Student Focused Postgraduate Supervision

A Mentoring Approach To Supervising Postgraduate Students
(Version 1)

Catherine M. Down
Elaine Martin
Louise Bricknell

(Office of the PVC Teaching and Learning, and the Office of the PVC Research and Development)

RMIT University
June 2000
This document has been developed for those seeking to prepare themselves for the challenges of supervising postgraduate students in a research environment that is demanding change yet seeking to maintain those elements of its past that are valuable and pertinent to its current focus.¹

**Traditional Elements of the Supervisory Process**
- the development of the postgraduate student as an independent learner;
- a recognition of the critical intelligence that such learning requires; and
- an understanding that independent learning experiences will result in some level of personal transformation for the student.

**Changing Elements of the Research Climate and Supervisory Process**
- student choice—higher degree, mode of study, supervisor, institution, portable scholarship scheme;
- student focused—the development of a student as a researcher is as important as the research itself;
- community focused—the recognition that many postgraduate students will never work in the academy, and that their learning experiences must equip them to work as researchers in the wider social community (business, government, industry, internationally); and
- the student/supervisor relationship is defined by its visibility and not its invisibility. That is, it is considered a key aspect of the higher degree process. The outcome of this process—the successful completion of a higher degree—is the key performance indicator of the effectiveness and quality of the supervisor.

Given the context set by these contemporary and traditional scenarios, this document aims to support postgraduate supervisors develop student focused supervisory practices. Furthermore, it encourages supervisors to make these practices an explicit, rather than implicit, aspect of the supervisory process. One way that this can be done is to encourage postgraduate supervisors to view themselves as learning mentors.

1. **Postgraduate Supervisors as Learning Mentors**

The notion of postgraduate supervisors as learning mentors supports RMIT University’s student focused philosophy. Furthermore, it highlights the contemporary research environment. It is an environment that is characterised by its emphasis on developing students as researchers, and the development of research, but not either/or, and certainly not the latter at the expense of the former.

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The idea that postgraduate supervisors are indeed learning mentors is encapsulated by Delors’ (1996)\textsuperscript{2} notion that lifelong learning, and lifelong research, is based on a four strand framework of learning:

- learning to know
- learning to do
- learning to live with others
- learning to be.

Postgraduate learning is grounded in these four pillars. They provide the framework for lifelong learning at any level of the tertiary curriculum, but they are particularly pertinent in relation to the development of postgraduate students as independent, creative, confident, and motivated researchers. For example, some of the lifelong learning goals that these four pillars of learning support include:

- the ability to understand complex systems that interact unpredictably
- the ability identify and integrate existing and emerging personal, local, national and global perspectives
- the ability to prosper with different, paradox, and multiple sets of realities
- the ability to see and make connections between the past, the present, and the future
- the ability to encourage sustainability in relationships and the environment
- the ability to engage in a process of change, privately and publicly, civically and occupationally, throughout life
- the ability to extend learning styles and repertoires
- the ability to develop insights through questioning, through asking ‘why?’ and ‘what if?’ as well as ‘what?’ and ‘how?’.

(Bradshaw 1999, p. 23)\textsuperscript{3}

**Student Focused Postgraduate Supervision at RMIT University—What Does This Mean in Practice?**

The following comments outline the key aspects of student focused supervision. It is not enough to think that these things are incorporated into supervisory practice. They must be made explicit—they must be consciously brought to the surface of supervisory practices. For example, some useful ways to develop this conscious recognition are to reflect on just how you enable students to develop themselves as researchers? And/or how your supervisory practices promote transformative not reproductive learning? It would also be useful to ask your students to perform similar conscious learning tasks. For example, how do they learn? What do they feel


constitutes transformative learning? How have they transformed during their time as a postgraduate student? What evidence are they drawing upon to support these transformative claims? This evidence and feedback will support your efforts to develop supervisory practices that enable you to work as a learning mentor to your students. And learning mentors are student focused.

