

CHAPTER 10

Flow of Communication in Postgraduate Research Team Supervision

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Introduction

The trend of interdisciplinary collaborative research is fast becoming a norm (Adams, 2012), as postgraduate research supervision nowadays often involves more than one supervisor from multiple disciplines. (Hakkarainen et al., 2014; Manathunga, Lant, & Mellick, 2006). The purpose of supervision, regardless of the number of supervisors involved, includes steering, guiding, and supporting postgraduate students through the research process and providing technical and emotional support. Effective supervision means that supervisors can establish good and professional relationships with students, provide support and guidance, and give continuous motivation and inspiration (Azure, 2016).

In other words, postgraduate supervision comprises intellectual, methodological and emotional elements. Hence, for the successful completion of a postgraduate study, an effective working relationship that is based on effective communication between the supervisor and the supervisee is critical (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Tahir et al., 2012). Managing more than one supervisor makes it even more challenging for a student in light of the individual differences within the team, which cannot be expected to be cohesive or harmonious all the time.

It is well-established that the communication students have with their supervisors and the connection built between the two substantially impact their research journey (Maor & Currie, 2017). For this reason, considerable attention has been given to describing student-supervisor communication relationships and strategies (Nasir & Masek, 2015; Prazeres, 2017; Abiddin et al., 2011) for successful postgraduate supervision. Today, with the increase in team supervision, it is essential to consider how communication should flow between a team of supervisors and the supervisee, given the intricacy of possible differences and conflicts in opinions and directions.

Hence, the aim of the chapter is to highlight some of the potential areas of conflict in communication when more than one supervisor supervises a supervisee and how these can be managed. Hence, this chapter also proposes a model for effective communication and successful supervision between supervisors and supervisors and supervisees. We anticipate that this model will help minimise, if not circumvent, the possible areas of conflict and ensure the well-being of the student and the successful completion of the study.

Roles and Effective Communication

The role of the supervisor in postgraduate supervision is to provide a rich and robust research and learning environment for the supervisee. A positive learning environment for a supervisee would depend on how a supervisor performs his/her roles as a coach, facilitator, mentor, planner, manager and any other roles that might be necessary for the supervision (Table 10.1). While performing the role of a supervisor, s/he should engage in a professional relationship with the supervisee that is conducive to scholarly activities and intellectual enhancement for the supervisee (James & Baldwin, 1999). While a clear understanding of the role of the supervisor and supervisee is mandatory in building a successful supervisor-supervisee relationship (Thompson et al., 2005) The successful execution of any of the roles depends on the effectiveness of communication between the supervisor and supervisee.

It is noteworthy to mention that the qualities of an effective supervisor depend on the supervisory styles, supervisory relationships, and attrition. Ambiguous and dissimilar assumptions and expectations on the part of the supervisor and the supervisee will give rise to problems in the supervisory relationship, hence the supervision outcome (Abiddin & Ismail, 2011). A supervisor is expected to be willing to be available to the supervisee when they need help and have the ability to give constructive feedback (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). Finally, counselling skills are available whenever necessary. Central to all these roles and tasks is the communication between the supervisor and the supervisee.

Table 10.1
Roles of Supervisor and Supervisee in Postgraduate Research Supervision

Roles of a Supervisor	Tasks and responsibilities
Coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify/refine research questions • Plan and refine project/research • Advise on critical aspects of the project/research • Being directive when needed
Facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor progress • Periodically review supervision arrangements • Devote sufficient time to the student
Mentor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor intellectual development • Encourage publishing, seminar and conference presentations • Encourage networking • Assist with career goals
Sponsor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure access to basic resources • Advise how to access funding • Update current policies and procedures • Update administrative needs • Provide access to expertise
Roles of a Supervisee	Tasks and responsibilities
Planner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an appropriate research and study plan • Set up a conducive study environment and follow a routine

