

Student Perceptions of Research Supervision (SPORS)

Parallel questionnaires for students and supervisors

Introduction

Students and supervisors sometimes have different conceptions of supervision. One may give a higher priority to an element of supervision which the other thinks is relatively unimportant.

Student and supervisor independently fill in parallel questionnaires in which they indicate how they rate 35 items in terms of priority. Together they discuss their responses and clarify differences of opinion. It is hoped that such discussion will both improve communication and bring about a better match between the student's needs and the supervisor's style at each stage of the supervision process.

Please note that neither student nor supervisor is asked to judge the quality of provision of any of these items. These are NOT evaluation instruments.

At the University of Western Australia, these questionnaires have been collected and analysed to gain some insight into the congruence – or lack of it – between supervisors' and students' conceptions of supervision (see [discussion paper](#)). In case Consortium members wish to make similar use of these questionnaires, there is space at the top of the questionnaire for respondents to include appropriate demographic data, which will, of course, be unnecessary if supervisor and student will be the only ones viewing the questionnaires.

SPORS tool

The SPORS tool includes:

[Supervisor questionnaire](#)

[Student questionnaire](#)

[Instructions and information](#)

[Discussion paper](#)

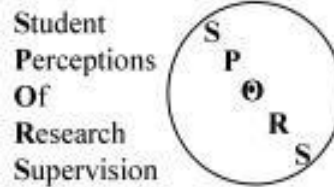
This tool was originally developed by the Centre for Staff Development at the University of Western Australia.

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STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Please fill in the following demographic information

1. NAME: _____
2. DEPARTMENT: _____
3. SUPERVISOR: _____



4. Are you also a member of UWA staff? Yes No
5. Research degree: Honours Masters Ph.D.
6. Student status: Full-time student Part-time student
7. Years enrolled in research degree: ____ yrs ____ mths
8. Your gender: Female Male
9. Your age: _____
10. Your background (for equity research):
 - International fee paying student
 - English is your second language
 - Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander
 - Other (please specify country of birth) _____

Your supervisor(s) will also fill in a similar form to rate current supervision style from 1-5.

You may then exchange questionnaires & organise a time with your supervisor to discuss the relative ratings.

Rate items on IMPORTANCE to the success of your research candidature:

[Note - you are not rating your supervisor]

1=LOW PRIORITY 3=AVERAGE PRIORITY 5=HIGH PRIORITY

I CURRENTLY PREFER A SUPERVISORY STYLE/PRACTICE TO:	low	high
1. Be well informed about the different aspects of research support (e.g., grants & scholarships).	1	2 3 4 5
2. Help me with topic selection.	1	2 3 4 5
3. Relay the extent of support available for research on topic selected, resources and expertise.	1	2 3 4 5
4. Inform me of supervisor's/department's expectations in regard to performance and progress.	1	2 3 4 5
5. Monitor and provide feedback about my performance to ensure adequate progress.	1	2 3 4 5
6. Treat me equitably/fairly in terms of time and effort.	1	2 3 4 5
7. Give me new ideas for research.	1	2 3 4 5
8. Help me to identify important goals.	1	2 3 4 5
9. Provide a lot of detailed supervision (quantity).	1	2 3 4 5
10. Provide pointed/pertinent supervision.	1	2 3 4 5
11. Maintain close regular contact/meetings on a pre-arranged schedule.	1	2 3 4 5
12. Keep records of all meetings and indicate action taken or advice given.	1	2 3 4 5
13. Require written work on a pre-arranged schedule so progress can be assessed regularly.	1	2 3 4 5
14. Be available and easy to approach about any problem.	1	2 3 4 5
15. Give me strong encouragement in my research.	1	2 3 4 5
16. Answer my specific questions.	1	2 3 4 5
17. Have general expertise in supervising research.	1	2 3 4 5
18. Be an expert in my area of research.	1	2 3 4 5
19. Share knowledge with me.	1	2 3 4 5
20. Support me on technical issues and problems.	1	2 3 4 5
21. Be interested in my research project.	1	2 3 4 5
22. Listen to and respect my existing knowledge and skills.	1	2 3 4 5
23. Introduce me to scholarly networks.	1	2 3 4 5
24. Assist me in consulting other people for expertise.	1	2 3 4 5
25. Encourage me to explore issues for myself.	1	2 3 4 5
26. Make available regular discussion groups for both myself and other students.	1	2 3 4 5
27. Encourage me to become interested in areas outside my research topic.	1	2 3 4 5
28. Suggest ways that I can make the most effective use of time.	1	2 3 4 5
29. Give me support and guidance in preparation of my written thesis.	1	2 3 4 5
30. Comment on the content and drafts of my thesis.	1	2 3 4 5
31. Help me to develop academic writing skills.	1	2 3 4 5
32. Assist me to publish my research.	1	2 3 4 5
33. Recognise and develop my intellectual property.	1	2 3 4 5
34. Help me on extra-research issues such as personal life, employment and technical training.	1	2 3 4 5
35. Ensure that I have a project of appropriate size and degree of difficulty.	1	2 3 4 5

