RESEARCH SUPERVISION RECOGNITION PROGRAMME

Sample Application

UK Council for
Graduate Education

ABOUT THIS
SAMPLE APPLICATION.

This sample application for the UKCGE's Research Supervisors Recognition Programme is designed to show you what your completed application might look like.

A single, reflective account, it demonstrates how you could evidence your supervisory practice, and reference the literature, for each of the ten Good Supervisory Practice Framework criteria used in the recognition programme.

Beginning Your Application

Download the complete Application Pack from the **Research Supervision Recognition Programme** website:

supervision.ukcge.ac.uk

About the Research Supervision Recognition Programme

The Research Supervision Recognition Programme is reflective practice toolkit including the Good Supervisory Practice Framework which acknowledges the complexity of the role, and an opportunity for Structured Self Reflection, leading to an award from the UK Council for Graduate Education.

Find out more >

Introduction

I graduated in Widgetology from the Universities of Poppleton (Bachelor's and Master's) and Uttoxeter (PhD). After two post-doctoral posts at Uttoxeter, I was appointed as an Associate Professor in the Department of Widgetology in the University of Barchester in 2007 and have subsequently been promoted to Assistant Professor. My research area is applied widgetology and I have been principal investigator for three major projects and have over thirty publications in the field.

With regard to research supervision, I have acted as second supervisor for one doctoral student, and as principal supervisor for a further nine

Of the latter, five have completed their theses, and all gained their doctorates, in three cases within four years, and two within five. Four passed with minor corrections, while one had major corrections.

My supervisees have included international candidates from China and Thailand respectively and one who transferred from full-time to part-time status.

I have been an internal examiner for two doctorates and an external one for four.

1   Recruitment and selection

When I became a principal supervisor, I decided to establish a personal web site to try and attract good early career researchers to work with me. In constructing the site, I had to decide what information would be relevant both to intending applicants and to me. I thought the key areas were the availability funding, possible research topics that I could supervise, pre-existing research expertise, and how to make an application. The site (http://a.n.other@barchester.ac.uk) is taking 100-200 hits per year, and that so far, I have recruited three of my doctoral candidates by this means.

Particularly as a first-generation university student myself, I am conscious of the need to widen recruitment to postgraduate research degrees by increasing the numbers of candidates

from non-traditional academic backgrounds (see for example Pasztor and Wakeling 2018). I have given numerous presentations at postgraduate fairs stressing that research studentships at Barchester are open to everyone and encouraging applications particularly from under-represented groups. This has helped both for the university and for my department, which now has a much more diverse research student population.

2   Relationships with candidates

As with many supervisors (see for example McAlpine and Amundsen 2011), my initial view of how to supervise was formed by my own experiences as a doctoral candidate. My supervisor was of the old school with a very hands-off attitude to supervision – he was happy to comment on my work but not to help me to do it. As a result, I often struggled to make progress and it was a fraught experience.

So, when I became a principal supervisor myself, my initial inclination was to go to the opposite extreme and be very highly directive. This worked for some candidates, but it did not work for all; one candidate who was mature and had a lot of experience in industrial widgetology, clearly resented what she saw as my overbearing attempts to direct her research. I discussed this with my second supervisor, who was content to leave the candidate to get on with it. I asked her how she expected the candidate to make progress. Her answer was that, in her judgement, this candidate was ready and able to go solo. With some misgivings, I lightened the reins, and in fact she flourished with only very 'light-touch' supervision. This taught me a valuable lesson, that one size does not fit all and that the supervisory style has to be adjusted to the needs of the candidate.

With regard to expectations, I try to gauge these at the start, using the Brown and Atkins (1988) questionnaire. This approach was particularly effective in the case of my two international candidates. The questionnaire revealed that both expected me to tell them what to do, when, where and how, which was how they had previously been supervised in their countries of origin. I knew it would come as a shock to them if I just told them to go off and get stuck in, and instead set them a series of mini-research projects involving reviewing key

papers, identifying gaps in the literature, and planning research to see if they could be filled. Both got the idea very quickly and found promising topics which they were then able to develop into full research proposals. They still needed a lot of direction in terms of theories and methods, but soon developed the confidence to work more on their own and they developed into independent – and very hard working – candidates.