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Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule supervisor-supervisee meetings • Keep a meeting/attendance record book (to record meeting dates and topics of discussion with the supervisor) • Maintain regular contact with the supervisory team • Manage regular progress report
Learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend relevant courses • Search and read materials for research • Attend workshops, seminars and conferences to build networking and to gain knowledge
Involver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of current policies and procedures – in particular, with the Senate Regulations and the Code of Conduct for Research • Respond to feedback and guidance provided by the supervisor • Act on any opportunities that are beneficial to research

Effective communication can be compromised in a variety of situations, such as irregular and infrequent communication, ineffectual communication, and gaps in linking the expectations of supervisor/s and supervisee. Infrequent and irregular communication can occur between the supervisory team and the supervisee because supervisors are mostly busy, supervisors are absent (sabbatical leave, going to retire or relocate to other institution), supervisors have no experience in supervising, and supervisors are from different fields (Reddy, 2017). Problems arising from these would be delayed feedback or no feedback from the supervisor, thus leading to non-progress or failure of the supervisee and his/her research. Frequent and regular communication is one of the keys to effective supervision of postgraduate research, which involves multiple layers of the supervision process. Misunderstandings from poor communication in the supervisory process should be avoided, as a problematic and conflicting supervisor-supervisee relationship can have a negative impact on the supervisee. (Reddy, 2017).

Ineffectual communication with the supervisor and a general lack of direction from the supervisor can also contribute to the failure of the supervisee. Hence, a “working alliance” between the supervisor and the supervisee from the start of the

supervision process, with frequent meetings, especially in the beginning, plays an important role. Supervisees are expected to have a clear idea about their research, share responsibility in the direction of the research and the methodology, be self-motivated, work consistently, be independent, have frequent meetings and develop an effectual relationship with their supervisors.

Supervisors and supervisees should communicate their expectations clearly so that their expectations can be met. The relationship between supervisors and supervisees is a shared responsibility. A great partnership can be formed between supervisors and supervisees when both parties understand what is expected of them. Early alignment of expectations between supervisors and supervisees is necessary for effective supervision.

Team Supervision and Its Composition

Team supervision, co-supervision and joint supervision are common terms used to define two or more academics who are formally appointed to supervise a postgraduate student upon enrolment until completion of study (Paul, Olson, & Gul, 2014; Olmos-López & Sunderland, 2014). In team supervision, academics from other disciplines or universities work as a team with the same objective: to supervise effectively despite possibly having contrasting viewpoints.

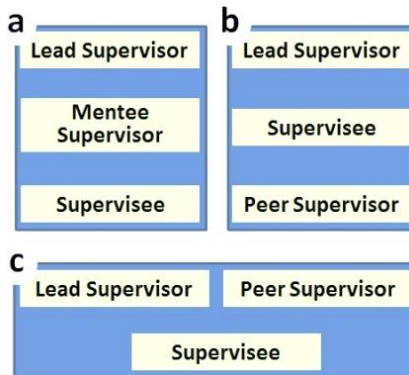
Several factors determine the composition of the supervisory team. Ideally, many universities promote the concept of “coaching” or “mentoring” team supervision (Manathunga & Goozée 2007), where at least one team member should have supervised to completion, and at least one supervisor is a novice who, although having expertise in the subject or method, has not previously supervised. In the context of the IIUM, Assistant Professors who have little experience in supervision are mentored by a chairman, either a professor or an Associate Professor.

Such a mentoring supervision team allows the option of status differentiation within the team, led by the experienced supervisor. The resulting hierarchy from the lead (or first) supervisor to the mentee supervisor to the research supervisee will likely result in a harmonious working relationship. It has a greater potential for smoother functioning compared to supervisory teams

of peer or equal status (also known as “horizontal”), where the issue of power dynamics is less clearly defined (Watts, 2010). Watts argued that a ‘horizontal’ team can be productive and positive within the team in a student-centred supervisory practice (Watts, 2010). The student-centred supervisory practice ensures comfortable working relationships, thus directly benefitting the student. However, this can only be achieved when the team of supervisors understand that student learning is the main aim of postgraduate education and can effectively negotiate differences in opinion (Paul, Olson, & Gul, 2014).

