

United Kingdom

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Abstract

The single supervisor model was dominant from the inception of the PhD in the UK in 1917 through to the 1980s. But then a series of developments led to the widespread introduction of team supervision in the late 20th and 21st centuries. This chapter seeks to 1) outline these developments in the context of the emergence of a national framework for team supervision 2) consider how that framework has been implemented by institutions and 3) look at evidence of its effectiveness from the perspectives of supervisors and candidates. The main conclusion is that, while team supervision is formally the norm in the UK, sole supervision may still be prevalent and operating under the radar.

Keywords

Co-supervision, eligibility to supervise, national framework, sole supervision, team supervision, United Kingdom.

Introduction

The research doctorate came late to the UK; it was only in 1917 that the first PhD (in fact DPhil.) programme was established in Oxford, which was quickly followed by other UK universities (Simpson, 1983). In terms of supervision, the arrangement adopted was that to have a single supervisor for each student. This was, of course, the original apprenticeship model pioneered in Berlin in the early 19th century and exported over the globe, and one which could be easily grafted onto the Oxbridge one-to-one tutorial system. However, just over a century later, team supervision has at least formally become by far the dominant supervisory arrangement in the UK.

The present chapter seeks to 1) outline the national framework for team supervision; 2) consider how it has been implemented in institutions; and 3) look at evidence of its effectiveness from the supervisor and candidate perspectives.

The national framework

From very early days of the doctorate in the UK, serious concerns were expressed about the dangers of reliance on a single supervisor (see Simpson, 2009), ones which memorably surfaced much later in the Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, 105), which concluded that:

...universities do not take their responsibilities for the organisation of postgraduate study seriously enough. Apart from the general lack of formal training and seminars, there is also the problem of the negligent supervisor...in many cases, research students feel neglected and uncertain what they can do about it.

But, if there were problems, they were brushed under the carpet, and the single supervisor model remained dominant in the university sector.

However, this model was not deemed appropriate for other higher education institutions created from the 1960s onwards in the UK, principally the polytechnics. These did not initially have their own degree awarding powers, but awarded degrees validated by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). The latter regulated not just the standards of awards, but their quality also and drew up common rules and regulations. These included (CNAA, 1983, 6.1) that ‘normally two supervisors must be appointed’, with a Director of Studies (main supervisor) and one or more second supervisors. The intention was that students should have access to more than one source of support and then have a safety net in the event of issues or problems with the other member of the supervisory team.

In 1992, legislation was passed to enable the polytechnics to apply to become universities, which raised a number of funding and organisational issues relating to postgraduate education. These were investigated in the so-called Harris Report (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 1996), the remit of which included the quality of research degree provision. The Report recommended (Box 3b) that all institutions should make suitable arrangements for supervision, including ‘pre-specified, appropriate back-up supervisory arrangements (in case these become necessary for whatever reason)’. It also recommended that this should be embodied as part of a code of practice for research degree programmes to which adherence would be monitored by a new single quality agency.

In 1997, the higher education sector as a whole established the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to take responsibility for the quality assurance of educational provision. One of its first initiatives was to consult over a code of practice for research degree programmes (QAA, 1999). This advised institutions to consider, in the event of team supervision, whether one supervisor should be designated as the first point of contact and what alternatives should be available in the event of the supervisor(s) being unable to act for a temporary or extended period (QAA, 1999, p.15).

But, in the second edition of the Code (QAA, 2004, p.14), it was stipulated that, as well as a main supervisor, ‘...he or she will *normally* [emphasis added] be part of a team’. This change was justified on the grounds (QAA, 2004, p.14-15) that it would give the student access to a multi-faceted support network and that participation in a team would provide ‘... valuable staff development and grounding in the skills necessary to become an effective research supervisor’.

Subsequently, the QAA (2007, p.8) undertook a special review of research degree programmes which looked into team supervision and found that ‘Most institutions now have supervisory teams, generally comprising two or three people’. But this did not include all institutions; between 2009 and 2011 institutional audits by the QAA (2012, p.14) found three institutions where ‘in some cases research students were being supervised by an individual supervisor, a practice inconsistent with the guidance in the Code’ and recommended that they ‘...review their arrangements to ensure they were securing the advantages of a team approach to supervision’.

In the third edition of the Code (QAA, 2014, p.18), ‘normally’ was abandoned and substituted by ‘Every research student *has* [emphasis added] a supervisory team’. Similarly, the fourth edition of the Code (QAA, 2018, p.8) specified that, ‘In addition to the main supervisor, there *will be* [emphasis added] a supervisory team which will encompass the breadth of academic, pastoral, and skills knowledge and experience.’

