

The Art of Joint Supervision of Graduate Students: What Advice Should We Give Supervisors

by

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Abstract

Across the world there has been a trend away from the single supervisor, particularly for doctorate degrees to joint supervision. The United States was an early mover to a team approach with the advent of advisory committees. More recently there has been movement away from the sole supervisor model in countries which follow the UK or European doctoral model. Joint supervision is more complex than sole supervision because more relationships are involved. New supervisors can find joint supervision difficult because of these complexities, many of which they may be unaware of. Hence the need for supervision education in the art of joint supervision. This paper answers the question of what advice should be given to supervisors on the topic of joint supervision. Twelve advantages of joint supervision that have been identified in the literature are listed. That different supervisors can have different supervisory styles is one of the complexities that needs to be cognised. For this reason, Gatfield's model of different supervisory styles is discussed. Fourteen issues or problems that can occur in joint supervision are summarised and the paper concludes with direct advice for supervisor on how to make joint supervision work. The three key elements of that advice involve ensuring there is good communication, aligning everybody's expectations and respecting the views and opinions of fellow supervisors.

KEYWORDS: *Advantages of joint supervision, advice for supervisors, difficulties of joint supervision, styles of supervision.*

1. Introduction

I have been delivering seminars and workshops on the good practice of supervision of graduate research students for nearly 20 years, across six different countries and a wide range of institutions. A recurring difficult question I often get asked goes along the lines of:

“I am supervising with another/a senior/a very senior colleague and I find their style/approach/advice/behaviour troubling/wrong/difficult to understand. What advice do you have for me to remedy this situation?”

Typically, there is also a power differential between the two supervisors, the one being complained of is often very senior and supposedly experienced while the troubled colleague is relatively new to supervision and does not wish to confront their colleague because of that person's possible involvement in future promotion, tenure or workload decisions.

I have always found these types of questions difficult to give satisfactory answers to. There is really no easy, simple, right answer. Lately I have been giving thought to this type of question having been asked to design and run some master classes on how best to jointly supervise. As a consequence, I have been investigating what the literature has to say to help and having enlightening conversations and testing ideas with master class participants. My own personal experience, as either a sole or joint supervisor of 45 students who have successfully completed PhDs under my supervision, has also informed my thinking.

Before going further, it is worth clarifying what is meant by joint supervision. Joint supervision occurs when two or more people are involved in supervising a student through his/her research project for a research degree such as a PhD. The most likely scenario is a main/principal/primary supervisor and an associate/secondary supervisor. It can also involve co-supervision and in particular co-supervision across institutions in the case of a jointly awarded degree or with somebody from industry. These two situations raise further complications of joint supervisors being at different locations and even in different time zones, making face-to-face meetings of supervisors difficult and rare. Joint supervision may involve more than two supervisors and membership of the supervision team may evolve as the research project itself evolves.

Joint supervision is more complex than sole supervision because more relationships are involved. New supervisors can find joint supervision difficult because of these complexities, many of which they may be unaware of. Hence the need for supervision education in the art of joint supervision.

This paper aims to answer the question, what advice should we give to supervisors involved in joint supervision. It gives a personal view of what good practice in joint supervision looks like. Like any relationship, it needs good communication, alignment of expectations and mutual respect to make it work well. It is worth the effort because when joint supervision breaks down, it is usually the student who suffers.

There are a number of books that provide advice on how to supervise graduate research students. Typically they don't contain a lot of advice on how to make joint supervision work. Exceptions are Taylor & Beasley (2005) who devote a whole chapter to this topic and Phillips & Pugh (1987) whose handbook for students and supervisors is now in its sixth edition (Phillips & Pugh, 2015). The more recent editions of Phillips and Pugh's book have had more to say on this topic than have earlier editions, perhaps reflecting the increased importance of the topic and the associated growing literature. Much of the journal literature is positioned in a particular discipline and is based on observations

made for a specific country's doctoral system often as applied in one particular institution. This paper aims to provide generic advice that applies to doctoral supervision in any country that follows the UK or European doctoral model.

The plan of the paper is as follows. The next section gives a number of reasons why joint supervision has become so popular. Gatfield's (2005) classification model different styles of supervision is outlined in Section 3. Section 4 itemises the issues and problems that can occur while Section 5 provides direct advice for supervisors on how to make joint supervision work.

