



*Research Report*

# Best Practice in Supervisor Feedback to Thesis Students

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### **Publishers:**

Ako Aotearoa –  
The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence  
PO Box 756  
Wellington 6140

### **Published**

December 2011

### **Design and layout:**

Fitzbeck Creative

ISBN: 978-0-473-19648-6

<http://akoaooteaoroa.ac.nz/best-practice-supervisor-feedback>



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# Executive Summary

## Project aims

The primary aim of the project was to investigate what supervisors and thesis students in New Zealand universities identified as best practice in the feedback that is typically given in three main discipline areas: Humanities, Sciences / Mathematics, and Commerce. A subsidiary aim was to see whether or not there are similarities and differences in supervisor and student perspectives within and across disciplines. An additional aim was to identify any differences in the nature and delivery of feedback to speakers of English as a first language (L1) or as an additional language (L2). The final aim of the study was to produce advice on what supervisors and students consider to be best practice in thesis supervision.

*An important type of information provided by feedback is that which helps them understand the expectations of their disciplinary community. It 'conveys implicit messages' about the values and beliefs of the discourse community, the nature of disciplinary knowledge and student identities in the community (Hyland, 2009, p. 132).*

## Methodological approach

The study adopted a multi-method approach to data collection in order to triangulate the self-report data from questionnaire responses and interview comments with evidence of feedback from samples of students' draft texts. Supervisors and students (but not supervisor-supervisee pairs) were sought across three discipline areas (Humanities, Sciences / Mathematics, Commerce) from six New Zealand universities where each of these disciplines is represented. Of the 234 participants sought for the study (180 students – 10 from each of the 3 disciplines at each of the 6 participating university, and 54 supervisors – 3 from each of the 3 disciplines at each university), 35 supervisors and 53 students volunteered to take part in the study. Data were collected from open-ended questionnaires (with separate questionnaires for supervisors and students), follow-up one-to-one interviews with a sub-set of questionnaire respondents, and samples of written feedback provided by supervisors in drafts of a student's thesis. Questionnaire responses were analysed by means of content analysis and the key themes were categorized and, where appropriate, quantified. These findings were then triangulated with interview data and textual evidence of feedback from students' draft texts in order to establish patterns. Further details are provided in the relevant chapters of this report.

*Because different perspectives about what is required or expected sometimes exist between supervisors and students, we would suggest that dialogue between the two parties needs to be established from the very beginning of the supervisory process and maintained throughout.*

## Key findings

Isolating the key findings from a study that produces a wide range of findings can be a subjective task. The findings that we present here as key findings are those from Table 28 that were most frequently mentioned by supervisors and students

in their questionnaire responses and interviews. We are not suggesting a hierarchical ranking in terms of importance.

1. A wide range of beliefs and practices concerning feedback are held by supervisors and these are consistent across the disciplines represented in the study.
2. Best practice was typically explained as that which is most appropriate for an individual student at the time feedback is provided. Such feedback takes into account a range of individual student characteristics (e.g., prior learning background; learning style and preference), and the stage that the thesis has reached. Sometimes there was a mismatch between what supervisors said they believed or practised and what the textual feedback revealed.
3. The content focus of the feedback was generally the same for both L1 and L2 students but sometimes supervisors found it necessary to provide some L2 writers with a greater amount of feedback on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness than was the case with most L1 students.
4. How feedback is communicated varies from supervisor to supervisor. Supervisors tend to select direct and indirect feedback strategies according to the focus of the feedback (the areas referred to).
5. Supervisors and students recognized the fact that the relationship between them needs to be framed as a partnership of equals.
6. From the student perspective, direct or 'to-the-point' feedback is easier to understand and act on. It also needs to offer positive and constructive comments when critiques are given.
7. Written feedback, followed by face-to-face meetings, is useful in allowing discussion to 'flesh out' and clarify points that are made and to help students move forward to the next stage.
8. Methodologically, the study revealed the value of triangulating self-report data as it afforded a glimpse into consistency of viewpoint and provided a more substantive insight into practices that might not be so fully realized with a single data source.

*Students recommended that feedback should be positive, consistent, timely and clear, with a balance between positive and constructive comments and comments that critiqued their work. Students wished to see the supervisor/supervisee relationship to be constructed in terms of a 'partnership of equals' rather than as a 'manager/employee' relationship. They wanted supervisors to demonstrate genuine interest in their work, while at the same time recognizing that ultimately the work was the students' responsibility.*

*Given the importance of feedback on different aspects of writing, we suggest that professional development for supervisors could usefully include workshops to support supervisors in identifying and diagnosing problems in students' writing. Given that supervisors across disciplinary areas had shared perspectives on the features of writing that should be considered in giving feedback, it is suggested that professional development workshops for supervisors do not need to be discipline-specific. Workshops for supervisors from different disciplines could be organised to discuss the types of writing problems students have and how to respond to them.*

# Introduction

## Aims and rationale

The topic of research supervision has attracted considerable interest in the literature to date (Pearson & Brew, 2002; Kamler & Thomson, 2008; Whisker, 2005). At one level, interest has focused on broad policy issues of administration, procedure, finance and completion rates and, at another level, 'practice-oriented research' has focused on gathering information about postgraduate students' experiences to inform guidelines about 'good supervisory practices' (Lee & Green, 1998, p. 2). Within the literature, a number of works written for supervisors (such as, Wisker, 2005; Moses, 1985) examine the process of supervision from beginning to end and discuss a range of issues in supervision. Other works examine specific topics, such as, supporting doctoral students in publishing before completion (Aitchinson, Kamler & Lee, 2010) or the design of professional development programmes for supervisors (Johnston, 1998; Pearson & Brew, 2002).

However, research supervision has been surprisingly under theorised in the literature (Lee & Green, 1998; Wisker, 2005) and it has tended to be vaguely defined as a collection of 'implicit and unexamined processes' (Pearson & Brew, 2002: p. 138). Pearson and Brew (2002) report evidence suggesting that supervisors often base their practices on 'their own often unexamined experiences as a research student' (p. 146) and argue that there is a need for a better understanding of the tasks and activities in which supervisors actually engage. According to Pearson and Brew (op. cit.) an understanding of these tasks and activities could usefully inform the creation of professional development programmes for supervisors. The present report describes a research project investigating one key supervisory task – the provision of feedback on students' drafts of sections and chapters of their theses. Although a range of factors play a role in the successful completion of a research dissertation or thesis, the quality and appropriateness of research supervision is critical, and supervisors' constructive and detailed feedback on written work has been identified as a key characteristic of good research supervision (Engebretson et al., 2008).

Reviewers and researchers have been investigating response to student writing since the early 1980s (for L1, see Brannon & Knoblauch, 1981; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981; Sommers, 1982; and for L2, see Leki, 1990; Zamel, 1985) but most of the investigations have focused on undergraduate student writing. At graduate or postgraduate level, some studies (Bitchener & Banda, 2007; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995,1997; Dong, 1998) have investigated the difficulties that thesis students sometimes encounter (from both student and supervisor perspectives), but little attention has been given to the specific types of response that supervisors give their thesis students and the extent to which students find them helpful. For a number of reasons, it is important that this gap in the literature be investigated. As the following quotations reveal, feedback is particularly important for thesis students because in many respects it replaces the type of instruction other students receive in lecture and classroom approaches.

- Feedback on writing plays a central role in the enculturation of students into disciplinary literacy and epistemologies (Hyland, 2009, p. 132).
- Feedback 'lies at the heart of the learning experience of a PhD student ..... it is through written feedback that the supervisor communicates and provides advanced academic training, particularly in writing, to the supervisee' (Kumar & Stracke, 2007, p. 462).

- The centrality of feedback for student-writers is well established in the literature (Benesch, 2000; Hyatt, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004).
- Effective comments on students' work constitute one of the characteristics of quality teaching (Ramsden, 2003).
- Literature on feedback on undergraduate written genres (such as, essays and library research papers and undergraduate dissertations) shows that feedback on writing from literacy teachers is generally valued by students (Hyland, F. 1998) and appears to lead to improvements in writing (Ferris, 2003).

Given the importance of providing thesis students with feedback, it is therefore equally important that we understand what feedback is provided and how it is provided so that we can reflect on the appropriateness and sufficiency of current practices. From the limited literature available on these areas of interest, it can be seen that a start has been made on examining supervisors' practices and student responses to what they receive. The following section reviews briefly key studies in this area.

### **What kind of information is provided in feedback?**

An important type of information provided by feedback is that which helps them understand the expectations of their disciplinary community. It 'conveys implicit messages' about the values and beliefs of the discourse community, the nature of disciplinary knowledge and student identities in the community (Hyland, 2009, p. 132). For an example of written feedback (from markers) of this kind at doctoral level, see San Migual and Nelson (2007).

Kumar and Stracke (2007) analysed the written feedback on the first complete drafts of a PhD thesis in Applied Linguistics. They construct feedback as a form of communication and draw on the construct of speech functions for analytic categories. Their study investigated the kind of information provided in two distinct forms of feedback, 'in-text feedback comments' (the spontaneous thoughts of the supervisor expressed as though through a dialogue) and 'overall feedback' (a text devised by the supervisor which offers general feedback and summarises main concerns). The study suggested a 9-way classification of feedback comments: referential (editorial, organisation or content); directive (suggestion, question or instruction) and expressive (praise, criticism or opinion). As can be seen, this classification has mixed components. The referential function encompasses potential foci of feedback, whereas sub-categories of the other two functions are what specific speech acts could realise the function. The study found that over half the in-text feedback comments in the draft PhD were referential, around a third were directives, and less than a third were expressives, whereas in the overall feedback nearly 45% of comments were expressives.

Hyatt (2005) also draws on the notion of functional categories in his analysis of feedback on postgraduate writing. The data for this study comprised 60 feedback commentaries on 6000-word assignments written on a masters programme in Education. Hyatt identified six categories of feedback comments: phatic comments that function to establish and maintain good relations; developmental comments to aid the student with subsequent work; structural comments that refer to the organisation of the work; stylistic comments that refer to the use of academic language; methodological comments made on research-based assignments that refer to aspects of research

design or analysis; and administrative comments referring to course-related issues (these are six, not seven). The study found that comments on content, style and development were most frequent, whereas comments in the other categories, such as comments on organisation, were infrequent.

### How is feedback provided?

Research indicates potential problems with how feedback is communicated in higher education. Hyland (2009) notes that although feedback from subject tutors should help students gain an understanding of the cultural context and expectations of the new academic or disciplinary community, it may be given in 'mixed messages' about these expectations as subject tutors are themselves uncertain and feel standards are not absolute (Ivanic et al., 2000). Feedback may lack specific advice on how to improve (Higgins et al., 2001) and may not be communicated clearly enough for students to be able to interpret (Carless, 2006; Chanock, 2000), thus suggesting that an awareness of the 'psychology of giving and receiving feedback is vitally important to student learning' (Carless, 2006, p. 219).

