

# ELIGIBILITY TO SUPERVISE A STUDY OF UK INSTITUTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies (see for example Bair and Hayworth 2004, Lovitts 2008, Gardner 2008, Cohen 2012, Kyvik and Olsen 2013, Moxham et al 2013, Stephens 2014, Friedrich-Nel and MacKinnon 2017) have shown research supervision to be crucial in determining the quality of the student experience and the chances of timely completion. For these reasons, it has been recognised that it is important to have appropriate criteria to determine eligibility to supervise research students.

In many countries, such criteria are legally defined by the state. So, for example: in China, supervisors have to be full professors with acknowledged research achievements (Shen 2007); in France and Poland they have to have a higher doctorate, the ‘habilitation á diriger des recherches’ (Simpson 2009); in Spain, they must have at least six years of experience of research (Byrne et al 2013); and in Sweden by law at least one member of the supervisory team must have completed an appropriate training programme (Emilsson and Johnsson 2007).

In other countries, criteria for eligibility are left to individual institutions. So, for example, universities in Australia have numerous requirements including academic status, completion of relevant training and previous experience of supervision (see Kiley 2011 and Guerin et al 2017).

In the UK, since 1992 defining supervisory eligibility has been a matter for institutions, but in practice they have been guided by the precepts/indicators in various editions of the Quality Assurance Agency’s (QAA) Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes (QAA 1999, 2004, 2013). A decade or so ago, the QAA (2007) undertook a review of adherence to the code on the part of institutions which found some common features but also considerable variability in criteria relating to supervisor eligibility.

So far as the author is aware, since 2007 there has been no review of the criteria used by institutions to define eligibility to supervise research students. The aims of the present paper

are then to 1) identify the criteria used by UK higher education institutions 2) to discuss and comment upon them and 3) to reach conclusions and make appropriate recommendations.

## **METHODS**

In UK institutions, criteria for supervisor eligibility are usually embodied in institutional regulations and/or codes of practice for research degree programmes. As these are important documents for both supervisors and students, they are usually available in the public domain. In order to access them, between June and December 2017 the web sites of all the 143 institutions which provided research degrees were visited, and in the vast majority of cases the relevant information was extracted. In a handful of cases, data was not available from public sources, and further enquiries were made by e-mail or telephone.

One institution had no information available on its external web site and numerous e-mail enquires remained unanswered, and this was excluded. So the final dataset comprised 142 institutions, 99% of those providing research degrees.

The regulations, codes of practice, and communications were then analysed to identify the criteria used to define eligibility to supervise research degrees. These included mandatory initial and continuing professional development and the mentoring of new supervisors for a first supervision. In order to ascertain what meeting these criteria involved, a further trawl was undertaken of the sections of external-facing institutional web sites dealing with supervisor training and development. Again in most institutions this information was in the public domain, but in a small number it was not and enquiries were made by e-mail and telephone. Data was not available for all institutions or all aspects, as outlined in the relevant sections below.

## MAJOR CRITERIA

In all, nine major criteria were identified in the documentation. In order of frequency, they were:

### Membership of academic staff

Of the 142 institutions, 127 (89%) had an eligibility criterion relating to staff status. Of those with such a criterion, 28 (22%) required all supervisors in the team to be members of the academic staff of the institution, 8 (7%) required one only to have this status, and the remaining 91 (72%) required this of the first, or main, supervisor only.

Of the eight institutions which required one supervisor in the team to be a member of academic staff, four did not elaborate in their documentation about the status of the other member. The four which did variously mentioned staff who had honorary or emeritus/a status, were employed by collaborative partner institutions, were employed by external organizations (including industrial, public, commercial, and professional ones). In principle, then, it would seem that these could become first supervisors, although this would perhaps be surprising particularly for staff employed by external organizations.

Of the 91 institutions requiring first supervisors to be members of academic staff, 25 did not elaborate further in their documentation on the criteria to be a second supervisor. Of the 66 institutions which did provide information, 60 (91%) allowed second supervisors to be drawn from staff employed by external organizations, 16 (24%) from staff with honorary or emeritus/a status, 6 (10%) from post-doctoral and research staff and teaching fellows (in all cases subject to their contracts exceeding the duration of the studentship), and 3 (5%) from visiting academic staff.

