



Sitting Together: A Supervision Resource for Doctoral Supervisors and Students

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For the full project report go to: www.akoatearoa.ac.nz.

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Introduction

A recent research project funded by the Central Hub of AKO Aotearoa focused on intercultural supervision (Doyle, Manathunga, Prinsen, Cornforth, & Tallon, 2017). The participants were 16 international doctoral students from African countries, and 14 supervisors from a range of disciplines in two universities. Semi-structured interviews were loosely framed around Manathunga's (2014) work on intercultural supervision as a social and relational space.

This project provided insights into doctoral supervision that may be useful in intercultural supervision in particular, and for doctoral supervision in general. The resource presented here draws on findings from the project and the literature. It is organised around the analytic framework used in the AKO project, and consists of the themes:

- Time – Past, Present and Future
- Connectedness and Belonging
- Epistemology – Ways of Knowing
- English language and Writing
- The Pedagogical Relationship.

We hope this resource will be of useful for doctoral supervisors and doctoral students in building effective supervision relationships and successful doctoral projects. To this end we also include the recommendations the student participants made in relation to supervision, and a list of references for further reading.

Time – History

I'd recommend that they just try to be very flexible and understand the background which we have all come from, it's not the first thing to be here. We have also done school in other places.

Students and supervisors bring previous academic and research experiences into the supervision relationship. Our student participants included aspiring, early and mid-career academics and policy-makers. Those who were academics in their home countries had extensive experience as supervisors of master's theses. Most had experienced supervision as a master's student. Ten of the 16 student participants had completed all or part of their Master's in an overseas university (Malaysia, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the USA), and six in their home countries.

Our supervisors had diverse supervision histories, ranging from being a first-time supervisor to having supervised more than thirty doctoral theses to completion. We found that different academic cultures and traditions sometimes led to taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations that were not necessarily shared between students and supervisors. We suggest students and supervisors talk about past research and academic experiences, and about expectations they have of each other in the supervision relationship.

Suggested topics for supervisors to explore with students:

1. What were your reasons for enrolling in a New Zealand university? In this university?
2. Can you tell us about what your experiences with research education and with supervision have been? *Explore the thesis and supervision process at master's level – how it worked, frequency of meetings, feedback processes, how problems were managed, what made a difference to learning and work, engagement with theory and research methods.*
3. What questions have you about: *My supervision experience? My approach to supervision? My expectations? My research?*

Time – Present

With research in this field you've got to position the context... I need to know their country's system. I need to know the issue from their country's point of view and from them as people. So that's actually the first writing I get them to do... Because I need to be clear as a supervisor in challenging them on their questions that I've got the context right.

As a starting point supervisors can become more knowledgeable and aware of the history and present day social and cultural milieu of the student's country, and that of their student. At the same time they can be conscious of these in relation to their own country and self and how the past plays out in the present. Postcolonial theory encourages supervisors and students to become conscious of, and seek to [re]examine the Western/Northern constructions of knowledge that remain dominant in many disciplines (Connell, 2007). The fresh and critical insights of postcolonial theory may assist supervisors to engage more effectively in empowering intercultural supervision. In particular, recent work by Manathunga (2014) has used postcolonial, feminist, indigenous and cultural geography theories to reimagine the role of place and geography, time and history and knowledge and epistemology in intercultural supervision.

In a New Zealand academic context there is an espoused belief that argument, challenge, and willingness to confront ideas are desirable qualities. A number of the students discussed coming from social and academic cultures where qualities such as respect for elders and authorities and avoidance of conflict were inculcated into young people and students. Students provided examples of remaining silent or using alternative and indirect strategies when they disagreed with their supervisors, or believed that their supervisors had misinterpreted something, or when they needed help.

Suggestions:

1. Work on creating the space and the supervision relationship where the student is comfortable enough to share what they are thinking and where there can be dialogue.
2. Ask the student what might be alternative viewpoints/counter arguments.
3. Seek and welcome feedback on how a meeting/supervision is going.
4. Ask the student what they need from feedback/supervision at this time.

Time – Future

One department had a mentoring programme for doctoral students:
We want them to leave here with, it doesn't always work, but the idea is that they leave here with publishing plans for their dissertation, with one possibly two articles and with a teaching profile, a lecturing profile, and some experience.