In a wide-scale survey of feedback on writing at doctoral level (social sciences in the USA), Gulfidan (2009) used interviews to derive categories for questionnaire items to investigate students' perceived needs and attitudes to written feedback. This study provided a 12-fold categorisation of aspects of writing students perceived as needs (p. 71). Amongst the latter were: arguments and justifications in my paper; clarity and understandability of the statements; inclusion and exclusion of information; transition and flow between sentences, paragraphs or sections; and formatting (tables, APA style, etc.). The study also investigated preferences for methods of 'receiving feedback': 45% preferred receiving feedback electronically (such as, by track-changes) compared with 17% who preferred hand-written comments, and 37% who had no preference. Among their positive statements for preferences on how feedback should be provided, Gulfidan found the students preferred 'straightforward written feedback', 'feedback that gives me clear instructions for how to revise my paper' and 'detailed, specific comments more than overall, general comments'. Among negative statements for preferences were 'suggestions that are hard to use while revising my paper', 'marks without text (such as, underlined sentences and question marks)' and feedback that 'tries to change my writing style' (pp. 74–5).

Against this background, the present study sought to provide a detailed description of the feedback practices in the New Zealand context.

Two theoretical perspectives were relevant to our investigation. The first concerns genre theory and its focus on the discourse patterning of an academic genre like the thesis (and its component part-genres). The wide range of literature informing this work points to the importance of understanding the discourse requirements and expectations of one's discourse community (Hyland, 1998, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Paltridge, 2001, 2002; Swales, 1981, 1990). The second perspective concerns socio-cultural theory with its focus on the benefits that can accrue from a scaffolding approach to instruction, including explicit instruction and feedback, 'model' text analysis, and supervised draft writing (Dudley-Evans, 1986; Lantolf, 2000; Storch, 2002).

## Methodology

Following Greene and Curucelli's (1997b) argument that '[t]he underlying premise of mixed method inquiry is that each paradigm offers a meaningful and legitimate way of knowing and understanding' (p. 7), a multi-method approach to data collection was considered most appropriate for this study. This was because we wished to examine effective feedback from a range of angles for purposes of triangulation, complementarity and expansion (Greene, Curucelli, & Graham, 1989; Greene & Curucelli, 1997a). This enabled us to provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective feedback seen from a variety of perspectives (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 674) and to present a more valid and reliable account of what appeared to be happening with regard to effective feedback practices.

We drew on a mixed method component design (Greene & Curucelli, 1997a) whereby different instruments were used as discrete aspects of the overall inquiry. Self-report data were used to understand supervisor and student perspectives on feedback given to students during the drafting of the various chapters of their theses. Examining the feedback that was actually given on samples of draft texts that students had written provided a complementary vantage point. Thus, the data informing the findings of the study were obtained from (1) a questionnaire (see Appendices A and B), (2) interview questions that related to three of the key questions asked in the questionnaire, namely, the nature/focus of the feedback provided by supervisors, the ways in which this feedback was provided, and two key pieces of advice that the interviewee would want to impart to a new supervisor (see Appendix C for the interview prompt questions), and (3) a discussion, during the interview, on the feedback provided on samples of students' draft texts.

Participants were drawn from the three discipline areas of six New Zealand universities. Completing a questionnaire were 35 supervisors and 53 students. A much larger number of supervisors and students were invited to take part in the study (see Executive Summary above for detail) but, for a number of reasons, were either unavailable at the time of the data collection or reluctant to participate in the study. The data collection process at each university was coordinated by one person. In each case, it was a supervisor from a Humanities school or department. The completed questionnaires were collected by each coordinator and sent to the research team. Once the responses had been analysed, the interviews were conducted at each university by one of the research team members using the same interview prompt sheet. Participants who agreed to be interviewed (22 supervisors and 22 students) were asked to bring a sample of the feedback they had provided (supervisors) or received (students). For various reasons, not all interviewees were able to bring a sample of this feedback.

Drawing on data from both supervisors and students, elicited from questionnaires, interviews and examples of written work, enabled us to incorporate of 'a *plurality* of interests, voices, and perspectives' (Greene & Curucelli, 1997b, p. 14, emphasis in original) and thereby to 'understand more fully' and 'generate deeper and broader insights' (p. 7) than reliance on a single data source would have allowed. The data analysis process is outlined in detail in the methodology section of Chapter 2 (supervisor perspective) and, where additional steps in this process applied to the analysis of data from students, Chapter 3 (student perspective).

## Report structure

The report has been divided into a further 3 chapters: Chapter 2 presents the supervisor perspective; Chapter 3 the student perspective; and Chapter 4 the conclusion. A list of references and appendices conclude the report.

## Supervisor perspective

In this section, we present (1) an outline of the areas we investigated with respect to the supervisor perspective on feedback provided to thesis students, (2) a detailed account of the methodological approach to data collection and analysis, and (3) a presentation of the findings and discussion for each of the areas outlined in (1).

## Student perspective

In this section, we present (1) an outline of the areas we investigated with respect to the student perspective on feedback provided by thesis supervisors, (2) an account of the methodological approach to data collection and analysis in any respects in which it differed from that reported for the supervisor perspective, and (3) a presentation of the findings and discussion for each of the areas outlined in (1).

## Conclusion

In this section, we (1) summarize what we consider to be the key findings of the study, (2) identify the limitations of this particular study, (3) make recommendations about how the findings of the study might be applied, and (4) suggest areas for further research.

## References

The list of references provides readers with citations of all sources referred to in the report.

## Appendices

Appendix A presents the Supervisor Questionnaire

Appendix B presents the Student Questionnaire

Appendix C presents the Interview Questions

Appendix D presents Examples of Text Analysis

# Supervisor Perspective

## Areas of consideration

As well as identifying the nature/focus of feedback provided and ways in which supervisors present it on their students' draft texts, we were keen to uncover the aims and priorities underpinning the decisions they make, what they expect their students to do with the feedback they are given, how they determine whether or not the feedback is effective, what training they had received before taking on the role of supervisor, what recommendations they would make to those providing supervisory training, and what advice they would offer to new supervisors. In summary, the areas of consideration included:

1. Strengths and weaknesses of students' writing
2. Aims and priorities of supervisor feedback
3. The nature/focus of feedback provided
4. How feedback is provided
5. Expectations and experiences of student response to feedback
6. Determining effectiveness of feedback
7. Supervisory training – nature of training and recommendations
8. Advice for new supervisors

## Method of investigation

The questionnaire responses were analysed first according to the following steps outlined below (*Method for establishing questionnaire/interview response categories*). A sub-set of participants volunteered to be interviewed and this included a discussion of feedback provided on the draft texts of a student's thesis. The interview questions focused on three of the questionnaire areas of consideration: the nature/focus of feedback provided, the ways in which it was provided, and two key pieces of advice they would want to give to a new supervisor. In discussing the interview questions, interviewees were asked to illustrate points they were making from the feedback they had provided on a sample text. The sample text material was analysed after the interviews had been conducted (see *Method for analysing sample text data* provided below). The findings presented in this report are the result of triangulating these three data sources. The aim of the interviews and the sample text feedback discussion was to seek clarification on what had been mentioned in the questionnaire responses, to delve more deeply into the responses that had been given, to uncover evidence of what had been mentioned in the responses, and to see if there were any additional areas of response that came to mind since the questionnaire responses had been written.

### *Method for establishing questionnaire/interview response categories*

Using the pilot student questionnaire responses from the Humanities, as many distinct response categories, as were evident from responses on each questionnaire, were created. These were then combined and rationalised to the fewest response categories possible, for each question, without

blurring responses. This information was then tabulated for each question. Participant codes were used on the tables, indicating discipline area and allocating each participant a number, so that responses could be tracked. In addition, quotes were entered onto the tables alongside the participant code where the participant's responses were considered to be especially enlightening or neatly expressed the key idea of the response category.

All Humanities students' questionnaire responses were then entered into the tables. New categories were added whenever a participant's answer did not fit into any of the categories already designated. Separate, similar sheets for Commerce students' questionnaire responses and Sciences /Mathematics students' questionnaire responses, were set up with the same categories used for Humanities students' responses. Students' responses were entered on the respective sheets for each discipline area. New response categories were added when necessary and the other discipline area sheets were updated with the new response categories. Once all participants' responses had been entered, the number of responses in each category for each question in each discipline area was tallied.

The same procedure was followed for supervisors' questionnaires to establish response categories for each question in the three disciplines areas: Humanities, Commerce, Sciences /Mathematics. Again, the number of responses in each category for each question in each discipline area was tallied.

When a participant's answer to a particular question also clearly answered a different question, or gave more information about another question, that additional information was also entered under the question to which it was relevant. In the case of supervisor questionnaires, this happened commonly for Questions 3 and 9 – both of which dealt with the feedback process – and for Question 5 a–e, where sub-questions were sometimes misunderstood and information pertaining to an aspect of feedback was supplied for one sub-question when it belonged to a different one; for example, an answer pertaining to 'Linguistic Accuracy' (sub-question e) was given under sub-question d, 'Writing Coherence and Cohesion'.

The interviews included questions about (1) the nature or focus of the feedback supervisors said they gave their students, (2) how the feedback was provided and (3) two key pieces of advice the interviewee would want to give to a new supervisor. Responses to the questions asked were coded according to those established for the questionnaire responses. Occasionally some additional categories emerged as a result of new ideas and practices being mentioned in the interviews. Frequency of response was calculated and these findings were compared with those from the questionnaire analyses.

### ***Method for analysing sample text data***

Based on draft scripts received from interviewees, the study sought to identify the areas on which the supervisors gave feedback. The drafts were quite varied. Some were initial or early draft, while others were late or final drafts. Some were relatively short (2 pages) while others were lengthy (up to three chapters in one case). Furthermore, the scripts the interviewees provided were unequally distributed across the three disciplinary areas (21 scripts from Humanities, 6 from Sciences/Mathematics and 5 from Commerce). In light of the varying lengths and the distribution, the data for

this thrust of enquiry comprised four pages from 5 scripts in each disciplinary area (15 scripts in total).

First, the amount of feedback the supervisors had provided was ascertained by identifying and counting the on-script feedback comments. A feedback comment was defined as each instance when a supervisor made a verbal remark or drew a symbol (such as ^ to indicate a missing element) on the script. The feedback comments had been either handwritten or made using a computer track changes function. The remarks varied in length from one or a few words (for example, *are they?*) to multiple sentence constructions, such as the comment shown below:

*Comment (G.R.S.3): Do we need a clear definition or operationalisation of what you mean by SR strategies and their relation to other language learning strategies? Are there strategies that are not SRL? Is all learner strategy research SRL research? Over the next couple of pages, I find myself unsure of whether you are using the terms synonymously. (Humanities)*

Once identified, each feedback comment was examined for the area it targeted. Initially, we used categories from question 3 of the interview for supervisors to classify the target of these comments (content; requirements or expectations for the different parts of the thesis; organisation; writing cohesion and coherence; and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness). However, observations of the feedback comments on the scripts led to some minor modifications. The second category (requirements or expectations for the different parts of the thesis) was expanded to include references to academic conventions, such as APA or correct ways to format Tables). Observation revealed very few on-script comments targeting organisation other than in relation to genre requirements (presumably this area was discussed through other channels, such as oral feedback or discussion prior to the writing of a draft). In the main, on-script feedback comments targeting 'organisation' concerned organisation in relation to coherence. Such comments were thus coded as cohesion/coherence. An example is shown below:

*Things are a bit jumbled in this chapter e.g. you introduced XT in Chapter 1, talk about it in this chapter then have a section entitled 'The XT problem'. We need a bigger picture for this chapter. Tell the reader. (Sciences / Mathematics)*

The classification of foci of feedback comments below was developed for our study. This classification was used to code and quantify the on-script feedback comments.