## Mandatory initial professional development

Of the 142 institutions, 124 (87%) cited this criterion as applying to internal supervisors who had no previous experience of supervision. Of these, no further data could be obtained for two, nine were currently engaged in re-structuring their programmes, a further two had devolved initial professional development to sub-institutional levels, and three offered bespoke training tailored to the needs of individuals. These had to be excluded from the dataset, which then comprised 110 institutions. These were investigated in terms of the duration and content of initial professional development programmes, and whether they were certificated, credit-bearing and assessed.

### Duration

Two of the 110 institutions had on-line programmes for which no information on duration was set out in the documentation. Data for the remainder are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Duration of initial professional development programmes (days) N=108 (99%)

	<b>0.5 or less</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>2.5 or more</b>
<b>Number</b>	51	28	5	13	10
<b>% of Total</b>	47%	26%	6%	12%	9%

### Content

Descriptions of the content of mandatory initial professional development programmes were available for 110 institutions. The content was categorised using the author's (Taylor, 2014, 2016) classification of supervisory practices into the regulatory, pedagogical, diversity, student support, student development, progression and completion, and examination domains.

The **regulatory** domain was defined to include descriptions in the content of programmes of 'rules', 'regulations', 'regulatory frameworks', 'policies', 'procedures', 'standards', 'codes of practice' and 'quality assurance requirements'. Regulatory matters were covered in 106 (96%) of these institutions.

The **pedagogy** domain was defined to include use of the terms 'supervisor pedagogy', 'approaches to supervision', 'models of supervision', 'supervisory styles', 'challenges and solutions/strategies in supervision', 'supervisory relationships' 'establishing effective supervisory relationships'. 'conceptions of supervision', and 'student supervisor dynamics'. In all, this terminology was used by 92 (84%) of institutions.

Following Hammond et al (2010), the **diversity** domain was divided into three sub-domains, the first of which was diversity in the *composition of the student population*. Terms found included 'Working with student diversity', 'diversity and equality', 'different learning backgrounds of students', 'supporting students with additional needs', 'supporting students with disabilities', 'cultural awareness' 'potential cultural issues' and 'supporting international students'. These were mentioned in the course descriptions of 12 institutions (13%).

The second sub-domain was diversity in *modes of study*, studying part-time and/or at a distance. Explicit mention of supporting students studying in these modes was made in course descriptions by 4 institutions (4%).

The third sub-category was diversity in *supervising different types of doctorates*, extending beyond the traditional PhD to include professional doctorates, practice-led doctorates, doctorates by publication, and industrial/collaborative doctorates. Only 3 institutions (3%) mentioned supervising any other type of doctorate than the traditional one in their course descriptions.

The **student support** domain was signified by descriptions such as 'overview of university services relevant to PGR support', 'student support', 'well-being and pastoral support', 'college support services', 'support mechanisms available in the faculty and the university', 'managing student anxiety and emotional issues' and 'managing student isolation'. These were found in the programme descriptions in 30 institutions (27%). of institutions.

The **student development** domain included general descriptions such as ‘skills training and career development’, ‘postgraduate skills development and recognition’, ‘career management for researchers’, ‘able to describe the skills development needs of PGR over time and know the opportunities available’, and ‘skills and advice on professional and career development’. These were found in the programme descriptions of 24 institutions (22%). Additionally, in a further four institutions (4%), there were references to developing specific skills, in particular academic writing. Adding the general and the particular, this domain was represented in the programme descriptions of 28 institutions (26%).

The **progression and completion** domain included statements such as ‘monitoring progress’ ‘dealing with limited student progress’, ‘how to ensure students complete on time’, ‘students at risk and how to help them complete’, ‘delivering on-time completions’ and ‘techniques for ensuring timely completions’. These were found in the programme descriptions of 44 institutions (40%).

The final domain was **examination**, where descriptors including ‘preparing for examination’, ‘research degree examination’, ‘preparation for examination and the viva’, ‘appointment of examiners and the role of the supervisor and the internal examiner in the examination process’, ‘how to select suitable examiners and prepare your students to survive their viva’ and ‘good practice with regard to research degree examinations. These and similar were found in the programme descriptors of 39 institutions (35%).