So, over a period of years and in accordance with successive editions of the Code of Practice, team supervision became a national expectation in the UK.

Institutions

However, higher education institutions in the UK are self-governing, and are not necessarily compelled to follow national guidelines, even where set by a body established by the sector as a whole. In order to see what the position was at the institutional level, in 2022 a survey was undertaken of the rules and regulations on the external websites of the 150 institutions offering doctoral programmes. In four cases, information was only available on staff intranet sites, leaving a main dataset of 146 institutions, 97% of the total.

Mandatory team supervision

Of these institutions, only 10 (7%) did not have a formal requirement for team supervision. These included a number of smaller institutions specialising in the arts (where qualified supervisors may have been in short supply) but also five major research-intensive institutions which, despite national policy, had retained at least the option of the single supervisor model. But in 136 institutions, 93% of the total, team supervision was a formal requirement.

The form of team supervision

A further seven institutions gave no indication of what they meant by team supervision, leaving 129 where information was available. All but one stated that teams should normally be comprised of principal and secondary supervisors with the former having overall responsibility for the supervisory function, but with provision exceptionally for a third supervisor (e.g., in interdisciplinary or industrial doctorates).

The roles and responsibilities of supervisors

Many institutions defined these roles and responsibilities, as in the typical example below.

The University of Loughborough Doctoral College (2022) defines the roles of primary and secondary supervisors as:

The primary supervisor will be responsible for managing the doctoral researcher's overall research programme. They will:

- * Ensure the doctoral researcher has access to appropriate facilities and advice to pursue their programme, agreeing with the secondary supervisor and the doctoral researcher how the programme will be conducted including how the responsibilities of doctoral researchers and supervisors listed below will be discharged.
- * Ensure the doctoral researcher understands the progression requirements and the format and standard of work which is required of them...
- * Take the lead in advising the doctoral researcher on their transferable skills training requirements.
- * Be responsible for signing off any requests from the doctoral researcher for periods of study away from the campus...and ensuring the impact of any such arrangements on the research programme are clarified and documented if required.

- * Take the lead in the academic supervision of the doctoral researcher, unless the secondary supervisor has particularly relevant subject knowledge but is still developing their experience of supervision...

The secondary supervisor will normally provide additional academic expertise for the research degree programme and an alternative point of contact where the primary supervisor might be temporarily unavailable. Ideally, they should be willing to step in as primary supervisor should the original primary supervisor cease to be available for some reason, but it is recognised that this will not always be possible or appropriate...

Models of supervisory teams

Within this overall framework, a number of institutions specified different models of supervisory teams with different weightings attached to the input of supervisors depending upon the circumstances. A typical example is set out below.

The University of Durham (2022) defines four main models of team supervision:

- * equal co-supervision by subject experts

In this case, the supervisory team comprises only subject experts, each with an equal (50%) weighting in terms of the division of supervisory labour. This type of team is particularly appropriate where the research project is highly interdisciplinary or involves methodologies drawn from different disciplines.

- * unequal co-supervision by subject experts

Here, the team still consists of subject experts, but one is expected to undertake more supervision than the other(s). This may be because they are closest in subject expertise in relation to the research project and also act as the lead supervisor with the others contributing proportionately less. So, for example, supervisor weightings may be 60 for the lead supervisor and 40 for the other.

- * unequal co-supervision by subject experts and generalists

The third model is where one supervisor is an expert in the area of the candidate's research project and is usually the lead supervisor, while the other supervisor(s) is/are generalist(s) with experience in the broad area of the research. This model gives the candidate access to specialist expertise and to general advice while providing a back-up in the case of the absence of the lead supervisor. Weightings in this case often vary from 90:10 to 70:30.

- * unequal co-supervision by subject experts and experienced supervisors

The final model is where the team consists of a subject specialist, who is usually the lead supervisor, and one or more other supervisors who has/have considerable experience of successful supervision but not necessarily in the area of the candidate's research. This model may be employed when a candidate's topic is narrow so that only one supervisor can be identified and/or where a supervisor has very little or no supervisory experience themselves and can benefit from mentoring. Again, weightings here usually vary from 90:10 to 70:30.

Eligibility to supervise

Institutions also have responsibility for defining who is eligible to supervise, and in what capacities.

Data on eligibility was available for 133 institutions. For main supervisors; 87 (65%) stipulated that main supervisor had to be employed by the institution; 61 (46%) that they had to have undertaken appropriate training; 53 (40%) that they had to have experience of one or more completions (or if not were mentored by or apprenticed to an experienced supervisor); 52 (39%) that they had to have doctorates; and 47 (35%) that they had to be research-active.

