



Let's make dissertations masterly again!

A study on improving the experience and results of the post-graduate final project in the UAE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to enhance the supervision-level of post-graduate dissertations in a Middle East Branch Campus of a Transnational Higher Education Institution (HEI). For a number of years, the proposal stage of the dissertation had been more or less ignored and final dissertation results had been adequate. Then in one academic year, a series of initiatives comprising; focused workshops, formative assessment, one to one guidance, best practice panels and proposal grading, were developed and implemented. This resulted in a sustained passing rate and a significant elevation of grade classifications awarded. The author suggests that the practices contained herein could benefit similar dissertation programs offered both in the Middle East region and worldwide.

Keywords: formative assessment, masters dissertations, improving award classifications, research methods, research supervision

JEL codes: A23, M10, Y4

1. INTRODUCTION

The master's dissertation, thesis or project (depending on the education system) is typically the highest weighted component of the post-graduate degree. As such it can determine the final classification of the qualification and it is thus THE most important module the students take. In the author's experience as both an undergraduate and graduate student, little was offered by way of preparation short of a one hour lecture on the project or dissertation. This has then led to the students embarking on their research journey with a good deal of trial and error, not forgetting the input and guidance from the mentor, supervisor or director of studies, whose experience and expertise can be varied. This paper sets out to examine existing practices and then suggests and tests a series of enhancements followed by an essential before and after measurement, culminating with a set of conclusions and recommendations for similar situations.

The test-case is a post-graduate program run at the United Arab Emirates (UAE) campus of a British HEI that has run for more than a decade and has a good standing in a highly competitive national environment where there are 80 HEIs offering 140 similar programs. The graduating requirements of the program are that to get the full qualification, the student must pass six 20 credit (effectively single weighted) taught modules and the 60 credit (effectively triple weighted) 15,000-word dissertation module. Students can effectively get two bites of the cherry with each module through either a deferral for which they can get their deserved grade but can only get a passing grade for a re-take. The module was traditionally broken up into two components; the presentation (20%) that took place one month before the hard copy submission (80%).

All post-graduate modules and awards at the HEI are classified as pass (40-59%), pass with merit (60-69%) or pass with distinction (70 %+). The institutional target is that all modules must have a passing rate of 85% enrolled after re-takes per run. In addition, all modules must have a 65% passing rate at distinction or merit for all students enrolled again, after re-takes. Finally, the overall classification grade of the program is determined by the classification of the dissertation, in that to get a distinction grade overall, the student must get a distinction in the dissertation AND three out of the six taught modules. There is no compensation at the PG level and extenuating circumstances, although whilst always considered at the examination boards have rarely or never been considered in the author's memory for final qualification classification. The program and specifically the

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dissertation module had historically achieved some good results, (see table 1 below) but, there is always room for improvement.

Table 1. Dissertation module results 2013 - 2015 (all %)

Year	Pass Rate	Distinction	Merit	Pass	Defer	Fail	Total
2013	95	24	32	39	0	5	100
2014	95	25	24	46	3	2	100
2015	98	24	38	36	0	2	100

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

An examination of the a priori literature in the field of post-graduate dissertation pedagogy can be broken down into a set of overlapping categories. Here are arbitrary groups and how their concomitant relationships interrelate. Some writers report on undergraduate studies, some discuss masters projects and others examine Ph.D. studies. The author has looked at the whole spectrum and highlighted similarities rather than differences.

2.1.Roles of Supervisors and Supervisees

Roberts and Seaman (2018), suggest that good supervision is characterized by trusting relationships where students and supervisors share research interests and supervisors provide advice without undermining students' ownership of projects, resulting in evolving supportive relationships that foster student growth. Having stated this, and as with any relationship, there is potential for interpersonal conflicts in supervisory relationships. Rowley and Slack (2004) noted that sometimes supervisors may need to supervise (undergraduate students) in areas outside of their expertise; and suggest this may be the case when there are irresolvable personality conflicts between a supervisor and student. Finally, Kirton et al. (2011) use a wonderful metaphor; the 'Marriage of Convenience' to describe the various dimensions and significant chronological events of the student/supervisor relationship. Four data themes were identified and included: 'Matchmaking and betrothal', 'Soul mates or not', 'Married life' and 'Giving birth'.