These findings are summarised below:



**Table 2:** Citations of domains in initial professional development programmes (N=110)

	Regulatory	Pedagogical	Diversity	Student Support	Student Development	Progression and completion	Examination
<b>Number</b>	106	92	19	30	28	44	39
<b>% of total</b>	96%	84%	17%	27%	26%	40%	35%

### Certification, credit and assessment

With regard to assessment, only nine (8%) of the 110 mandatory initial professional development programmes in institutions were certificated and/or credit-bearing. In two cases, this took the form of certificates awarded to supervisors for attending the programme; in four, research supervision formed part of compulsory credit-bearing and assessed Postgraduate Certificates in Academic Practice; in a further two, supervisors were required to complete the first part of a dedicated postgraduate certificate in research supervision, and in one they were required to complete a full credit-bearing certificate in research supervision which was externally accredited.

### External supervisors

The above apply to internal supervisors, but as was noted under the first criterion, many institutions made provision for the appointment of second supervisors from external organizations. Of the 60 which did, only one had mandatory training for such supervisors while a further six (10%) mentioned encouraging them to participate in voluntary professional development activities.

### Having previous experience of supervision

Of the 142 institutions, 110 (78%) cited previous supervisory experience as a criterion. Of these, 25 (23%) required the first supervisor only to have experience, 56 (51%) either the first or the second supervisor, and 29 (26%) required that if the first supervisor had no successful completions then the second supervisor had have at least one.

In terms of the meaning of experience, 43 (39%) of these institutions did not have a numerical definition, while in the remainder it was specified as supervising a minimum number of students to successful completion. Among the 66 institutions with numerical definitions, 57 (86%) required supervisors to have at least one successful completion, while the remaining nine (14%) defined as it as two or more. In a handful of institutions, staff who had successfully completed the initial professional development programme were allowed to count this in lieu of one successful supervision, although in all of these institutions at least one supervisor in the team had to have completed an actual supervision.

### Having subject expertise relevant to the candidate's research project

Of the 142 institutions, 62 (44%) specified this condition. Of these 29 (46%) required subject expertise from all of the supervisory team, 24 (38%) from first supervisors only, and 9 (15%) from either member of the supervisory team.

### Being research-active

58 of the 142 institutions (51%) had this as a condition of eligibility. Of these, 30 (51%) required this of all of the supervisory team, 17 (30%) of the first supervisor only, and 11 (19%) of at least one member of the supervisory team.

## Possession of a research degree at an equivalent or higher level to the one being supervised or having equivalent research experience

57 (40%) of the 142 institutions specified this condition. Of those institutions which did 36 (63%) required that all of the supervisory team had an appropriate research degree or equivalent experience, 14 (24%) of the first supervisor only, and 7 (13%) of at least one member. Two of these institutions had this requirement but allowed exemptions for, in one case being a full professor and in the other having supervised four or more students to completion.

## Mandatory continuing professional development (CPD)

Of the 142 institutions, 56 (39%) required supervisors to refresh their knowledge and skills at regular intervals. Of those which did 16 (28%) required supervisors to undertake refresher development every year, 6 (11%) every two years, 22 (39%) every three years, and 12 (22%) every four years or more. This criterion was reviewed for duration, content, and recognition and assessment.

### **Duration**

Information on the duration of CPD activities was not available from some institutions either at all or because it was left to sub-institutional levels (faculties, colleges or schools) or to individual supervisors to self-report. Additionally, in a number of cases, CPD took the form of an untimed on-line programme. Excluding these, data on duration was available for 38 institutions of which 35 (92%) required supervisors to undertake programmes lasting half a day or less and 3 (8%) a full day.

### **Content**

In terms of the content of CPD activities, after eliminating those where they were distributed to sub-institutional levels or left to the discretion of individual supervisors, information was available for 52 institutions. Of these, 13 (25%) required that experienced supervisors should repeat the initial professional development programme, i.e. there was no additional provision.

For the 39 institutions which made additional provision, the content of activities was categorised and coded under the same domains as those for the initial professional development programmes.

Descriptions in the **regulatory** domain included ‘changes in university regulations’ ‘changes to the Code of Practice and regulations’ ‘updates on regulations’ and ‘latest changes in policies and procedures’. In all, references to the regulatory domain formed part of the content of CPD programmes in 25 institutions (64%).

For the **pedagogical** domain, descriptions included ‘discussing good/best practice in supervision’ ‘sharing personal experiences of supervision and reflecting on areas that could benefit from change’ ‘new ideas for successful supervision’ and ‘cohort and programme-based models of doctoral supervision’. References to the pedagogy domain formed part of the content in 16 institutions (41%).