For second supervisors, 44 institutions (33%) specified that they should be employed by the institution; 51 (38%) that they should have completed training; 40 (30%) that they should have doctorates; 30 (23%) that they should be research active; and there were no requirements in terms of previous completions.

In addition, a number of institutions had requirements of the supervisory team as a whole; in particular, 65 (48%) required that between them, the members of supervisory team had to have between one and three previous completions.

Training for team supervision

Team supervision can have many advantages for supervisors including learning from colleagues, enabling specialisation of support for candidates, sharing the load, providing cover for absences, and supporting professional development particularly where novice supervisors are paired with experienced ones (see for example Kalman et al, 2022; Robertson, 2019).

But it can also present challenges. The latter (Taylor et al., 2018) may include: intellectual disagreements; mismatches of expectations of the research project; conflicting expectations of supervisory roles; one or other supervisor abrogating their responsibilities to the detriment of the workload of the other; supervisors not liaising with each other and candidates falling through the cracks; clashes of supervisory styles; and personality clashes.

In order to maximise the benefits and minimise the challenges, as Guerin et al. (2015) and Fillery-Travis et al. (2018) have pointed out, team supervision demands a range of knowledge and skills beyond that required of the single supervisor and for that reason it might be expected that team supervision would feature prominently in professional development programmes for supervisors.

In 2017 the author (Taylor, 2018) undertook a web-based survey of the content of mandatory initial supervisor professional development programmes in 106 institutions for which relevant data was available, which found that less than handful incorporated managing team supervision. A similar pattern was found in the much smaller group of 39 institutions with mandatory development for established supervisors.

An attempt to repeat this investigation for 2022 proved abortive because during Covid many institutions removed descriptions of their professional development programmes from their public websites and made them only accessible online through staff intranets. But, in the few cases where it was possible to compare data in 2017 and 2022, the major changes in programmes appeared to be in relation to mental health and wellbeing and diversity, and team supervision was notable by its absence.

Rewards for team supervision

In the same 2017 survey, the author (Taylor, 2018) reviewed the inclusion of criteria relating to research supervision in academic promotion policies. Public information was only available for about half the institutions in the UK, of which nearly four-fifths included performance in research supervision in promotion criteria. But in the vast majority of cases the latter only rewarded academic staff with specified numbers of supervisions completed as first supervisors, and secondary roles were largely ignored.

Supervisors

In the past, there has been very limited literature relating to supervisors' views of team supervision in the UK (see for example Pole, 1998; Olmos-Lopez and Sunderland, 2017; Watts, 2010). But that has been recently rectified by a major survey study conducted by the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE, 2021). While it was based on a convenience sample which limits its overall representativeness, the survey attracted a large number of respondents, in all over 3,400, making it one of the largest of its kind.

Respondents were asked (UKCGE, 2021, p.29) whether they had participated in team supervision in the previous five years; 30% said that they had 'always' participated in team supervision, 40% 'frequently', 17% 'occasionally', 6% 'rarely', and 6% 'never'. For a supposedly mandatory activity in nearly every institution in the UK, it is surprising that less than a third of respondents reported that they 'always' supervised in teams as opposed to 'frequently' or 'occasionally'.

The implication would seem to be that, while mandatory team supervision is formally an almost universal part of the regulatory framework, it is less so in practice. Further analysis of the data (UKCGE, 2021, p.29) suggested that the extent of this varied between universities in different mission groups, with those in the GuildHE and Million+ groups (predominantly the post-1992 institutions once regulated by the CNAAB) being significantly more likely to have team supervision than those in the Russell Group of research intensive universities (all pre-1992).

The UKCGE survey (UKCGE, 2021, p.30) asked respondents whether they felt that team supervision was beneficial for doctoral candidates; 30% strongly agreed, 35% agreed, 25% were neutral, 5% disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed, and 3% were unsure. Clearly, there was a substantial majority which felt that it was beneficial.

When asked why, the overwhelming response (84% of the sample) was that team supervision offered candidates a broader range of experience and expertise; as one supervisor (UKCGE, 2021, p.30) put it:

Alternative perspectives within supervision teams, particularly at the beginning of a PhD, helps the candidate situate their study within the field and helps them to determine their own path and independence (Anonymous).

The only other response of any significance (11% of the sample) was that team supervision by supervisors from different disciplines was important in supporting interdisciplinary research.

The survey also looked at the benefits of team supervision to supervisors themselves, which included sharing the burden of supervision and the development of supervisory skills through learning from each other. It found evidence that supervisors did learn informally from each other, as indicated in the quote below (UKCGE, 2021, p. 50):

... being part of a bigger team can be quite useful... So I learn from being involved with other supervisors and also discussions with colleagues. If I have a problem with my student, how will you deal with this? That's the sort of way of reflecting, I guess (STEM, RG, SE Mid-Career).