The author believes that this is a valuable construct and (over)uses the nuptial comparison to exhaustion. Many of the (occurring) problems can be attributed to the relationship between the supervisor and the Ph.D. candidate, and similar experiences have been reported in international studies (Aspland and O'Donoghue, 1994; Conrad, 1994, Brew and Peseta, 2004; Buttery et al., 2005). The "marriage" highlights the duality of shaping and supporting students' efforts that framed supervisors' commitments and actions: i.e. it details how supervisors saw themselves as having a gatekeeping role and a commitment to align students' work with academic standards, and at the same time a personal commitment which involved a responsibility to assist students to pursue a topic that excited their interest and to support their sense of agency, (Day and McLaughlin, 2006).

Horowitz and Christopher (2014) discuss a program that offers a solution to (supervision) issues by pairing undergraduates with graduate students to work on their dissertation research by way of developing vital skills, as part of an initial semester-long doctoral foundation course project grounded in theory and research from cognitive instruction. It explicitly teaches and supports the objectives of (a) mastery of a research-supported knowledge base, and (b) development of conceptual tools to foster understanding, integration, and effective application of research. The process of this semester-long student project follows two basic threads: (a) to build a research knowledge base in the content area and (b) to develop student skills in reading. Undergraduates undertake hands-on research while learning about graduate school, and the graduate students learn about the mentoring process while receiving assistance that allows them to keep their dissertations moving toward completion.

Harwood and Petic (2018) discuss a longitudinal (research supervision) approach, drawing on multiple sources of data and including the perspectives of both parties (supervisor and supervisee), to gain a detailed understanding of their roles. Four broad phases of the journey are identified: (i) a relatively unconstrained period of topic exploration, closest to the partnership model; (ii) a more controlled period associated with feedback, that requires the student to make changes to writing (and thinking), closest to the teaching model; (iii) a second less controlled period, when findings and how to frame the emergent story of the research are tackled, closest to the partnership model; and (iv) a final directive phase, closest to the teaching model, enabling the student to get their dissertation completed on time.

Katikireddi and Reilly (2016) found that supervision is often tailored to students' evolving needs and while a number of behavior (types) that facilitate basic competence and that good supervision is to some extent learned from experience. They also identified tensions in the supervision process, with two ideal types discernible.

Supervisor-led dissertations tend to be narrowly defined by the supervisor and well suited to the credentialing purpose of the dissertation. In contrast, a student-led dissertation is more tailored to some students' learning requirements. The latter may require greater supervisor effort and put the student at greater risk of failure when the end product is assessed against criteria for a research product. In reality, a broad continuum exists between these ideal types and they represent a negotiated process that unfolds over time, rather than equating to supervisors (who may tend to operate more in one mode than another but switch their practice depending on the project and student).

Marland and Lyttle (2003) further describe the findings of studies that focus on the personal characteristics of students which lead to dropout from doctoral programs such as the qualities of the student persistence, the time taken to decide on research topic and writing ability. Also reported on by Marland and Lyttle (2003) are studies concerning students' personal difficulties such as marital breakdown, accidents and illnesses and having a baby which results in students having no alternative path but to drop out of their Ph.D. studies. Finally, as Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) report there may be difficulties surrounding the use of in-depth qualitative research methods and uncovering participants 'lived experiences' and obtaining open and frank accounts of the participants' supervision experiences.

2.2. Supervision Methods

An interesting notion is suggested by (RCP, 1998; Cottrell, 1999) in that in the "professions", supervision for masters students is more hands-on and routinized. Methods of supervision vary between countries and centers. In protected hour per week' with his/her educational supervisor, supervision includes various aspects like framing research questions and appropriate methods to examine implementation of methods, analysis, and interpretation of results, and systematic reviews/meta-analysis and this is primarily done by the thesis guide. Supervision starts with the thesis protocol and continues with periodic sessions about the progress of thesis work. Viswanath et al. (2013) note that some of the interested residents also involve themselves in research with other mentors. Scholefield and Cox (2016), conducted work in this area and suggest that most of the supervisors (studied) embraced the workshops and group supervision seeing the benefits in peer support, competitiveness, cross-fertilization of ideas among the students. Others (in the study) however, were less engaged and as the data highlighted had little knowledge of the new model or resources available to support the students.