PLEASE TURN THE PAGE FOR FURTHER RATINGS AND WRITTEN COMMENTS

This section is a standard rating section of your Department and University.
 You are encouraged to rate and discuss any pertinent issues with your supervisor.
 [Please note - individual results will not be released to departments]

PLEASE RATE:

Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), No Opinion (NO), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA) or Not Applicable (NA).

THE DEPARTMENT:						
36. Provides information about the Department and its staff.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
37. Ensures availability of policy/procedural guidelines for enrolment, proposal, preparation, thesis and submission.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
38. Gave me sufficient time for topic selection.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
39. Provided me with sufficient information and options about possible supervisors or co-supervisors.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
40. Provides strong support for research students.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
41. Ensures adequate resources for the research undertaken (i.e. equipment, space, staff time & travel).	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
42. Has provided me with the opportunity to participate in the Department's intellectual life.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
43. Ensures appropriate opportunities for students to develop skills at presenting their work (e.g., seminars).	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
44. Has provided me with access to issues outside my speciality.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
45. Ensures that students do not feel isolated.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
46. Ensures appropriate opportunities for students to interact and develop intellectual relationships.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA
47. Provides guidelines for dealing with student/supervisor conflicts.	SD	D	NO	A	SA	NA

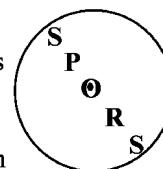
WRITTEN COMMENTS

(If you have any further comments for discussion please write below)

SUPERVISOR QUESTIONNAIRE

1. STAFF: 4. Years teaching: _____
 2. DEPARTMENT: 5. Years supervising: _____
 3. STUDENT: 6. Full-time staff Part-time staff
 7. Gender: Female Male

Student
Perceptions
Of
Research
Supervision



- ⑩ Give a copy of the STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE to your research student(s) to complete.
- ⑩ You may then exchange questionnaires & organise a time with the student(s) to discuss the relative ratings.

Rate your current supervision style:
1=LOW PRIORITY 3=AVERAGE PRIORITY 5=HIGH PRIORITY

(This rating will obviously reflect your style of supervision and your opinion on the importance of the items below, and will likely vary depending upon the discipline and the student being supervised)