### **Classification of foci of on-script Feedback Comments:**

Focus	Examples
Content (including arguments and information)	<i>Need a diagram illustrating the hidden terminal problem Lots of words. Could be replaced with an equation (or better have both). (Sciences /Mathematics)</i>
Requirements (including genre expectations and academic conventions including referencing and other APA type concerns)	<i>Literature review or introduction? References? (Humanities)</i>

Cohesion and coherence (including links between and order of information and ideas)	Cohesion: <i>'It' - Unfortunately different referent.</i> Coherence: <i>Things are a bit jumbled in this chapter...</i> (Sciences /Mathematics)
Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness (including surface level language forms and clarity of meaning)	Original: 'information collected during communicating with the interviewees' Correction: <i>collected during the interviews</i>  Original: 'to bring the meaning of messages' Correction: <i>to accurately reflect the meaning</i> (Commerce)

The study also sought to provide a description of the range of ways supervisors formulated their feedback comments. Following Kumar and Stracke (2007), this was a line of enquiry into how supervisors *communicated* with their supervisees on this important issue. In order to do this, we sought to pinpoint the various pragmatic intentions behind supervisor on-script comments. That is, we wanted to be able to show how supervisors typically framed their comments. The concept of 'pragmatic intention' was used to enable us to explore what supervisors were trying to achieve in terms of 'interaction' with the student, such as, asking for information or making a suggestion. We took as a point of departure broad categories of pragmatic intention described in previous research and developed these in line with observations of the Feedback Comments. As a point of departure, we drew on the three-part classification of pragmatic functions (referential – providing information, directive – trying to get the hearer to do something, and expressive – conveying feelings) suggested by Kumar and Stracke (2007) and further sub-categories suggested by Ferris et al. (1997) and categories of elicits (questions) from Tsui (1992). The sub-components for the three major pragmatic functions were largely 'data driven' (based on our observations in the sample scripts).

To illustrate the systems of analysis, examples of the on-script comments from two scripts are shown in Appendix D. The Feedback Comments have been categorised according to the focus of the feedback comment and the way the comment has been framed in terms of pragmatic intention.

### **Findings and discussion**

In this section, we organize the findings and discussion according to the order in which the questionnaire was structured. For each area of consideration, a table of frequencies with which each response was offered by supervisors is provided. Readers are reminded that these frequencies are unsolicited instances of response offered by supervisors. They are not an indication of the extent to which all supervisors advocate or adhere to a particular practice being commented on. Key patterns observed are then highlighted in the accompanying text. For areas that were also asked about in the interviews, additional insights to those provided in the questionnaire responses are discussed. Often, these points of discussion refer to the feedback given on the sample texts.

#### **1. Students' thesis writing strengths**

Supervisors across all disciplines highlighted what they thought were strengths in their students' writing. In particular, the ability to develop a good written argument and the fact that the empirical research undertaken by students was well done were the two most frequently mentioned strengths. Interestingly, the former contradicts the concern of other supervisors who identified the creation of

argument as an area of weakness in Table 2 below. It was an area identified by students who took part in Gulfidan's (2009) study as one on which they want clear feedback, suggesting therefore that it is an area of concern to them. In some of the earlier literature (e.g., Cooley & Lewcowicz, 1995, 1997; Dong, 1998), supervisors reported that their thesis and dissertation students experienced difficulty in developing coherent and cohesive argument across paragraphs and sections. The stage that a student is at in the writing of his/her thesis and the extent to which ideas have been discussed before writing commences may well explain why some supervisors see argument creation as a strength while others see it as a difficulty.

**Table 1: Students' thesis writing strengths according to supervisors**

Strengths	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths(11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Systematic handling of info	2	0	1	3
2. Good written argument	4	4	0	8
3. Respond to feedback	1	1	1	3
4. Contextualize the content	1	0	1	2
5. Good empirical researchers	3	2	1	6
6. Grammar	1	2	0	3
7. Grasp of subject area	2	1	0	3

## **2. Students' thesis writing weaknesses**

Table 2 shows that a range of issues were identified by supervisors as weaknesses in their students' writing: structuring their material so that it is clear and has the desired or warranted rhetorical impact; correct and appropriate expression; and difficulties in the development of an argument and in critically evaluating what they have read and written. Each of these has been identified in the writing difficulties literature (e.g., Cooley & Lewcowicz, 1995, 1997; Dong, 1998). The Sciences/Mathematics and Commerce supervisors were particularly concerned about weaknesses in their students' expression, while Humanities supervisors also mentioned their concern with the amount of literature detail their students were trying to deal with and, not unrelated, with a lack of independent thinking.

**Table 2: Students' thesis writing weaknesses**

Weaknesses	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Structure for clarity & impact	8	7	2	17
2. Omission of key point	1	1	0	2

3. Perspective too small	2	2	0	4
4. Too much literature	4	0	1	5
5. Lack of independent thinking	5	0	2	7
6. Poor management of material	1	0	1	2
7. Argument & critique difficulties	9	3	1	13
8. Faulty grammar/ expression	5	7	4	16
9. Reluctance to submit early drafts	1	0	1	2
10. Lack of conceptual depth	1	0	2	3
11. Theoretical gaps	0	2	2	4
12. Confidence as topic experts	0	1	2	3
13. Methodological issues	2	0	1	3
14. Writer's block	0	2	0	2

### **3. Aims and priorities in providing feedback**

Table 3 shows 16 different responses from supervisors about their aims and priorities in providing feedback to their thesis students. The responses range from the most macro and general (e.g., to achieve the full potential of the student; foster academic excellence and represent the research well) to the most micro (e.g., focusing on clear, accurate and technically appropriate writing). Other categories of response refer to the creation of an encouraging, supportive and respectful environment; helping the student to move his/her work to the next stage so that completion occurs; providing the necessary training and instruction so that the student is able to meet the requirements and expectations of the research and writing processes; providing frank, constructive feedback on drafts of the thesis; and encouraging students to develop a critical assessment of their own work and that of others. Attention is also given to the content presented in the thesis (its accuracy and completeness), the structure and organisation of the content (its rhetorical effectiveness in creating argument), the creation of clear writing and observance of technical conventions.

Considering the overall aims and priorities of supervisors, Table 3 shows that uppermost in their mind appears to be preparing a thesis that does justice to the research that has been conducted, helping students write clearly and appropriately, and ensuring they are able to move forward confidently from where they are at when receiving feedback. For this to occur, a number of supervisors mentioned the need to offer different forms of training or instruction and direction in the structure and organisation of what they have produced and will be producing as they move forward. While there are some differences in frequency of response across the disciplines, these are

not significant. Interesting patterns are the extent to which Humanities supervisors mentioned their focus on helping their students move to the next stage in their work and on helping them create clear expression. Uppermost in the minds of the Sciences / Mathematics supervisors seemed to be the need to ensure that students represented their research well. This was also considered important to a number of Humanities supervisors as well.

**Table 3: Supervisor aims and priorities in providing feedback to thesis students**

Aims/priorities	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. To achieve full potential	5	1	3	9
2. To represent the research well	7	7	2	16
3. To foster academic independence	2	3	4	9
4. To encourage, be supportive, respectful	5	3	0	8
5. To meet the demands of the stage a student is at	10	1	3	14
6. To provide direction for development	3	1	3	7
7. To ensure a completed thesis	2	1	0	3
8. To train in research, problem-solving skills	5	2	4	11
9. To provide frank appraisal	1	1	1	3
10. To check content is accurate and complete	3	5	0	8
11. To develop structure	5	4	1	10
12. To encourage critical thought	5	1	2	8
13. To improve writing	5	6	3	14
14. To help L2 writers with language issues	1	0	0	1
15. To help create clear expression	8	6	1	15
16. To help with technical accuracy	5	3	0	8

Focussing more specifically on the areas of feedback that are apparently considered important by supervisors when providing feedback on their students' written drafts, Tables 4–8 examine these feedback areas in greater detail than the first two questions of the questionnaire that investigated overall aims and priorities.

#### **4. Feedback on content**

Table 4 shows that nearly all supervisors provide feedback on content. This finding was confirmed from the analysis of the on-script feedback comments, which had shown that comments on content was the category seen across the highest number of scripts (14 out of the 15 scripts analysed contained comments on content) with an average of 6.6 comments per script. A similar feedback focus on content has been reported by Kumar and Stracke (2007), Hyatt (2005) and Gulfidan (2009). Across all three disciplines, feedback on gaps in their students' coverage of content is mentioned most frequently in the questionnaire responses but the extent to which this is mentioned is not high in any of the discipline areas. Less than a third of the supervisors in Humanities and Sciences / Mathematics mentioned this as an area of focus and an even smaller proportion of those in Commerce commented on this as an area of focus. However, in the interviews we were able to find out what types of gap were most frequently commented on in the feedback. Across the disciplines and within discipline areas, frequent mention was made of gaps in theoretical understanding and coverage (e.g., identification of 'the main theoretical threads', an 'appropriate range of theoretical perspectives including cross-disciplinary perspectives', and an inability to relate the theoretical frameworks to the research of the thesis). Commenting on the wider significance of the work ('the big picture') and placing a critical focus on what is written were two frequently noted areas in which content feedback was provided by supervisors across the disciplines. Several supervisors said that they 'needed to alert their students to new literature in the field'. Gaps in the justification or explanation of arguments were frequently mentioned by supervisors. Sometimes, supervisors said that 'their students failed to understand some of the key concepts and constructs they were working with' but most often this was only a problem in the early stages of the research and writing process. Not only did supervisors mention the need to address gaps in their students' drafts but that they also had to indicate where content should be edited from the thesis (e.g., if students had 'raided material' from others without acknowledgement or inserted too much unjustified personal opinion). A couple of supervisors said that they provided written and oral feedback on what content areas their students should focus on next. While most supervisors stressed the importance of giving feedback on their students' draft material, several in Humanities were strongly of the opinion that 'major written content feedback is not required if supervisors meet often with their students and discuss the content expectations before their

*Across the disciplines and within discipline areas, frequent mention was made of gaps in theoretical understanding and coverage (e.g., identification of 'the main theoretical threads', an 'appropriate range of theoretical perspectives including cross-disciplinary perspectives', and an inability to relate the theoretical frameworks to the research of the thesis). Commenting on the wider significance of the work ('the big picture') and placing a critical focus on what is written were two frequently noted areas in which content feedback was provided by supervisors across the disciplines.*

students start writing’. This was mentioned particularly with regard to overcoming gaps in theoretical understanding. Had it not been for the follow-up interviews, our understanding of the specific content areas referred to in the feedback would not have been revealed.

