

Feedback in Postgraduate Supervisory Communication: An Insight From Educators

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ABSTRACT

Postgraduate supervision is one of the most complex forms of teaching in higher education. Given the high rate of failure to complete postgraduate research, the quality of the research supervision has been questioned and some determinant factors leading to this undesirable outcome have been proposed like student's expectations of the supervisor, supervisors' insufficient knowledge, lack of interest in students' work, and unsatisfactory ways of delivering feedback to the students' work. Based on our experience as research supervisors and supervisees, we consider feedback significant in creating effective working relationship between the research supervisor and supervisee and supports successful completion of the research program. Different studies have investigated to what extent the supervisor's feedback can be more effective in improving student's performance and the type of feedback the students need. However, few studies have looked at how and why feedback is given as a supportive activity for students' learning and development. This paper specifically focuses on how effective working communication between the research student and the supervisor can be achieved through the way feedback is given to the supervisee and how the student receives the feedback. The study concludes that the supervisors' ability and the supervisee's readiness to be open to criticism to provide and receive constructive feedback in a balanced way should lead to desirable academic outcomes in the academic context.

Keywords: postgraduate supervision, constructive feedback, feedback strategies, working communication

INTRODUCTION

In most research universities, students who pursue postgraduate degrees usually do a research study under the supervision of one or more faculty members. The Economic and Social Research Council in UK ESRC (1991) has regarded the supervision process as the single most important variable affecting the success of the research process. Armstrong (2004) describes it as the most complex and subtle form of teaching in which academics engage. Connell (1985 P38) describes research supervision as "the most advanced level of teaching and one of the most complex and problematic". The role of supervisor is to guide the research student throughout their study, provide the time, expertise and support to foster the candidate's research skills and attitude and to ensure the production of a research of acceptable standard (Heath, 2002). The results of surveys about postgraduate supervision quality showed low completion rates and levels of student's satisfaction with the guidance provided and unsatisfactory delays in receiving feedback about written drafts and progress. Researches pointed out that this indicates not an ideal situation and inadequacy in the monitoring of higher degree student progress (Gurr, 2001; Aspland et al, 1999). Armstrong (2004) reported on the high figures of failure of graduate degrees in the social sciences in the UK and North America. Further, his study indicated that a high proportion of those who complete their research degrees take longer time than expected, and students often express dissatisfaction with the research process. These studies reveal numerous concerns for both postgraduate students and supervisors. This paper is structured as follows, Section2 discusses the supervisor- postgraduate student relationship from different points of view in the literature, Section3 presents the importance of giving and receiving feedback between both the supervisor and the research student, Section4 presents best strategies for giving feedback, and finally Section5 concludes the paper.

THE SUPERVISOR- POSTGRADUATE STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

The quality of the supervisor-research student relationship has been discussed in a number of research studies as vital to the success of the research process and student's satisfaction and timely completion of their postgraduate

study (Spear, 2000; Aspland et al, 1999; Armstrong, 2004). Mainhard et al (2009) indicated that good working relationship between supervisors and their PhD or master by research students were associated with good progress and satisfaction. Pearson and Kayrooz (2004) see the domain of research supervisory practice as a facilitative process involving educational tasks and activities that comprise the work of supervision. These studies have identified the need for more awareness of supervision responsibilities, demands and interests of research students. As Zuber-Skerritt and Roch (2004) explained that to identify and communicate the postgraduate supervisor's role and meet the expectations of postgraduate students, there is a need for an in-depth studies of the PhD experience and supervisory pedagogy to overcome some of the problems associated with the supervisor-student relationship. In discussing the characteristics of good research supervisor, Brown and Atkins (1986) suggested a list of supervisory roles and attitudes which include director, facilitator, advisor, guider (suggesting timetable for writing up and giving feedback on progress), manager (checks progress regularly, monitors study, gives systematic feedback, plans work). This paper focuses on particular role of the supervisor which is providing a constructive and timely feed back to the student.

A consensus is developed in the literature around the conceptualization of feedback as a process of communication and dialogue in specific social context (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010). Others have defined it as giving and sharing information in the form of guidance and support as an integral element to foster improvement, development, and understanding of material learned and applied (Sutton, 2009; Gullet, 2010). Gullet has concluded that influential and mutual feedback between peers, which has its focus on development rather than evaluation, is the most important feature during assessment. As argued by many researchers in higher education (Ramsden, 2003; Sutton, 2009; Hattie and Timperly, 2007; Weaver, 2006) effective and high quality feedback is a key element of quality teaching in higher education. In their argument, Row and Wood (2008) noted that feedback is the most powerful factor that affects students' achievement. They also explained the consistent positive effects of feedback on learning and developing student's understanding and skills. They found that undergraduate students value feedback; want to receive feedback that enables them to improve their performance. However, they found, students feel that providing late feedback shows little interest in their work and students want tutors to consider their feelings and point of views when giving feedback. The study found also that feedback was considered unhelpful when it is vague, untimely, or when not enough information was provided to make it useful.

