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Online Supervisor Compliance Training

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Abstract: Supervisor training for postgraduate research candidates has been recognised as a priority area by the Australian Government and institutional quality auditing agencies for many years. The need for increased Doctoral completions to help bolster the academic workforce is well documented, as is the influence of effective supervision for timely completions. More discussions need to be had about delivering effective supervisor training, and also distinguishing between training for supervisor compliance and training for supervisor best practice.

Introduction

Universities have a responsibility to ensure that all postgraduate research candidates are provided with a rich intellectual and academic environment to help them complete their doctoral studies. A key element of this environment is supervisor excellence, which is an important predictor of timely and successful doctoral completions. What approach do universities take to ensure excellence in supervision? All universities in Australia are bound by the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007),* which sets out responsibilities for institutions, researchers, supervisors and research trainees.

However, training for postgraduate research supervisors is quite disparate across Australian universities. Some universities have supervisor registers, which monitor qualifications, research output, supervisor completions and training, which determine whether the supervisor is eligible to supervise postgraduate researchers. While all universities engage in supervisor training at some level, the extent to which they address issues of policy compliance or supervisory practice may vary in detail from describing rules, policies, guidelines and forms, through to managing the supervisor-candidate relationship, giving timely feedback and dealing with difficulties.

While both supervisor policy and practice are not unrelated, it could be argued that good supervisory practice is not possible without firstly undertaking supervisor compliance training to understand required rules, policies, guidelines, forms, milestones, responsibilities and available resources. Similarly, supervisory policy is developed to address the quality of individual supervision as well as requirements for monitoring and reporting quality.

Given that compliance training is a legal requirement in Australia, what designates the best median for delivering supervisor compliance training? This paper explores the role of compliance training within a broader supervisory educative framework. Appropriate pedagogical models are discussed in terms of a case study to identify benefits and limitations of both online and face-to-face delivery of supervisor compliance training.

Background

In Australia, the Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, guides universities and researchers in responsible research practices. The Code promotes research integrity and explains what is expected from institutions, researchers and trainees. Section 3 of the Code "*Supervision of research trainees*" outlines supervisor responsibilities, which includes:
- Understanding what support services, resources and training are available to support research trainees within their School, Research Center, Faculty, Graduate Research School, Library and other university support centers;
- Mentoring research trainees;

- Understanding university rules, policies, guidelines and forms required for each phase of the postgraduate research journey, and be able to advise the research trainee to complete these in a timely fashion;
- Providing oversight of valid and accurate research outcomes from research trainees that are under their supervision; and
- Ensuring research trainees receive appropriate credit for their work.

At Edith Cowan University, these training requirements have been packaged into a supervisor compliance-training course, and traditionally, have been delivered through three-hour face-to-face training sessions. However, is face-to-face training the best manner of delivering compliance training?

Supervision Pedagogy

The question remains as to what is an appropriate model for compliance training. As the name suggests compliance training focuses on specific requirements rather than theories or multiple perspectives. A training focus would suggest a limited range of outcomes compared to those of broader education. The concept of learning itself can be a frustratingly intangible concept. While any attempt to categorise learning theory is potentially reductive it is useful to view the field in terms of three broad schools of thought. Learning can be seen as a behavioural process (eg Skinner, 1974), a cognitive one (eg Ausubel, 1968), or as an individualised process of construction within a social and cultural framework (eg Vygotsky, 1978). If one were to cast compliance training outcomes in the light of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1953), it would appear that they fit firmly within the bounds of lower order thinking. The concept of compliance is cast firmly in notions of *knowledge* of procedures, *comprehension* of the underlying concepts and *application* of those procedures within a university setting. Since the procedures are received rather than developed by the trainee, the role of analysis, synthesis and evaluation are very minor. Indeed, it is not for the supervisor to develop their own procedures but to follow existing ones explicitly.

Such an objectified and behavioural approach may seem somewhat out of step with contemporary learning approaches which value the inherent complexity of most domains of learning. Constructivist approaches are most closely aligned with acknowledging multiple perspectives while more traditional approaches focus on extinction of errors (Hannafin & Rieber, 1989). Since compliance training is bound by rules, the underlying epistemology is inherently objective. While most would argue that all learning is constructivist in that the learner is active in developing their own understandings, compliance requires a single learned response to a given circumstance and the extinction of errors is a desirable goal.

Online Delivery of Training

The objectivist argument is carried forward through to the instructional model that underpins the learning strategy. Compliance requires trainees to follow a set of procedures in the management of Research and Higher Degree students. These procedures relate to key stages such as candidature, proposal reviews, rules for progression and so on. Therefore the strategy is an information-based one leading to knowledge outcomes. Online delivery was selected as the primary method for this.