Supervisors and students share the common goal of a PhD being awarded in a timely fashion. Students (and some supervisors) in our study were acutely aware of the time pressures students were under to complete their thesis before scholarships/finances ran out, or before students were required to resume their employment. Students thinking ahead focused on the experiences of other students needing to do significant editing or writing of their theses but without financial support to continue. In contrast supervisors were conscious of what examiners were likely to expect of the thesis.

As well as successfully completing a PhD, students may also have other goals that it is good to talk about including:

- future career aspirations
- contribution to discipline, policy, practice, or innovation
- wanting to research to make a difference in their home country
- publishing
- immigration

One of the students in our study switched the focus of his thesis after his supervisor pointed out there was not a department in the field internationally that had an academic position with that focus. This was a small field with limited opportunities, and the supervisor thought that if the student wanted an academic career he might need to shift his focus.

Suggested questions to explore with student:

1. Why are you doing this PhD? *What do you want its contribution to be? Who do you hope will read it?*
2. What do you hope to accomplish during the PhD?
3. What are your hopes and aspirations post-the PhD?

Connectedness and Belonging

When I was coming to New Zealand I was very conscious that it's very far away from home and I thought I hope the people that I work with in the department will realise that in addition to being a student I am also a human being who is trying to settle in a new country.

The theme of *Connectedness and Belonging* links to experiences of community, place and pastoral care. Our participants were thousands of miles away from home. Coming through their interviews were the sense of being connected or the absence of that sense; the feeling of belonging and being known or conversely of not belonging and not being understood; of being visible or invisible that came through. These resonated with Manathunga's (2014) emphasis on the centrality of place and theorising of intercultural supervision as a social and relational space.

Some students were accompanied or joined by their partners and children, and advice was sought from supervisors on practical matters related to starting life in a new country: how to find affordable accommodation, where to buy particular products, obtaining assistance from church agencies with furniture and other goods.

Relationships with supervisors were sometimes uneasy, something one student attributed to cultural differences. "Some of my African friends have all these worries about how their supervisors don't get them and they don't get their supervisors....so if they could find a way the lecturers or the students will have to learn more about different cultures".

1. Talking with the student about how things are going outside of the university: *How is your accommodation? What things do you still need? How are you getting about the city? Is there anything that we can help you with? When are the family arriving?*
2. Students and supervisors described a range of academic and social initiatives that contributed to students feeling connected to an academic and social community:
 - Student led thesis groups
 - Group supervision/Cohort groups/Laboratory groups
 - Social activities for staff and students – BBQs, dinners, welcome to families
 - Involving students in the department – contributing to courses, tutoring
 - Introducing the student to experts in the field, to visiting scholars
 - Writing together
 - Going to conferences together

Epistemologies – Ways of Knowing

The differences in culture also caused difficulties in trying to appreciate where I was coming from because there are certain things that perhaps the professor felt that he understood them better from a theoretical point of view and perhaps I understood it differently from a practical point of view in my environment back home.

The supervision relationship is a contact site in intercultural supervision. Manathunga (2014) along with other post-colonial scholars in the social sciences and humanities has highlighted how time and space and knowledge shape intercultural supervision and disturb and unsettle it, but may also be potentially generative of new ways of knowing and being. Postcolonial theory encourages supervisors and students particularly in the social sciences and humanities to become conscious of, and seek to [re]examine the Western/ Northern constructions of knowledge of their disciplines (Connell, 2007). Postcolonial theory may offer supervisors the possibility to engage more effectively in empowering intercultural supervision.

The literature on intercultural supervision suggests that empowering intercultural supervision acknowledges the cultural knowledge students bring with them into universities and facilitating the further development and dissemination of this diverse knowledge. This includes mutual respect, dialogic approaches as pivotal to effective supervision teaching and learning strategies.

Our participants came from diverse cultures, countries, and academic disciplines, and the students' doctoral projects were situated in a range of fields including the physical, natural and social sciences and humanities. African knowledges and ways of knowing entered some of the doctoral conversations and at times presented challenges for students and supervisors to negotiate, and at others the struggle to understand a different way of thinking led to new knowledge. "It's like a little bit of the world opens up in a new way that you haven't seen before when it happens well".