2. Why has joint supervision become more popular?

Across the world there has been a trend away from the single supervisor, particularly for doctorate degrees, to joint supervision. The United States was an early mover to a team approach with the advent of advisory committees. Another popular model, particularly in countries which adopted the UK or European doctoral model, is the two supervisor approach with a main/principal/primary/lead/first and associate/secondary supervisor. There is also evidence (see Pole, 1998) of joint supervision being more prevalent in the natural sciences and engineering than in the arts and social sciences. Reasons for having multiple supervisors include:

- i. as a backup in case one of the supervisors (particularly the main supervisor) can no longer supervise or moves to another institution (Moses, 1984), something that seems to be happening a little more regularly than in the past;
- ii. as a backup in case a supervisor goes on leave, falls ill or is overloaded with other duties (labelled the "academic relay team" by Paul, Olson & Gul, 2014, also see Ives & Rowley, 2005);
- iii. to allow new supervisors to be mentored in the art of supervision by an experienced supervisor (Phillips & Pugh, 1987);
- iv. to provide better coverage of the key academic areas under study, this may be disciplinary coverage in an interdisciplinary study or disciplinary and research methodology coverage (Phillips & Pugh, 1987);
- v. to give the student access to somebody who can give them a second opinion about aspects of their research (Frame & Allen, 2002 and Taylor & Beasley, 2005);
- vi. to possibly extend the range of supervisory styles the student is subjected to and improve the chances of matching the needs of the student (Moses, 1984, Cullen et al. 1994 and Taylor & Beasley, 2005);
- vii. in some cases, to enable a division of labour in supervision, perhaps allowing the main supervisor to cope with a larger number of students (Taylor & Beasley, 2005);
- viii. to take the practice of supervision from being a largely private activity (between student and sole supervisor) to being more of a professional activity (Manathunga, 2005, 2012);
- ix. if issues of an interpersonal nature begin to emerge between the student and a supervisor, then it allows the possibility of another supervisor acting as a mediator to help diffuse the situation (Lahenious & Ikävalko, 2012 and Paul, Olson & Gul, 2014);
- x. to allow the student to tap into a broader range of resources and networks (Lahenious & Ikävalko, 2012);
- xi. to provide an expanded network that may help in finding appropriate examiners (Paul, Olson & Gul, 2014); and
- xii. to improve the chances of the student completing and completing more quickly than solely supervised students.

Reasons i, iii and iv have long been identified and used to justify joint supervision. Reason viii became evident to me when Monash University introduced a requirement that all students have at least two supervisors. An academic who was a student at the time, recently told me that the appointment of a second supervisor was like bringing sunshine on to a student-supervisor relationship that had been troubling and difficult for her. I have personally experienced reasons x and xi on a number of occasions. Humphery (2011) presented evidence in support of reason xii. His 2011 University of Newcastle (UK) study was based on data from the 2004 cohort of students in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, which contained a mixture of solely supervised students and jointly supervised students. He found that 54% of students who had supervisory teams submitted within 4 years compared to 32% for students with a single supervisor. Also a higher proportion of students with sole supervisors had withdrawn from their degree. Further evidence to support xii may be found in Ives & Rowley (2005).

3. Different styles of supervision

An important element in answering the question raised in the introduction is to understand that there are different styles of supervision. New supervisors have really only come across the style(s) in which they were supervised, so it can come as a shock to work with somebody with a completely different style.

Gatfield (2005) has proposed a simple but very helpful model of different supervisory styles. He examined 60 significant research articles and books on the topic of PhD supervision. With the help of two senior experienced supervisors, he identified 80 variables that were considered important with respect to successful completion of a PhD. These variables were clustered into eight groups which were then classified into three factors, namely “structural”, “support” and “exogenous”. Based on Blake & Moulton’s (1964) management grid which classified management styles using a graph with two axis, namely “concern for people” and “concern for production”, Gatfield proposed a similar model for supervision styles with “support” (for the student) on the y-axis and “structure” on the x-axis. Different combinations of low or high “support” and “structure” leads to four different supervisory styles which Gatfield (2005, pp317-8) describes as follows.