In his seminal article 'Media Will Never Influence Learning' Clark (1994), argued that instructional media had no more bearing on the quality of educational outcomes than a grocery truck did on the groceries that it was delivering. The implication is that the instructional strategy is more important than the medium used, however this paper argues that the medium does in fact play an important role. In this particular case, the use of online delivery has inherent value. The online medium can be updated as policies change, ensuring ongoing quality. Similarly the online environment provides opportunities for rich media in the forms of video case studies, examples and so on.

It should be noted that research supervisors engage with compliance training as a requirement of registration. The apparent paucity in terms of learning strategy can be more than countered by the flexibility and efficiency of online delivery as well as its potential to act as a live repository of up to date resources. Such content-oriented environments can be disparagingly referred to as 'shovelware'. The reality is, however, that a shovel is an effective tool when the purpose is to transfer a large amount of material quickly.

Online Course for Supervisor Compliance Training

The content-oriented nature of online learning is evident in the Supervisor Compliance Training environment at ECU. The environment is highly structured, allowing trainee supervisors to access policy information and supporting documentation as evidenced in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Online Supervisor Compliance Training Modules

Module 1: Supervision: Performance, Rules and Support
This module covers

- Supervisor performance and research environment data, including: ECU PhD Cohort analysis, ECU Predictive Model of Success for HDR students (1992-2009), Supervisor League tables, National Benchmarking of PhD completion rates, Postgraduate Research Evaluation Questionnaire results, and funding issues related to HDR students at ECU
- A discussion of supervisor compliance rules and register aligned to the Australian Code for The Responsible Conduct of Research. Includes all relevant rules, policies, guidelines and templates needed for supervision at ECU, including the new supervisor policy ratified in Feb 2010
- New policies and GRS initiatives related to HDR such as online training and e-books, Research Commons, GRIP, ESL training, Three Minute Thesis (3MT), Supervisor Register, SOAR centre, Honours policy, online progress reports etc
- Resources, services and support available for supervisors and HDR candidates - central, faculty, research centres, school and GRS-based

Module 2: The Process of Supervision
The Process of Supervision describes a model for HDR supervision, including feasibility and risk assessment, contract, design, developing and finalising the thesis. It focuses on key aspects of mentoring HDR candidates: tracking and evaluating the progress, managing the relationship, conflict resolution strategies and resources, career planning, giving feedback, equity and culture issues and handling remote candidates. There is also an explanation of key milestones aligned to the HDR journey, such as responsibilities, processes and forms required for effective supervision. These include confirmation of candidature, progress reports, assessment, examiners, good practice etc

Figure 2: Documents and Resources

ECU Rules, Policies, Guidelines & Forms
Outlines university rules, policies, guidelines and forms that are necessary for supervising ECU Higher Degree by Research students.

ECU Services & Support
Lists resources and support services available to Higher Degree by Research and Honours students available at ECU. Supervisors may refer students to these people, programs, and research training programs to help meet students' particular research needs.

Templates & Checklists
Provides templates and checklist to help with the development of students' research skills, especially with regard to developing a research topic, organising a research proposal, and writing throughout candidature. It also has some information for supervisors on how to help manage the relationship

Links to Supervisor Resources
A collection of websites to aid in supervisor training and development

Bibliography of Research Publications about Supervision of HDR Candidates
A collection of articles and abstracts pertaining to the supervision of HDR candidates

The content is modelled authentically on the process of supervision (Figure 3). Articulating this process explicitly provides an advance organiser for trainees as well as an opportunity to address just-in-time learning needs for specific information. The process of supervision follows a project management methodology with the following phases:

- Feasibility and Risk Assessment - refers to the process of identifying factors that may affect a candidate's chances of successfully completing their studies. Issues considered include entry qualifications, language, supervisor expertise, financial status, enrolment mode and institutional factors;
- The Contract - deals with outlining expectations, as well establishing the Supervisor-Candidate relationship. Issues include setting expectations, first interview checklist, and learning plan;
- The Design phase – developing the research proposal and confirmation of candidature. This is a critical phase in the process as this is here where most of the major decisions regarding the research topic take place. The candidate is on probation until candidature is confirmed and the research proposal accepted;
- The Development phase – where most of the research is undertaken, and candidates are busy with writing, collecting and analyzing data, and publishing;
- Finalise – wrapping up the chapters into a coherent thesis, and identifying examiners; and
- Other aspects of the model that are always active include mentoring the candidate, managing the relationship, and tracking/evaluating progress.