Of course, approaches need to change over the course of a research degree (see Benmore 2014) and I have a policy of spending part of one supervision a year with candidates reviewing the 'fit' of my style to their needs. On occasion, this has thrown up that I have been under- or over-directive and, where appropriate, I have adapted my style accordingly.

3   Positive relationships with co-supervisors

I myself had a single supervisor who was often away from the university and I often thought that it would have been better if there had been a second supervisor to fill in the gaps. So, it was with a high degree of anticipation that, at the start of my supervisory career, I myself became a second supervisor.

However, it turned out to be a less than perfectly smooth ride; the principal supervisor had very different ideas about how the project should be undertaken and our feedback on draft chapters was often at odds. It ended up with the candidate having to manage us, as apparently is often the case (see Guerin and Green 2015).

When I became a principal supervisor in my own right, I was determined that my co-supervisor and I would work as a team from the start. I looked at some of the literature, and in a paper by Grossman and Crowther (2015) found a very comprehensive checklist covering the what, where, when and how of co-supervision.

My practice now is to go through the checklist with co-supervisors at the start of a candidateship so that each knows what is expected of them, and to share the result with the candidate so that they know who is responsible for what. Also, we re-visit this annually, just to make sure that we are all singing from the same hymnbook.

4 Supporting candidates' research projects

Candidates come to me with a fairly general idea of a research field, and one of the main tasks is to help them to develop a research proposal which is worthwhile, doable within three or four years at the most, will engage them for that period, and which has the potential to be awarded a doctorate.

I do this by asking them to put their ideas down on paper, evaluate them using the above criteria, and then discuss them with me. These discussions are wide-ranging and cover everything from possible theoretical frameworks through methodologies and research methods. By questioning them and asking them to justify their choices, I can assist them to develop a research plan that is coherent, can be done within the time limits, and has the potential to create original knowledge and gain the award.

The task then is to produce a research plan setting time against task. Most candidates understandably have little idea of how to plan a research project, but I have found a way to help them. This is to ask them to look at the deliberately faulty research plans presented in Delamont et al (2004) and ask them to identify the problems and say how they would put them right.

Once the proposal and plan are in place, the next tasks are to gain the relevant approvals. My department requires that all research proposals and plans are approved by the Postgraduate Committee to ensure that they are viable and doable within four years and that any potential risks in the research are minimal and manageable. Once the proposal is approved, any project involving empirical research has to go before the faculty ethics committee. The guidelines are complex, and I work with candidates to interpret them in the light of their projects and ensure that all necessary safeguards are in place.

Once they have the proposal, the plan, and the approvals, they are off down the slipway, but of course their journey is rarely straightforward; research is often one step forwards and then two backwards and occasionally one or more sideways. I alert my candidates to this early on by pointing them towards Harbury's (1966) humorous illustration of the uncertainties of

research and then I take them through one of my own projects from first thoughts on the back of an envelope through the blood, sweat, toils and tears of doing research and so to the final published paper.

5   Encouraging candidates to write and giving appropriate feedback

For my own doctorate, I was advised to get my research out of the way before doing most of the writing at the very end. This proved quite stressful because late in the day I had to learn how to do academic writing, which was time consuming. Also, I found that the more I wrote, the more things changed, and I kept having to go back and alter earlier chapters. This was because, as I discovered later, writing is not just the product but part of the process of doing research, i.e. it is through writing that meaning is made of the research project (Woolf 2010).