As suggested by Podonly (2009), business schools should foster greater integration through courses that reflect a mix of academic disciplines, by linking analytics to values, and appointing teaching teams where faculty from hard and soft disciplines co-teach in the same classroom. Sroufe and Ramos (2011) posit that to an extent, authors have been able to bring together faculty from Marketing, Operations, and Sustainability while overseeing and mentoring MBA teams involved in Life-Cycle Analysis and Environmental Product Disclosures. To add to this, the success of postgraduate students, according to Lumadi (2008), is dependent on active supervision, which he believes is an area not well understood. Hattie and Marsh (2004) stress that the process of conducting research and the product of the research is critical to the success of the submission.

Román-Suero et al. (2012) suggest possible ways to improve the teaching-learning process that includes a learning project that is designed according to the needs and circumstances of each student so that both the ethics and technical knowledge of the future professionals are enhanced. With the aim of helping masters and doctoral students develop vital skills, as part of an initial doctoral foundation course Knight (2005) suggests a semester-long project grounded in theory and research from cognitive instruction that explicitly teaches and supports the objectives of (a) mastery of a research-supported knowledge base, and (b) development of conceptual tools to foster understanding, integration, and effective application of research. The process follows two basic threads: (a) to build a research knowledge base in the content area and (b) to develop student skills in reading, to help graduate students build both abstract and applied competencies in reading, understanding, and applying research.

The work of Wagener (2018) shows the importance of the regulation, and the supervision of students during the writing of a master's thesis. They emphasize the fact that accountability for technical and methodological aspects helps students develop their self-regulation skills in a broad sense. This requires some training time for this specific topic so that it can be developed quite easily and efficiently on a global scale (Wagener 2013). Even slight changes in the assessment methods in classes can prompt the development of self-regulation of cognition (Wagener 2016). Hence, methods exist to address self-regulatory problems concerning cognitions or emotions.

2.3. Volume of Supervisees

The author can vouch for the notion that the sheer volume of supervisees can have an impact on quality and as Scholefield and Cox (2016) state, 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. To compound this, Cullen, (2009) notes that most research on the supervision of dissertation students is largely focused on individual supervision of post-graduate courses 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.

Viswanath et al. (2013) suggest that post-graduate psychiatry residents in India appear to be satisfied with most areas of supervision even though it is informal, done by multiple supervisors and as-usual (i.e. done on a need-based way) in most settings. Some specific areas may require more formal and protected time supervision. Need-based multiple and group supervision may be as good as formal, structured "protected time" supervision in most situations. Kiley et al. (2011), outline that certain factors, combined with lower likelihood of research publications resulting from undergraduate research projects, contribute to supervisors' perceptions that as Justice et al. (2009) state, undergraduate dissertation supervision is more difficult and less rewarding than Ph.D. supervision limiting the transferability of Ph.D. supervision literature and resources to the undergraduate dissertation context

O'Neil et al (2016) state that most group approaches presented in the literature use formalized and structured approaches which include formal curricula and departmental and/or faculty-wide implementation plans. These models of group supervision often include large numbers of students and the involvement of other supervisors. Small groups, in which one supervisor's students get together to discuss their research journeys informally and critically, already harbor the positive effects of group practices.

Wichmann-Hans et al. (2014) suggest that the idea of peer and group learning is not new in higher education and that it has been applied and studied extensively in courses, programs, and other formal classroom contexts. However, there is not, as yet (at date), a correspondingly large body of research into peer learning in supervision contexts. The authors address the challenges experienced by supervisors practicing Collective Academic Supervision (CAS) as part of a Master's Programme in Guidance and Counselling. Analysis reveals three major challenges experienced by the supervisors: (1) facilitating equal participation within heterogeneous student groups, (2) balancing between providing answers and involving students, (3) identifying and developing the students' analytical skills. The practical implications of these challenges are discussed and conclude that metacommunication regarding individual expectations and group behavior should be part of supervisors' repertoire of strategies when practicing CAS.