Some key principles of student focused postgraduate supervision at RMIT University can be summarised as follows:

**Transformative not reproductive learning**

- sound educational practices in which the learner is central to the educational process and in which the learning is characterised by multiplicity, connectedness, transformation, and the development of critical intelligence
- learning defined by its outcomes which allows a multiplicity of learning pathways and learning styles
- a recognition of the worth of the learner and the learning journey undertaken

**Enabling not obstructing**

- provides flexible but structured support to learners
- allows students to identify and monitor their own progress through the development of an individual learning program. For example, the continual evaluation of the alignment of supervisor and student expectations
- provides a framework within which students can create their own learning path
- encourages students to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses, and to use this knowledge to enhance their learning
- maximises the recognition of existing skills, knowledge, competence, confidence, etc.
- allows for individual rates of progress but within the context of RMIT University’s policies and procedures for completion of higher degrees
- results in an individual thesis/project/publications which have intrinsic value to the learner, the wider community (business/industry/academic) and as such showcase the quality of supervision at RMIT University to outside agencies

**Inclusive not exclusive**

- provides support and guidance to all postgraduate students regardless of ethnic, racial, sexual, gender, age, social class, theological, disability differences
- supports, within any discipline/field of study, a diverse range of research topics, problems, and projects

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2. Role of the Postgraduate Supervisor as Learning Mentor

Student focused supervision requires a supervisor to adopt and develop a number of overlapping and mutually reinforcing roles. These include:

- **Learning Advisor**

  In the context of postgraduate supervision the supervisor will be expected to provide advice. This advice needs to support growth towards autonomy in learning. It must empower; it must invite challenge and critique; and it must be delivered in such a way that it develops the self-confidence of the student.

- **Advocate**

  The student focused supervisor may need, and must be ready to, act in an advocacy capacity for their postgraduate students in relation to the rules, regulations, policies and procedures of postgraduate study at the RMIT University. For example, they may need to negotiate, on behalf of their student, with the Research and Graduate Studies Committee. Such negotiations may involve documentary procedures and protocols, extensions, scholarship applications, and completion times. The student focused supervisor needs to ensure that such negotiations are fruitful and in the interests of all parties. A student focused supervisor must, therefore, be “streetwise” regarding RMIT University’s, and various scholarship bodies, policies and procedures pertaining to postgraduate study.

- **Assessor**

  A student focused postgraduate supervisor who is developing his/her supervisory practices within the context of a learning mentor should supervise, at all stages, a postgraduate student’s work in accordance with the agreed outcome—the successful and expedient completion of a higher degree. Students and supervisors should be able to make an informed appraisal, at any point during the research process, as to the satisfactory development of this agreed outcome; and where necessary they should amend, revise, and/or further develop various aspects of this process in order to ensure that the path towards this agreed outcome remains visible, flexible, and structured, at all times. In short, it is essential to consciously and continuously align and realign student and supervisor expectations of the research process: students have to know and be able to explain where they are in relation to this agreed outcome, and the same applies to supervisors.\(^5\)

- **Challenger**

\(^5\) See Biggs, J. 1999. Teaching for Quality Learning at University. OUP: Buckingham
Learning is about taking risks and moving outside one’s own preferred zone of comfort. A student focused supervisor needs to be able to recognise when to challenge and when to provide support.

- **Co-learner**

To maintain a student focused approach to supervision and utilise the approach of a learning mentor it is important for postgraduate supervisors to see themselves in the role of co-learner. Experience in learning and teaching, and an orientation to and enthusiasm for learning are two important things that supervisors bring to the student/supervisor relationship. Learning is about taking risks and supervisors should be prepared to take learning risks with their students. Thus, supervisors should encourage students to “have a bash.” They should work with students to find out what directions the students want to pursue, and encourage the student to explore why these directions are driving them; supervisors should be able to anticipate what their very different students might need, that is, time alone, formal direction, reading, encouragement to write, a gentle push into the research environment.

Supervisors acting as co-learners simply need to remember that the anxieties, frustrations, doubts, elation, and sometimes despair that they experience during their own research are also experienced by the student. They need to bring this to the student’s attention and encourage the student to recognise that such learning experiences are a crucial and valid aspect of any research process. This will assist the student develop her/his ability to learn independently and thus manage their own learning more effectively. Independent learning is a very important measure of success.