The third domain was **diversity**, which was previously defined in terms of three sub-domains. With regard to the *composition of the student population*, two institutions (5%) of the 39 mentioned development relating to supervising a named group of students, in both cases ‘international students’. With regard to mode of study, there were two institutions (5%) of the 39 which mentioned developing supervisors in supporting part-time and distance students. With regard to the third sub-domain, supervising multiple forms of the doctorate including professional doctorates and PhDs by publication, this was mentioned by four (10%) of the 39 institutions. In all, diversity-related content was mentioned in eight institutions, 21% of the total.

The **student support** domain was mentioned in course descriptions only by two institutions of the 39 (5%) in the forms of ‘create research environments that actively support students’ and ‘support for your research student’. Student development content was mentioned by four institutions (10%) with references including ‘resources to develop PGRs’ ‘the RDF and development needs analysis’ and ‘the doctoral researcher development programme’.

The sixth domain was **progression and completion**. Descriptions such as ‘preparing for progression’ ‘retention and successful completion’ and ‘moving towards completion’ were found in the programme outlines of nine institutions, 23% of the total.

The last category was **examination**. Statements such as ‘examinations’ ‘the viva’ ‘the research degree examination and viva’ ‘the appointment of examiners and the viva voce’ were found in the course descriptions of nine institutions, 23% of the total.

These findings are summarised below:

**Table 3** Citations of domains in continuing professional development programmes (N=39)

	Regulatory	Pedagogical	Diversity	Student Support	Student Development	Progression and completion	Examination
<b>Number</b>	25	16	8	2	4	9	9
<b>% of total</b>	64%	41%	21%	5%	10%	23%	23%

### Certification, credit and assessment

Only two of these mandatory CPD programmes were certificated and none were credit-bearing or assessed. The question which then arises is about how institutions monitored whether experienced supervisors had completed the relevant requirements within the allotted timescale. Of the 56 institutions with mandatory CPD, there was no mention of monitoring in the documentation of 47 institutions (84%) of institutions, but 9 (16%) mentioned policies and procedures in the forms of registrations on lists of approved supervisors or ‘licenses to supervise’ which could be withdrawn so that non-completers were unable to carry on as supervisors.

## Having the capacity to supervise additional research students

54 of the 142 institutions (38%) specified capacity to take on additional students as a condition. Of these, 15 (28%) specified capacity constraints for first supervisors only, 31 (58%) for supervisory teams as a whole, and 8 (14%) had maxima for both supervisors and for teams. Of the 16 institutions specifying capacity constraints for first supervisors only, all defined this numerically with 12 (75%) setting a limit of 6 and the other four (25%) a limit of 8. Of the 31 mentioning capacity for supervisor teams as a whole, 10 (32%) did not specify a maximum figure. Of the 21 which did, 2 (10%) stated a maximum of 5 or less, 17 (81%) 6- 8 and 2 (10%) more than 8 with a maximum of 10.

## Being mentored for all or part of a first supervision

Of the 142 institutions, 34 (23%) had a condition that new supervisors were mentored during all or part of their first supervisory cycle. In 28 of these institutions (82%), mentoring was required only for the appointment of a first supervisor who had no previous experience of supervision, in which case another experienced supervisor acted as mentor. In the remainder, supervisors were not allowed to become a principal supervisor before completing their apprenticeship in supervision, in most cases involving co-supervising to one successful submission. There was no information available for any institution about how mentors were selected and only one mentioned a mentor training programme.

## Other criteria

It should be noted that, in addition to the above, there were four other criteria which were mentioned by virtually all of the institutions in the survey. These were: that there should not be a conflict of interest between supervisors and students; that supervisors: should not be in a relationship with students whom they were supervising or with co-supervisors; that, in the cases of staff doctorates, supervisors should not be the line managers of supervisees; and that

supervisors should not themselves be currently studying for a research degree (although a few institutions made exceptions for staff registered for PhDs by prior publication).

# DISCUSSION AND COMMENT

## MEMBERSHIP OF ACADEMIC STAFF

The QAA (2007: 7) review of research degree programmes found that ‘Most institutions expect their supervisors to be full-time permanent members of academic staff, and a few explicitly state this as a requirement’. By 2017, this had clearly moved on with nine-tenths of institutions insisting that at least one of the supervisory team should be a member of the academic staff. Adding those which insisted that both supervisors should be members of staff (22%) and those requiring this of first supervisors only (72%), first supervisors had to have such status in 94% of these institutions (N=127).