Kumar and Johnson (2019) discuss a model where group mentoring students in both the online doctoral programs were organized according to research groups that each worked with a mentor. In one program, all the mentors met with their research groups regularly, for example, monthly or biweekly using Adobe Connect, Google Hangout, or conference calls during the initial stages of the dissertation. During these meetings, they discussed specific topics related to research design, procedures, or dissertations; students presented, brainstormed, and received feedback on their research ideas, research design, and data analysis; and students shared challenges with proposal development or dissertation implementation. Faculty also structured peer review and feedback amongst student peers, requesting them to support each other by reading drafts, reviewing codes, etc.

2.4. Researching Supervision

While the literature on dissertation research, writing, and supervision at Master's level per se are only beginning to expand, there are the rather more established doctoral thesis and undergraduate project of literature (Anderson et al. 2006). A few studies have straddled both doctoral and Master's supervision (Youngman, 1994), or Master's and undergraduate projects (McMichael, 1992), and there are a few people with a long-standing interest in Master's students and their supervisors (Grant, 1999, 2003). To add to this, Lumadi (2008), profess that the success of postgraduate students, according to is dependent on active supervision, which he believes is an area not well understood. Hattie and Marsh (2004) further stress that the process of conducting research and the product of the research is critical to the success of the submission. Sinkovics et al. (2015) address this shortcoming (of supervision research) by providing an empirical understanding of the perceived usefulness and value of masters-level dissertations and evaluating their impact on the personal and intellectual development

of students. Findings demonstrate the unique ability of the dissertation to enhance student employability, both for scientifically interested and deep learners as well as for functional learners.

Olibie and Uzoachina, (2015) State that the research of supervision is often a scholarly and creative activity that takes place within a community of scholars where constructive relationships between graduate students and their advisors/mentors are essential for the promotion of research excellence and adherence to the highest standards of scholarship, ethics, and professional integrity. Successful mentoring for doctoral students should be therefore be built upon effective characteristics and values through several curricula enhancement strategies so that by improving on research mentoring, we can improve the research process and enhance the research progress of postgraduate education students.

Hajar (2016) suggests that the participants' language learning goals and associated strategy use for writing a dissertation are essentially influenced by the practices of their dissertation supervisors, who seemed to adopt a 'dynamic assessment' approach. The adoption of dynamic assessment by most supervisors helped the participants to strengthen the vision of their ideal self, and make their goals clearer and more specific.

2.5. Supervision of Supervisors

Emilsson and Johnsson (2007) deal with supervision as a purposeful pedagogic method. They suggest a departure from a project aimed at studying 'supervision on supervision' through a program including a special model for learning, process-oriented group supervision as a method of improving doctoral supervision is discussed. In their model used, the supervisors' relationships and the experiences form the basis for the reflection process connected to, among others, communication theory and social-psychological explanatory models. Pointing out the five requirements of trust, theories, tools, training and time, it is concluded that 'supervision on supervision' well may serve as a way of improving doctoral supervision.

The same authors suggest that the learning process starts with the supervisor's 'perceived problem'. Then the 'personal explanatory theories' are focused on, including the experienced reason to the problematic situation arisen as well, as imaginable solutions. By means of 'theories in social science', various perspectives are considered through reflexive thinking. Gradually 'new knowledge' and 'new personal theories' are developed in preparation for future problems. Hart (2009) posits that academics should become action researchers by becoming part of the phenomenon they are studying "if we are going to make rapid headway in sustainability, more business school faculty members need to get into the real world, make things, happen, and write about their experiences instead of sitting in their offices spinning data tapes and looking for significant correlations."

Berge, et al. (2002) discuss that this (supervision) has led researchers from the domains of management, education, and psychology to suggest switching focus from "skills" to "competencies," which can be regarded as higher-level abilities. Bridgstock, (2009) suggest the fact that postgraduate careers no longer tend toward a vertical line in one organization and one country, mean that a fixed set of skills may not suffice over an extended period Considering the various observations and findings which emerged during this study, it can be concluded that an intervention such a standard (or paperwork) was beneficial to assist students and supervisors in progressing, developing and improving skills when writing dissertations and theses Singh (2011).