MY CURRENT SUPERVISION STYLE AND PRACTICE IS TO:	Low	High
1. Be well informed about the different aspects of research support (e.g. grants & scholarships).	1	2 3 4 5
2. Help the student with topic selection.	1	2 3 4 5
3. Relay to student the extent of support available on topic selected, resources and expertise.	1	2 3 4 5
4. Inform the student of my/department's expectations in regard to performance and progress.	1	2 3 4 5
5. Monitor and provide feedback about the student's performance to ensure adequate progress.	1	2 3 4 5
6. Treat all students equitably/fairly in terms of my time and effort.	1	2 3 4 5
7. Give the student new ideas for his or her research.	1	2 3 4 5
8. Help the student to identify important goals.	1	2 3 4 5
9. Provide a lot of detailed supervision (quantity).	1	2 3 4 5
10. Provide pointed/pertinent supervision.	1	2 3 4 5
11. Maintain close regular contact/meetings on a pre-arranged schedule.	1	2 3 4 5
12. Keep records of all meetings with the student and indicate action taken or advice given.	1	2 3 4 5
13. Require written work on a pre-arranged schedule so progress can be assessed regularly.	1	2 3 4 5
14. Be available and easy to approach about any problem.	1	2 3 4 5
15. Give the student strong encouragement in her or his research.	1	2 3 4 5
16. Answer the student's specific questions.	1	2 3 4 5
17. Have general expertise in supervising research.	1	2 3 4 5
18. Be an expert in the area of research supervised.	1	2 3 4 5
19. Share my knowledge with the student.	1	2 3 4 5
20. Support the student on technical issues and problems.	1	2 3 4 5
21. Be interested in the student's research project.	1	2 3 4 5
22. Listen to and respect the student's existing knowledge and skills.	1	2 3 4 5
23. Introduce the student to scholarly networks.	1	2 3 4 5
24. Assist the student to consult other people for expertise.	1	2 3 4 5
25. Encourage the student to explore issues for herself/himself.	1	2 3 4 5
26. Make available regular discussion groups combining my students and other's students.	1	2 3 4 5
27. Encourage the student to become interested in areas outside her/his research topic.	1	2 3 4 5
28. Suggest ways that the student can make the most effective use of time.	1	2 3 4 5
29. Give the student support and guidance in preparation of his or her written thesis.	1	2 3 4 5
30. Comment on the content and drafts of the thesis.	1	2 3 4 5
31. Help the student to develop academic writing skills.	1	2 3 4 5
32. Assist with publication of the student's research.	1	2 3 4 5
33. Recognise and develop the student's intellectual property.	1	2 3 4 5
34. Help student on extra-research issues e.g., personal life, employment and technical training.	1	2 3 4 5
35. Ensure that the student has a project of appropriate size and degree of difficulty.	1	2 3 4 5

Written Comments

If you have any further comments for discussion, please write below or over the page.

Student Perceptions of Research Supervision (SPORS)

Instructions and information

Objectives

The primary objective of this project, Student Perceptions of Research Supervision (SPORS) is to facilitate discussion between supervisors and their students.

Participation

Participation in the SPORS process should be voluntary for both supervisors and students.

Timing

There is no inappropriate time to use this system – it is recommended for use early in a research candidature and then on an ongoing basis. Students especially may find that their perceptions of what is of highest priority in supervision may change depending on the stage of their candidature.

Questionnaire design

Due to the relatively small numbers of research students per supervisor and the resulting lack of anonymity, the questionnaires have been designed to facilitate a non-threatening dialogue between students and their supervisors.

Students and supervisors are asked to indicate areas of **importance** or **priority**, rather than rate performance as in traditional evaluation surveys.

This should then lead to a meaningful dialogue as students and supervisors compare supervision style preferences.

There are two questionnaires, one for research students and one for supervisors, which are identical except for phrasing of the items.

Supervisors: Depending on your supervision style, you can either fill in a separate questionnaire for each student or use one completed questionnaire for all your supervised students.

Students: It does not matter whether you are a member of staff as well as a student, or whether you are co-supervised or doing interdisciplinary studies based in two departments. If some of the items are not appropriate or you need to fill in two surveys (i.e. for each supervisor or department), modify the system to suit your individual needs.

Treatment of questionnaire information

Copies of the completed questionnaires should be exchanged between supervisors and their students with a time set aside for discussion of the responses. It is suggested that discussion centre around areas of substantial rating differences. If the two responses are '3' and '4', discussion is probably not necessary, but if the responses are '2' and '4', the difference should probably be explored.

Student Perceptions of Research Supervision (SPORS)

Discussion paper

Student and Supervisor Perceptions of Postgraduate Supervision

This paper is a lightly edited version of one presented at the conference “Quality in Postgraduate Research – Is It Happening?”, 18–19 April 1996, Adelaide, by Sally Wijesundera, Owen Hicks and Sarah Mann of the University of Western Australia.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the consonance and dissonance between student and supervisor preferences for different styles of postgraduate supervision.

Late in 1994 the Centre for Staff Development at the University of Western Australia made available on a trial basis a system of paired questionnaires for students and supervisors. The system aims to encourage a non-threatening dialogue between students and supervisors. The questionnaires ask the students to rate their preferred supervision style and the supervisors to rate their current style. A rating of the performance of either the supervisor or the student is not sought. Student and supervisor exchange questionnaires and discuss their responses.