**Table 4: The focus of supervisor feedback – content**

Content elements	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Content feedback given	16	10	7	33
2. No content feedback given	0	2	0	2
3. On gaps in literature	6	1	3	10
4. On irrelevance	4	0	3	7
5. On wider significance	1	2	1	4
6. On arguments	1	2	1	4
7. On literature content	2	2	1	5
8. On theory	1	0	2	3

### **5. Feedback on part-genres**

When asked about the extent to which they provided feedback on what they expected or required in the various part-genres of the thesis, it can be seen from Table 5 that many supervisors from across the disciplines referred to the need to give feedback on the structure and organisation of part-genres and that they directed their students to the part-genres of other theses in the field and to guidebooks/handbooks. Mention was made of these feedback areas by supervisors in all disciplines. Again, most supervisors said that they provided feedback on the various part-genres of the thesis. In the interviews, it became clear that content specific to the various part-genres of the thesis was not an area that needed much written feedback if the following steps had been undertaken before students started writing: discuss the requirements and expectations

*In the interviews, it became clear that content specific to the various part-genres of the thesis was not an area that needed much written feedback if the following steps had been undertaken before students started writing: discuss the requirements and expectations first; give outlines of what goes where; show examples of what is expected (e.g., extracts from sample theses).*

first; give outlines of what goes where; show examples of what is expected (e.g., extracts from sample theses). Two supervisors said it was more likely that ‘part-genre feedback would be given to students who were conducting several studies as part of their thesis’. Those who did talk about the need on occasion to provide feedback on part-genre expectations referred mainly to issues with the writing of the methodology and discussion sections. This was particularly the case in Humanities and Commerce. The ‘uniqueness of a particular piece of research’ was usually the reason this was needed.

**Table 5: The focus of supervisor feedback – part-genre requirements/expectations**

Part-genre elements	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths(11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Part-genre feedback given	16	10	7	33
2. No part-genre feedback given	0	1	1	2
3. On structure	5	3	3	11
4. On purpose of part-genre	1	1	2	4
5. On using other samples & handbooks	4	3	1	8
6. On part/whole balance	0	1	0	1

### **6. Feedback on structure and organisation**

Table 6 reveals an overall focus by supervisors within and across disciplines on providing students with feedback on the structure and organisation of their content (also identified in the previous section) so that an argument is successfully developed. Again the interviews gave more insights into the type of feedback that was provided. Creating a logical argument was the overriding concern of those interviewed. Issues concerning the coherence of arguments raised by supervisors in the questionnaires and interviews were borne out by findings from the analysis of on-script feedback comments, as will be explained in the following section. Some mentioned a lack of logic in their students' arguments, poor linking of ideas, an absence of transitions, and a failure to integrate tables and quotations into the argument being presented. The earlier writing difficulties literature (e.g., Cooley & Lewcovicz, 1995, 1997; Dong, 1998) has also reported that coherence and cohesion in argument creation are recurrent difficulties for some thesis-writing students. Other areas of feedback on structure and organisation referred to in the questionnaire responses tended to be only mentioned by one supervisor but most supervisors mentioned that they provided feedback on structure and organisation of content.

*Creating a logical argument was the overriding concern of those interviewed. Issues concerning the coherence of arguments raised by supervisors in the questionnaires and interviews were borne out by findings from the analysis of on-script feedback comments, as will be explained in the following section. Some mentioned a lack of logic in their students' arguments, poor linking of ideas, an absence of transitions, and a failure to integrate tables and quotations into the argument being presented.*

**Table 6: The focus of supervisor feedback – rhetorical structure**

Structure elements	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths(11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Structure feedback given	15	9	7	31
2. No structure feedback given	1	3	0	4
3. On building an argument	5	4	4	13
4. On using other samples	1	0	0	1
5. On hedging	1	0	0	1
6. On quantitative research mainly	0	0	1	1

### **7. Feedback on writing coherence and cohesion**

Table 7 shows that the need to provide feedback on how to effectively link sections of text was highlighted by Humanities supervisors. Other areas of attention were only mentioned by one or two supervisors. Overall, most supervisors confirmed that they did in fact offer feedback on coherence and cohesion even though the frequencies in this table provide little evidence of feedback on coherence. In the interviews, supervisors frequently said that coherence was a problem because ‘there was a lack of clear and sufficient signposting’. Findings from the analysis of on-script feedback comments showed that comments on coherence and cohesion had been provided on 7 out of the 15 scripts with an average of 1.2 comments per script. Others mentioned how contradictions and going off the track interfered with the coherence of a statement or section. One Humanities supervisor said ‘there was a need to focus feedback on individual sentences because the difficulty that my students had in creating a clear argument was the result of the poor linking of individual sentences’. Another supervisor said that he had to deal with ‘sprawling and unpunctuated’ writing and that there was a need to provide detailed reformulations in the feedback. With regard to these issues, the supervisors said there was no real difference between L1 and L2 students. As Gulfidan (2009) found, students tend to be very aware of these difficulties and they expect to receive feedback on how they can improve their clarity and transitions between sentences, paragraphs and sections.

**Table 7: The focus of supervisor feedback – writing coherence & cohesion**

Elements	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Feedback provided	16	10	6	32
2. No feedback provided	0	2	1	3
3. Need section links	5	1	1	7
4. Especially for L2 writers early	1	1	0	2

on				
5. Make it accessible to outsider	1	0	1	2
6. Delete inconsistent ideas	1	0	2	3
7. Poor quality of writing	0	1	2	3

### **8. Feedback on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness**

Of those who responded to the question about whether they gave feedback on linguistic issues, all supervisors reported that they did. In the interviews, however, two supervisors said that they did not consider it their role to provide such feedback. As one said, 'We are not editors'. There was clear evidence from the analysis of on-script feedback comments that supervisors frequently attended to problems in this area. Indeed the highest number of feedback comments observed on the scripts focused on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness, with an average of 15 comments per script and a range of between 5 and 33 comments. A wider range of response was received for areas of feedback given on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. The need to provide feedback on voice and stance was mentioned more often than other areas of focus and this occurred across all discipline groupings. In the interviews, four supervisors mentioned the need to teach their students about hedging. As one supervisor put it, 'huge claims are not hedged in light of the literature'. Speaking of the other possibility as well, another supervisor said the 'interpretation of results from Statistics can be too tentative or strong'. In the questionnaire responses, issues of accuracy were mentioned by many supervisors across the disciplines, with specifics being mentioned about how this feedback was given (proofreading feedback in the form of direct error correction and the provision of reformulations of the erroneous expression). A couple of supervisors said they needed to tell their students not to use such colourful description. In terms of the frequency with which feedback was provided, the interview findings were varied. Some said that they only had to give linguistic feedback in the early and later stages in order to 'set the standard' or 'help the student polish up the writing before examination'. Others, however, said it was a recurrent task even though they did not like doing it. Several said they were happy to provide feedback on stylistic features but not on matters of accuracy. For one supervisor, 'a negotiated space to develop their own style' was considered important.

**Table 8: The focus of supervisor feedback – linguistic accuracy & appropriateness**

Elements	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Linguistic feedback given	15	11	7	33
2. No linguistic feedback given	0	1	1	2
3. On voice & stance	6	4	1	11
4. On style	3	1	0	4

5. Provide reformulations	2	3	1	6
6. Expect student to sort accuracy	3	0	0	3
7. Feedback if persistent & multiple problems	3	0	0	3
8. Micro-correction leads to macro in discussion	1	0	0	1
9. Proofreading is provided	0	3	3	6

### **9. Overview of on-script feedback**

The analysis of on-script feedback comments illustrated the feedback practices the supervisors had described in their questionnaires and interviews. The analysis showed that supervisors provided numerous feedback comments. A total of 351 on-script feedback comments were identified with an average of 25.07 comments per 4-page script (approximately 6 feedback comments per page). The number of comments per script varied from 7 to 46 comments over the four-pages of scripts. The ranges are shown In Table 9.

**Table 9: Number of feedback comments on scripts**

No. Feedback comments	Under 10	11–19	20–29	30–39	Over 40
No. of scripts	2	5	3	0	4

Note: 1 script (Humanities) was 2 pages in length and was not included in the reporting of quantitative results.

The number of feedback comments varied according to disciplinary area with the supervisors in Sciences / Mathematics making the most comments. However, given that the analysis was made on the basis of a partial analysis of 5 scripts (4 scripts in the case of Humanities), this finding should not be generalised. The average numbers of feedback comments by discipline is shown in Table 10.

**Table 10: Number of Feedback Comments in relation to disciplinary area**

Feedback Comments	Humanities	Sciences / Maths	Commerce
Total no.	68	180	103
Average no. per script	17	36	20.6

As discussed above and as shown in Table 11, feedback comments focused a good deal on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness, with an average of 15 linguistic-focused comments per script, far higher than any other category. However, as shown in Table 11 not all scripts contained linguistic-focused Feedback Comments. Supervisors almost invariably commented on content (with content-focused Feedback Comments in 14 of the 15 scripts) and one supervisor had made 12 content-focused comments on one sample part script; comments on ‘requirements’ had been written on most scripts but comments focusing on issues of cohesion/coherence were seen on only around half the scripts.

**Table 11: Range of Feedback Comments according to foci**

Focus of Feedback Comments	No. of scripts	Range across scripts	Average per script
Content	14	2–12	6.6
Requirements	11	1–7	1.77
Cohesion/coherence	7	1–6	1.2
Linguistic accuracy & appropriateness	13	5–33	15

Note: Only 2 comments focusing on organisation were evident and it is expected that this was a topic that supervisors gave feedback on through other channels, such as in face-to-face meetings or global feedback sheets.

### ***10. The feedback system adopted by supervisors***

Several questions in the questionnaire asked supervisors to comment on their feedback system. Question 3 was a general question inviting whatever responses supervisors chose to make about their feedback system. From the 13 different types of response presented in Table 12, four main categories emerge: How the feedback is provided, that is, the mode of delivery (responses 1–4); when the feedback is provided (responses 5–8); the type of feedback provided (responses 9–12); and keeping track of the feedback provided (response 13). While most supervisors reported that they meet with their students to provide feedback, a smaller proportion actually provide handwritten feedback on draft texts, suggesting that most provide both written and oral feedback but that some supervisors only provide oral feedback. These patterns appear to be characteristic of supervisors across the disciplines. Very few supervisors commented on when they provide feedback although it would be assumed that written feedback in most cases precedes oral feedback. With regard to the type of feedback provided, the use of track changes was mentioned more often than other approaches. One would assume that supervisors are using the terms ‘track changes’ and ‘electronic editing’ to mean the same type of feedback. If this is the case, more than half the supervisors mentioned this as part of their feedback system. Some also said that they include a summary sheet as well as in-text feedback. A few supervisors referred to the keeping of records but it would be understood that those who provided electronic feedback also kept records electronically.

**Table 12: The overall feedback system of supervisors**

Characteristics	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Handwrite comments on hardcopy	12	7	5	24
2. Meet to discuss	15	9	7	31
3. Prompt feedback	2	1	0	3
4. Cyclic – draft, correct, meet, revise, draft	2	1	1	4
5. Send comments to students & other supervisors before meeting	1	0	0	1
6. Track changes	6	3	2	11
7. Provide a summary sheet	4	0	2	6
8. Keep records of feedback	1	1	1	3

**11. When feedback is provided and why**

Further information on when feedback is provided by supervisors is revealed in Table 13. The majority of supervisors reported that they provide feedback (1) during early drafts of chapters, (2) on an advanced first draft of chapters and (3) on the near final draft of chapters. Across the discipline areas, this was a common practice. A number of Humanities and Commerce supervisors explained that they also provide feedback on drafts that are written in between the initial and final drafts, but fewer in Sciences and Mathematics mentioned that this was their practice. It is noticeable that Humanities supervisors also give feedback when their students are preparing for their oral examination. For the other discipline areas, this practice was only mentioned by one of 18 supervisors. It is not surprising to hear that timing and frequency of feedback varies according to individual student needs or desires but this was only mentioned by three Humanities supervisors and four Commerce supervisors, and not by supervisors from the other disciplines. Three additional practices were noted by one or two Humanities supervisors but not those from other disciplines.

