EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the 2021 Research World Café, we asked researchers, ‘How can we enhance the quality of our higher degree supervision?’ The discussion elicited a diverse range of responses:

First, researchers questioned how the University measures ‘quality supervision’. They also discussed how the supervisors themselves view quality supervision, both individually and as members of a supervision team.

Second, researchers discussed how institutional policies, practices, and systems facilitate or hinder quality supervision. These included workload concerns, improving training and development opportunities for supervisors, and flexible and innovative models of HDR study.

Third, researchers generated ideas about how the University can attract quality HDR students and improve the student experience.

DETAILED SUMMARY

Researchers (N = 66) from all Colleges participated in this discussion. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of comments captured by each statement.

Questions about the University’s measure of ‘quality’

1. How did you determine that there was a problem with the quality of our supervision? ‘It’s not clear what the problem is with quality of supervision.’ (2)
2. We need a definition of high-quality supervision. (2)
3. What are the metrics? (2)
   - Time to complete
   - Quality publications
   - Examiner grades
   - Measure of student satisfaction
4. University focuses on deadlines. Maybe we should focus more on the production of quality outputs?

From their perspective, a quality supervisor...

1. Sees HDRs as apprentice researchers
   - Understands that they are different than undergrads
   - Integrates students into a research team
2. Provides ‘safe’ support
3. Suggests rather than tells students what to do
4. Is...
   - approachable
   - proactive
   - responsive
   - flexible
   - reflective
5. Encourages collaborative relationship, not just solely expert–student
6. Ensures the students’ projects align with their expertise (2)

7. Actively encourages student development
   - Upskilling students quickly
   - Encouraging students to develop and give mock presentations (2)
   - Giving student opportunities to achieve milestones that they can be proud of (e.g., a conference presentation or a journal article)
   - Ensuring students have the skill set to make sure their PhD is a success
   - Provides experience in different ways (e.g., workshops)
   - Provides stewardship/mentorship

8. Puts systems into place for student success, such as
   - Weekly meeting with students (2)
   - Offering timely communication and constructive feedback (2)
   - Encourages students to take notes in meetings
   - Benchmarking along the way, not just milestones (2)
   - Acknowledging common issues across milestones
   - Contingency planning for ethics delays, delays in data collection
   - Sets clear expectations and manages students’ expectations (4)
   - Ensures all supervisory team is engaged

9. Thinks beyond the PhD by encouraging students to...
   - Develop a funding success track record
   - Develop a publication track record (5)
   - Develop connections with industry
   - Develop career pathways (4)
   - Get professional experience where appropriate
   - Obtain international experience through exchange programs so they are internationally competitive
   - Provide information to students about exit pathways

10. Tailors their supervision to the needs of their students
    - Has multiple models for different students and funding requirements (2)
    - Provides creative supervision (e.g., engages beyond supervision, considers supervision as bigger than the supervisory relationship) (2)

What does a quality supervision team look like?

1. Consider the composition of the supervisory panels
   - How the team is chosen and their expertise is important. Who oversees this process and approves panels? (4)
   - Multidisciplinary and avoid silos (4)
   - Include all career stages, provide opportunities for ECRs (4)
   - At least three supervisors, increase role of associate supervisors (2)
   - Increase industry supervision to better align the research outcomes with industry needs (2)

2. Flexibility with supervisory roles
   - Supervisors need to take a collegial approach
   - Panel with supervisors popping in and out

3. Create a culture of group supervision (2)
   - Group-based community of supervision
   - Groups of students help each other, develop critical feedback skills
Workload issues and incentives

1. Workload model issues
   - Workload model rewards only quantity, not quality of supervisions (3)
   - Supervision time and effort needs to be better valued. Need to be able to allocate time in advance. (5)
   - Better recognition/counting of supervision in academic workloads. How many supervisions is too much?
   - Is there a systemic problem that in taking on more supervision you have to reduce other activities?
   - Need to reward HDR supervision in the workload model

