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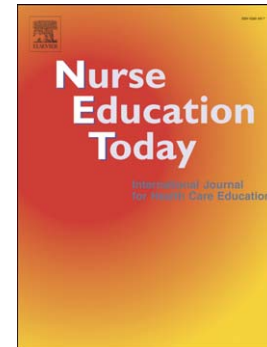
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DESPERATELY SEEKING CONSISTENCY: STUDENT NURSES' EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS OF ACADEMIC SUPERVISION

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Abstract

Background

Academic supervision - the support available to students when writing assignments - is a fundamental element in the provision of support within nurse education. Not only can it underpin high levels of academic achievement, but it also has a role in enhancing the retention of students. Despite its importance, there is little investigation of undergraduate academic supervision within the nursing literature.

Objectives

To explore students' experiences and expectations of academic supervision as part of an undergraduate programme of nurse education

Design

A qualitative approach to explore student perceptions.

Setting

The research was undertaken at a Higher Education Institution in the United Kingdom. The institution offers undergraduate nurse education programmes to approximately 800 students.

Participants

Eight pre-registration nursing students from a Bachelor of Science programme participated in a focus group interview. All were in the first semester of their final year.

Methods

Data were collected using focus group interviewing, based around a semistructured question framework. The focus groups explored students' expectations and previous experiences of academic supervision. The focus group was recorded, responses were transcribed and thematic analysis was undertaken to identify key findings.

Results

Three themes were identified from the data: relationship with supervisor, variation between supervisors, and the link between supervision and marking. Overall, students identified frustration with variability in the provision of academic supervision

Conclusions

Effective academic supervision depends on a strong relationship between student and supervisor - something that can be difficult to achieve if supervision is only for a short period of time. Equally, students crave a consistent approach to supervision, in terms of both the amount and content of feedback. Students are able to identify and articulate a clear link between effective supervision and academic achievement.

Keywords: Students, Nursing; Academic achievement; Student experiences; Student retention

INTRODUCTION

The retention of student nurses is a key priority for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Though estimates of attrition rates vary widely, it is thought that over one-quarter of student nurses fail to complete their programme of study, resulting in financial wastage for nurse education commissioners and a potential impact on students who may have invested time and money into their unsuccessful studies (Wray et al, 2012).

The causes of attrition from nursing programmes are manifold. Some inherent student characteristics such as male gender (McLaughlin et al, 2010) and lower (or non-standard) academic entry qualifications (Pryjmachuk et al, 2009, Dante et al, 2011), are thought to be associated with higher levels of attrition. However, issues related to the provision of nurse education, such as financial difficulties (Andrew et al, 2008) or experiences on clinical placement (Crombie et al, 2013), are also important factors.

Failure of the theoretical components of pre-registration nursing programmes has also been identified as an important component of attrition (Hunt et al, 2012). Consequently, the support given to students throughout their programme of study by academic staff is an important area when exploring reasons for – and approaches to reducing – student attrition. This study focuses specifically on the support available to students when writing assignments – termed 'academic supervision'. Specifically, this paper reports on a qualitative exploration examining undergraduate student nurses' perception of academic supervision practices within a University delivering an undergraduate degree in nursing in the United Kingdom (UK).

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last thirty years, nurse education in the UK has moved away from apprenticeship based training, and into the dual environments of practice and formal academia (DOH, 2006). One manifestation of this transition was the move to all-graduate programmes in 2011 (NMC, 2010). With this move to traditional higher education has come a change in the way the theoretical components of nurse education are studied for, and accredited, from those of the early 1990s (UKCC, 1986). In particular, the move of nurse education into the Higher

Education sector and, more recently, the move to an all-graduate profession, have raised the importance of academic achievement.

Students undertaking academic programmes of study to qualify as a Registered Nurse within Higher Education in the UK are partly judged on their success through academic achievement of written assessment (Gopee and Deane, 2013). However, there appears to be little work that has explored the role of academic supervision within programmes of nurse education or social sciences at undergraduate level (Todd, Smith and Bannister, 2006, Gopee and Dearne, 2013). There is however, readily available literature regarding research supervision and supervision at postgraduate level (Hemer, 2012, MaCallin and Nayer, 2012, Severinsson, 2015).

Identifying the optimum approach to providing academic supervision offers challenges to HEIs and individual lecturers (Amundson & McAlpine, 2009, Dowie, 2008, Peelo, 2011). Although Emilsson & Johnsson (2007) identify supervision as a sophisticated, high-level teaching process in which learning is central, Fry et al (2009) suggest that a subtly different set of skills are required for supervision than for teaching. How these skills are best learned or honed however, is not apparent from the literature, although an 'on the job' approach is alluded to by some (Blass et al, 2012, Pello, 2012). This is supported by Halse (2011) who explored how academics, through the process of supervision, had to develop basic knowledge and skills not learned within their own research training.

If there is no established, evidence-based guidance and training to support the development of academic supervision skills, there is a risk that this will impact on the quality of support given to students. Turner (2015) recognises this risk and suggests that further investigation of structures for academic supervision is warranted.

While academic staff play a key role, the student as supervisee also serves an important role within the supervision dyad. The relationship between academic supervisor and supervisee is often complex and subject to a range of power dynamics (Hemer, 2012, Askew et al, 2016). Therefore, it is beneficial to understand whether students receiving academic supervision have a view upon their expectations of the academic relationship and the support received from their supervisors. Alongside this, identifying how the student's perceptions diverge or converge with those of the supervisor's view is an important topic for consideration.

Some HEIs have basic guidelines for students and academics alike and there is occasionally some work in the literature to guide undergraduate supervision (Rowley, 2000 Bowman and Addyman, 2014). However, the operationalization of these guidelines can often be inconsistent, leading to a lack of clarity and uncertainty for students and lecturers alike (Grant, 2005). In addition, although guidance may be available for supervisor and supervisee, this may not be explicit for those with little experience as a supervisor. (Todd et al, 2006)

Cahill et al (2014) suggest that good academic and pastoral support is integral to the student receiving a good learning experience. When academic support is offered however, some thought must be given to the relationship in which that support is delivered. Grant & Graham (1999) explored this relationship by "acknowledging it is an unequal power-filled pedagogical relationship" and suggested this is one in where both student and supervisor have the capacity to act to bring change. Mackinnon (2004) reflected on academic supervision and added definition by describing academic supervision as a relationship between people filled with complexity. If these relationships work, then they are likely to result in successful academic results; relationships that are less successful are less positive and could adversely influence success rates (De Valero 2001; Gurr 2001).

The research literature therefore highlights the importance of academic supervision in supporting students to successfully complete programmes of study. However, there is less information available on the actual experience of supervision from the perspective of students. This study aimed to fill that gap in the evidence base.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this work was to explore students' perceptions of academic supervision as a basis for future work towards developing a robust academic supervision framework for undergraduate nursing students. With regard to the research compass model proposed for educational enquiry by Ringsted et al (2011), this approach would fit as an explorative study to seek to describe phenomena. This study therefore utilised a descriptive qualitative design as suggested by Holloway & Wheeler (2013).

Ethics

Ethical agreement to proceed with the project was obtained through Faculty-level Research Governance and Ethics committees. The participants were assured that involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could decline or withdraw without the need to give a reason. All participants who volunteered were informed about the study's purpose, and were given assurances regarding confidentially and anonymity. All data were stored securely with access limited to the lead researcher (LG) only.

Sample

Data were collected at a HEI in which pre-registration students undertake a three-year undergraduate programme of study leading to an honours degree in nursing. Only students undertaking Adult field nursing were included within this study. The rationale for only selecting adult field students was because of substantial differences in the way that academic supervision was provided to students in other fields. Final year student nurses were identified as the study sample group. This group was selected because they had sufficient experience of academic supervision practices to provide informed feedback.

A group of 25 students was selected from the final year cohort. From a list of all student identification numbers, 25 were chosen at random by a member of administrative staff not otherwise connected to the study. The only exclusion criterion was that the students could not be personal students of the lead researcher (LG) who is also a lecturer in the HEI. This exclusion criterion was put in place to reduce the possibility of either negative or positive bias. This work was also undertaken in a semester where the lead researcher was not providing any academic supervision to the selected student group.

The 25 students selected were approached and asked to participate. In total, a group of eight students expressed an interest in taking part. