. Each group had a lead supervisor. Each supervisor was allocated 6 supervisees and some also saw their supervisees as a group as well as on an individual basis.

Supervisors were prepared for this new model through supervisor's forums.

Sample

The cohort studied were 3rd year nursing undergraduates, these students were pre-registration specialising in child, adult or mental health nursing and whose ages ranged from 18 to 55 years. These students faced many challenges whilst undertaking their dissertation project such as completing a three month clinical placement and coping with family life.

These students (n = 110) enrolled on the dissertation module and their supervisors (n = 37) were selected from a large HEI between August and October 2013. A purposive sample of n = 8 students and n = 7 supervisors took part in the focus groups, the students being from a wide range of supervisors. This represented 7% of the student cohort and 19% of the supervisors.

Data collection

A mixed method data collection strategy was used which included anonymous Internet-based questionnaires and focus groups which were audio-taped. Two data collection methods were applied to both samples in order to obtain a more detailed picture of the experiences of the students and supervisors' use of the model (Gerrish and Lacey, 2010). The questionnaires were used to gather information about demographics, attitudes and experiences. Focus groups were used to gain an in-depth insight into staff and student experiences of the process and to observe the group dynamics as the participants explored and shared ideas. First submission results for both cohorts were taken from the HEI database, 57 for 2009 cohort and 88 for 2010 cohort.

Survey development

A 34 item self-reported questionnaire was developed for the students and 24 item one for the supervisors. Both surveys were piloted and revised to increase their intelligibility (Kumar 2014). Questionnaires were distributed to both students and staff using SurveyMonkey and e-mail reminders were sent to increase the response rate. Both staff and students were invited by e-mail to take part in their respective focus groups. Information with details of the study and a consent form were also attached. Both staff and student focus groups were conducted on the HEI site by the researchers.

Data analysis

Both SurveyMonkey and IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) were used to analyse the questionnaire data to identify recurring trends in areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The student t-test was used to compare the grades of the current cohort (new model) with the grades of the previous year (Fig. 3).

The focus group recording was transcribed verbatim and analysed using the NVivo package and Seidal's (1998) qualitative data analysis model.

Credibility was enhanced by the use of verbatim quotes to verify themes that emerged from participants to support interpretation of the data. Two colleagues familiar with qualitative methods analysed the data and arrived at similar themes as the researcher.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained through the University's Health Ethics Sub-Committee and approval to conduct the study on the university premises from the head of the nursing department.

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