Criteria for Appointment of Supervisors

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Across Australasia, research training has been highlighted as a vital part of positioning for the Knowledge Economy of the 21st Century. The ‘research assessment exercise’, which appears under various acronyms in various countries, requires timely successful completions from research students. The onus is currently on the Tertiary Education Institutions to ensure that the students have an appropriate support system to assist them to achieve their potential within the appropriate timeframe and according to the degree in which they are enrolled – that is, to achieve (in alignment with their potential) a successful completion in a timely manner.

Providing appropriate support is increasingly becoming one of statutes and regulations as a framework for operation and a ‘safety net’ around both research students and supervisors. Naturally the framework is sometimes regarded as a constraint … but as postgraduate numbers increase, new disciplines are created, interdisciplinary grows, and student expectations change, it is important for all that expectations are clear.

Regulations or guidelines being used in handbooks are along the lines of the following: The candidate shall have two academic supervisors, at least one from the institution in which the candidate is enrolled. On occasion an industry partner might assist the supervisory team (especially for research degrees by project) or a consultant may contribute. The senior supervisor shall have a degree higher or equivalent to the degree being supervised, experience of supervising students to the successful completion of a postgraduate degree and be research active (publishing, obtaining grants). At least one of the supervisors shall be actively involved in research in the candidate’s general field.

‘Registers of Supervisors’ are being created to assist the appointment process. At UNITEC and RMIT, the principles for registration and accreditation of research supervisors runs something like this:

- have a higher degree than the one being considered for supervision, or the equivalent degree plus experience;
- have experience in supervising the same type of degree being considered to successful completion (in order to achieve this all supervisors will have to be associate supervisors initially);
- have credibility in the chosen area of research; this means publishing in refereed, internationally circulated publications, or (for instance in the performing arts) giving invited performances or displays, within the last five years.
- be experienced in an appropriate methodology;
- engage in supervisor development activities (at least per year) (university and faculty professional development programs, conference presentations on supervision, publications on supervision);
- hold an academic appointment.

The Register is maintained by the Graduate School (or equivalent), the academic committee of which approves the appointment of supervisors in accordance with both the regulations and the wishes of the people involved. The register provides an indication of quality assurance, and reduces the ‘checking time’ for everybody. ‘The most common question in the appointment process tends to be: ‘Is the supervisor active in research in the appropriate area?’”

While the introduction of such schemes has meant that some faculties have feared the loss of supervisory capacity, it is indeed the opposite in our view. In terms of sheer numbers, the scheme might place some supervisors in the category of ‘associate’ until the criteria are met. However, in the long term we will have enhanced lists of quality supervisors - perhaps in number but not necessarily- but certainly in terms of research standing, supervisory expertise and knowledge as well as external and internal credibility.
Given this, it behoves all academics to be active in research of the ‘quality-assured’ type, and to gain experience in supervising, as well as to engage regularly in (or contribute to) professional development related to supervisory theory and practice.

Such activities are inextricably linked and the benefits flow from one to the other. The connections between publication and supervision, which arguably have been long known within the sciences, are gaining in terms of recognition within the social sciences (at long last). Analysis of research reports (two traditional Universities in New Zealand) indicates that 40-50% of all publications, regardless of discipline, have postgraduate students as their first author. All supervisors know that it takes very much longer to assist most students to write a Journal article than it would take to write it themselves — but assisting a postgraduate student to publish is part of the education process. Joint publication is an important part of teamwork, collaboration, and the ‘Contribution to research culture’ that the New Zealand evaluation system is encouraging. Furthermore if the publication is considered carefully and well planned, it can contribute to the thesis in terms of actual text, further theorizing or development of the work and/or provide examinations with evidence of solid academic work (which when cited within the thesis impresses no end).

The register of supervisors also provides a mechanism for becoming active in professional development associated with supervision. In Australia, for instance, all universities provide research supervisor training and development. As noted above this feeds into the supervisory register as supervisors must keep up to date, but more than that the professional development serves to highlight the importance of research supervision. At UNITEC and RMIT professional development in this area includes issues such as the relationship between supervisor and candidate, procedures and guidelines (roles and responsibilities), ethics, IP (intellectual property), examination, completion strategies, publication as well as the changing nature of research degree frameworks and the implications for supervision. Such professional development programs can provide opportunities for supervisors to keep up to date, network with colleagues, consider new theories in the light of ongoing practice, focus on the various research cultures that span our disciplinary specific and transdisciplinary research. In addition, supervisors can find opportunity to discuss the never-ending list of issues that arise within the delicate relationship between supervisor and candidate. Similarly the sessions may well involve students who can participate in the debates, share ideas and voice perspectives and opinions. Successful supervisors can contribute to the programs through the presentation of seminars, but also within their own supervisory teams by mentoring more junior colleagues (often termed associate supervisors).

The importance of supervision is now well recognized within research institutions. For instance, under the Research Training Scheme in Australia, universities are funded (and thereby given research places) according to performance on three criteria: research completions (50%), income (40%) and publications (10%). The stress on completions (timely and successful) is clear. The push to improve our supervisory practices is based on the desire and need to enhance timely and successful completions but also to provide students with an effective, solid research experience. We are more aware than ever before of the need to focus on progress. If students slip, we action ‘at risk’ steps in order to assist them in getting back on track or in making the often difficult decision to withdraw. As research places are now of a premium, they are sacred positions. Students need to know this. Supervisors need to be aware that the position of supervisor is a privilege not a right. Our quality processes focus on both the student and the supervisor.

As the research degree frameworks within which we supervise extend, we need to clear about expectations of both the student and ourselves as well as the degree per se. With an increased emphasis on graduate capabilities, we need to monitor more the opportunities that we cultivate for students, assess regularly their needs and be conversant with available resources and support structures within our institutions. Furthermore our supervisors need to be well versed and clear about the nature of the research outcome within various research degree structures and supervise accordingly.
The development of supervisor registration and accreditation procedures, with their inherent criteria, serve to improve our supervisory practices, enhance completions, contribute to a well grounded research experience and highlight the importance of supervision. This latter point we have long known. At last it is being recognized at university levels as well as national levels. Supervision is a privilege not a right. That it is now given more press and credibility means that this esteemed work, which we many of us enjoy far more than other academic activities, has a solid quality assurance foundation, support in terms of time in workloads, and recognition within promotion schemes. Opportunities abound. Supervise we will. And well.