**Table 13: When feedback is provided and why**

Characteristics	Humanities(17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Early drafts	14	8	7	29
2. Advanced first draft	17	9	6	32
3. Between drafts	11	2	4	17
4. Near final	17	9	6	32

draft				
5. As preparation for oral exam	17	0	1	18
6. Varies among students	3	0	4	7
7. Stage of writing determines feedback	2	0	0	2

## **12. How feedback is provided**

When asked about how they provided feedback, several different types of feedback approach were commented on. With regard to the medium in which the feedback is offered, a high proportion of supervisors said that they provided handwritten hardcopy feedback as well as oral feedback. Nearly all supervisors in Humanities mentioned both approaches, whereas there was a tendency for supervisors in the other disciplines to offer oral feedback a little more than handwritten feedback. Referring specifically to written feedback, slightly more supervisors in Humanities said that they provided handwritten feedback on hardcopies rather than electronically by means of track changes. However, there appeared to be no noticeable difference in this approach by supervisors in the other disciplines. More than half the Humanities supervisors write a summary sheet of feedback points as well as in-text feedback, compared with two in Commerce and none in the Sciences / Mathematics discipline areas. A third approach to feedback mentioned by supervisors was the provision of direct and/or indirect feedback. Although there were only a limited number of supervisors in all discipline areas who mentioned this aspect of their feedback, it is noticeable that no preference for one of the two types was mentioned. When indirect feedback was mentioned, it seems that the same respondents also indicated the manner in which this type of feedback was provided, namely, by the use of underlining, circling, arrows and crossing. Thus, the students were left to determine what the various identifications meant.

**Table 14: How feedback is provided**

Method	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Handwrite comments on hardcopy	15	6	4	25
2. Verbal feedback	16	9	6	31
3. Email dialogue	0	2	1	3
4. Track changes	5	2	3	10
5. Textual correction	10	1	3	14
6. Summary sheet	11	0	2	13
7. Direct	6	1	1	8
8. Indirect	6	1	1	8
9. Underline, circle, cross out, arrows	6	2	0	8

10. Students to take notes from oral feedback	0	2	0	2
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In terms of the track changes and handwritten comments on the scripts, analysis showed that there was a good deal of complexity in the feedback comments. This was seen primarily in the ‘piling’ up of pragmatic functions seen within many feedback comments. Often comments appeared to have multiple (2+) functions. Two examples are shown below. In Example 1, the supervisor appears to use a question (elicit: information – *what is the evidence?*) to ‘lead into’ or ‘lay the ground’ for the second act, (telling - *Quote pretest data*). In Example 2, the supervisor elicits confirmation (*So you’re saying L2 instruction is influenced by L1?*), registers a positive response (*Fine*) and then makes a suggestion (*but perhaps it needs explicit ... stating*) all within the same feedback comment.

Examples:

1. *Yes but what is the evidence for this? Quote pretest data.*

2. *So you’re saying L2 instruction is influenced by L1? Fine, but perhaps it needs explicit ... stating.*

The linguistic-focused comments almost invariably entailed the use of supervisor reformulation. In other words, the supervisors used the ideas the supervisees had tried to express but rephrased them to render them more accurately in terms of grammar and vocabulary, or to make them clearer in meaning or more appropriate in style. Example 3 below shows a supervisor’s reformulation of a weakly expressed phrase by the supervisee.

3. The supervisee had written *to bring the meaning of messages*. This was reformulated by the supervisor as *to accurately reflect the meaning*.

The analysis of on-script comments by the supervisors also showed that they tended to use positive responses as prefaces to critiques, a phenomenon termed ‘sugaring the pill’ in the research literature (Hyland & Hyland, p. 185). Example 4 shows a sweetener (*Nice*) used before the more critical question that follows.

4. *Nice, but is the above really leading to the conclusion?*

To further illustrate the systems of analysis, examples of the on-script comments from two scripts are shown in Appendix A. The Feedback Comments have been categorised according to the focus of the feedback comment and the way the comment has been framed in terms of pragmatic intention.

*The analysis of on-script comments by the supervisors also showed that they tended to use positive responses as prefaces to critiques, a phenomenon termed ‘sugaring the pill’ in the research literature (Hyland & Hyland, p. 185)*

### 13. Feedback meetings

The next question asked supervisors to comment on issues to do with their oral feedback meetings with students. Table 15 shows that virtually all supervisors meet with their students. Responses to this question revealed a range of aims and practices before, during, and after the meetings. Mainly

Sciences / Mathematics supervisors said that it is their practice to read their student’s draft and make notes on it before having a meeting. Given the number of supervisors who said that they meet with their students, one can only assume that meetings are not always convened to provide feedback on written drafts. During the meetings, four different reasons for the meetings were offered: (1) to go through feedback comments that had been provided on a draft, (2) to discuss what the next stage of the research/thesis writing process should be, (3) to talk and listen to what the student wants to say or ask, and (4) to address any omissions or problems with the work that has received feedback. It is clear from Table 15 that not all supervisors mentioned each of these practices. In keeping with the four practices mentioned, three aims were mentioned for having meetings with students: (a) to check their understanding and clarify the feedback that had been given on draft texts, (b) to encourage the student, and (c) to point the way forward. The first of these aims was the one most frequently mentioned by supervisors and this was the case across the discipline areas. A smaller number of supervisors commented on their expectations of their students after the meetings. A few supervisors in Humanities asked their students to submit a summary of the meeting and an action plan for on-going work but this practice was not mentioned by supervisors in any of the other disciplines. An even smaller number of supervisors in two of the discipline areas said that they expected students to resubmit their revised drafts. Additional expectations of supervisors following the provision of written and verbal feedback were elicited with another question that is reported below in Table 17. As we are finding with all supervision practices, those related to meetings vary according to the stage the student is at and their needs and desires.

**Table 15: Feedback meetings**

Characteristics	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Yes I have them	16	10	7	33
2. No I do not have them	1	1	0	2
3. Before: read draft & make notes	3	6	2	11
4. During: go thru comments	7	2	2	11
5. During: set next steps	6	0	3	9
6. During: talk & listen	4	1	3	8
7. During: address omissions, problems	4	2	3	9
8. Aim: encourage	3	1	1	5
9. Aim: move forward	4	0	1	5
10. Check points are understood; clarify feedback	6	7	4	17

11. After: student summarises & emails action plan	4	0	0	4
12. After: expect student to resubmit	2	1	0	3
13. Varies by stage & student	1	1	0	2

#### **14. Factors considered when providing feedback**

When deciding what feedback to provide, when to provide and how to provide, supervisors mentioned that they took into account a range of factors, including the student's educational and cultural background, level of linguistic proficiency, perceived academic competence, and psychological issues (e.g., confidence and anxiety levels). Psychological factors and linguistic proficiency were mentioned more than the other factors. There was little difference in this regard among supervisors across the disciplines. The educational background of a student was also taken into account by a number of supervisors in each discipline area. Although perceived academic competence and cultural background were mentioned as factors for consideration, very few supervisors in all disciplines said that this was a major consideration for them.

*Supervisors should be aware of cultural issues in feedback – for example, cultural background may make a difference to the extent to which students expect 'direct' feedback. Cultural / linguistic background is, then, a factor in influencing the balance of feedback (direct v. indirect) that students find most helpful. However, regardless of background, students appear to appreciate the opportunity to discuss the feedback in subsequent follow-up meetings.*

**Table 16: Factors considered when providing feedback**

Factors	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Education background of student	8	3	3	14
2. Linguistic proficiency	12	6	3	21
3. Psychological factors	14	3	3	20
4. Academic competence	3	3	0	6
5. Cultural background & expectations	1	2	1	4

### **15. Expectations of students' responses to feedback**

As a result of having provided their students with feedback in written or oral form, a number of supervisors mentioned that they then had certain expectations of their students. Of the six expectations presented in Table 17, it can be seen that half or nearly half of the respondents said that they expected their students to address the macro-issues that they had referred to and, assuming the written feedback was discussed in an oral meeting, to seek clarification of any points about which they were unclear from what had been provided in the feedback. Although the majority of these responses came from Humanities supervisors, it is noteworthy that a high proportion of Commerce supervisors also drew our attention to the latter expectation. Several supervisors in the Humanities and Sciences / Mathematics also explained that they expected students to sort out mechanical issues.

**Table 17: Expectations of students' responses to feedback**

Expectations	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Understand and solve macro issues	12	4	1	17
2. Deal with mechanical matters	7	4	0	11
3. Say if feedback is unclear & if disagree with points	5	4	5	14
4. Take notes & agree with meeting decisions	1	1	0	2
5. Resubmit	1	0	1	2
6. Understand that criticism is helpful	1	1	0	2

### **16. Experiences of students' responses to feedback**

The previous question was followed up with a question about the extent to which students met the expectations of their supervisors. As Table 18 reveals, a range of experiences were identified by the supervisors but only a couple of experiences were mentioned by more than a few supervisors, and in these cases the responses tended to relate to the intent of the following question. Not surprisingly, these supervisors said they were able to determine how effective their feedback had been by the extent to which issues referred to were addressed in subsequent drafts. This point was made more often by supervisors in Humanities and in Sciences / Mathematics than by those in the Commerce discipline area. As several Humanities supervisors added, issues were sometimes not successfully addressed in the first redraft.

**Table 18: Experiences of students' responses to feedback**

Experiences	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Takes 2 or more attempts	4	2	1	7
2. Micro-issues continue to annoy	1	2	0	3
3. Subsequent drafts usually reflect response	6	6	1	13
4. Comments often ignored	1	0	1	2
6. Keep students happy	1	1	2	4
7. Should be quick to fix	2	1	1	4
8. Learn from other students	0	0	1	1

**17. How supervisors determine the effectiveness of their feedback**

The supervisors identified six ways in which they said they measured the effectiveness of their feedback. Not surprisingly, the majority of supervisors in all disciplines looked at the next draft from their students to see if the issues identified had been successfully addressed. Several supervisors mentioned that this was preceded by checking the understanding of their students in the oral interviews. Some took a more longitudinal stance and evaluated the effectiveness of their feedback over time. A few, especially in Sciences / Mathematics also looked at the affective response of their students rather than just their verbal response.

**Table 19: Effectiveness of feedback**

Factors	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Issues are addressed in next draft	17	9	5	31
2. Ask students what they think	2	0	1	3
3. Check they understand at meetings	4	5	3	12
4. Look for affective response	1	3	1	5
5. Track overall development	3	2	1	6

### **18. Supervision training**

We were also interested in finding out whether or not supervisors tended to have any form of training before being a supervisor. As can be seen from Table 20, the majority across all disciplines said that they had not received any formal training. Of those who reported having received some training, the most common options were a university course (offered by the university staff professional development centre) or mentoring provided by a more experienced supervisor.

