

Strand E Case Study – An MA HEP module on ‘Postgraduate Research Supervision and Examination’

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A) Overview

A key area of work within the Courage Project was supporting the supervisory relationship. This case study summarises design and implementation of an elective module for the MA in Higher Education Practice (MA HEP) on ‘Postgraduate Research Supervision and Examination’. The MA HEP is a probationary course, with most academic staff undertaking the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice, or progressing to Diploma or full Masters degree.

B) Action taken

This module provided a pedagogical space for academics undertaking the MA HEP, to explore how research supervision can be experienced by both students and staff members. It examined recent changes in thinking about the research degree process and different strategies for enhancing the learning of postgraduate research students, deepening competency and independence. Learning was through a combination of seminars and independent learning. Intended outcomes were:

- An understanding of the variety of supervisory relationships and roles and behaviours that may be adopted by supervisors
- An awareness of how the cultural background, language and wider lifestyle and study choices of postgraduate research students may affect the supervisory relationship
- An ability to identify and reflect on strategies for improving student progress and competency over time
- An awareness of academic literacies and different opportunities and practices for effective postgraduate writing
- The ability to identify and critically evaluate the different methods of providing feedback to students on the progress, examination and publication of their work

The module was developed by the case study lead, initially as a pilot to run in 2018-19, in partnership with the Faculties of Arts and Humanities and Social Science. It recruited nine staff members in the autumn of 2018 (HUM: four, SSF: five). All staff were relatively new to postgraduate research supervision, either planning to

supervise for the first time in the near future, or having recently assumed the role of secondary supervisor. The module consisted initially of four sessions on: **Student and Supervisor Expectations and Motivations; Transition and Support; Developing Writing; Feedback and Examination.**

The module included a formative assessment component involving the production of multiple 'patches' feeding into a summative assignment. The assessment process was designed to draw on staff expectations of and experience in postgraduate research supervision, and wider understanding supervision as a form of teaching. Although the focus of this module was pedagogical rather than pastoral, the emphasis on expectations, motivations, transition and support allowed staff to explore the many reasons that students undertake research degrees, and the variety of backgrounds and study modes employed in an advanced degree course.

Following a successful review of year 1 (see Section C below), the module continued in year 2 (2019-20 academic year), when it was extended in content (see separate case study on Developing Wellbeing Content for the Professional Development of Research Supervisors) and opened to all staff undertaking the Certificate, Diploma or MA HEP from any Faculty or research institute at UEA. In Year 2, it drew teaching experience from across disciplines with contributions from senior staff in Faculties of Medicine & Health and Social Science, and also the Careers Service. This increased the teaching team to four people, each teaching a specific seminar on the module, and contributing to the assessments. The capacity of the module remained at 20, but a repeat of each seminar was placed in the MA HEP schedule for 2019-20 to allow alternative dates for staff with busy schedules. Rather than an autumn Semester module, in Year 2, the module ran for the full academic year, with submission dates for assignments reflecting the cycles of other modules on the course. This was intended to allow the students more preparation time alongside their other modules.

C) Impacts and outcomes

Year 1 mid-module review (Nov 2018)

The following key points were made:

What you think is good about the module/course so far? *Mix of colleagues and the background; different scenarios and situations that one might encounter; reflecting on practice in relation to theory; key theorists are made explicit and will help to guide reading; hands-on, practical approach; organization of the module – it is explicit and what we have in mind*

What is difficult? *Formative assessment – types of documents and more examples would be helpful – and the perspective from student and supervisor; finding time to prioritize module outside of the sessions; application of the ideas for those who are not yet supervising*

What could be done differently – what you'd like to see more/less of? *Space out the deadlines and split the formative tasks so that they are a few days apart; greater clarity is needed around the summative assessment, and how the learning outcomes should be incorporated into it; more practical advice would be helpful*

What is the most important thing you learned so far? *Recognition of differences – cultural and academic expectations, and managing students’ expectations in relation to UEA guidelines; trying to draw lines between responsibilities; learning contracts as a practice and document; differences in learning/teaching writing cultures, not just between disciplines but also institutions*

Staff members enrolled on this module clearly benefitted from being in a cross-disciplinary community of colleagues (as elsewhere on the MA HEP programme)

End of Module Evaluation (Year 1)

Although only two students completed the end of module evaluation online, the responses on the quality of the module itself were positive (4-5 = agree/strongly agree), but responses were neutral around preparedness of the students (3). Significantly, both respondents strongly agreed that they felt more confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.

Impact of Assessments (Year 1)

Summative assessments aimed to capture evidence that participants were engaged with the five learning outcomes. These assessed with a rubric at three levels: 1 (no treatment of the learning outcome), 2 (limited treatment of the learning outcome) and 3 (substantial treatment of the learning outcome).