Feedback can be both positive and negative. While giving positive feedback is relatively easy, being a supervisor can involve occasions when it is important to give negative feedback on research or progress in general. Feedback helps research student to become more aware of what s(he) is doing and how to do it, but it is important to realize the way feedback is given. Pearson and Kayrooz (2004) describe introducing any type of evaluative activity or feedback between research students and supervisors as highly problematic for different reasons, such as cordiality of the circumstances and student's fear of negative consequences in a relation featured with difference in power and dependence. They suggested at the same time that providing feedback to students give them the opportunity to reflect on their work, change and modify in order to become more effective. On the other hand, Pearson (1999) argued for the importance of giving feedback to supervisors as well on their practice that will enable them to understand the more subtle features of their practice and what they might improve.

Zhao et al (2007) emphasizes the importance of feedback and that students most satisfied with their supervisors when they receive both regular and constructive meaningful feedback on research and progress towards the degree. Feedback is constructive when it both emphasizes the strength of the student and offers suggestions for improvement in a timely manner. For feedback to be helpful, it needs to be given in a concerned and supportive way and to include both positive and negative observations. It's good to remember that people often dislike feedback if it is negative. The effective supervisor can reduce the stress on the research student by employing certain communication strategies so that student completes the study on time and feel satisfied, while at the same time the supervisor achieves the goals expected from the student.

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Research indicated that to maximize the effect of feedback, attention must be paid to the psychology of giving and receiving feedback (Rae and Cochrane (2008). Mutch (2003 P25) contended that "the giving of feedback on assessed work is a social practice that demands attention to not only the text but also to condition of production, distribution, and reception ". The importance of the way of giving feedback is that student's self-esteem has the potential to be damaged by feedback. This is supported by Weaver's study (2006) on how students vary in their attitudes to receiving feedback. She argued that the way in which comments are worded in a written feedback is ultimately shaped by tutors values, beliefs, and understanding for the nature of the message conveyed. Further, self-esteem is affected by receiving negative or unexpected feedback especially for student with low self-confidence which tends to take all feedback as a judgment of ability. This makes the student feel beaten and may think of leaving the study. Therefore, it is important for the supervisor to have an understanding of each student's needs before providing feedback.

The constructive feedback will be most helpful when used to develop the current performance of the student. If the student remains open minded when receiving this sort of feedback, s (he) will feel more confident in openly discussing research, issues, and challenges with the supervisor and will help break down barriers and encourage productivity. When students perceive feedback as not personal, they will tend more to accept it and being able to integrate it into future work which is a powerful skill that will be of great benefit for the student in the future career life. On the other side if the supervisor be able to receive feedback, this points supervisor's ability to create effective communication with the student. As the most commonly reported difficulties for the research student relate to communication difficulties with supervisor, maintaining good communication strategies can help avoid some of the more distressing situations in which students and supervisors can find themselves. When students feel confident that they can offer feedback without consequences they will feel that supervisor listen to them, value their opinions which increase their confidence and help student to grow in areas of weaknesses. Studies in the nature of the relationship between supervisor and student (Sutton, 2009) affirm the importance for both tutors and students to enter into a meaningful and effective academic dialog through which students can effectively provide feedback by identifying strength and weakness in tutors' practice. He argued that dialog relationship encourages students to compare their own performance with that ideal and enables them to diagnose their own strength and weakness. Through dialog students can receive formative feedback which emphasizes the strengths of student's work and offers suggestions for improvement.

STRATEGIES FOR GIVING FEEDBACK

Certain strategies are important in giving feedback. Supervisor should present his concern objectively not emotionally and without judgment. Focus on the problem not the student. Ask questions and listen to understand what is being said and help student to understand how to improve his/her work. Negative feedback is person focused and could be disappointing instead of encouraging. Positive constructive feedback is problem focused and seeks way to improve performance. In giving feedback, especially when assessing written work the purpose should be clear, vague comments may leave the student confused and not able to know what to do. Supervisors should mention work that is being done well in addition to any series shortcoming that needs to be overcome. In that, supervisor needs to be specific about the errors that were made, what should be done to correct them, and the expected results. Supervisor better listen to student, make sure the student has opportunity to talk about his perspective on this constructive feedback, to ask questions to clarify what the supervisor is talking about and then offer suggestions of corrective action. The student on the other hand should be prepared to receive supervisor's constructive criticism in a positive way. Student should check attitude, recognize that supervisor's feedback is not a personal attack. It should be viewed as part of learning experience. Student should listen carefully to understand the message especially if it appears to be negative and critical, then reflect back the message to the supervisor to clear up any misunderstanding before it becomes more complicated. For this, student may need to clarify the feedback by asking questions. Student is expected to accept praise with appreciation, considering that positive, encouraging feedback is an indicator of a healthy relationship with the supervisor. Then student should use positive feedback as motivator to strengthen what is already being done.

CONCLUSION

Supervision is a complex role especially if it involves supervising postgraduate students. The importance of feedback in the supervisor - research student relationship has been analyzed in different studies that confirmed the effect of constructive feedback on the student that receives it in timely manner. Constructive feedback focuses the strength and weakness of the student research not the student himself. It regularly offers suggestions for improvement and needs to be given in a concerned and supportive way by discussing both positive and negative sides of the student research. For the supervisor to be helpful to the student, there are certain communication strategies that the supervisor may employ to reduce the stress on the research student. It is important that the supervisor be able to listen to the student and help him understand how to improve his/her work. Feedback from the supervisor as comments on a written work should be clear because vagueness leaves the student confused about what to do. It is important that both student and supervisor involve in discussions and provide feedback to each other's. Student is expected to accept praise with appreciation, considering that positive, encouraging feedback is an indicator of a healthy relationship with the supervisor.

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