**Table 20: Supervision training**

Provision	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Training received	5	2	1	8
2. No training	12	9	6	27
3. Did university course	3	3	1	7
4. Had workshops	3	0	1	4
5. Mentored by experienced supervisor	2	1	2	5

### **19. Recommended training**

We were interested in finding out what type of training supervisors would recommend if it were to be provided. Approximately half the Humanities supervisors said that they thought new supervisors would find it helpful to have dedicated workshop training and the use of worked examples in such training. Several supervisors in the other discipline areas also made these two suggestions. A small number of supervisors in each discipline area also thought that training from an experienced supervisor would be useful. It was interesting to read that supervisors in the Sciences / Mathematics group wanted training to be discipline-specific. In the interviews, it was explained by several supervisors that the training they had received was not sufficiently discipline-specific. Several supervisors in the first two discipline areas felt that there was no need for any training.

**Table 21: Recommended training**

Recommendations	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Use worked examples	8	3	2	13
2. Provide workshops	7	3	2	12
3. Mentor with co-supervisor	4	2	2	8
4. Provide seminars	2	0	1	3
5. Take part in role plays	2	1	0	3

6. Training to be discipline-centred	1	5	0	6
7. provide online training	2	2	0	4
8. No need for it	2	4	0	6

## 20. Advice for new supervisors

Whether or not supervisors thought that training should be offered, they were keen to make suggestions about the type of advice that could be given to new supervisors. As Table 22 reveals, a wide range of suggestions was made about the things supervisors thought were really important in the supervision relationship. A good range of supervisors said that they believed their role was to identify problems and guide their students about how to address them. However, they did not see it as their role actually to solve the issues. This point was made more often by Humanities and Commerce supervisors. Several supervisors in all discipline areas thought it was important to focus on macro-issues rather than micro-issues and in doing so to provide detailed, specific feedback rather than feedback that was too general or indirect, leaving the student to second guess what was actually being referred to in the feedback comments. Interestingly, only Humanities supervisors thought it sufficiently important not to provide feedback on all the issues they identify at any one time. About half the Commerce supervisors felt it was important that supervisors did not academically dominate the supervisory relationship (e.g., in controlling the direction of the process and in prescribing what must be presented in the thesis).

*A good range of supervisors said that they believed their role was to identify problems and guide their students about how to address them. However, they did not see it as their role actually to solve the issues.*

**Table 22: Advice for new supervisors**

Advice	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
1. Focus on macro	5	1	2	8
2. Identify problems, guide but don't solve	8	1	4	13
3. Provide detailed, specific feedback	4	2	1	7
4. Include positive feedback	5	0	0	5
5. Provide consistent, regular feedback	2	1	0	3
6. Expect an iterative process	2	2	0	4
7. Don't respond to all issues at once	5	0	0	5
8. Expect some trial & error	1	0	0	1

9. Be honest	1	1	0	2
10. Give reasons for feedback	1	0	0	1
11. Do not dominate academically	0	0	3	3
12. Communicate standards & criteria expected	0	0	2	2
13. Be goal orientated	0	0	1	1
14. Don't trust student's judgement	0	1	0	1
15. Be prompt	0	2	0	2
16. Good students deserve best you can offer	1	1	0	2

In the interviews, we also asked the supervisors to tell us what they thought would be the two most important pieces of advice they would give a new supervisor about feedback. A wide range of advice was offered and this has been categorised in Table 23. The advice column presents verbatim quotes from supervisors. It can be seen that some of the advice offered in the questionnaire responses is repeated here. Perhaps the most interesting and arguably most important additional focus provided in the interviews was who should be responsible for the work.

*Advice to new supervisors included making feedback understandable, specific, and constructive. Decide what is appropriate to the level or stage the student is at.*

**Table 23: Two pieces of advice on feedback for new supervisors**

Category	Advice
Overall	Make it understandable, specific, constructive. Be warm, encourage, and advise. Prompt feedback is all important.
How much feedback	Decide what is appropriate to the level or stage the student is at.
When to expect writing from students	Early and weekly in order to prevent fear but make sure these are not high stakes pieces.
Overall approach	Always find something positive to say. Motivate. Take care if you are not meeting the student.
When should you meet	Always be available for discussion. Meet weekly. Meet at least every 3–4 weeks. Meet when the student wants to meet.
Have dialogue	Listen to what your student is saying. It is a two-way process. Adopt a 'let's discuss' approach.
Expectations	Don't expect improvements over night. Improvement in writing is 'an evolution'.

Focus of feedback	Focus on the big picture. Know what your student is capable of. Just do what needs to be done. Point out key problems early on.
Responsibility	The student is responsible for the work. Students must maintain ownership of the work. Give suggestions only but with reasons. Don't impose ('leave your ego behind'). Negotiate and do not talk at the student. Discourage dependency. Be clear about what you expect. Challenge the student to be critical and take ownership. Keep an eye on the thesis as a whole.
The direct or indirect approach	Depends on the relationship. Be direct on content and don't confuse with subtle hints. Pose lots of questions. Tailor to suit because no approach suits all.

## Student Perspective

### Areas of consideration

To ensure that the student perspective on effective supervisor feedback was incorporated into the study, students across the three disciplines of Humanities, Sciences / Mathematics and Commerce were invited to take part. The areas of consideration, from the student perspective, were:

1. Benefits of feedback
2. Feedback priorities
3. How feedback is provided
4. Additional feedback wanted
5. Advice for new supervisors

### Method of investigation

Data collection methods were similar to those used with supervisors. Across all three disciplines 53 students completed questionnaires, and a subset of 22 was subsequently interviewed. As with the questionnaires for supervisors, questions were open-ended to give participants the opportunity to report what they considered to be relevant, and frequencies reported in tables refer to occurrences in which a particular point was offered without solicitation. The questionnaires elicited data relevant to all five areas of consideration, whereas the interviews focused specifically on areas 2, 3 and 5. Thus, similar instruments were used with the students to those used with supervisors, although the questions were different. Analysis of responses was carried out in the same way across both supervisor and student data. Interviewed students were also asked to provide a sample of written feedback they had recently received on a piece of their writing. In cases where feedback was provided, it was discussed with the student as part of the interview (text analysis of feedback comments has been recorded in the section pertaining to supervisors).

## Findings and discussion

### 1. Benefits of providing feedback

Several questions on the questionnaire were designed to elicit from students their perceptions about what they considered to be the most useful benefits of written feedback for them. Table 24 presents the most commonly identified benefits of receiving written feedback.

**Table 24: Identified benefits of feedback**

Identified benefits	Humanities (34)	Sciences / Maths (4)	Commerce (15)	Total (53)
Helps with appropriate language	14	1	3	18
Keeping the student 'on track'	12	0	4	16
Helps to improve the content	8	0	5	13
Encouragement and motivation	7	0	3	10
Logical organisation	6	0	0	6

It is immediately apparent that written feedback appeared to be viewed as being considerably more useful to humanities students than to Sciences / mathematics students, who seemed to perceive no benefit to written feedback, at least as identified through responses to the questionnaire. This is not to suggest that Sciences / mathematics students did not receive written feedback. Rather it suggests that Sciences / mathematics students did not seem to have considered the benefits of particular types of written feedback in ways that were clearly important to humanities students.

It was evident that, considered across all three discipline areas, the primary concern of students was to receive written feedback on the *quality* and *choice* of language, with a secondary consideration being that feedback helped them to keep moving in the 'right direction' with their writing. Linguistic appropriateness was, perhaps not unexpectedly, a major consideration for humanities students, with 4 out of 10 citing this as the primary benefit. In the Sciences / Mathematics discipline area it was evident that this was the only priority with regard to written feedback, and only 1 out of the 4 respondents noted its importance. A third of Humanities and Commerce students valued written feedback that would help them improve the content of their work. Overall, guidance on choice of appropriate language was considered to be the primary benefit of written feedback, with 1 in 3 reporting this.

*A number of students reported that they found open-ended comments that provoked them to think more useful than direct feedback that told them what to do. The use of open-ended or indirect comments appears, then, to be valued by research students who wish to develop their own independence and 'voice' and who see this type of feedback as beneficial in this process.*

## 2. Feedback priorities

Participants were also asked in the questionnaire to identify what they saw as the most important types of written feedback they received. Students were asked to think about the feedback they would identify as important within three broad areas: (1) feedback on the content and subject-matter; (2) feedback on the organization and structure of their writing; and (3) feedback on the accuracy of their language. In the course of the interviews students were asked to recall instances of feedback across these three categories, and a number of students provided specific examples of the types of feedback they received. Findings from the questionnaires are tabulated in Table 25.

**Table 25: Identified feedback priorities**

Types of feedback received		Humanities (34)	Sciences / Maths (4)	Commerce (15)	Total (53)
Content	Relevance to literature	14	0	0	14
	Rethinking the way the work is being presented	10	2	0	12
	Help with finding literature	9	1	0	10
	Appropriateness of methodology	7	1	0	8
Organisation and structure	Organisational specifics	18	3	4	25
	Overview of organisation	10	2	4	16
	Cutting out or condensing irrelevant material	7	0	0	7
Accuracy of language	Vocabulary and register	18	0	5	23
	Grammar and spelling and punctuation	12	3	6	21

With regard to issues relating to the content or subject matter of the thesis it seemed from the questionnaire responses that humanities students appeared most often to receive feedback that alerted them to the extent to which their developing arguments were related to literature, in contrast neither the Sciences / mathematics nor the commerce students noted that they received feedback in this area. However, both Humanities and Sciences/Mathematics students received written feedback aimed at helping them rethink the ways in which they were presenting their work. It was also noted by 1 in 4 students of humanities and Sciences / mathematics that feedback that supported them in finding appropriate literature or developing an appropriate methodology was

given. Curiously, those in commerce disciplines did not note that they received feedback in any areas of content or subject-matter.

With regard to matters of organization and structure, all three discipline groups reported receiving written feedback, and for all three groups the most common type of feedback related to specifics of organization. Students from all disciplines also noted that they received more global feedback on organizational matters, but only the humanities students appeared to receive specific feedback on their writing aimed at identifying and dealing with what supervisors perceived as irrelevant material.

Finally, feedback on accuracy of language focused more specifically on vocabulary and register than grammar and spelling for the humanities students, whereas for Sciences / Mathematics and commerce students more attention appeared to be paid to grammar than to vocabulary. Indeed, for the mathematics students it appeared that a focus on structure dominated feedback with regard to linguistic accuracy, with no students noting that they received feedback relating to vocabulary.

An interview with one humanities student, for whom English is a second language, provided perspectives across each of the three broad categories considered which exemplify a range of feedback types:

- With regard to content – the supervisor provides a written introduction to the piece of writing which gives a useful overview and then numbers points in the margin of the written text which make reference to issues the student needs to think about. Feedback on content focuses on ideas for future development.
- With regard to organisation and structure – the supervisor uses arrows to represent visually where sections or sentences should be moved, and also suggests ways in which additional information can be added.
- With regard to writing style and accuracy – the supervisor makes direct corrective feedback by crossing out words, or by suggesting other structural issues such as ‘this sentence is too long’ or ‘this language is too informal’.

Balanced feedback was also exemplified in an interview with another Humanities student (English as L2). This student clearly benefitted from a range of written feedback that operated at different levels. Some feedback was very directive, such as specific corrections to individual words, or crossing out of sections to be removed, or arrows indicating sections needed to be moved. Other feedback was more indirect and framed as questions (“What do you think?”) or statements that required the student to think about why something may be problematic (“This doesn’t seem to fit”). There was therefore a balance between direct and indirect feedback. A separate summative statement was provided by the supervisor to guide the student’s further work.

