Supervising students affected by language and/or distance: staff / student perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Many postgraduate computing students enrolled with Unitec New Zealand complete their dissertations or theses while living at such a distance from Unitec that face-to-face supervision is rarely, if ever, possible. A significant number of them have a first language other than English. This paper describes the challenges that this situation creates for students and their supervisors and identifies some strategies that may be used to maximise the learning support provided.

Keywords

Distance, learning, postgraduate, supervision, support.

1. INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate education has become a growth industry around the world in recent years. Last century the norm was that students would live near the institution offering the programme for all or most of the time that they were enrolled. It is now common for students to conduct their research at a distance from the institution and have few if any face-to-face meetings with their supervisors. Yet McKavanagh, Bryant, Finger and Middleton (2004) state that there is "little research relating to the role and use of ICTs [information and communication technologies] in the supervision of RHD [research higher degree] students".

Mahony (1997) conducted a SWOT (Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats) analysis of research supervision at a distance and identified a number of issues, including:

• Implicit expectations that postgraduate students are part of a group and will assist one another.

• University environment does not necessarily mirror the non-university environment in terms of expectations, deadlines, resources, etc.

• Presumption that the research degree program is the primary concern of the student.

• Pressure by employer/sponsor on students/university for deliverables.

• Increased need for student self-direction.

• Students vulnerable to distractions.

Wisker (2000) noted some issues that may occur in cross-cultural supervision:

• The need to consider power relations between supervisors and students.

• Students experience a cultural transition and one of levels of learning.

• Students need time to translate complex ideas.

• Much of the developmental work with students is carried out in facilitative/supervisory dialogues which involve a different kind of teaching and learning.

• The level of supervisory discussions may not match the level of the thought processes of either party.

She also observed that problems faced by part time students can be "exacerbated by distance and cultural differences" but "students closer to home can be too reliant on informal contact rather than systematic discussion of work done".

This paper considers how some of these issues are addressed in Unitec's postgraduate computing programme. It begins by outlining the context and indicating the scale of the problem. Then some of the strategies that students and supervi-

sors have employed are described. The effectiveness of each of these strategies is reviewed, based on questionnaires that were returned by nine of the 18 students who have completed at a distance and by eight of the nine supervisors who supervised the 18 students. Finally some general conclusions are drawn.

2. BACKGROUND

The Master of Computing (MComp) programme has proved popular with students from other parts of the country (Blake et al, 2004) and from many other countries, including China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Sweden and Thailand. MComp students must complete either 180 credits of coursework and a 60 credit dissertation or 120 credits of coursework and a 120 credit thesis. Normally a dissertation takes six to 18 months to complete and a thesis takes one to three years to complete, depending on how much time the students are able to devote to their research and writing (most are in full-time employment). At the time of writing, 30 students have completed, and 44 are at various stages of the process (from developing a research proposal to awaiting results).

Students must attend weekend classes (usually in Auckland) in order to complete their coursework, but there is no requirement that students reside in or near Auckland while conducting research for their dissertations or theses. In practice, many students must be supervised at a distance for the duration of their research. This creates significant difficulties for students who are fluent in English and can cause major problems for students who are not. Three Chinese, eight Norwegian and 17 German students have undertaken research in their home countries and 14 New Zealand students have undertaken research in centres remote from Auckland.

Unitec's research supervision code requires that each student is assigned at least two supervisors and has "frequent and regular contact" with them (Unitec New Zealand, 2003). The 42 "remote" MComp students have seldom if ever met their supervisors face-to-face during the research process, from initial proposal to final submission. To compound the problem three of our supervisors are based outside New Zealand (one in Australia, one in Hong Kong, one in Mexico) and another spends a lot of time in Peru (Joyce, Barbour, Fielden & Muller, 2003). All four use electronic means to communicate with their supervisees and the other members of the supervision team. The next section reviews strategies that students and their supervisors employ to bridge these significant geographical gaps.

3. STRATEGIES

For the past three years we have conducted a "postgraduate research forum" on Tuesday evenings, once or twice a month. Staff and students meet on-campus from 4:30pm to 6pm to discuss matters of mutual interest such as writing research proposals, conducting literature reviews, collecting and analysing data, writing up, and the examination process. We advertise these sessions well in advance and encourage all students to attend, whether they have completed, are under way or have not yet started their research. Initially we experimented with "video-streaming" so that remote students could view the sessions. It soon became clear that the technical problems and timing issues inherent in "live transmission" were such that it was better to record the sessions onto CD-rom and use "snail mail" for distribution.