Figure 10.1a-c

Model of Supervision. (a) Mentoring Supervision Model, (b) Horizontal Supervision Model with Student-Centered Supervision Practice and (c) Horizontal Supervision Model without Student-Centered Supervision Practice



Therefore, in practice, supervisory teams may take on three different models, one being categorised as the mentoring model and the other two belonging to the horizontal model with or without student-centred supervisory practice (Figure 10.1).

Team Supervision and Its Advantages and Disadvantages

There are a number of advantages and disadvantages of team supervision. Among the advantages are: the new supervisor will

have the opportunity to learn from the experienced supervisor, the co-supervisor will cover the supervisor who needs to be away (sabbatical leave, attending a conference), the supervisee has a broader range of expertise available, and supervisors share the supervisory roles and tasks. On the other hand, the problem with team supervision includes differences in the opinions of supervisors, which could lead to disagreements. The supervisee then will have to deal with conflicting views, which, in the end, will affect the quality of the research and the study completion time (Guerin & Green (2015)

In team supervision, both the supervisee and the team of supervisors should clarify their expectations, as having different expectations is the most common cause of a troubled supervisory relationship. An effective working team is more accessible when the supervisee and supervisors are clear about their expectations of each other and comfortable about renegotiating expectations throughout the postgraduate supervision.

Pang (1999) recommended five key principles for developing effective team supervision:

- Establish clear-cut expectations in the group and allow the supervisee to be open about his/her fears of being confused by more than one supervisor.
- Trust and respect when views and perspectives differ.
- Supervisors should try to keep the supervisee away from departmental politics.
- Try to keep work and social times separate in the team (distinguish between supervisors and friends).
- Supervisors need to identify the extra pressures that team supervision puts on the supervisee and be particularly sensible and supportive.

In a case study, Guerin, Green, and Bastalich (2011) described different ways postgraduate students tried to manage conflicting advice from supervisors. Among them are working through differences at meetings and relying on the primary supervisor to set the direction or deciding which advice to follow. Based on the data collected, these researchers recommended three strategies for managing conflicting advice. The strategies include

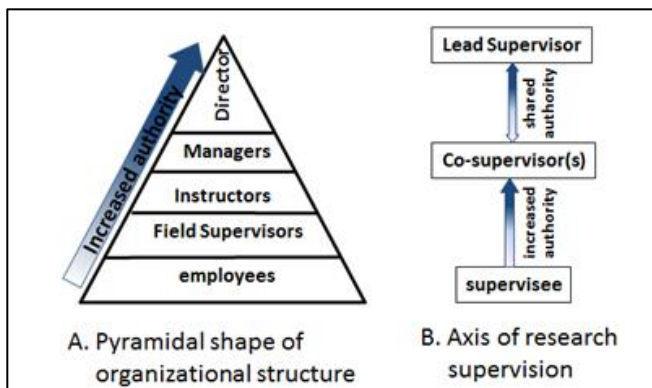
1) providing simultaneous multiple feedback verbally at a joint meeting, 2) providing successive feedback where the draft with track changes is sent to each supervisor in turn, and 3) providing selective feedback where feedback is sought only from the supervisor with the most relevant experience.

Areas of Conflict in the Communication Between More than One Supervisor

In a group involving more than one supervisor and a supervisee, there is always a lead supervisor (who might be called the main or first supervisor). If a pyramidal shape hierarchy in an organisational structure (Figure 10.2a) is applied in postgraduate research supervision, the lead supervisor and the supervisee remain at the two ends of the axis while the other supervisors (often designated as co-supervisors) remain at the middle of the axis (Figure 10.2b). However, unlike in the organisation hierarchy, in research supervision, the supervisory authority may not always necessarily need to follow the pyramidal shape of the organisational structure rather than a horizontal layering (Figure 10.1c).