Consider:

1. Be curious about diverse ways of knowing and being.
2. Be open to diverse knowledges and ways of knowing.

Ask about the thinkers and philosophers who have influenced the student, and find out why.

English Language and Writing

It was my first time to stay in a foreign country that is speaking English and English is their culture ...I had problems to hear my supervisor and the supervisor had problem to hear me.

Initially many of the African students struggled with the 'Kiwi' accent and other accents, and idiom. One would record supervision meetings rather than struggle with making notes. "The usage of words in English, sometimes the interpretation in different cultures are different of the same word. So those are some of the challenges".

Writing is at the core of doctoral pedagogy, and is a site of pain and joy. The research literature suggests that scholarly writing is a social practice that most, if not all, doctoral students struggle with. Working in another language intensifies the challenges of doctoral writing. In many disciplines doctoral students work in isolation and may not necessarily be aware of the learning journeys of fellow students

The findings from our study illustrate that the practices and conventions of contemporary English language academic writing may demand subtle and complex negotiations in supervision. Our supervisors and students grappled with diverse language and writing issues including: balancing voice and authenticity; examiners and editors being able to understand writing; the research being accessible; the relationship between thinking and writing and the role language plays in argumentation.

Multiple Englishes now flourish internationally – including versions such as those of the United States of America and Nigerian English. The Western/Northern hegemony over academic writing conventions and English language is being challenged. Pare (2011) argued that the conventions of the Anglophone academic world may be seen to support the colonial project –through "rhetorical hegemony" (p.173).

Consider:

1. Supervisors guiding students to know about academic genres (thesis, journal articles, conference papers) and being explicit about how to join the scholarly conversations of the discipline
2. Navigating the tensions between encouraging students' voices to develop in ways that are culturally grounded as well as clear about Anglophone expectations that scholarly writing is clear, crisp and direct.
3. Encouraging student writing groups
4. Writing conference papers and journal articles
5. Inviting students be to part of writing projects

The Pedagogical Relationship

I like to create a sense of community within the lab-I think that that sense of community instils a sense of pride in the students in terms of having a strong research group and motivation, because they learn from the others, it actually creates a sense of competition amongst the students ...so I think it increases the productivity of the students, it means they're more likely to finish on time.

There were diverse supervision arrangements and pedagogical approaches to supervision. In the physical and natural sciences students tended to be research groups or 'lab' groups sharing facilities and perhaps office spaces, sometimes meeting weekly and having individual meetings. Descriptions of the pedagogical relationship varied from "I am strict supervisor" to student talking of being given a kingdom to explore. Overall both students and supervisors were conscious of the need for students to own their doctoral projects. One student reflected how when undertaking his Master's in Europe he had valued the frequent and close interactions with his supervisors, but was now finding that he was growing in independence through not having ready access to his supervisors – they met monthly.

One supervisor described his pedagogical approach in terms of "joined up thinking". He encouraged his students to connect random things from their background, reading and from conversations and to think, "oh I wonder if that's the same as this? how would I test that?" Alongside this he thought it important to give permission to students to critique the work of other academics, and he modelled the process in discussion with students. This included reading the literature together and laughing at some of the absurdities published and through seeing that most papers have errors then students learn it is okay to make mistakes.

Interestingly many of the students used the metaphor of parents to describe their relationships either with past or present supervisors. This carries a notion of duty and care. One of our participants commented: "I regard them as my parents or my aunties [...] a good and understanding relationship between supervisors and their students is very important".

We recommend:

1. Being conscious of the pedagogical approach being taken, and discussing this.
2. Finding out what helps the student develop as a thinker, researcher and as a writer.
3. Talking about and encouraging the student to take advantage of learning support, writing and other workshops, writing groups, thesis support groups, online groups and blogs.
4. Reading and talking about doctoral and writing pedagogy taking advantage of, and attending workshops to develop supervision skills, intercultural competence, and scholarly writing.