This paper reports on the analysis of 88 paired questionnaires in order to identify patterns of supervision style preference on the part of students, current supervision styles as identified by supervisors, and the correlation between individual student preference and the current style of supervision they appear to be receiving.

Background issues

Findings from research into the problems students experience with postgraduate supervision and the recommendations made from such studies for improving practice suggest that some kind of process for making explicit the different assumptions and expectations that supervisors and students have of the supervisory process is desirable.

Early research in the UK (Welsh, 1979) reported that strategies for making progress in the arts, social sciences and sciences are different, and that some of the main problems students face are those of adjustment, intellectual isolation, loneliness, personal difficulties and lack of appropriate facilities for study. Welsh (1981, 1982) later recommended the importance of matching students’ expectations with those of supervisors in order to deal with these issues.

Research from Australia (Moses, 1984) suggested that 29% of students sampled were dissatisfied with the supervision they were receiving and that there was considerable uncertainty in staff about their role and responsibilities as supervisors. Some of the issues students were concerned about included supervisor neglect, personality clashes, communication barriers such as age, culture and language differences, and personal differences in approach to work. Supervisors, on the other hand, were concerned about the appropriate amount of supervision, topic selection, frequency of meetings, the variety of approaches to supervision, and personal relationships with students.

Moses (1984, 1985) recommended that more communication should be encouraged between students and supervisors, that supervision should be more structured, and that meetings should be more formal.

Powles (1988a) found that although 60% of her sample were satisfied with the supervision they were receiving, the area of greatest dissatisfaction concerned a lack of appropriate guidance in the early stages, particularly with analysis (34%), topic (23%), and design (23%). This dissatisfaction seemed to increase with the number of years of candidature, and if the student was female or part-time. Powles recommended a more structured approach to the research proposal and to the monitoring of the student's progress.

Later research (including AVCC, 1990 and Wright, 1992) was concerned with the issues of lengthy completion rates and student drop-out.

Powles (1989a) suggested that although the factors contributing to drop-out rates seemed to be complex, involving student personal factors and not just university factors alone, those who discontinued were more likely to be dissatisfied with their experience of supervision. In particular, they wanted more guidance and feedback in the early stages and in the writing up phase of the work.

The issue of difference in assumptions and expectations is further highlighted by work such as that of Becher et al (1993) which shows clear linkages between different research epistemologies in the different disciplines and supervisory practice and research education.

Other significant sources of difference include gender (Conrad, 1994), cultural background (Aspland & O'Donoghue, 1994), age and part-time status (Ryan, 1994).

Philips' research (1994) goes beyond identifying factors contributing to possible differences. Her research shows the prevalence of communication breakdown, primarily because of a neglect to make assumptions and expectations explicit. Her main message is that we should not assume that anything is understood. For example, a student may believe that all is progressing well, whereas the supervisor may see the student as incapable of progress without their help.

She suggests that the key to successful supervision is making assumptions and expectations explicit, and checking understanding.

A number of recommendations have been made on how to do this. Powles (1992) suggests that one of a number of strategies for improving students' motivation and experience of research is for: "pre-enrolment briefing or counselling in order to clarify students' expectations about the research process, their own and their supervisors' responsibilities" (p. 40). Ryan (1994) recommends the use of contracts and checklists and McCormack (1994) suggests the need to devote time in the early stage of candidature to exploring the supervisor and student's different expectations as to roles and responsibilities. She proposes using something like Moses' (1992) Rating Scale on Supervisor and Student Roles and Responsibilities as a focus for this, or a supervisory agreement such as the one developed by Graham and Grant (1992).

All of these studies seem to show a problem of a difference of expectation between students and supervisors, and point to the need for more communication between supervisor and student and for more structured approaches to it.

Development of a Student/Supervisor Dialogue System

The Student Perceptions of Research Supervision (SPORS) system was developed primarily to address the lack of a formal, structured approach to supervision feedback and to provide a mechanism for facilitating a dialogue between students and their supervisor(s).

The SPORS system departs from the traditional approach used by student evaluations, where the student is asked to rate their teachers' performance against a list of items. The lack of anonymity of the student providing feedback and the unequal balance of power in the student/supervisor relationship suggested a tool involving direct evaluation of the supervisor's performance risked being unused or unhelpful in providing diagnostic feedback. In the SPORS system, supervisors indicate their current supervision style and compare this to their student's preferred supervision style.

The items chosen represent key practices reported in the literature and suggested by various supervisors and students. The items are ordered in a nominal linear sequence of the supervision process from beginning to end. They focus on issues from gaining scholarships, choosing a research topic, providing feedback, encouragement, expertise, enthusiasm, contacts and guidance, to helping the student write and publish their research.

The ratings indicate student and supervisor priorities on a five-point scale (1 – low, 3 – average, 5 – high). Students are asked to rate items on importance to the success of their research candidature. It is emphasised that they are not rating their supervisor.

Data and analysis

The initial trial of SPORS was conducted at UWA in Semester 1, 1995. The sample consisted of responses from 88 supervisor/student pairs (dyads), rating supervision style priority across 33 style dimensions. The completed forms came from 27 different academic departments.

Four types of analysis were conducted to gather insights into student/supervisor relationships at UWA:

1. Comparisons of the relative priority (on average) assigned to individual items
2. Identification of items with significant differences between supervisors' perceptions of their current supervision style and students' perceptions of the importance of the style dimension to the success of their research
3. Correlations between student and supervisor responses to each item
4. Correlations of student responses with that of their supervisor to the range of items

Results: Comparative item priority

To assess the relative importance of individual items, the average response for supervisors and students was calculated for each item.

Results: Differences in perceptions of current supervisor style versus student preferred style

Confidence intervals were calculated around the average responses for supervisors/students for each item.

The items which supervisors rated as more important than students (10% level of significance) were:

- Help with extra research issues
- Recognise and develop intellectual property
- Assist in consultation with others for expertise
- Listen to and respect existing knowledge and skills
- Encourage responsible time management
- Help develop academic writing skills
- Help with topic selection
- Help negotiate for appropriate examiners
- Give strong encouragement
- Encourage independent exploration of issues
- Give new ideas for research
- Help identify important goals
- Schedule regular meetings
- Answer specific questions
- Enthusiasm about the research project

- Support on technical issues and problems
- Support and guidance in preparation of written thesis
- Provide feedback about performance and progress

The items which students rated as more important than supervisors (10% level of significance) were:

- Run regular discussion groups
- Provide limited but pointed/pertinent supervision
- General expertise in supervising research

Results: Correlations

Computation of the correlation between students and their supervisors was done in two ways. Firstly, the correlation coefficient of student/supervisor responses for each individual item was computed. Secondly, the responses to all 33 items for the individual student/supervisor dyads were correlated.

On 48% of the items there is significant correlation between the responses of students and supervisors.

Within 62% of the dyads there is significant correlation between supervisor style and student's preferred style.

Conclusions

Students and supervisors attach highest priority to supervisors providing counsel in the research and writing of the thesis and support and empathy throughout the process. Counsel includes providing feedback about performance and progress, guidance in preparation of the written thesis and help in identifying important goals. Key aspects of the supervisors' support role include being available and easy to approach about any problem, giving strong encouragement to the student and displaying enthusiasm about the research.

Issues to which students and supervisors attach lowest priority focus on areas outside the main research project. These include encouraging interest in areas outside the research topic, helping with employment, and technical training and process issues (records of meetings, time management advice).

Supervisors rated many items, on average, as more important than students. This may suggest that they have a broader perspective on what is important in research training. For example, supervisors attach significantly greater priority to help with extra-research issues, recognition and development of intellectual property, consultation with other experts, and developing writing skills. Students, on the other hand, rated as more important limited but pointed/pertinent supervision, implying greater focus on the immediate task of completing their research thesis.

Analysis of the dyadic relationships indicates relatively low correlations between student and supervisor scores across all the items for many of the dyads and is cause for some concern. It matters little if there are commonly held views between students and supervisors, as revealed by aggregated scores, if there remains considerable divergence between the views of individual students and their supervisors. There quite often appears to be a mismatch in expectations at the level of individual dyads, suggesting a genuine need for a tool like this to prompt discussion of specific issues.

The dyadic data generated in this study requires further investigation. What could yield interesting findings is a closer analysis of the dyads with obviously low correlations and those with high correlations in student and supervisor opinion. One might assume that the dyads with low correlations indicate difficulties, or at least potential difficulties, while the dyads with high correlations reflect 'healthy' student/supervisor relationships.