“Laissez-faire Style

- Low structure low support
- Candidate has limited levels of motivation and management skills
- Supervisor is non-directive and not committed to high levels of personal interaction
- Supervisor may appear uncaring and uninvolved

“Pastoral Style

- Low structure high support
- Candidate has personal low management skills but takes advantage of all the support facilities that are on offer
- Supervisor provides considerable personal care and support but not necessarily in a task-driven directive capacity

“Directional Style

- High structure and low support
- Candidate highly motivated and sees the necessity to take advantage of engaging in high structural activities such as setting objectives, completing and submitting work on time on own initiative without taking advantage of institutional support
- Supervisor has a close and regular interactive relationship with the candidate, but avoids non-task issues

“Contractual Style

- High structure high support
- Candidate highly motivated and able to take direction and to act on own initiative
- Supervisor able to administer direction and exercises good management skills and interpersonal relationships
- Most demanding in terms of supervisor time.”

He also notes that while supervisors may have a preferred style, they may move between styles depending on the circumstances and their perceived needs of the student. His classification of twelve very successful supervisors in a Business Faculty at an Australian university revealed that ten provided high support and ten provided high structure with a total of nine being classified as “contractual”.

When presenting to supervisors on how best to jointly supervise, I find it helpful to outline Gatfield’s model and invite discussion. That often leads to the question of what is the best style to aim for. The language Gatfield uses does suggest “contractual” is best although being demanding of a supervisor’s time is often seen as a negative. In my view, supervising a PhD student has considerable parallels with project management, particularly if there are human subjects and/or non-trivial resources involved. So I feel it is important to provide a high level of structure. With respect to support, that might vary from high support when needed and perhaps medium support most other times. Different students may require different levels of support

That supervisors can have vastly different styles provides the first part of the answer to the question raised in the introduction. The next two sections provide a deeper understanding of the issues that can be at play and strategies for minimising their harm.

4. Issues and problems that can occur

There are a range of issues and problems that can occur in joint supervision. These include:

- i. different supervisors give conflicting advice (Phillips & Pugh, 1987);
- ii. the student finds the diversity of opinions expressed by different supervisors to be confusing, unsettling and difficult to negotiate (Guerin & Green, 2015);
- iii. the student finds he/she is unable to satisfy two supervisors who disagree;
- iv. requires both the student and supervisors to have reasonable negotiation skills (Guerin & Green, 2015, Paul Olson & Gul 2014);
- v. nobody in the supervision team takes overall responsibility for the thesis project as a whole, so that no one has an overall view of the thesis (Phillips & Pugh, 1987);

- vi. the student plays one supervisor off against another (Phillips & Pugh, 1987);
- vii. supervisors have different personalities and do not get on well;
- viii. supervisors have different expectations of what their role should be (Taylor & Beasley, 2005);
- ix. supervisors use their roles as supervisors to score points off each other as part of their own power struggles to the detriment of the student (Phillips & Pugh, 2015);
- x. one (or more) of the supervisors abdicate their responsibilities, often because of a disagreement;
- xi. the student feels ganged-up-on in supervision meetings with multiple supervisors and finds it difficult to argue his/her case (Phillips & Pugh, 2015);
- xii. conflict between an academic supervisor and an industry supervisor with the former being concerned with academic rigour and what the examiners might say while the latter may be more concerned with the potential benefits to practice (Taylor & Beasley, 2005);
- xiii. typically results in an increased academic workload compared to sole supervision (labelled “meetings, bloody meetings” by Paul, Olson & Gul, 2014); and
- xiv. an increased difficulty in arranging times for everyone to meet.

In my experience, issue i does happen reasonably often. Guerin & Green explore issue ii in great detail and bring to our attention the difficulties students can have in dealing with the diversity of opinion that can come from multiple supervisors. Issue iii is more likely to occur when there are two main/principle supervisors of equal standing, something that occurs in jointly awarded degrees with each institution appointing a co-supervisor. There is then a real temptation for each of the co-supervisors to be concerned only about that part of the project physically conducted at their institution. Phillips & Pugh (1987) warn students about this difficulty with having two main/principle supervisors. Issues xiii and xiv are rather obvious but surprisingly are rarely mentioned in the literature. My experience is that busy supervisors will raise xiii as a reason why they shouldn't be forced to have a second supervisor.

5. Making joint supervision work: Advice for supervisors

My view is that the three key aspects to making co-supervision work are communication, aligning everybody's expectations and having respect for the views and opinions of your fellow supervisors. I also believe that good supervision does boil down to two important attitudes that need to be maintained. The first is respect by the supervisors to the student and the second is that the student always trusts his/her supervisors.