Hajar (2016) suggests that dissertation supervisors need to take measures to enhance their supervisees' long-term, rather than just short-term, goals. They can do so, by showing more commitment and interest in their students' work, sending timely feedback and helping students to pursue a topic that excited their interest in providing evidence of how the writing dissertation process can gain academic, professional and national benefits to a researcher. Vos and Armstrong (2017) stress the need to have a better understanding of whether sufficient time is allotted to research training – for both supervisors and students - and to the entire dissertation process. Some of their issues raised bring into question the academic standards of master's programs that are much shorter today than in times past when students were given an additional six months to a year to concentrate on and complete the dissertation.

3. METHODS

The dissertation module leader formed a small task force to look at ways in improving the student experience and grades awarded. This is a summary of the methods used.

One of the major stumbling blocks with the program and other dissertations in the same school was that the dissertation proposal was not assessed. This led to some of the students not prioritizing its importance in the program (and general) scheme of things with several proposals submitted having the feel of being done on the fly and even hand-written. The author cites a memorable case to subsequent students where an anonymous dissertation had a hand-written objective as "To get a better job so that I can buy my Hubby (husband) a Merc (Mercedes Benz automobile)." The supervisors were assigned to the candidates based on a best-fit basis

between proposal topic and field of discourse and a series of 4 face to face (mostly) individual meetings from May through September commenced. The problem with the (mostly) poorly written proposals was that the initial meeting and potentially first month was spent (wasted) on revising it so that it could be a robust enough foundation upon which to build this significant piece of academic work.

However, salvation was at hand, both in the forms of serendipity and *deus ex machina*. In the 2015/2016 run, the module had a change, from previous runs (driven by the home campus) in that the proposal was assessed and carried 10% of the overall mark. The campus teaching team saw this as a very positive initiative as it gave the students a very hard-nosed introduction to the module and emphasized the gravitas of the proposal itself. In previous runs where the proposal had no weighting and merely a pass/fail status, the campus team felt that it was not given the importance that it deserved by some students and the standard of proposals submitted reflected this. Under the “old system”, those that did not pass on first submission were merely assigned a supervisor and as stated, the topic for the first meeting was to elevate the proposal to a passing standard.

In addition to the of grading the proposal, the team introduced a series of other initiatives;

- Workshops. For several years, the Module Leader and two other staff ran a series of ten three hour workshops for part-time students that took place every two or three weeks. The full-time students (and any part-time students who wanted to attend) were provided with an intensive series of workshops that could be delivered over five nights in one non-teaching week or over a series of weekends. The full time “fast-track” variant was always run after week 12 of the 24-week academic year so that students had a chance to cover potentially 50% of the material before they could start working on their dissertation.
- Drop-in session. This took place in week 18, and the workshop (open to all students) took the form of a “proposal clinic” where two members of the program workshop teaching team set up shop in a classroom and saw all students with their draft proposal on a one to one, first come first serve basis. This was a busy session that started an hour before the regular time and went way over the allocated time with the majority of students taking advantage of this initiative. Those that elected not to attend this session potentially missed out on the first phase of essential formative feedback.
- Proposal draft feedback. In week 20, the workshop took the form of potentially all module students meeting with a dissertation advisor (not supervisor) and having one to one feedback on their proposal thus far. The students were allocated on a best fit and at times random basis, to one of three members of the teaching team. A week in advance, blank appointment grids with set time slots for the 3 advisors were posted on the module leader’s door and students signed up and met with the advisors. The vast majority of students took this opportunity. Again, students who did not attend these sessions missed out on the second invaluable formative feedback opportunity and in most cases the chance to pitch their idea to a different advisor.
- Good practice panel. Arguably the “jewel in the crown” of the module workshops was when in week 22, four exemplar (distinction grade) dissertation students from the previous run were (by invitation only) welcomed back to the HEI to present their dissertation presentations and share the wealth of their experience with the (then) current batch of dissertation students in the regular workshop slot. After the four presentations, the presenters formed a panel and took questions from the floor. The event then led to an informal and touchingly collegiate reception where refreshments were served and dissertation students past and present exchanged views and ideas.
- Proposal submission moderation. The proposals were submitted and each of the three advisors took the work of those students that they had been assigned and assessed them. The three advisors then met for a moderation meeting where a large sample of the submissions was examined. As per institutional sampling guidelines, all distinctions, all fail and 10% of merits and distinctions per advisor were sampled in a round-robin fashion. This amounted to more than 50% of all submissions and adjustments or agreements were documented as part of the internal moderation process to be shared with the UK campus and external examiners.
- Supervisor allocation. The results for the proposals were announced and the students were assigned to a supervisor matching the subject of the proposal as best the team could with the supervisor’s field of discourse. The students then met the supervisor on a one to one basis (monthly if possible) until the presentations took place in September.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The proof of the pudding is of course in the eating and the next two assessment points went thus:

- Presentation assessment. In September all students were given a 30-minute slot to present to their supervisor and the second (as yet) disinterested marker. A grade (out of 20) was agreed by the

assessment team and this with the proposal grade (out of 10) and the final submission (out of 70) formed the final mark for the module (out of 100).

- Final submission assessment. The dissertations were submitted in early October and assessed by the supervisor and second marker. Marks were agreed and all grades were entered on the assessment grid and excel grid sent to HDN. In the sample sent, all submissions hard copies of the proposal and its assessment, the presentation assessment and both copies of the final submission grids with an overall agreed grade with supporting rationale.
- The majority of proposals passed first time and those that did not were given the opportunity to meet with their supervisor and re-submit their proposals on the understanding that they would only get a basic passing grade for that component (40%).

The results are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2. Dissertation module results 2013 - 2016 (all %)

Year	Pass Rate	Distinction	Merit	Pass	Defer	Fail	Total
2013	95	24	32	39	0	5	100
2014	95	25	24	46	3	2	100
2015	98	24	38	36	0	2	100
2016	97	48	29	20		3	100

At a glance, the main change was a 100% increase in distinctions and this in itself can be seen as a major victory. The passing rates have remained stable and still very high by comparison to the institutional target (85%) and the fails are low.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The overall student ability and level of knowledge for the sample were mixed and this was reflected in assessed work (see table 2) above. The batch was generally well-motivated and there was good attendance overall. Students found the module very challenging but hopefully benefitted from and enjoyed the work. From the academic team's side, there were no major issues with this module and it was a pleasure to work as a small collegiate team and see the students benefit from the initiative

In short, there were some pleasing results; the initiative of assessing the proposal, which forms the foundation upon which the dissertation is built was a unanimous game-changer. The three sessions outlined above enhanced the grades and it is intended to continue this good practice in subsequent runs. The sample was a typical intake group and it can clearly be seen that the results were improved with a positive increase (100%) of distinction-level submissions.

Nothing in life comes without a price and the module was challenging for students and professors alike. Students benefited from the elevated levels of discipline and formative assessment opportunities available with several students going on to publish their work and/or present at international conferences. The home campus and external examiners asked for a justification for the elevated results and the author obliged with a report with similar content to parts of this paper. It has to be noted for the record that they only asked for it once!

The "emphasis" on the proposal paid off and now several runs later, there is a clear distinction (no pun intended) between those students who take full advantage of the drop in proposal session, informal proposal feedback and best panel and those that seemingly continue to write their proposal on the back of a shopping list on the metro on the way to campus. You can lead a horse to water, but you most certainly not make them ALL drink.

Any great collaboration is built upon the foundation of mutual understanding and respect so that the whole notion of roles and relationships between student and supervisor was paramount in this study. The work of Roberts and Seamen (2018) is echoed in that respect, in that rapport and shared interests (both academic and pastoral) made meetings much more convivial. The author cannot over-emphasize the marriage metaphor espoused by Kirton et al. (2011) and it is a commitment that is deployed right from the earliest stages of the dissertation classes, right up to submission in that the student, in the author's own words "is advised to select a topic that will engage their passion, interest, and commitment for a period of six months". This then adds to the work of Day and McLaughlin (2006) in that interest and sense of agency must be engaged of the student to redeem full benefit from the experience. The idea of pairing undergraduates and post-graduates (Horowitz and Christopher, 2014) is also worth considering. The personalized touch (Katikireddi and Reilly, 2016 and Harwood and Petic, 2018) are very prevalent in this type of teaching, where essentially every student will produce a unique study.

The whole crux of this paper concerns “methods” and the notion of effectiveness (doing the right thing) vs. efficiency (doing things right); and as such the work of (RCP, 1998, Cotterell, 1999) is firmly applauded in that the “wise” students appreciated the set routines, timelines and student/supervisor declaration (wherein the student agreed a timeline to adhere to). The author echoes the findings of Visanant et al. (2013) and Scoefield and Cox (2016) in that the pooled resources, expertise, and camaraderie amongst the supervision team crated a synergistic or gestalt approach whereby the sum of the constituent parts greatly overshadowed the whole. The work of Podonly (2009) was also proven beneficial in that the disparate disciplines of the supervisors and esoteric approaches greatly advanced those students who chose to attend the sessions available. Methods and practices suggested by Román-Suero et al. (2012), Knight (2005) and Wagener (2018) go a long way in improving the bespoke needs of each student as they embark on their novel journey.

As regards the sheer volume of supervision, in this study an increased number of supervisors had been deployed, whereas previously a handful of professors who had directly taught the students were used. The 1:1 allocation of Sholefield and Cox (2016) was still deployed for the meetings. The notion of drop-out and non-completion suggested by Marland and Lyttle (2003) was still apparent in that in both tables (Table 1 and Table 2) a small element (5, 3 and 2 %) of the total module enrolment did not pass. In the author’s experience, a student rarely fails this module and if they do, they get an opportunity to re-submit at a capped basic passing level. Thus those students (2 or 3 at most per batch) who did not pass after retakes, simply did not submit the dissertation and thus did not get the full master’s degree, but settled for a Post Graduate Certificate or Diploma depending on their completed credits. This then opens a completely new can of worms wherein the supervisor takes on the de facto role of pastoral tutor, whereby in these one to one sessions, diverse and extreme extra-university factors are unearthed, to echo the work of Dickson-Swift (2008), that are in some cases shocking, desperate and pitiful; and thus the makings of another paper altogether.

The issue of “too many students” has been faced by the author and cases where the supervisor repeating the “basics of how to do the final project” are rife. Some supervisors purposefully call students to the initial meeting at once to cover all the basics in one go. The work on group supervision at masters level (O’Niel et al 2016, Wichmann-Hans et al. 2014 and Kumar and Johnson 2019), provide excellent solutions, any and all of which could be incorporated into the program and/or institutional practice.

The author suggests that whilst there is an abundance of literature concerning undergraduate and doctoral project/dissertation/thesis supervision, there is room for more studies on master’s research, (McMichael, 1992, Sinkovics et al. 2015). The esoteric nature of this work is that due to the part-time mode of study (evening classes, 6.30-9.30pm only) and the fact that this is driven by the fact that the 80% of the students work full time and this could mean that the pressures upon the sample, may not be typical of other graduate students who are studying in full-time mode and attending day classes. Notions of ethics, research excellence and academic integrity (Olibie and Uzoechina, 2015) can also be built into the teaching and learning process.

The notion of the supervision of supervisors was an interesting learning point from the whole activity and the author recalls that in personal experience, no formal training had been given. Some much so in fact that there is a clear demarcation between the “never having supervised a master’s research project” one day and “being a master’s supervisor” the next. The paradigm shift can indeed be seen as daunting and one that is very much learning by doing and learning by mistakes. The special model for learning Emilsson and Johnsson (2007), and process-oriented group supervision was key in the methods used and for the period of supervision, the author kept in close contact with the team, with particular emphasis on the “debutante” supervisors. Hart’s notion (2009) in that that academics should become action researchers by becoming part of the phenomenon they are studying was reflected in the practice of assigning students to supervisors on a field of discourse best-fit basis. Skill-sets and competencies Berge, et al. (2002) (Bridgstock, 2009) and the standardized paperwork used Singh (2011) were particularly relevant and useful resources in the study. The notions of commitment and interest in their students’ work, sending timely feedback (Hajar 2016) as well as the concept of sufficient time available (Vos and Armstrong 2017) are both commonly occurring events that need consideration.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Ultimately the message of this paper is to recommend expanding and refining the practices detailed in the methods section. The notion of including more professors with specific discipline, research and project management skill-sets in the dissertation team is highly encouraged. This would have the dual advantage of exposing the students to not only a wider spectrum of methods but also more professors and potentially their future supervisor.

Another notion that has been subsequently been adopted is to invite students from other masters programs to at least specified research methods workshops and especially the fast-track suite that can be completed in either a week or a series of two weekends. This has the benefits of exposing students not only to a broader

menu of methods and professors, but also a cross-fertilization (for want of a better phrase) with students from different disciplines and by implication professional networks.