However, there were a few institutions which specified that only one member of the team should be a member of staff, which could imply that the main supervisor was external to the institution. There were others which did not mention this criterion at all, which seemingly raises the prospect of research students being supervised entirely by staff not employed by the institution. Perhaps more likely, these institutions may have taken for granted that first and/or second supervisors would be members of staff, and hence did not feel it was necessary to put it into their regulations and/or codes of practice.

## MANDATORY INITIAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A number of studies (see for example Brew and Pesata 2009, McCulloch and Loeser 2016) have shown that undertaking initial professional development helps to enhance both the experience of new supervisors and that of their students. For these reasons, a requirement for mandatory development was included in the second (QAA: 2004) and third (QAA: 2013) editions of the QAA Code of Practice. The QAA special review (2007: 8) found that ‘mostly’ new internal supervisors were required to undertake initial professional development while, a decade later, the present study found that five-sixths of institutions had mandatory initial professional development programmes.



This may seem impressive in principle but is perhaps less so in reality. In nearly three-quarters of institutions, initial programmes only took a day or less, which as Brentel (2017) has pointed out, hardly seems adequate to cover what is now a very complex and demanding part of academic practice.

In terms of content, there was almost universal coverage of the regulatory domain and most programmes incorporated the pedagogical one, usually in terms of managing relationships with students. But other important domains including diversity, student support, and student development were only mentioned by around a quarter of institutions in their descriptions of professional development programmes. So many new supervisors may have had the same response to a mandatory supervisor training course as Feather and McDermott (2014: 169), namely that:

...although [it] was insightful and engaging, we did not learn much more than we already knew. The programme dealt mainly with the mechanics (form-filling, administration, recording of attendance, and other administrative tasks) of supervising PhDs, but not the realities of supervision: that is, the emotions... and the softer issues of dealing with students and their needs. So this left both of us with anxieties and questions concerning the supervision of doctoral students; more so as every member of staff was expected to take on more doctoral students by the school and the university.

This seeming lack of coverage of the 'realities' in many programmes may raise concerns in the contexts of supporting supervisors to respond effectively to the increased diversity of the composition of the research student population (see for example McCulloch and Thomas 2013, Taylor et al 2018), to well-being issues including mental health (see for example Hughes et al 2018, Barry et al 2018), and to student development needs particularly in relation to academic writing (Maher et al 2013, Guerin et al 2017). It may be noted that such omissions are contrary to the current version of the QAA Code of Practice (2013: 19) which specifies supervisors should be 'sensitive to the diverse needs of individual research students and the associated support available' and that 'higher education providers ensure that supervisors are

aware of the range of support available and communicate to their students how they can access it.’

Also, concern may be expressed at about how far initial professional development programmes are equipping academic staff to supervise students who are studying part-time and/or at a distance. Part-time students may have very different needs to full-time ones and require different forms of support from supervisors (see McCulloch and Stokes 2008, Watts 2008), and similar considerations apply to students studying at a distance (see Nasiri and Mafakheri 2015 and Despancde 2017).

Further, there is an issue about how far initial professional development programmes are preparing academic staff for supervising doctorates other than the traditional PhD. There is evidence that supervising professional doctorates (see for example Bourner and Simpson 2014, Armsby et al 2017, Fillery-Travis and Robinson 2018, Lee 2018), practice-led doctorates (Hamilton and Carson 2015, Fillery-Travis et al 2017) industrial doctorates (Salminen-Karlsson and Wallgren 2008, European Commission 2017) and doctorates by publication (Dowling et al 2012, Pretorius 2016) can be a very different kettle of fish, and it seems that this has been recognised by few institutions.

With regard to the QAA Code, only a handful of institutions seem to have paid attention to the recommendation in the current version of (2013: 17) that professional development for supervisors is ‘given similar status to programmes on learning and teaching in higher education for new academic staff’. Such programmes are in most cases certificated and credit-bearing and assessed, but this was only the case for a handful of institutions in relation to research supervision.

This is perhaps surprising because, as Green and Powell (2005) noted over a decade ago, a number of institutions had dedicated mandatory professional development programmes for new research supervisors. Moreover, at the time it was widely expected that many others would follow suit and adopt the innovative Training and Accreditation Programme for Postgraduate Supervisors (TAPPS) developed under the aegis of the Biology and Biotechnology Research Council (see Cryer and Mertens 2003, Eley and Murray 2009).