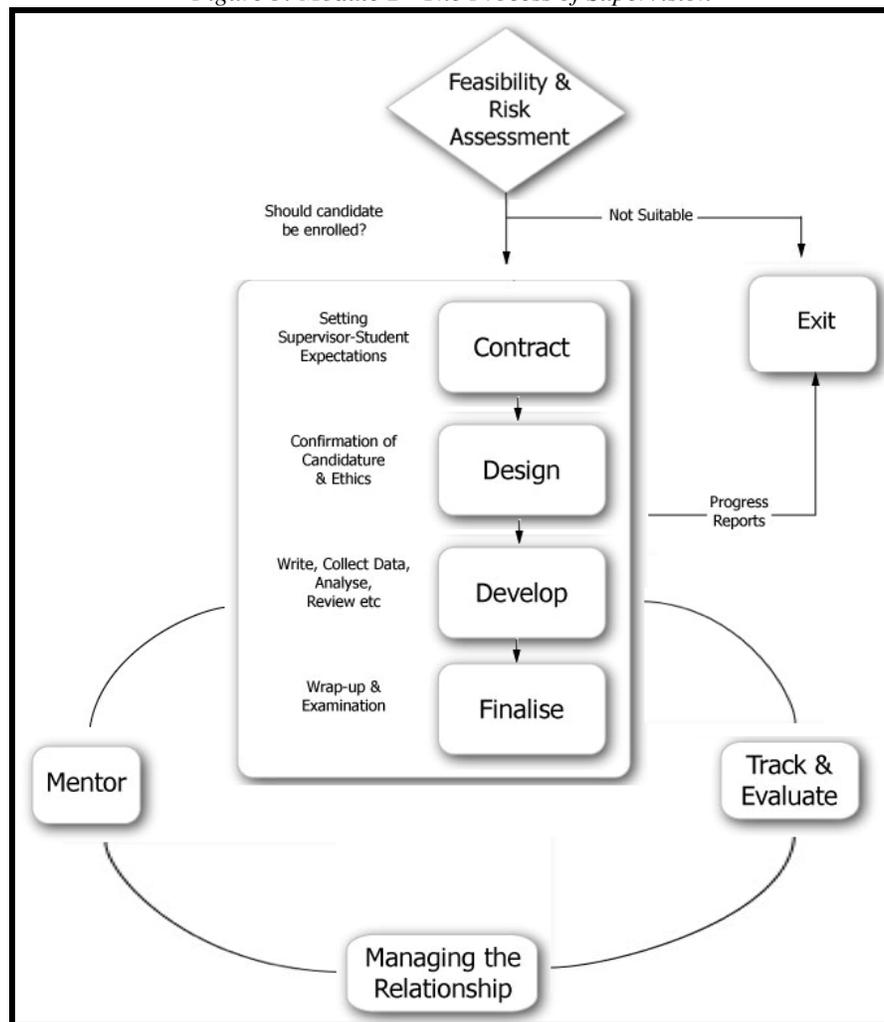*Figure 3: Module 2 - The Process of Supervision*

Figure 4 demonstrates how the environment can be resourced with rich media to supplement policy information. It should be noted that the purpose is not to open up debate about issues (in this case, the role of student contracts) but to reinforce the learning with distinctive forms of information that enhance urgency and promote ownership of the concepts with the trainee supervisors.

Figure 4: Module 2 - The Process of Supervision: Setting Supervisor-Student Expectations

The Supervisor Training Forums provide an opportunity for learners to engage with the course content on a personal level (Figure 5). The purpose is not to open up the learning to debate at an epistemological level but to provide opportunities for specific cases to be discussed as well as obtain valuable feedback from trainees, addressing content that may not be clear or issues relating to course delivery.

Figure 5: Supervisor Training Forums

Assessment tasks are compulsory, and assessed by an external assessor. The tasks take the form of a simple knowledge based test, and have been designed to test knowledge and information required for supervisor compliance. Sample questions from the assessment include:

- Read the supervisor policy and describe three key elements that are stated in the policy. For each element, refer to the policy item number and discuss how it will affect your supervisory practice.
- New HDR candidates require induction/orientation to ECU culture, policies, process and resources. This is done through the Graduate Research Induction Program (GRIP). For each of the 7 modules in GRIP, outline (under each heading) resources and information you would expect your new HDR candidates to be aware of, and access.
- Outline 5 key discipline/faculty specific resources, support services or training services that you would like your student to be aware of

- The 'Templates and Checklists' section within 'Documents' on the BlackBoard site has a variety of useful templates and resources. Select 5 documents and discuss how you would make use of these with your candidate.

Conclusions

Media may only influence learning to the extent that a truck can affect the quality of the groceries it delivers but there are tangible differences between one truck and another. A quality truck is capable of delivering a wide variety of foodstuffs without spoiling. This is the philosophy behind research supervision compliance training at ECU. The online delivery model is consciously information driven, and the outcomes tied explicitly to lower order thinking.

Ultimately a supervisor requires timely information and an opportunity to check their understandings of that information against established norms. Where information is aligned to key stages of a formal process, such materials reinforce the approach to quality inherent in the system itself and reflect the values embedded in the supervision process. In a culture where research compliance training is often seen as an imposition on time poor academics that is addressed by occasional seminar presentations, the online research supervision compliance-training module presented here represents significant development. Its structured information-based approach to delivery, matched and formal mechanisms to assess lower order outcomes provide for instructional delivery that meets the logistical requirements of supervision training in a manner that is objective and efficient.

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