An important first step when a new student starts his/her work is to agree on who has what roles and responsibilities and get them written down. While this may appear to be the responsibility of the main supervisor to do this, it can also be done by any member of the supervision team. So if you find yourself as a junior member of a supervision team not knowing what is expected of you, then you may have the most to gain by doing the following. First make a list of the topic/subtopic areas in the proposed project and also the responsibilities of the supervision team. The latter usually can be found in a university document, Monash University has its Code of Practice for Supervision of Doctoral and Research Masters Students. Then call a meeting of the supervisors to go through your list and agree on the assignment of responsibilities. If everyone has the list in front of them, this could be done by a phone hook-up if necessary. The next step is to document the decisions made and share your deliberations with the student allowing him/her to provide feedback. A variation is to add the

responsibilities of the student to the document. Make sure the final document is available to everybody, all supervisors and the student.

A related task is to agree early on how the supervision meetings will work. Not all meetings need all supervisors to be present, so work out how often each of the individual supervisors should meet with the student and how often there will be meetings involving all the supervisors. In the case of supervision across significant distances, you need to agree on what video conferencing platform will be used for virtual meetings. The team needs to make sure everyone has access to the appropriate software and hardware for the selected platform in anticipation of these meetings.

There should also be clear expectations about written work and which supervisor will respond and in what timelines. If you find you need to deliver some critical comments to the student, resist the temptation to do this by email. Such comments are best delivered in a face-to-face meeting (real or virtual) or by telephone if a face-to-face meeting is not an option.

It is very good practice to ask the student to take notes at supervision meetings and email a summary back to all supervisors as a record of the meeting. You can help this process by providing a template for the student to follow. For example, the template might take the form of a series of headings the student is asked to address such as: time and date of the meeting and who was present; what was discussed; who (student, supervisor) promised to do what by when, and time, date and place of the next meeting.

If conflicting advice is given, supervisors need to sort out amongst themselves any conflict and then give consistent advice. The first step in doing this is knowing that it has happened. It is surprising how often it does happen, so it is worth telling the student in those early meetings that they are responsible for informing members of the supervision team if conflicting advice is given. The supervisors then need to discuss what the solution to this conflicting advice should be, do not assume the student will be able to sort it out. If you find it difficult to agree, then look back to the roles and responsibilities document and see who has responsibility for supervising that area of the project. If that does not work, you will need to look for a way to break the deadlock such as who is the most experienced supervisor or getting an independent opinion from a senior colleague. A related issue is that all members of the supervisory team need to recognise that the diversity of opinions expressed by different supervisors, can be confusing, unsettling and difficult to negotiate as recently highlighted by Guerin & Green (2015). They recommend having agreed procedures for handling this issue.

Project plans complete with a timetable should be drawn up and be available to all supervisors. They should be seen as working documents that are subject to review and adjustment. Timelines should be added to this plan as they are agreed. There will be some timelines that will be imposed by the institution such as confirmation of candidature or defence of the project proposal. These are good times to review how the supervision arrangements are going and whether they need changing. I believe it is very helpful to plan a review of how supervision is going every six months for full-time candidates, with the review fitting in with institutional timelines where possible. The aim is to have these review dates set in advance so they are not done as a reaction to a crisis. The roles and responsibilities document could also be reviewed at these times. Typically, it need not be too time consuming, but make sure the student can raise any issues no matter how large or small. In particular, this is a good time to check with the student whether he/she is experiencing any difficulties with diverse opinions from different supervisors.

There might be times when two or more supervisors need to read a major draft and then have a private discussion before giving agreed comments back to the student. This is to avoid giving conflicting or different advice.

You should respect your fellow supervisors for their ideas, views and approach. They may see something that you don't notice and you will learn from working with your colleagues, no matter whether they are early career researchers or nearing retirement. Good research requires attention to detail, so the more 'attention' a piece of research gets the better.

Finally, remember ultimately it is the student who suffers if things go wrong. Don't become an absentee supervisor. Over the years, I have seen many students who are willing to say that they rarely see one of their supervisors and that they are a supervisor only on paper. If you are finding you are losing touch with one of your students, take the initiative to get back in contact.

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