- **Counsellor**

Students undertaking postgraduate study should be going through the process of reflecting on their academic strengths and weaknesses, their career goals and limitations, and exploring and developing specific research skills and areas of interest. All these things require that students contest and move beyond established comfort zones. Postgraduate supervisors working as learning mentors have a duty to act as a sounding board and source of advice on issues related to the academic, personal, and career development of the students. This duty extends to advising how best to develop a research project that will support the student’s career, and yet be flexible enough to allow for diverse students and the fluctuating nature of the research process itself.

- **Critical Friend**

This is a very important role for postgraduate supervisors and one that requires a careful balance with the role as ‘supporter’. A critical friend
needs to establish a sense of trust and confidence. This sense allows them to offer objective advice in a way that the listener is able to interpret constructively. The role of the critical friend is to listen and give feedback on the planning of the student’s research, and to critically comment on written drafts and plans of action. The advice offered by the postgraduate supervisor in such instances may not be welcome, but how it is received should not deter the supervisor from providing it. In fact, the supervisor should encourage the student, if the advice offered by the supervisor is not welcomed by the student, to reflect on why their supervisory advice has unsettled them.

- **Research Alignment**

It is important that the postgraduate supervisor constantly query the student’s methodological, theoretical, empirical alignment. That is, is each aspect of the research process conducive to an effective outcome?—the successful completion of a higher degree within an appropriate time frame (set by the RMIT University). At each stage of their higher degree the postgraduate student must be reminded that new ideas and directions, while supported, must inevitably provide a thesis/project/or minor thesis that clearly aligns its research questions, methods of investigation, and empirical data. Moreover, it is the postgraduate supervisor’s responsibility to weed out any potential misfits in this alignment process, or weaknesses, before the work is submitted to examiners. This process of research alignment must commence from day-one of the student/supervisor relationship.

- **Enabler**

Effective enablers usually are supported by and frequently utilise good networks of friends and contacts. As a student focused postgraduate supervisor these networks could include:
  - Registration as a Senior Supervisor
  - Contributions to workshops/ supervisor training sessions and to the Postgraduate Supervisors’ Web site (for example, Discussion Board forum or Case Studies)
  - An understanding of and an ability to work in ways that foster supervisory practices through the notion of the supervisor as a learning mentor
  - a good grasp of the policies, procedures, and regulations that govern postgraduate study at the RMIT University
  - and knowledge of appropriate resource bases: scholarship funds and opportunities, industry or business grants, possible fieldwork placements, research opportunities

Effective enabling must be conscious that the line between enabling and creating dependency is a very thin one. It is important that supervisors ‘enable’ in ways that focus on increasing the independence of student(s).
• **Interpreter**

Every vocational or educational sector develops a community of practice. Membership of this community of practice entails the use of specific jargon, ways of knowing and acting, and values. Developing supervisory practices that support the notion of a learning mentor will entail working with postgraduate students in ways that assist them to interpret how best to work with and develop the ways of knowing and acting pertinent to their chosen area of study. External examiners’ reports are an important indicator of how well this interpretative role has been managed.

• **Listener**

Students at times will find themselves dealing with language, jargon and systems with which they are unfamiliar. They will also be making a number of significant decisions based on information they may not fully understand. As a postgraduate learning mentor it is important to be a good listener and ensure that students understand precisely the issues and processes with which they are dealing.

• **Mediator**

The roles of mediator and negotiator frequently overlap. As a mediator, postgraduate supervisors will assist students to resolve any issues or conflicts which may arise as a result of working with peers, co-supervisors, members of the department, research bodies, research sources, and/or dealing with internal or external agencies.

• **Negotiator**

Dealing with bureaucracies and large organisations such as tertiary education institutions can be difficult and frustrating even for experienced negotiators. The postgraduate supervisor as learning mentor can assist their students to identify appropriate contacts within organisations and to successfully negotiate research plans. This assistance may take the form of giving advice or it may involve the mentor in actually dealing with the institution directly. The mentor can also be a source of advice to students, to the institution, and to less experienced supervisors, all of whom maybe seeking to enhance their negotiation skills.