Strengths

At moderation discussions, the assessors noted how well most students on the module had integrated their patchwork text into their teaching practice. Across the five learning outcomes covered by the rubric at **level 3**, the strongest areas were in:

- **The ability to identify and critically evaluate the different methods of providing feedback to students on the progress, examination and publication of their work (67% of participants)**
- **An ability to identify and reflect on strategies for improving student progress and competency over time (44% of participants)**
- **An understanding of the variety of supervisory relationships and roles and behaviours that may be adopted by supervisors (44% participants)**

This was particularly evident in several examples, where the students had considered the different forms of feedback (peer review exercises, focusing on omissions and commentary on practical issues such as the schedule of the project). There was also clear sensitivity to the way that feedback is delivered to research students – focusing on the work rather than the person.

The students were also attentive to their roles as supervisors, and thought carefully about the different styles and modes they employed in their communication. Although some treatment lacked the nuance of the theoretical models covered on the module, an appreciation of both structure and support were common across the assignments.

Weaknesses

Where several students seem to have evidenced lower achievement or engagement (**level 1 or 2**, but not level 3):

- **An awareness of academic literacies and different opportunities and practices for effective postgraduate writing (78% of participants at level 2**
- **An awareness of how the cultural background, language and wider lifestyle and study choices of postgraduate research students may affect the supervisory relationship (22% of participants at level 1, 56% of participants at level 2)**

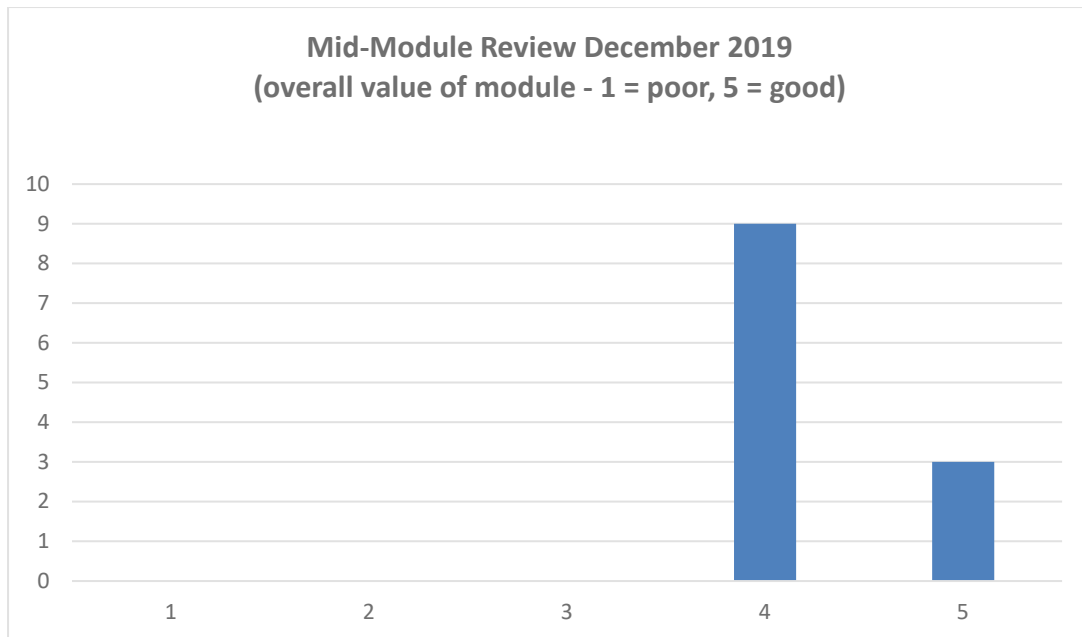
Although some students cited authors who had dealt with the notion of academic literacies, few tackled the subject confidently by explicitly referencing their own disciplinary conventions, hierarchies and power relations to better understand the 'hidden features' of academic writing in their field.

Although for some students, there was attention to differing educational systems as individuals moved across national boundaries in their academic careers, there was less explicit connection with specific challenges in accessing institutional resources. This was particularly so with part-time students, who can be found in significant numbers in both the social sciences and arts and humanities.

Year 2 (2019-2020) Mid-Module Evaluation (Dec 2019)

As noted above, the second year of the module was expanded to all academic staff across the University, and the intake increased to 15 staff members, with the majority from the physical and social sciences.

Although the current cycle is still in progress, a mid-module evaluation has been conducted in December 2019. The overall value of the module and specific comments have been gathered and reported to the MA HEP teaching team, and responses provided to the module participants.



Specific Comments

In the mid-module evaluation comments, participants expressed an interest in seeing UEA-specific case studies around student issues or problems, and even involving postgraduate research students in the seminars, which was considered for the pilot of the module. Although these may provide authentic examples of practice, there are ethical issues around doing so, which would impact both on students and academic staff. There are confidentiality restrictions around assessed work on the MA HEP currently in place. However, it may be that the recent University and sector Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) results may provide some insights into the challenges that students have reported. The Courage Project reports and initiatives themselves, where publicly available, would also provide useful course materials.

Participants also noted that discussing wellbeing in class can be quite challenging and requires a level of trust that may require members of the class to build more rapport before the task is introduced. Embedding the wellness action plan activity into a later session may be more appropriate in future versions of the module.

Participants were very positive about the mix of presentations and group tasks, and also mentioned how important it was to have a range of academic staff sharing practices from within their home disciplines or departments. This has been reported back to the MA HEP team for future staffing considerations.