Figures 10.2A and 10.2b

Model of Supervision: (a) Pyramidal Shape of Organisational Structure, (b) Axis of Research Supervision



Hence, the implications of following or breaking the chain of command in research supervision will vary compared to those in organisational workflow supervision. For instance, employees in an organisation often account for circumvention through supervisor inaction, supervisor performance, and supervisor indiscretion (Kassing, 2009).

In research supervision, the execution of a plan or decision to conduct a given research task is often implemented (or imposed to be implemented) by the supervisee. In supervision involving more than one supervisor, the target work and the relevant working plan may come from more than one supervisor. When the plans are complementary or supplementary, the outcome is productive. However, complications arise, and the outcome will be counterproductive if different supervisors advise or command the supervisee differently. Hence, the complications in effective and productive communication between the supervisee and more than one supervisor are linked to the fact that different supervisors of the same supervisee might differ in their opinions, working principles and approaches. Nonetheless, it is impractical to expect that all supervisors of a supervisee will share the same opinion or view regarding decision-making. This can be amicably resolved with the predetermined scope of authority in the decision-making process during the supervision.

In an organisational structure, authority is often unidirectional; increased authority comes with increased hierarchy. However, in research supervision, authority can be shared among the supervisors, i.e., between the lead supervisor and co-supervisor(s).

Flow of Communication Between Supervisors and the Supervisee

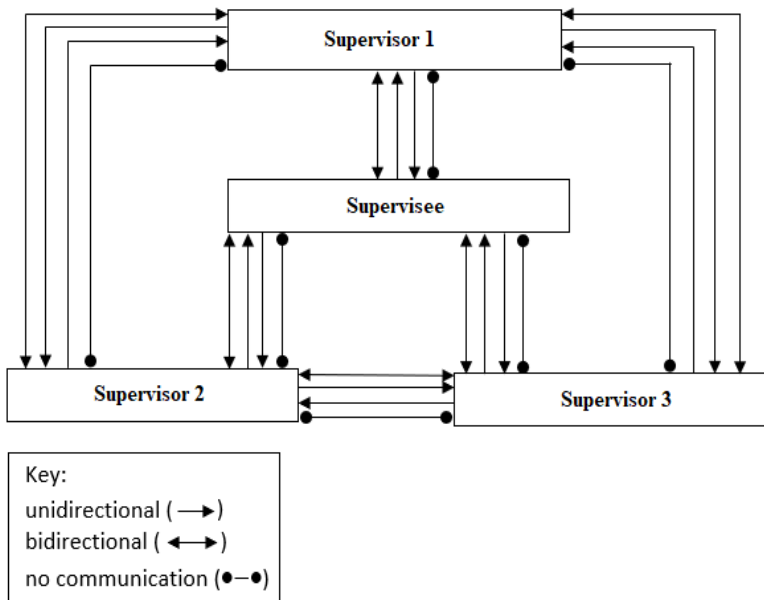
In group communication, any individual may communicate in a unidirectional (\rightarrow) or bidirectional (\leftrightarrow) manner or may choose not to communicate at all ($\bullet\text{--}\bullet$). Possible communication flows in a team supervision involving one supervisee and three supervisors are illustrated in Figure 10.3. Depending on the number of supervisors involved, there are enormous possibilities for establishing communication between the meteam members

There are four supervisory styles based on the direct/indirect and active/passive concepts (Gurr, 2001). They are:

- 1) Direct active, which is characterised by initiating, criticising, telling and directing the student,
- 2) Indirect active, which is characterised by asking for opinions and suggestions, accepting and expanding students' ideas, or asking for explanations and justifications of supervisee's statements,
- 3) Indirect passive, which is characterised by listening and waiting for the student to process ideas and problem solve, and
- 4) Passive, which is characterised by having no input and not responding to student's input.