Although it is impossible to find a perfect match or “marriage” Kirton et al. (2011) between the subject matter, the supervisor and the student as close a fit as is possible must be made with the time and resources available. From the author’s personal experience, the notion of respect, rapport and shared interests (Roberts and Seamen, 2018) formed the basis of the more memorable collaborations. In previous runs, the module leader with a small team of tutors would sit with the assessed proposals, the supervisor availability and literally shuffle them about until, for want of a better phrase, all holes were plugged. In subsequent runs and to echo the interest and sense of agency (Anderson et al. 2006) a request will be made to the supervisors to see what dissertations they would be happy to supervise. An upside of this would be to see what dissertations and students they would not be happy to supervise. From the student perspective, it has never been and never will be common practice to ask students to vote for a supervisor but unofficially, if a student did make a request for a specific supervisor, they would be encouraged to talk to that professor about the project and if they (the professor) were keen to supervise a request could be made from the professor and not the student side

The sheer number of methods deployed by supervisors would have to match the number of supervisors themselves, as all professors have their preferred methods of supervising. The lessons learned from this study are that whilst there is no pressure for the professors to “micro-manage” the students, then there is an absolute need for them to be “strongly encouraged” to meet both deadlines and their supervisors on a very regular and to an extent prescriptive pattern. To wit, a series of forms (meeting log, student undertaking and formats for type of dissertations) is widely used and to an extent hammered home with the students.

An invaluable resource is the use of anonymized and with permission exemplar material of the highest graded work from the previous or at least very recent runs. With exemplar proposal and completed work and hand in hand with the best practice panel, students could be allowed to see, if nothing else, the format and sheer professionalism and attention to detail that is required of them if they are to not only succeed but also to excel in their most highly weighted submission to date. In addition to this face to face-only viewed material, it is highly encouraged to have a wealth of public source material Visananth et al. (2013) and Scholefield and Cox (2016) for the students to have access to right from the start of the module. Finally, as wide a range of supervisors (age, heritage, and discipline) is encouraged (Podonly, 2009, Sroufe and Ramos, 2011) so that the students can be exposed to a variety of methods of inquiry.

The perennial problem of supervisors having “too many students to supervise was overcome by simply involving more supervisors as suggested by Sholefield and Cox (2016). A quota system is recommended whereby, professors of a certain rank are expected to supervise to completion an arbitrary amount of students and thereafter be rewarded for additional completions on a pro-rata basis. The idea of dropout Marland and Lyttle (2003), whilst regrettable does and will continue but needs to be controlled and the notion of the supervisor becoming a de facto role of pastoral tutor, whilst being a time consuming by-product of the supervision process can unearth and put paid to some common factors that could lead non completion of dissertation and the master’s qualification as a whole thus echoing the work of Dickson-Swift (2008).

7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

7.1 Group supervision

Much of the literature in this study has examined the feasibility of group supervision as a method for facilitating this essential degree component. This is a technique that has many advantages amongst which; saving time and resources from the institutional perspective feature heavily and those of symbiosis and shared learning experience from the student side have strong appeals. A possible collaboration with a master’s program in education or teacher training could go a long way to foster pan-institutional practice and activate synergies of methods, experience, and theories.

7.2 Quantitative survey

Whilst this study covers many of the issues facing this complicated facet of academic practice, the methods used are of secondary and qualitative natures only. A window into another interesting dimension can be elicited from a quantitative study using similar data sets from subsequent cohorts who have gone through updated iterations of the supervision process described herein. This could be affected as an online exit survey after the students have handed in the hard copy final submission as this could capture the student’s perception of the whole process from workshops through to hand-in.

8 THE LAST WORD

There is much work to be done in the field of postgraduate research supervision (McMichael, 1992, Sinkovics et al. 2015); and thus, the final recommendation is to suggest that other masters programs, at the overseas campus, the home campus and indeed within the wider academic community adopt the practices of assessing the proposal as well as running drop-in sessions, proposal feedback sessions and best practice panels, where possible within their specific academic and assessment frameworks. The author would be happy to consult, learn and collaborate on similar best-practice projects in this nascent and esoteric field.

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