The Pedagogical Relationship – Feedback

Sitting together looking at the words, sharing their ideas, so you can see a supervisor has made somewhere a comment then he or she will say, okay you presented this information here, I didn't understand that they are now able to explain... And then the supervisor can add ideas

In our study the discussion on feedback centred on feedback on written drafts of the proposal or the thesis, and to a lesser extent on feedback on other writing such as for journals or conference presentations. Students were divided in terms of preferences as to the form and timing of the feedback:

- Written feedback
- Face-to-face feedback
- Combination of written and face-to-face feedback

Nearly all favoured meeting to discuss feedback, but differed on the preferred timing of the feedback. For some students the combination of a cultural background where it was unthinkable to question a supervisor, with needing time to understand the feedback meant that written feedback provided in advance of the meeting allowed the student time to prepare to advance their arguments and to discuss the feedback.

However, both students and supervisors provided examples of written feedback being perceived as more formal and directive than intended. For example, the response to the written comment “What do you mean by this?” was for a student to remove the section rather than to provide an explanation.

We were surprised at how commonplace queries or comments on students’ drafts rankled with a number of students. These included comments such as: *I don't understand; This does not make sense*. We realised we did not know how our own students regarded such comments.

We recommend that students and supervisors:

1. Discuss timing and mode of feedback
2. Regularly review whether there needs to be changes in when and how feedback is given

Suggestions for Practice – The students

They basically have left me on my own, but once they realise, no, this guy has been silent for a long time they will get in touch. They will get in touch and ask 'how is the work going?' So you don't also take it for granted that the student is, I mean silent for a long time and therefore he is okay.

The doctoral candidates in our study made a number of suggestions for supervision:

- Staff and student inductions to cover culture, to help staff understand students' cultures, and international students to understand kiwi culture.
- For supervisors to be aware of students as people, and of their broader identities (parent, child, respected academic) and challenges (financial, culture and language).
- Staff to be aware of how difficult it is for those coming from a background where it is frowned on to disagree with a supervisor, and the need to adopt strategies to enable students to voice opposing views to their supervisor/s.

"What is your point of view on this?"

"What is your argument?"

"What are some of the arguments that you think people might raise?"

- Emphasise the value in asking questions, and that asking questions does not mean a person is dumb.
- That students and staff sit together and clarify expectations in terms of the work required for the proposal, the research and the thesis, and the nature of writing required at each stage. Then to work out the student's academic needs:

Are there knowledge gaps? Content gaps?

Skills gaps in research methods, statistics or writing?

How will these needs be addressed? What courses might help?

- For supervisors to once in a while drop in on the student workspace to see how students are doing.
- That supervisors be aware of the fear of scholarships or funding running out before the thesis was completed – and hence the value in addressing writing and editing early in the process.

Further reading

- Carter, S., Laurs, D., Higgins, R., Martin, J., Teaiwi, T., & Wolfgramm-Foliaki, E. (2016). *Supporting doctoral writing: He ara tika mā ngā kaiārahi: Research report*. Auckland: Ako Aotearoa Northern Regional Hub
<https://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/download/ng/file/group-4/supporting-doctoral-writing---research-report.pdf>
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- Rath, J. (2008). *Developing research supervision skills: Understanding and enhancing supervisor professional development in the Aotearoa New Zealand context*. Ako Aotearoa Regional Hub Funded Project: Final Report. Wellington: Ako Aotearoa.

Links to project resource

Doyle, S., Manathunga, C., Prinsen, G., Cornforth, C., & Tallon, R. (2017). *Supervising African doctoral students: Enhancing intercultural supervision in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Ako Aotearoa Central Regional Hub.

<https://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/sites/default/files/files/supervising-african-doctoral-students-enhancing-intercultural-supervision-in-aotearoa-nz.pdf>

Resources for students (video)

Hall, M. (2009). *Five factors for PhD success: Some research based suggestions* [video]. New Zealand: Victoria University.

<https://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/community/te-hononga-m%C4%81tauranga-m%C4%81ori-doctoral-resource-portal/resources/pages/five-factors-phd-succ>

Laurs, D. (2009). Māori PhD resources – How to eat an elephant [video]. New Zealand: Victoria University.

<http://mdsweb.vuw.ac.nz/Mediasite/Viewer/Viewers/Viewer320TL.aspx?mode=Default&peid=0c6a0180-9953-402f-a89d-18b6a4509003&pid=3a226795-2c67-401f-a60c-6510f472c551&playerType=WM7>

Blogs for students and supervisors

The thesis whisperer.

<https://thesiswhisperer.com/>

Patter – the blog of Professor Pat Thomson.

<https://patthomson.net/>