Figure 10.3

Flow of Communication between Supervisors and the Supervisee

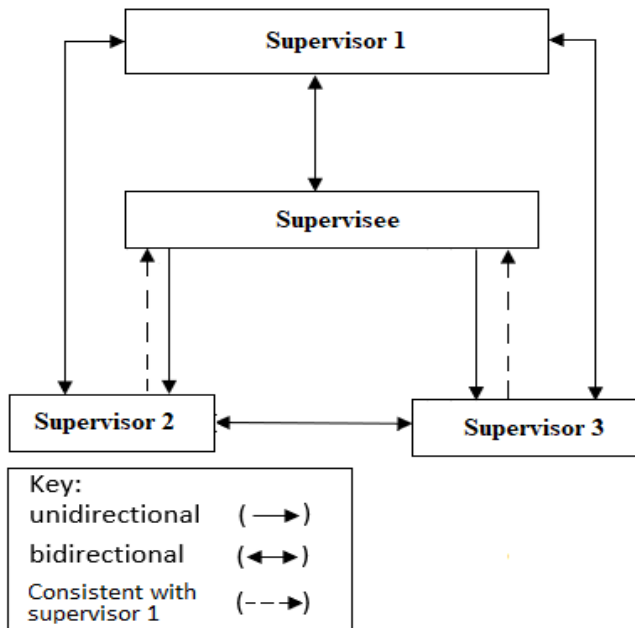


The decision-making process is never easy when it involves more than one individual. Grant (2001) identifies power issues as complicating postgraduate pedagogy. According to Grant (2001),

two aspects are relevant to supervision: structural power and relational power. In structural power, supervisors are more powerful than supervisees as supervisors are more knowledgeable and experienced researchers due to ‘their institutional position and functions’ (Grant, 2001, p.14). The supervisee would, therefore, feel powerless when making decisions. In relational power, supervisors and the supervisee can act upon one another, and thus, the supervisee is able to act out the supervisors’ authoritative commands and empowering guidance. “A power-balanced supervision relationship can improve the quality of theses or dissertations and, by implication, the quality of graduates” (Schulze, 2012).

Figure 10.4

Proposed Flow of Potentially Effective Communication Between Supervisors and Supervisee



According to Abiddin and West (2007a), postgraduate students have the right to decide as they own the research. They should become independent throughout the study, and supervisors

are needed to assist them. This would create an environment where the supervisee participates more in the decision-making, leading to a better relationship with the supervisors.

Unlike a supervisee working under a research grant, most supervisees are responsible for managing their work, from selecting the research topic and planning the research to writing the thesis. Nguyen (2016) demonstrates that the supervisee still holds ownership of the thesis while under the supervision of more than one supervisor. The study showed that the supervisee responded affirmatively to the supervisors' feedback and was free to voice opinions and make decisions. This creates an environment where the supervisee participates more in decision-making, leading to a better relationship with the supervisors.

Research on supervision has focused on the timely completion of a postgraduate study as funding requirements and completion rates are linked. The main reason for the non-completion of postgraduate study was problems with supervision. Manathunga (2005) identified four early warning signs that require supervisors to be alert during supervision. These are constantly changing the research topic/planned work, avoiding all modes of communication with the supervisor, isolating themselves from the institution and avoiding submission of work for review. Utilising an effective flow of communication would, therefore, eliminate communication problems, specifically in team supervision.

Postgraduate supervision is undeniably both rewarding and challenging. Grant (2001, p.13) stated that postgraduate supervision is "unavoidably a messy business because the process is entangled with power, desire and difference in supervision practices". Although supervisors and supervisees may have different expectations of roles, responsibilities, and abilities, the most important point is the involvement of the supervisors in interacting and communicating (Schulze, 2012). Both parties should communicate well to share experiences, perspectives and decision-making tasks.

As most of the problems in postgraduate supervision result from poor communication, there is a need to start a conversation early to set out expectations. Supervisors and supervisees should discuss agreeable modes of communication

and how frequent the communication should be to ensure the smoothness of supervision. Supervisors and supervisees should also discuss the challenges of using online communication and develop an alternative means of communication should technological difficulties be experienced.