But in the event, the TAPPS scheme was only ever formally adopted by one university which ran it for a few years before dropping it, while several other institutions which had mandatory credit-bearing programmes for research supervisors have closed them in recent years. In one case where a public explanation is available (see Bennett 2011), reasons included the inflexibility of credit-bearing provision and the excessive commitment for staff already struggling with multiple demands on their time at the start of their careers.

While the need to relieve the burden on newly-appointed academic staff is undoubtedly real, the lack of credit-bearing provision may, as Guerin et al (2017:99) have put it, represent:

...a missed opportunity. If participants were to gain formal credit from their work in such courses, the result may be better engagement from staff who see greater benefit in the time they invest in this training. For example, the formalized recognition of teaching that is offered by the Higher Education Academy in the UK or a [Post-] Graduate Certificate in Higher Education could be used as incentives to undertake formal supervisor development.

A further departure from the Code of Practice is with regard to external supervisors. The current version of the code (2013: 17) specifies that 'to ensure consistency of supervision, supervisors working in industry or professional practice... are offered opportunities to engage in developmental activities'. However, such activities were only mentioned in the documentation on supervisory eligibility by a handful of institutions and this may be an area which, particularly in view of the increase in industrial doctorates and hence in external supervisors (see Ori 2013) may merit attention.

## HAVING PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE OF SUPERVISION

Previous experience can enable staff to develop what Hockey (1997, 2003) has termed the 'craft' of supervision, the elements which can only be learned by doing it. Also, there is some evidence (see for example Sinclair 2004) that students whose supervisors have previous experience are more likely to complete on time. Reference to supervisory teams having at

least one member who had supervised a student or students to successful completion was made in the both later editions of the QAA Code of Practice (2004: 7, 2013: 18), and in 2017 this was a requirement in nearly four-fifths of institutions. But one-fifth of institutions still had no formal requirements and it would seem that in these staff without previous experience could in principle become supervisors, including entire supervisory teams.

## HAVING SUBJECT EXPERTISE RELEVANT TO THE CANDIDATE'S RESEARCH PROJECT

Many studies (see for example Macauley 2000, Bair and Hayworth 2004, Wadesango and Machingambi 2011) have stressed the importance of subject expertise in terms of the abilities of supervisors to support and direct candidates' research projects. But this criterion was mentioned by under half of the institutions. It would be surprising if such a view reflected a perception that such expertise was not important, which would then be a matter for concern if students are being supervised by those without the relevant expertise, or it could be considered too obvious to need mention.

## BEING RESEARCH-ACTIVE

Traditionally the view has been that research supervisors need to be currently working at the cutting edge of their disciplines in order to offer advice and support to their students, and this has been seen as an essential precondition for supervising research degrees (see for example Rudd 1985). This was reflected in the second edition of the QAA Code of Practice (2004: 15) which specified that 'At least one member of the supervisory team will be currently engaged in research in the relevant discipline(s) so as to ensure that the direction and monitoring of the student's progress is informed by up to date subject knowledge and research developments' while the third (2013: 18) added that the research should be 'excellent'. But this criterion, with or without excellence, was only mentioned in two out of five institution in the 2017 review. Its absence in the remainder may reflect a perception that current

experience is not necessary, or alternatively it may be that in many institutions academic staff are research-active by definition and hence are automatically deemed to meet the criterion.

## POSSESSION OF A RESEARCH DEGREE AT AN EQUIVALENT OR HIGHER LEVEL TO THE ONE BEING SUPERVISED OR HAVING EQUIVALENT RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

It seems likely that supervisors would have greater knowledge and understanding of what is involved in undertaking a research degree if they have one themselves or had equivalent research experience. Studies (see for example Neumann 2003, Ives and Rowley 2005) have found that students whose supervisors had research degrees or equivalent experience were more likely to complete and on time. In the QAA (2007: 7) review, it was stated that ‘most’ institutions had this requirement or made special arrangements for supervisors without doctorates, but in the 2017 survey this criterion was only mentioned by two-fifths of institutions. It would be surprising if this was because a research degree or equivalent was not valued as a qualification for supervisors, and perhaps more likely because possession of a research degree was already a pre-condition of gaining an academic post, and hence not deemed relevant.

## MANDATORY CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Doctoral education has been in the throes of change for the past thirty years and as Hammond et al (2010: 12) have pointed out

A consequence of this...is the decreasing relevance of supervisors’ own supervisory experiences for supervision in the 21st century and hence the need for supervisors to develop new supervisory practices.

For this reason, it is important that experienced supervisors ensure that their knowledge and skills remain up to date, and a requirement for mandatory continuing professional

development formed part of the second (QAA 2004) and current (2013) editions of the QAA Code of Practice.

One of the key findings of the QAA special review (2007:8) was that:

Variability of expectations and requirements was found to be greatest in the training and development of established supervisors...In many institutions, there is still work to be done in engaging many established supervisors in supervision development programmes. In most institutions, supervisors are encouraged or expected, but rarely required, to engage in personal development activities in this area.

A decade on, the world seems little different with three out of five institutions having no requirement at all for established supervisors to update their practice, perhaps reflecting the well-documented unwillingness of experienced supervisors to undertake refresher courses (see Hammond et al 2010, Blass and Bertone 2013, Spiller et al 2013). Of those institutions which did have a formal CPD requirement, in over nine-tenths of cases it involved a time commitment of half a day or less, i.e. it was a minimal. In terms of content, the focus was upon regulations, pedagogy, completion and examination, with relatively less on diversity and seemingly very little at all on student support or development.

That said, there is some evidence that these two facts, the unwillingness of experienced supervisors to undertake development and the content of the latter may be linked. Australian studies (see Blass and Bertone 2013, Spiller et al 2013) have found that experienced supervisors can feel patronized by low level content and managerialism in CPD programmes. Instead, Brentel (2017: 5) has suggested that what is needed is:

...a highly attractive, comprehensive package of follow-up measures which support and accompany [experienced supervisors] in their future professional performance: measures with additional topics and modules, for refreshing the lesson learned, for community building, for opportunities to jointly discuss and solve problematic cases, for jointly developing supervisory needs or journal contributions, for informal meetings such as supervisory lunch talks, for international cooperation and cultural

awareness, and thus for jointly creating and keeping the mission and vision of developing an outermost productive and supportive supervisory culture.

It may be noted that one UK institution, Birmingham City University, has recently developed just such a package which although voluntary appears to have been very successful in attracting experienced supervisors, and this may offer a way forward in supporting them to update their knowledge and skills (see Hill and Vaughn 2017).

Such curricular innovations might also be accompanied by improved monitoring of take-up. Only one in six institutions with mandatory CPD requirements for experienced supervisors mentioned policies and procedures for checking that they were meeting them. It may then seem that this requirement was honoured more in the breach than the observance, or alternatively that it was not considered necessary to include such policies and procedures in the documentation.

## HAVING THE CAPACITY TO SUPERVISE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH STUDENTS

Numerous studies (see for example Bair and Hayworth 2004, Smith et al 2006, Lovitts 2008, Cohen 2011, Wadesango and Machingambi 2011. Carter et al 2017) have shown that supervisors having the time to spend with their students is crucial in terms of the quality of the student experience and in supporting timely completion. The need for institutions to ensure that the quality of supervision was not put at risk because of excessive workloads was highlighted in all three editions of the QAA Code of Practice (1999, 2004, 2013). The QAA review (2007: 9) found considerable variability between institutions in terms of whether they defined a maximum number of students supervisors were allowed to supervise, with normal maxima of 6 for a main supervisor and 12 for a team.

This variability was replicated in the present study, with supervisory capacity mentioned by only two out of five institutions. This potentially raises the issue in such institutions of

supervisors or supervisory teams being overloaded to the detriment of the student experience, or alternatively it may be that this is managed on an ad hoc rather than a regulatory basis. Among those who did define maxima, the normal limits for a main supervisor were 6-8 while the limit specified for a team was 10.

## BEING MENTORED FOR ALL OR PART OF A FIRST SUPERVISION

Mentoring by experienced supervisors has the potential to provide reassurance to new supervisors in what is an unfamiliar and uncomfortable area of academic practice (see for example Turner 2015) and support them to develop good practice (Hammond et al 2010, Grossman and Crowther 2015). Such mentoring was encouraged in both of the later editions of the QAA Code of Practice (2004, 2013), and the special review (QAA 2007) found evidence that some institutions were providing mentors for new supervisors.

A decade on, mentoring of new supervisors was not a formal requirement in three-quarters of institutions. But, even in the remainder, there seemed to be no formal procedures for selecting mentors and, with one exception, schemes for training them. This raises the possibility that it is pot luck whether good or bad practice may be transmitted by mentors to new supervisors (see Hill 2011, Roed 2012).



## CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis, the three most common criteria for eligibility, used by around eight out of ten institutions in the UK, were that research supervisors should be members of staff, that they should be required to complete an initial professional development programme, and that they should either have previous experience of supervision themselves or if not form part of a team with more experienced co-supervisors.

That said, by no means all institutions explicitly stated these criteria in their documentation. Even where they did, as in the case of mandatory initial professional development, there were question marks about the duration and content of programmes, in particular in relation to diversity, student support, and student development. Moreover, and unlike programmes designed to ensure competence in mainstream teaching and supporting learning, few were certificated or assessed.

Of the other criteria, there were two which were closely related in terms of specifying that supervisors needed expertise relating to the candidate's topic or that they needed to be research-active or to have a research degree or equivalent experience. These were explicitly stated in their documentation by two-fifths of institutions. Their absence in the remainder may be because they were not taken seriously as criteria, which would be a matter for concern, but it would seem more likely that they were deemed obvious by institutions and hence not worth including in regulations or codes of practice.

Findings in relation to the remaining criteria seem to be potentially matters for concern. Firstly, despite the prominence of this in successive editions of the QAA Code of Practice (1999,2004. 2013) and the in the QAA (2007) review report, three-fifths of institutions did not require experienced supervisors to undertake any form of CPD. Even for the two-fifths of institutions which did requirements often seemed symbolic rather than substantive. Unless experienced supervisors flocked voluntarily to events, this would seem to leave many possibly ill-equipped to cope with the realities of supervision in the 21st century.

Secondly, and again despite prominence in the QAA Code and 2007 review, three-fifths of institutions failed to mention supervisory capacity as a criterion, leaving the prospect of supervisors being overloaded. As noted, supervisors having time for their students is crucial to the latter's experience and to their chances of timely completion. Defined limits also give supervisors a powerful weapon in the event of undue pressures to take on additional students

Thirdly, and despite encouragement through successive editions of the Code of Practice, only one-quarter of institutions had mentoring schemes for new supervisors, and even these seemed to be ad hoc with little or nothing in the way of mentor selection and training so there was no guarantee that good practice would be transmitted. Here institutions may well be missing a trick not only in terms of supporting new supervisors but involving established ones as mentors in professional development activities.

It should be pointed out that the validity of these conclusions is constrained by at least two factors. Firstly, they are based almost entirely upon documentary sources, and as has been pointed out in the text these may not incorporate assumptions that are taken for granted and for this reason are not explicitly stated. Secondly, the data only relates to a six-month period in the second half of 2017, and institutions may have subsequently changed and modified their provision. But, subject to these caveats, it can be suggested that, where appropriate:

- Institutions which do not currently do so might consider clarifying the employment status of supervisory teams, particularly in relation to main supervisors;
- Institutions might review their provision for initial professional development in the light of its duration and comprehensiveness in preparing supervisors for their roles, in particular in relation to diversity (of the student population, modes of study, and doctoral programmes), student support, and student development;
- Institutions might consider whether, in line with practice in other forms of teaching and learning, initial professional development in research supervision should be credit-bearing and assessed;

- Institutions might consider further encouraging external supervisors to participate in developmental activities;
- Institutions which currently do not specify that supervisors need subject expertise, research degrees, or research experience might consider whether it would be appropriate to incorporate these as explicit criteria;
- Institutions which do not specify capacity constraints might consider whether it would be worth considering limits to provide reassurance that supervisory workloads are realistic;
- Institutions which do not have CPD requirements of experienced supervisors might consider how they can ensure that they remain up to date;
- Institutions which do have mandatory CPD programmes might review the duration and content, particularly in relation to diversity, student support, and student development, and consider how they can be made more relevant and attractive;
- Institutions with such CPD programmes might consider explicating mechanism for monitoring adherence;
- Institutions which do not currently have mentoring requirements might consider whether there could be advantages in introducing mentoring as a way of supporting the development of new supervisors and engaging established ones in developmental activities as mentors;
- Institutions with mentoring requirements might consider the selection and training of mentors in order to ensure the transmission of good practice.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the help and support of colleagues – too many to mention individually - in institutions who dealt patiently with enquiries about supervisor eligibility and provided much of the information upon which this paper is based. He would also like to thank Gill Clarke, Chair-elect of the UK Council for Graduate Education, Dr Douglas Halliday, Vice-Chair-elect, Dr Margaret Kiley of the Australian National University, and Professor Alistair McCulloch of the University of South Australia for reading and commenting upon drafts of the paper. Any errors are, of course, the responsibility of the author.

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