So, as a supervisor myself, I encourage candidates strongly to start writing on Day 1 and continue throughout their doctoral studies. In particular, I ask them to keep a diary recording all of their thoughts about their research and details of any books or papers they have read and the references to them. I also push them quite hard to present written work regularly. This can be like getting blood out of a stone, but I find that giving candidates permission to present rough drafts often does the trick.

Perhaps my most important job as a supervisor is to give candidates feedback upon their work. Again, in this area my own experience as a research student was unhappy as my supervisor was hyper-critical, covered my drafts in red ink, and seldom praised me. In order to avoid this, both for written and oral feedback I use the framework suggested in Taylor et al (2018), involving congratulating the student on the good points before raising issues in a constructive way and suggesting possible changes before again ending on a positive note.

Before giving feedback, I always consult with the second supervisor, and try to ensure that we are giving the same messages or, if not, that we clarify any points of difference with the student.

A recent innovation has been to use 'feed forward' to make sure that candidates take note of my feedback. I have on occasion given copious feedback on a chapter and found, when the next one has been handed in, that the candidate has largely ignored my comments! Now, I ask them to provide a short, written report on how they have used my feedback – or if not, why not? – when they hand in the next chapter, which seems to have done the trick.

6 Supporting candidates' personal, professional and career development

At Barchester, the supervisory team have a responsibility for the personal welfare of research candidates, and I take this very seriously. I tell my candidates at the start that, if there are issues in their private lives which are impacting upon their research, that they should let me know so that I can direct them towards appropriate support and assistance. Usually, it is a matter of arranging an extension of time to complete the research. So, for example, when one student became pregnant, I arranged for her registration to be suspended for a year after which she returned part-time to her studies.

On occasion, though, it can be more serious. I had one candidate who had always been diligent, produced work on time, and turned up on time for supervisions who then suddenly vanished off the radar. I tried to contact him by e-mail and phone, and eventually he came to see me. He revealed that he had become severely depressed, and as a result had lost all confidence in himself and his work. Fortunately, I had recently become aware of mental health issues among research candidates (see Mackie and Bates 2018), empathised with him, and asked him if he would like me to contact the Counselling Service to provide him with professional support. He agreed, and with the help of counsellors and medics returned to his studies and eventually gained his doctorate.

For me, a key form of professional development is for my candidates to undertake teaching. Usually, they teach on modules for which I am responsible. I ensure that they are well briefed on the aims, objectives, content and outcomes of the module. Also, before they take a class, I ask them to come and observe me teaching the same topic and to give me feedback, and

then I do the same for them. I also encourage them to take the university's course on Introduction to Learning and Teaching, which is accredited for Associate Fellowship by the Higher Education Academy.

Such recognition can be helpful in terms of planning for an academic career, which nearly all of my doctoral candidates aspired to at the start of their studies. I try to be a positive role model and to discuss academic careers (pluses and minuses) with those who are interested so that they have an idea of what they would be letting themselves in for. I also support them to attend conferences and to build up presences on social media, for example ResearchGate and LinkedIn. But even with all of the prerequisites in terms of research, teaching, and networking, academic posts are like gold dust and only one of my five doctoral graduates has found employment as an academic.

The remainder, by choice or necessity, work outside academia and I think it is important to help them prepare for this eventuality. Every year, I meet with candidates individually and we go through the university's training needs template to identify skills gaps and opportunities to fill them. I encourage them to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the university to develop their skills. Recently, one of my candidates asked if he could take up a placement in industry for a month, to which I agreed, and I am pleased to say that he returned not only a better researcher but with a job in the bag!

7   Supporting progress and monitoring progression

In my day as a doctoral student, research projects took as long as they took, i.e. there were few pressure to complete. Now, of course, candidates are under pressure from research sponsors and institutions (not to mention their bank managers) to complete within three or, at the most four, years.

To keep to schedule, they need a range of personal skills, including project-, time-. and self-management, and I strongly encourage candidates to take advantage of development opportunities in these fields. On occasion, I have intervened directly and shown candidates how to go about managing their time using their research diaries.

As well as supporting candidates' progress, I also monitor it at supervisions by asking candidates to review their progress against previously set objectives and then to set new objectives for the next period. I use this evidence to inform my formal reports to departmental review panels which consider if and when candidates are allowed to continue with their studies. While of course I am not allowed to adjudicate on my own candidates, I do understand that it can be harrowing for them to appear before a panel to defend their work and try to prepare them in advance by listening to their presentations and questioning them on their submissions.

8   Supporting candidates through completion and final examination

Like many other doctoral candidates, I found producing the thesis one of the most difficult things that I have ever done, in large part because I didn't really understand what I was supposed to be doing and my supervisor failed to enlighten me. So, it was a case of trial and error and it took twice as long to complete my thesis as I had planned.

For my own candidates who are starting this process, I devote an entire supervision to going through what Taylor et al (2018) have identified as the key questions, namely: What is your case or argument? (thesis); What do you need to write to make that case or argument? (content); How can you organize your material to express this coherently? (structure); How much should you write in each part? (weighting); what style of writing should you use? (presentation); and 'Who are you writing for? (the examiners). For the last, to make them aware I give them a synthesis of the criteria used by examiners in judging theses derived from Golding et al (2013)

Once a full draft of the submission has been produced, candidates want to know whether, in your view, it will pass. When I became a principal supervisor and my student presented a final draft, I was concerned about advising her whether to submit. But I asked a colleague who was a very experienced examiner and he helped me to evaluate the draft. I thought that he would have been much tougher than me, but in fact he was less critical. Now that I have supervised

candidates to completion and examined myself, I know that this was because my expectations were sky-high while his were more realistic.

Once approved, the next step is the viva voce. While my candidates have had experience of being questioned by progress panels, many of them still see the viva as a huge hurdle, which has been confirmed by the literature (see, for example, Watts 2011). In order to prepare my candidates, I ask them if they would like to have a mock viva and if so then arrange for colleagues to read parts of the thesis, question them, and then give them feedback on how well or otherwise they responded. This has proved very valuable for candidates, particularly for international candidates in terms of reassuring them that they are being examined primarily on the content of their thesis, and not their command of the English language.

Of my five completions, four gained their doctorates with minor corrections (typos) but one had major corrections. He was the first student to whom I had acted as principal supervisor. Against my advice and that of my co-supervisor, he had declined to write a separate methodology chapter in favour of dealing with relevant matters and issues at what he saw as the appropriate points in the thesis. Unfortunately for him, his examiners felt that for the sake of coherence he needed to pull the methodological material into a single chapter and re-write and re-submit. With the benefit of hindsight, I could have advised him better. So now, while I do not wholly discourage candidates from making unorthodox submissions, I do spell out the risks more clearly.

9   Supporting candidates to disseminate their research

Wherever possible, I think that candidates should publish during their studies because it supports the development of their academic writing, helps to motivate them, and impresses examiners. So, right at the start, I say to them that they should try to publish their work, and I encourage them to go on courses put on by the Centre for Academic and Researcher Development on 'getting yourself published'.

Not all candidates can or do publish during their studies or, in some cases, even after they have gained the degree; their dissertations can end up, to quote a supervisor cited by Walker

et al (2008: 79) '…like John Brown [to] lie mouldering in their literary graves'. As there is no point in doing research and keeping it secret, I try to agree a publications plan with all of my doctoral graduates to make sure that their research is disseminated to the subject community.

Both for candidates seeking to publish during their studies, and those who have completed them, I suggest appropriate journals and, where appropriate, write joint papers. In such cases, I am very conscious of the need to ensure that the order of authors reflects their contributions to the study (see McFarlane 2015), so if the student or doctoral graduate has done most of the work his or her name goes first.

I am proud to say that, in all, my research candidates have published two books and over 20 papers, of which I have been the co-author of 11. This represents a significant contribution both to the subject and to my and my department's research output.

10   Reflecting upon and enhancing practice

Supervisors at Barchester are required to complete an initial professional development programme and to act as second supervisors for one student cycle before becoming principal supervisors. Once confirmed, principal supervisors are required to attend an updating workshop at least once every three years.

At the start of my career I attended the initial half-day programme, which was mainly devoted to understanding the university's rules and regulations relating to research degrees. This was helpful in alerting me to the regulatory environment at Barchester – which was different to that in Uttoxeter. But it was ultimately disappointing because there was so little on the pedagogy and practice of supervision, an experience which does not seem uncommon (see Feather and McDermott 2014).

This might have been less of a problem if, when I became a second supervisor, my experienced colleague had properly mentored me but, as noted above, our relationship was often conflictual and I learned relatively little.

Overall, I felt very much that I had been left to muddle through, and one of the consequences of that was an initially overly-directive style of supervision. But, as noted above, I soon learned that there was a need to vary my style in accordance with the different needs of my student, and I determined to learn more. To find out more, I then attended an external workshop on the pedagogy of supervision and found out more about research on the relationships between styles and needs (see Lee 2012) and, moreover, how these should vary over the course of a research degree cycle (Gurr 2001). When I returned to Barchester, I suggested to the colleagues in the Centre for Academic and Researcher Development that this should be included in the supervisor development programme, and this has been done.

'Muddling through' also extended to supporting candidates to complete on time; most did so off their own bat but a couple sometimes seem to lose the plot and achieved very little for long periods of time. Supporting timely completion was actually a topic which was considered on an updating course I attended, which introduced me to the work of Ahern and Manthunga (2004) on 'clutch-starting stalled research candidates'. I found their classification of the causes of stalling into the cognitive, affective, and social domains useful both in understanding why candidates were under-achieving and in deciding how to support them to progress. In particular, this led me to change my strategy with one of my candidates whom I had thought to be simply idle but realised that the problem was actually lack of self-esteem – what Kearns (2015) has called imposter syndrome – and that the solution lay in boosting her confidence. This proved effective and, while she went over time, she got there in the end.

As with my teaching, I evaluate supervision through a combination of self-evaluation and the Lee and Mackenzie (2011) questionnaire. For the latter, I devote one supervision per year to going through the items with the student and my co-supervisor just to make sure that we are all happy and on track.

In 2017 my candidates nominated me for a university's award for excellence in doctoral supervision. I was particularly humbled by their testimonies. Extracts include:

> 'Dr Other always went the extra mile to support me to successfully complete my thesis on time, to co-publish with me while I was a student, and to learn to teach. He was a

brilliant role model who motivated me to become an academic and it is in no small part to him that I owe my success in gaining an academic post'.

'I became pregnant during my doctoral studies. Dr Other was very understanding and supportive throughout the pregnancy and the first year of my baby's life. He very strongly encouraged me to come back and complete my studies and arranged for me to transfer to part-time status. He scheduled supervisions for the evenings and weekends when my partner could look after the baby. When I was tired and flagging and ready to give up, he always had faith that I would get there in the end. I did, thanks to his support.'

'When I came to Barchester from China, I had little idea of what was involved in research. Dr Other discussed many potential topics with me and showed me how to evaluate them until I came up with a good one. He helped me to design the study and then taught me how to work independently. At the end, he helped me to improve my writing and to prepare for my viva. His support was vital in helping me to gain my doctorate, and he has continued to collaborate with me after my return to Bejing'

I am pleased to say that I won the award. As a result of that, I was asked by my department to talk about my supervision at the research away day, and my talk went down well with both colleagues new to supervision and experienced ones, so much so that I have been asked to repeat it for the faculty and interest has been expressed by the Institute of Widgetology in a national workshop.

It has been a long journey from research student to novice supervisor to experienced supervisor to award winner, but an extremely worthwhile one; next to producing my own research, I find that supervising others to do the same is the most rewarding part of being an academic.

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