Supervisors and the supervisee must share power to generate knowledge via negotiation and communication (Brew, 2006). As such, power dynamics in the supervision relationship vary throughout the postgraduate study as the supervisee progresses to become more knowledgeable and take charge of the research study. Postgraduate research supervision should not be seen as a service, as argued earlier, but rather as a relationship between supervisors and supervisees (Petre & Rugg, 2004). That relationship is expected to last for a lifetime.

The supervision process is a two-way communication between the supervisor and supervisee (Abiddin, 2007). One of the most challenging aspects of working with multiple supervisors is that there is usually a lack of communication between the supervisee and one of the supervisors. Lack of communication between supervisors and the supervisee will lead to misinterpretation of messages. Effective communication is essential to develop a positive supervisor-supervisee relationship. Good lines of communication need to be established right from the beginning; continued and open communication needs to be worked on, and regular meetings need to be scheduled to maintain effective communication.

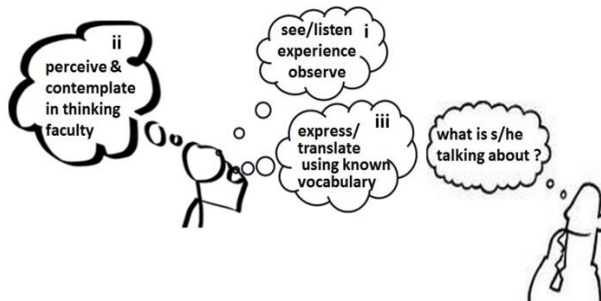
There are various modes of communication and methods of delivery, as suggested by de Beer and Mason (2009), such as face-to-face discussions/consultations, telephone communication, group discussions, e-mail communication, online chat/discussion, electronic file transfers, electronic databases, electronic calendars, electronic progress tools, websites and online courses. Nowadays, electronic media dominate communication modes, replacing much of the traditional, personal one-to-one supervision.

Tian and Singhasiri (2016) found that face-to-face supervision creates an opportunity for the supervisee to express his/her opinions and learn to make decisions despite supervisors' interventions. However, the use of online communication in combination with face-to-face interactions (supervision by

blended approach) ‘improves the supervision process’, ‘reduces the administrative workload of the supervisor’ and ‘creates a dynamic record of the supervision process’ (Beer & Mason 2009, p.213). Regardless of whether face-to-face communication, electronic media, or a combination of both is used, the supervisee needs to be effectively and efficiently supervised to ensure a favourable outcome. In other words, it is important for the supervisors to have good communication skills when engaging with the supervisee, be it face-to-face or via electronic media.

Finally, the communication skills of both the supervisor(s) and supervisee would determine the outcome of the communication. The main purpose of any communication has always been the exchange (i.e., transfer) of information (i.e., message) between the individual sending the message (i.e., the sender) and the individual receiving the message (i.e., the receiver). Whether or not a message is effectively communicated would depend on three steps of cognitive functions (or ability) of both the sender and the receiver, namely the ability to see, listen, observe, or experience (step 1); perceive and contemplate (step 2); and translate or express what has been observed or experienced in step 1 using the known vocabulary (step 3). Effective communication between two individuals depends on synchronising three basic steps (Figure 10.5). For effective communication, at the receiving end, the individual (receiver) must also listen to the expression and then perceive or contemplate what is being expressed by translating the expression using the known vocabulary.

Figure 10.5
Steps in Effective Communication



Conclusion

Team supervision not only provides the supervisee with access to a broader range of expertise and perspectives but also provides support to new supervisors by those who are more experienced. However, some aspects of team supervision can be challenging, including a lack of clarity about each member's role in the supervision process, leading towards disagreements and conflicts between supervisors with different views and a flow of inconsistent communication to the supervisee by multiple supervisors. It is more efficient and less confusing for the supervisee to receive instruction from the supervisor(s) who, among them, have bidirectional communication and reach a consensus on the instruction to be given.

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