2. All supervisors need to be named and acknowledged (e.g., at graduation)

3. Supervising the supervisors. There is no accountability. Include in performance reviews. (3)

4. Reward quality supervision in traditional (e.g., promotion, conferences, future employment) and non-traditional ways (e.g., car park, extra college awards, other incentives). (3)

Supervisor training & development

1. ‘As a supervisor, you don’t know what you don’t know’. Is there a need for competency mapping for supervisors? (2)

2. Suggestions to improve supervisor training:
   - Needs to reflect disciplinary differences. (3)
   - Move beyond checkbox approach.
   - Consider making mandatory (i.e., every 2 years).
   - Needs to be seen as high value to the researcher.
   - Tailored to student project/needs (e.g., traditional academic project vs. industry-based project). (2)
   - Incorporate soft skills training (e.g., how much support is too much? Managing supervisor’s expectations of students)

3. Developing best practice for supervisors.
   - Learn from peers and create a community of practice for supervisors, ideally catered. (6)
   - Need benchmarks and guidelines.
   - What are good supervision models and how might these be understood at different discipline levels?
   - Get supervision award winners to present on their style, philosophy, challenges, and successes. (2)

Institutional considerations

1. Systems improvements needed for Inspire

2. Flexible and innovative models of HDR study
   - Part-time study
   - Scaffold HDR degrees with coursework, if needed/wanted. (2)
   - Interchangeable components, non-linear approach.
   - Industry-focused and/or industry-based. (3)
   - Consider different pathways (e.g., traditional vs. industry-based).

3. Considerations for entry pathways
   - More efforts to retain students completing other degrees at Flinders (e.g., Honours, Masters). (2)
   - Develop a straight to Masters program from undergrad, with two streams: (i) Industry-focused Masters, and (ii) Traditional Master to PhD conversion program.
   - Improve pathways for students to do 18-unit research projects, which lead to HDR opportunities.
   - Extend entry requirements to look beyond GPA to accept students who are reliable, solid, and committed.
Improving how we attract HDR students

1. Improve the website to attract prospective students and provide information about different pathways. (2)
2. Clearly communicate the benefits of completing a PhD. (5)
3. What is the university’s point of difference for attracting HDRs?
4. Communications need to appeal to diverse audiences (e.g., first generation, Indigenous, gender, age, race, non-traditional backgrounds). (3)
5. Recognise that students are attracted to industry/subject, not Flinders per se.

How can we better attract students from undergraduate courses?

1. Understand disciplinary differences
   - Health Science students focused on getting into medicine not postgrad degrees
   - Engineering students can make money; why do a PhD?
   - Students drawn to professional courses rather than HDR courses in certain Colleges
   - Financial support for students is critical (e.g., more HDR scholarships, top-up funding, co-funding from industry). (7)
   - Choose quality projects; impactful research that brings in funding.
   - Facilitate a positive research culture.
   - Better engagement in finding HDR students and matching them with supervisors. (2)
   - Use Teaching Specialists as HDR supervisors to increase supervision capacity in high growth areas. (2)
   - Need to ensure continuity of supervision for students (e.g., if supervisor leaves university or is no longer able to supervise). (2)
   - More diverse faculty will allow us to better respond to the diverse lives and needs of the HDR cohort.
   - Refine recruitment processes to increase the quality of HDR students. (3)
   - We need to provide better language support for HDR students. (2)
   - Improve research training for students.

Improving the student experience

1. Give students a vibrant experience
   - Increased culture and inclusion of HDRs, within the university and at the college level. (3)
   - Provide university funding for HDRs to run social events or community projects.
   - Important for HDRs to form networks with other students to develop their skills and also provide social support. The students need to feel part of a team, this team can be multilevel (i.e., supervisor, lab, discipline, uni). (6)
2. A shared space is really important—allows for learning, social interactions, collaborations, reduced isolation, etc. (4)
3. Embed HDR voices more broadly and increase consultation for HDRs. (2)