

1. Background

Supervising students undertaking research projects at levels from undergraduate projects to doctorates is a significant part of the work of academics. Supervision at any level is widely recognized as complex and multidimensional. Fostering research capability in students requires high quality supervision.^{1,2} However, although there have been notable developments in research training, supervision and funding in recent years, high attrition and less than ideal completion rates have been attributed to poor quality supervision.^{3,4} To improve completion times, reduce attrition and generally improve levels of satisfaction, many higher education institutions have published lists of supervisory responsibilities, tasks and activities which are typically disseminated in related policies and procedures.

According to Pearson and Brew⁵ however, the difficulty with such lists is that "...they range from the general to the particular and mix technical research skills with those supposed to enhance employability more generally" (p.137), making it difficult to identify priorities and appropriate professional development strategies. Furthermore, although there are many opinions regarding roles and responsibilities of research supervisors, there is little published literature in the area of needs or readiness assessment of research supervisors from their own perspectives.

As revealed in the different dimensions of the topic adopted by researchers, supervision generally has various definitions, functions and forms of delivery.^{5,6} Most definitions are related to practice-based supervision in teaching, social work, psychology, counseling and clinical healthcare contexts. In health-care contexts, the emphasis is on the promotion of professional development and maintenance of patient/client safety. Nevertheless, a definition that is reflective across professions and which has most relevance to research supervision is that of Proctor (cited in Kilminster and Jolly⁶ who outlined three basic functions of supervision – normative (administrative), formative (educational) and restorative (supportive). Research supervision can therefore be defined as a pedagogical, administrative and facilitative process.

Indeed, some authors see supervision as in part or wholly, a form of teaching and consider that important roles of a good educator is to be a research supervisor, role model, mentor and facilitator in meeting students' needs to fulfill their research projects effectively.⁷ Pearson and Kayrooz⁸ also conceptualize research supervision as a facilitative process requiring challenge and support. In contrast, others maintain that the

emphasis in research supervision is less on teaching or mentoring and more on overseeing, evaluating performance and directing.⁹ Undoubtedly, there are often overlaps and as Ford and Jones⁹ point out, this means that in some situations supervisors may also fulfill the role of a mentor when promoting the professional development of their research students or switch into an instructional mode where necessary.

In practice, application of the three above mentioned components will be dependent on a number of variables including personal style, socio-cultural environment, intellectual level and characteristics of supervisor and supervisees, etc. Furthermore, tasks and activities at undergraduate and postgraduate supervision levels will include varying degrees of teaching, mentoring and coaching the research process, supporting and progressing students.

A definition focusing more on the evaluative/monitoring aspects of supervision provided by Bernard and Goodyear¹⁰ states that supervision is: "An intervention provided by a more senior member of a profession to more junior member or members of that same profession. This relationship is evaluative, extends over time, and has the simultaneous purposes of enhancing the professional functioning of the more junior person(s)..."(p.8).

Both research supervisors and students may have different preconceptions of what the supervisor role should entail and the ideal characteristics of each side of the equation. Similar to the old teaching adage 'see one, do one, teach one' being active in research is no longer seen as a sufficient pre-requisite for effective supervision of research. According to Remes et al.¹¹ the most appreciated qualities of the supervisor from students' perspectives were scientific competence, sufficient amount of time for supervision, encouragement, social skills and good interpersonal relationships. Supervisors therefore not only need professional expertise generally and in specific discipline areas of the students' research, but also personal qualities which enable them to communicate effectively and establish rapport with their students.¹²

Most universities are now quite explicit in their descriptions about quality research supervision and the roles and responsibilities of both students and supervisors.¹³ Most organizations also now recognize that the development of skills and understanding in this area is potentially a long-term investment in the institutional culture and provide induction and training for this important role.¹⁴ These include a range of programs ranging from half a day to a longitudinal series of educational activities lasting up to a year.

Against a backdrop of varying definitions and understandings about the functions and purpose of

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