• **Subversive friend**

There are times when 'due process' gives rise to unnecessary obstacles. As a 'subversive friend' you may be able to assist a student in overcoming/bypassing any such blockages through the use of formal and informal channels and approaches.
• **Supporter**

The major part of a postgraduate student's life is the development of the project or thesis. A key aspect of this on-going process is its evaluation in the light of questions such as, "is this the right standard for a” Ph.D., M.A., M. Phil., MSC.? and so on. Given this constant evaluation by the student a failure to reach specific goals or perform specific tasks can be easily generalised and seen as a larger personal failure. Thus, the failure to complete a particular chapter before commencing another might be experienced by the student as a lack of organisational ability on their part, and even a sign that the thesis or project will never be completed. Postgraduate supervisors acting as learning mentors can provide the student with on-going support and assist in building and maintaining levels of confidence and self-esteem throughout this process.

• **Teacher and Resource Base**

While the role of a learning mentor generally does not include teaching, postgraduate students may identify specific needs which fall outside their formal study plan and for which their supervisor may be the most/only accessible and convenient teacher. The needs of such students might mean that supervisors act as a resource base, directing students to academic peers, other postgraduate students, or appropriate resource bases. It might also mean that supervisors collaborate in ways that allow students to access multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary resources. The collaboration of supervisors would occur across departments, faculties, and even universities. It is a form of supervisory support and practice that will become increasingly necessary in the research climate proffered by the Government’s white paper, “A Policy Statement on Research and Research Training” (May 2000)."
3. Postgraduate Supervisors as Learning Mentors—Key Requirements

Developing postgraduate supervisory practices that manifest themselves as a student focused approach to supervision involve a number of underpinning requirements. These include being able to:

♦ act in a variety of different yet overlapping roles such as counsellor, negotiator, mediator, interpreter, critical friend, assessor, curriculum matcher, teacher, assessor, co-leaner, enabler, listener, subversive friend, challenger, coach, resource broker (including the selection of examiners)

♦ encourage learners to grow and become independent with respect to their learning

♦ assist learners to monitor and review their own progress

♦ demonstrate continuous improvement with respect to the role of learning mentor through personal reflective practice

♦ demonstrate continuous improvement with respect to the role of learning mentor through the reflective practice of one’s students

♦ demonstrate that supervisory expectations and student expectations are continually reviewed, assessed, and evaluated throughout the duration of the research degree

These requirements highlight an approach which sees the learner (postgraduate student) as central to the learning (research project/thesis), and the supervisor’s role as that of establishing an effective learning environment (with physical, intellectual, social and emotional dimensions). This approach values the supervisor/student relationship as one of cognitive and personal growth for both parties; it emphasises the facilitation of learning and a guided growth towards learning autonomy—in short, the development of postgraduate students as researchers.

Concluding Comment—Why Student Focused Postgraduate Supervision?

A student focused approach to postgraduate supervision necessitates a move from a traditional approach, centred more on the development of research, to a problem solving approach. In the latter approach the student is central—it is student focused—and their development is as important as the development of the research project itself. In fact, the quality of the research, indicated by its relevance to the wider community (in a general sense), is a reflection on the student’s ability and development as an independent researcher.
Moreover, both the student and the research are highly visible indicators of the quality of supervision received by individual students.

It is the visibility of the supervisory process that the present government seeks to increase by its portable scholarships scheme; its emphasis on student choice; its reform principles of transparency, contestability, and accountability; and competition for research funding grounded in indicators such as: research student completions; research outputs—publications, patents, consultancies; research impact; citations; successful commercialisation; collaboration; and research income. All these factors set the boundaries of the contemporary research climate, and central to them are the notions of preparing research students for employment and improving research training. These notions are grounded in student focused approaches to postgraduate supervision; they are supported by supervisors who work with students as learning mentors; they are effective supervisory practices; they are made explicit in the Government White Paper, “A Policy Statement on Research and Research Training (May 2000)”; and they underpin the RMIT University’s approach to all of its students—a student focused university.