With regard to the *specific* nature of feedback, a third humanities student (English as L2) commented that she found feedback that only posed questions (such as “what do you mean by this?”) to be less helpful than more directive feedback because she did not always understand what she was supposed to do by way of response. This student expressed a wish to receive more direct written feedback. It may be suggested on the basis of the interview perspectives of these three students that a range of different feedback, both direct and indirect, is likely to be more beneficial and welcome to students than only one type of feedback. This is especially so for those students for whom English is not a first language.

Overall, it was evident that the most identified priority for feedback for the students was feedback on specifics of the organization and structure of their writing, with just under half of the respondents identifying this as an important consideration. Secondary to this was choice of appropriate vocabulary and register (something that was not noted as having any priority among Sciences / mathematics students).

### **3. How feedback is provided**

Participants were also asked in the questionnaires to identify the ‘feedback system’ their supervisors utilized. Three broad types of feedback system were identified via the questionnaire: (1) written feedback only; (2) oral feedback only; (3) written-oral feedback (Table 26).

**Table 26: Feedback system**

Feedback system	Humanities (34)	Sciences / Maths (4)	Commerce(15)	Total(53)
Written feedback followed by face-to-face meeting	26	3	11	40
Only / largely written feedback	3	0	1	4
Only / largely oral feedback	2	0	3	5

It was clearly evident that, across all three disciplines, students regularly experienced written feedback followed by face-to-face meetings to discuss the feedback. This was noted by three out of four participants overall. Indeed, for the Sciences / Mathematics students this pattern appeared to be the only one they experienced. Interestingly, three commerce students (20%) noted that, in their cases, they received only or largely oral feedback, but this was clearly not normative practice. For those who received follow-up meeting after receiving written feedback it was clear that a major priority of meetings was to discuss the written feedback.

In several interviews reference was also made to the importance of written and oral feedback operating in tandem. One Humanities student, for example, commented that oral discussion needs to complement written feedback. This was because, in the view of this student, written feedback alone could not provide an overview or ‘overall impression’ of how the supervisor sees or evaluates the work. The follow-up meeting therefore provided the opportunity to ‘flesh out’ and to ‘clarify’ written feedback.

### **4. Additional feedback wanted**

In the questionnaires participants were also asked to consider the types of feedback they found the most helpful, and also areas on which they would like to receive feedback. Across all three disciplines it was noted that students did not report any areas where they perceived that feedback was lacking, although in some cases mention was made of wanting to receive ‘more of the same’.

However, across all three disciplines it was noted that the most helpful feedback received related to the content of their writing. This was considered as valuable by just under half of the humanities students (44%), by 3 out of 4 of the Sciences / mathematics students, and by one in three of the business students.

### **5. Advice for new supervisors**

Participants were also asked, in both the questionnaires and the interviews, to provide two suggestions to a new supervisor about the most helpful type of feedback they could give to students writing up a thesis for the first time. This question gave participants the opportunity, in the light of their own experience, to reflect on the issues they considered to be the most important in terms of the supervisor/supervisee relationship and provision of feedback. Table 27 provides a rank order of suggestions made in the questionnaire.

**Table 27: Suggestions for new supervisors**

Suggestions for new supervisors	Discipline area	Number of respondents	Total(53)
Focus on both written and oral feedback with a view to feed forward	Humanities + Commerce	11 + 1	12
Make positive and constructive comments alongside critique	All disciplines	7 + 1 + 3	11
Understand the project	Commerce	5	5
Give suggestions but do not be too directive	Humanities	3	3

It has already been noted that, across all three disciplines, the majority of students reported that their supervisors provided both written feedback and follow-up meetings to discuss the feedback. Among the humanities students the most frequently cited suggestion for new supervisors, noted by 32% of respondents, reiterated this method of operating. They suggested it was important to ensure feedback was provided in both spoken and written form with a view not only to reviewing what had been written but also ‘feeding forward’ to what was to come next.

After this came two suggestions, noted in each case by 22% of respondents, which were (1) to make positive and constructive comments alongside comments that critiqued the work, and (2) to focus on how best to structure the writing. Among students in the commerce disciplines, the most commonly cited suggestion, cited by over a third of respondents, was for supervisors to ensure that they understood the project well or that, as one participant put it, that the supervisor should ‘read the surrounding literature’. Linking spoken feedback to written feedback, and making positive and constructive comments, did not appear to be major concerns for these students, although it is

*Feedback should be positive, consistent, timely and clear, with a balance between positive and constructive comments and comments that critiqued their work.*

possible that this reflects what they perceive to be already working. Sciences / Mathematics discipline students similarly had little to say in the questionnaire by way of suggestions.

The interviews gave the participants the opportunity to reflect further about what they would like to see and to expand on their questionnaire responses. Typical comments raised in the interviews corroborated findings from the questionnaires and focused on the importance of a good *relationship* between supervisor and student. This was to be seen as a partnership of equals rather than as a 'manager/employee' relationship. Identified components of this relationship were the demonstration of genuine interest and recognition that ultimately the work was the student's own:

- Encourage students' ownership of their own work. Supervisors are there to make suggestions about the 'next steps', but the student needs to make the final decisions – this is a negotiated partnership (Humanities)
- The supervisor needs to make it clear that feedback is the opinion of the supervisor, but that the work is the student's own. This leads to a sense of empowerment for the student (Sciences / Mathematics)
- Be more 'hands-on' – engage with the thesis and the research; take an interest in the work in a way that communicates a genuine partnership rather than an employer/employee relationship (Commerce)
- Be serious about the role of supervisor and willing to engage with the role (Humanities)
- Show interest in the topic, keep up with reading around the topic, and operate as a 'peer' ... the supervisor needs to be genuinely engaged (Commerce)
- The supervisor needs to be engaging with the work (Humanities)
- The supervisor needs to be enthusiastic (Humanities x 2)

*For the students, it was perceived as important to ensure that feedback was given in both spoken and written form and used for purposes of both feedback and feed forward.*

Other comments raised during the interviews focused on dimensions of what was seen as 'effective' feedback, and what might therefore guide new supervisors. It was necessary for feedback to be positive, consistent, timely and clear:

- It is important to have positive feedback and encouragement (Humanities).
- Provide consistent and timely feedback (Sciences / Mathematics). (For this student 'consistent' incorporated ensuring that feedback from different supervisors was not contradictory.)
- Provide clear feedback ... not just questions that lead a student to wonder about how to interpret the feedback and what to do next (Humanities)

Two more general suggestions for new supervisors were:

- Encourage the students to write daily both to keep the project moving and to give the student a sense of progress (Humanities)
- Have an introductory or 'induction' meeting before starting the formal supervision process so that expectations can be made clear (Humanities)

In summary, the evidence from the student perspective suggests that students' primary concern was to receive written feedback on *quality* and *choice* of language. Alongside this, students identified a priority for them to receive feedback on specifics of the *organization* and *structure* of their writing. Reference was also made to the importance of written and oral feedback operating together. For the students, it was perceived as important to ensure that feedback was given in both spoken and written form and used for purposes of both feedback and feed forward. The evidence suggests that students did in fact receive regular face-to-face meetings, subsequent to receiving written feedback, with a view to discussing 'where to next'.

Students also recommended that feedback should be positive, consistent, timely and clear, with a balance between positive and constructive comments and comments that critiqued their work. Students wished to see the supervisor/supervisee relationship to be constructed in terms of a 'partnership of equals' rather than as a 'manager/employee' relationship. They wanted supervisors to demonstrate genuine interest in their work, while at the same time recognizing that ultimately the work was the students' responsibility.

# Conclusion

## Key findings

First we present the key findings from the supervisor perspective and follow this with those from the student perspective. In reading this material, we would like to remind readers that the findings are based on the occurrences in which a particular point was offered by the participants rather than on the extent to which each practice was followed by each supervisor.

### *Supervisor perspective*

#### **Questionnaire and interview findings**

1. A wide range of responses to all interview questions was given by the supervisors. Particular responses were sometimes mentioned a number of times by several supervisors, indicating therefore that the point in question appeared to be uppermost in the mind and experience of those making it. Often, this pattern was observed across discipline areas. On the other hand, as the Tables in this section reveal, a wide range of additional one-off responses was also offered, revealing just how complex and variable the views of supervisors are with regard to providing feedback on their students' draft texts.
2. Supervisors reported ten strengths in the writing of their students but sometimes these appeared to be contradicted when the same point was mentioned by other supervisors as a weakness (e.g., the ability to create an effective argument).
3. This observation is illustrative of a more general observation throughout the study – that feedback is tailored to the individual needs of students.
4. Some of the questionnaire questions asked supervisors if they observed a particular practice. In each of the tables, it is clear that a very high majority of participants said that they did observe the practice being referred to. This can be seen in Table 28 where the most frequently offered responses to the questionnaire questions are summarized. For example, with regard to the feedback system used by supervisors, most said that they (1) meet to discuss their feedback with their students (31/35 supervisors), (2) provide feedback on advanced first drafts and near final drafts (32/35 supervisors), and (3) determine the effectiveness of their feedback by the extent to which issues are addressed in the next draft.
5. The interview findings were a rich source of data for understanding the nature or focus of the feedback that supervisors say they provide. For example, most said in their questionnaire responses that they give feedback on areas that their students have not considered (i.e. gaps) but it was only in the interviews that we were able to elicit what types of gap they needed to provide feedback on.
6. Sometimes there was a mismatch between what supervisors said they did (in both the questionnaire responses and during the interviews) and what the text analysis revealed. For example, many supervisors said that they focused their feedback more on macro issues than

*Sometimes there was a mismatch between what supervisors said they did (in both the questionnaire responses and during the interviews) and what the text analysis revealed.*

on micro issues like linguistic accuracy. The text analyses, however, revealed a high level of commentary on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness.

- Interviews were also important for understanding whether or not feedback practices varied according to the L1 or L2 status of a student. Supervisors across the disciplines were generally of one voice in stating that their feedback practices did not vary as a result of any difference. However, a few supervisors did say that they had to provide their L2 writers with some feedback on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness, either on their early drafts (in order to 'set the standard') or on the final draft so that the thesis was 'blemish free' for the examiners.

**Table 28: Summary of most frequent responses from supervisors**

Area of consideration	Participants' responses	Humanities (17)	Sciences / Maths (11)	Commerce (7)	Total (35)
Students' writing strengths	Good written argument	4	4	0	8
Students' writing weaknesses	Structure for clarity & impact	8	7	2	17
	Grammar; expression	5	7	4	16
	Argument & critique	9	3	1	13
Aims & priorities in providing feedback	To represent the research well	7	7	2	16
	To help create clear expression	8	6	1	15
	To improve writing	5	6	3	14
	To meet the demands of the stage a student is at	10	1	3	14
Focus of feedback – content	On gaps in the literature	6	1	3	10
	On irrelevance	4	0	3	7
Focus on part-genre requirements & expectations	On structure	5	3	3	11
Focus on organization & rhetorical structure	On building a case or argument	5	4	4	13
Focus on writing coherence & cohesion	On linking between sections	5	1	1	7
Focus on linguistic accuracy & appropriateness	On voice and stance	6	4	1	11
Overall feedback system	Meet to discuss	15	9	7	31

	Handwrite comments on hardcopy	12	7	5	24
	Use track changes	6	3	2	11
When feedback is provided	On advanced first drafts & near final drafts	17	9	6	32
How feedback is provided	Verbal feedback	16	9	6	31
	Handwritten comments on hardcopy of drafts	15	6	4	25
	Purpose of meetings to check understanding & clarify feedback	6	7	4	17
Factors considered when providing feedback	Linguistic proficiency	12	6	3	21
Expectations of students' responses to feedback	That they understand & solve macro-issues	12	4	1	17
	Subsequent drafts usually reflect students' response	6	6	1	13
How effectiveness of feedback is determined	Issues are addressed in next draft	17	9	5	31
	Check understanding at meetings	4	5	3	12
Do supervisors have formal training	No	12	9	6	27
Training recommendation	Use worked examples	8	3	2	13
	Attend workshops	7	3	2	12
Advice for new supervisors	Identify problems, guide but do not solve	8	1	4	13

### ***Findings from draft text analysis***

8. The supervisors made on-script comments frequently.
9. All supervisors commented on content and nearly all commented on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness and on requirements. They made comments on coherence and cohesion of the text but these were less frequent.

10. Supervisors across the three disciplines commented on the same areas. It is interesting to note that comments on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness were even more frequent in Sciences / Mathematics and Commerce than in 'language-based' Humanities.
11. How supervisors made their comments varied in relation to the area of focus. They commented on linguistic features and requirements in a 'to-the-point' manner (through use of directives or reformulations). They commented on content and on cohesion and coherence in a generally more complex and indirect manner.
12. The supervisors in all three disciplines drew on the same range of pragmatic functions in making their feedback. Thus they appeared to communicate their feedback in similar ways.

### ***Student perspective***

13. Students valued written feedback on the organizational *specifics* of their writing, in particular the *quality, choice and appropriateness* of language.
14. Students wanted to receive positive and constructive comments alongside comments that critiqued their work.
15. Direct or 'to the point' feedback was easier to understand and easier to act on.
16. Written feedback needed to be followed by face-to-face meetings to:
  - a. discuss the feedback and 'flesh it out'
  - b. clarify
  - c. feed forward to the next stage.
17. The *relationship* between supervisor and student needed to be framed as a partnership of equals.
18. Students wanted supervisors to be knowledgeable, and to demonstrate genuine interest and enthusiasm.
19. Supervisors also needed to recognize that ultimately the work was the students' own.

### ***Limitations***

This section considers the limitations of the study. Following this, suggestions are made for future research.

### ***Supervisor perspective***

1. The use of open questions in the questionnaires and interviews had the advantage of eliciting a range of responses as supervisors expressed their ideas (rather than responding to prompts expressed by the researchers). However, a disadvantage of the range of responses was that, in some cases, it only enabled us to investigate quantitatively the extent to which all supervisors and students considered a particular idea or practice important.

*On balance, students appeared to value feedback that challenged them to think about their ideas and organisation, provided that this was linked with the opportunity to discuss feedback in follow-up meetings. The most helpful feedback was indirect. For example, use of indirect questions was interpreted as being supportive and helpful for some students because they liked to spend time thinking about their own writing. Posing questions, rather than giving direct answers, motivated them to develop their own writing.*

2. The sample size in two of the discipline areas was rather modest, so any attempt to make cross-disciplinary comparisons needs to be done with care.
3. The investigation of actual feedback practices (not perceptions) was limited to an analysis of on-script feedback comments on drafts the interviewees provided. It did not include analysis of other forms of feedback, such as oral comments in supervisory meetings or assessments provided on feedback sheets.

### ***Student perspective***

4. Students from the Humanities were more heavily represented in the study than those from the other two disciplines under consideration. This constrains the amount of cross-discipline comparison that can be made and is likely to skew findings in the direction of the types of feedback more normatively given to Humanities students.
5. That a number of zero responses were recorded in questionnaires from students in Sciences / Mathematics and Commerce could indicate that such students had given little thought to the issues raised in the questions or did not have anything to say. Where follow-up interviews did not occur, there was no opportunity to revisit the questionnaire and to seek clarification.

### ***Recommendations for further research***

1. Following limitations 1 and 5 above, we would suggest that a further quantitative study to examine the extent to which supervisors and students hold the various ideas suggested by respondents be undertaken. A series of behavioural and attitudinal statements could be developed and these could include both Likert-scale and ranking questions.
2. Following limitation 2 above, we would suggest that an attempt be made to recruit a larger sample size and a more equal participation from the three discipline areas. This would provide a more solid basis for investigation of disciplinary differences.
3. Following limitation 3 above, it is suggested that future research investigate other forms of practice (such as, supervisory meetings and feedback sheets) to provide a more complete description of feedback practices.
4. The present study hopes to have laid the ground work for further research in the area. One possibility is a comparative study into the nature of feedback given at early and later stages of the supervision process. A further possibility is a longitudinal study to gain insights about effective practice over the entire supervisory period from the perspectives of supervisor and supervisee.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A Supervisor questionnaire



### AKO AOTEAROA RESEARCH PROJECT

**TITLE: Best Practice in supervisor feedback to thesis writers in New Zealand universities**

#### Questionnaire for thesis supervisors

**Please answer the following questions as fully as you can, providing specific details and examples to illustrate your points.**

1. What are your aims (philosophy) in providing feedback?
2. What are your priorities?
3. What is your feedback system?
4. What are the main strengths and weaknesses of your thesis students' writing?
5. To what extent do you provide feedback on the following areas:
  - (a) Content knowledge, accuracy, completeness, relevance
  - (b) Genre knowledge (functions of different parts of a thesis)
  - (c) Rhetorical structure/organisation
  - (d) Argument development (coherence, cohesion)
  - (e) Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness (voice, stance, modality etc)
6. How do you determine whether or not your feedback is successful?
7. What factors (social, educational, proficiency level, psychological, etc) do you take into consideration when providing feedback?
8. When do you provide feedback (first draft, final draft, multiple drafts; more at some points; same all the way through the process) and why?

9. How do you provide feedback (written and/or spoken; direct or indirect; codes/symbols or verbal comments; textual correction or end notes)?

10. Do you have feedback meetings with your students? If so, what are your aims? What do you do before/while/after giving feedback?

11. With respect to your students' response to your feedback, what are your expectations and what are your experiences?

12. Have you had any specific training in providing feedback to students at this level?

13. If training were to be provided, what would you want to see included in the training and how would you like to see it provided (e.g. on-line or seminar/workshop etc)?

**Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study and for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.**



## AKO AOTEAROA RESEARCH PROJECT

**TITLE: Best Practice in supervisor feedback to thesis writers in New Zealand**

**universities**

**Questionnaire for thesis students****Instructions**

*Please answer the following questions as fully as you can, providing specific details and examples to illustrate your points. Because this study focuses on the **WRITING UP** of the thesis, we are less interested in what you might have to say about the research process or the supervisor-supervisee relationship (except when the latter is a factor in the feedback on your writing).*

Do you receive feedback from your supervisor on the drafts that you write?

Do you think feedback is important? Why or why not?

When you receive feedback, what do you do?

What type of feedback do you receive on the content/subject matter (e.g. selection and range of theory, research, etc)?

What type of feedback do you receive on the organisation/structure of your content?

What type of feedback do you receive on the accuracy and appropriateness of your writing?

Are any of the areas referred to in questions 4-6 more important and helpful for you? Why?

Are there any other areas you would like feedback on? Why?

How often do you receive feedback? Are you happy with this frequency? Why or why not?

How do you receive your supervisor's feedback? Written and/or spoken? Do you have a preference? Why?

Do you find it easy to understand the feedback you receive? Why or why not? If not, what changes would you like to see? Why?

Do you have feedback meetings with your supervisor? What happens in these meetings? Are they helpful? How do you determine their effectiveness?

How do you determine whether or not the feedback is helpful?

If you were to offer two suggestions to a new supervisor about the most helpful type of feedback for students writing up their first thesis, what would those suggestions be?

**Your answers to the following questions will help us interpret your responses.**

Have you answered these questions with respect to the writing up of your first thesis? (yes/no) Was it at Masters or Doctoral level?

Do you consider yourself to be a L1 (native speaker/writer of English) or a L2 (non-native speaker/writer of English) student?

Were your responses in relation to the writing up of empirical research (a study investigating a research question or hypothesis)? (yes/no). If your answer was no, how would you describe the type of research you were writing up?

**Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study and for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.**

## Appendix C

## Interview questions

### Ako Aotearoa Project – Supervisor/Student Interview form

**Supervisor/Student name**

**Interviewer name**

**Discipline**

**Date**

To what extent do you provide/receive feedback on the following areas?

Content (e.g. range and depth of knowledge, accuracy, completeness, relevance)

Requirements/expectations of different parts/chapters of a thesis

Organisation/structure of material (e.g. rhetorical/persuasive focus)

Writing coherence and cohesion

Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness (e.g. voice, stance, modality etc)

If you were to give 2 pieces of advice to a new supervisor about what constitutes effective feedback, what would they be?

Overall sense of what was important to the supervisor/student.

## Appendix D Examples of text analysis

### Example 1 of text analysis

Script 9	Track changes format	
1. Coherence	'First mention of something that perhaps needs to be explained'	Suggesting
2. Coherence	So you're saying L2 instruction is influenced by L1? Fine, but perhaps it needs explicit and early stating	Eliciting confirmation/expressive/suggesting
3. Content	Did it? Or was it claimed to be? Maybe references needed	Elicit confirmation/suggesting
4. Content	I tend to associate this with the model put forward by X	(Thinks student used the wrong reference) Informing

### Example 2 of text analysis

Script 10	Track changes format	
1. Linguistic	Types of task	(Student used 'task types') Reformulating
2. Linguistic	^the definitions of (several different types of task in the literature)	Student wrote 'section will review several different types of task ' Correcting (reformulating)
3. Requirements	Better if you can hold of Long 1985	(Student had used secondary reference) Suggesting
4. Linguistic	A (real-world task)	Student had written 'the real-world task' Correcting (reform)
5. Linguistic	(become)s	Student had written 'become' Correcting (reform)
6. Linguistic	^ by	Omitted item Correcting (reform)
7. Requirements	As above	Same comment on need for primary ref Suggesting
8. Content	This discussion would benefit from the inclusion of one or two examples of each type of task – as you do below	Suggesting
9. Linguistic	X (This type of taskx)	Correcting (reform)
10. Linguistic	"as they are in real life"	St had written 'the ways real life happens' Correcting (reform)
11. Content	Yes good	(St had provided an example of a type of task) Expressive (+ praise)
12. Linguistic	^ the	Correcting (reform)
13. Linguistic	(dichotomy) distinction	Word choice

		Correcting (reform)
14. Linguistic	(Kamaravadivelu) u	Spelling Correcting (reform)
15. Linguistic	As above 14	Correcting (reform)
16. Linguistic	,	Missing comma Correcting (reform)
17. Linguistic	X	(Student needs to remove speech mark) Correcting (reform)
18. Requirements	Give page numbers for your in-text references	Telling
19. Linguistic	As 14	Correcting (reform)
20. Requirements	'as above'	(Student needs to use primary not secondary reference) suggesting
21. Linguistic	Summarised some definitions of	Student had written 'given some positions to look at tasks' Correcting (reform)
22. Linguistic	^	(Missed preposition) Correcting
23. Linguistic	Into the classroom from	Student had written 'away from outside of classroom' Correcting (reform)