The survey also investigated the extent to which team supervision was used by institutions for formal learning purposes, in particular providing opportunities for new supervisors to be mentored by more experienced ones. This had been highlighted as good practice in three editions of the QAA Code of Practice (QAA, 2004, 2014, 2018), which recommended that institutions should consider adopting formal mentoring schemes. The survey (UKCGE, 2021, p. 50) asked respondents how often their institution had provided opportunities for less experienced supervisors to be part of a wide supervisory team: 16% of the sample said 'always', 43% 'frequently', 21% 'occasionally', 8% 'rarely', 4% 'never', while 7% were unsure. Again, there were differences between types of institutions with opportunities more likely to be 'always' or 'frequently' in the GuildHE and Million+ institutions than those in the Russell Group.

Candidates

In the absence of national survey data of the kind available for supervisors, it is difficult to determine the extent of the exposure of doctoral candidates to team supervision. However, a recent large-scale study of focus groups across a range of higher education institutions by Metcalfe et al. (2018, p.16) concluded that:

...accounts suggested that [team supervision] was not regarded as significant among... [Postgraduate Research Students] PGRs... Generally, PGRs in the focus groups talked more about their relationship with their supervisor than perceiving a supervisory team around them.

The implication of this is that, as with supervisors, team supervision is far from ubiquitous among candidates.

For those who are supervised in teams, it would appear that they echo their supervisors in terms of the main advantages of teams in terms of providing a broader range of experience and expertise (see for example McAlpine, 2013; Holmes et al., 2020; Olmos-Lopez and Sunderland, 2017). As one of the student respondents to Harrison and Grant's (2015, p.562) survey summarised it:

The diversity and strengths of each supervisor can assist and enrich various facets of the research as well as [the student] having access to the relevant contacts that each might have (student #45).

But the candidate literature also identifies a number of disadvantages. The principal one was disagreement between supervisors. So, for example, Deem and Brehony (2000, p. 160) quote one student as saying:

I have two supervisors and the problem is that they do not agree on what I should be doing. It has also been difficult to ... get them both at the same time to engage with my work... We've stopped meeting all three together because it has got nowhere.

These problems can be exacerbated with supervisors from different disciplines, as shown by the quote below from one of the student respondents to Wisker and Robinson's (2013, pp. 9-10) survey:

I had two doctoral advisors in the History department. One whose speciality was Victorianism and another who...specialised in European history, and ... [also one] in the English department... none of them agreed with the other, and I was constantly having to ... revise the same chapters according to these various demands.

Other issues identified by doctoral candidates interviewed by Olmos-Lopez and Sunderland (2017: 735) include personality clashes, problems in arranging joint meetings with very busy supervisors, lack of coordination, communication and involvement between them, and as reported by one of their respondents, supervisors holding back:

Both supervisors felt observed by each other and then [neither] of them dare[d] to give me exact directions or explicit pieces of advice... [neither] of them would do so because of feeling observed by his or her colleague... (Questionnaire respondent 12).

It would then seem that, as well as offering extra support, team supervision can have significant disadvantages for candidates.

Conclusions

The single supervisor model was formally dominant in the UK until the late 20th century when, under the influence of the CNAAs, the newer higher education institutions created from the late 1960s onwards adopted team supervision. When from 1992 onwards these institutions became universities, there was a divergence their practices and those of the older institutions, which attempts were made particularly by the QAA to close by strongly encouraging, and then requiring, team supervision.

Formally, that largely succeeded; by 2021, 93% of institutions had apparently made it mandatory. However, evidence both from the UKCGE (2021) survey on supervisors and that by Metcalfe et al. (2018) on candidates suggest that, while team supervision was relatively common across the higher education sector, it was by no means universal.

It is possible that this apparent disjuncture between the formal and the actual status of team supervision reflects the fact that, while team supervision may be mandatory within institutions, determining the form of it is left up to supervisors themselves as the best judges as to what is appropriate in the circumstances. This makes it entirely possible for two supervisors to be registered as a team with the institution, while the actual work of supervision is carried out virtually entirely by only one of them. So, in the UK, sole supervision may effectively still be widespread under the radar, i.e. the team supervision revolution is far from complete.

But, there is a large element of genuine team supervision reported by significant numbers of supervisors and candidates. This, as has been seen, can have advantages to both, but it can also

have disadvantages, particularly for the latter. In view of this, it is perhaps surprising that so few institutions deem it worth highlighting the issues in team supervision in professional development programmes or in establishing genuine mentoring schemes involving selection and training of mentors to support new supervisors through at least a first supervisory cycle. These are missed opportunities to make the best of team supervision for supervisors and candidates.

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