Most remote students (and many Auckland-based ones) use email to send questions and drafts to their supervisors, and expect (or hope for) rapid responses. Most supervisors use email to answer questions from remote students, comment on their drafts and ask them about progress. Some students and supervisors are very prompt in responding to emails but others are not, particularly students in full time work and supervisors facing deadlines for assessment results or submission of research papers. The tempo tends to increase in response to external pressures, such as time limits for submission or enrolment.

Evans (1998) observed that "email communication allows both supervisor and student to be more independent in terms of their physical and temporal spaces". He argued that "rather than these approaches being second best means of supervising and supporting postgraduate students, they may represent a better means, and one into which on-campus students might well be integrated". Wisker (2000) noted that email can

be used for "conducting a variety of supportive dialogues" and that "e-mail discussions on work in progress are facilitated with a rapidity which would be difficult to match with face-to-face supervision".

Many supervisors use the visual "change tracking" facility of word-processing software in order to annotate student drafts with questions about the content or suggestions for improvement (the Unitec supervision code requires that supervisors stop short of rewriting the text). Some supervisors also ask students to use change tracking to identify additions and alterations to their drafts.

In situations where emails are not an effective or efficient means of communication, long-distance telephone calls can be used to clarify intentions, discuss complex issues or give encouragement. One supervisor has successfully used iChat (a cheap form of video-conferencing) with a student who has English as first language. However, it is likely that these synchronous methods will be less effective for students who "need time to translate complex ideas" (Wisker, 2000) and to reflect before responding to non-trivial questions (especially if there are significant cultural and language differences).

4. RESULTS

Four of the nine student respondents had attended a research forum. Demand for the electronic version of the research forum is growing - after the most recent session we had 11 requests for the CD-rom from students in Auckland, elsewhere in New Zealand, and overseas. Students who have used this service speak highly of its value to them. All respondents used emails: five students and three supervisors had sent more than 12 emails during the remote supervision process; the other four students and five supervisors had sent five to 12 emails. Email has proved effective in most cases: seven out of nine students and six out of eight supervisors said it was their preferred form of communication. It works particularly well when there is a significant time difference between the locations of the two parties, so that one party can consider how to respond to a query or suggestion and even do some research while the other party is asleep.

Three students and four supervisors had used telephone calls, which can be expensive but may prove necessary to deal with issues that are not easily resolved in writing and/or require a more personal touch. One student/supervisor pair used iChat instead and they were very positive about its advantages. Five supervisors had used "change tracking" to highlight problems or questions and six students had been "on the receiving end". Conversely, four students had used "change tracking" to identify changes and three supervisors had been "on the receiving end". Views were mixed, with some finding that it made documents hard to read and caused confusion with Endnote.

5. CONCLUSION

Joyce *et al.* (2003) state that "a supervision relationship is a formal academic conversation carried out over an extended period of time between at least two people". Any conversation can be problematic, particularly if there are cultural and language barriers between participants. In a supervision relationship there are also power issues to take into account. Geographical distance and pressure of other work can compound the problems caused by cultural, language and power differences. This combination of factors has created significant difficulties for some of our remote students: four out of 18 have been required by the examiners to make major changes in order to pass (an outcome which has only occurred with one local student out of 15).

In only two cases are we aware of remote students being able to enjoy the sort of mutual support and encouragement that on-campus students can give each other. Nearly all remote students struggle to cope with the pressures and the distractions created by their other (paid) work and their family/social lives. All too often a work deadline takes priority over requests from a distant supervisor for progress reports or changes to be made to a draft. Only when time limits for submission are very close does research become "the primary concern of the student". At such times students often expect very rapid feedback from their supervisors who must juggle other responsibilities. Many students become concerned when they do not get rapid responses to questions or detailed feedback on drafts.

In case the reader may be forming the impres-

sion that supervision at a distance is entirely problematic, it is important to conclude by noting that there are many positive aspects. These can include (for both parties) greater flexibility in the timing and duration of supervision conversations, reduced impact of distractions and interruptions, and more time to consider how to respond. Certainly the first author has been able to give more (and hopefully better) feedback to remote students in one year than he received during four years as a PhD student with his supervisors in the same building! However it is important that supervisors use a range of technologies (e.g. email, iChat, Skype, VOIP) and continue to be aware of cultural, language and power differences and of the impacts of distance and of work commitments.

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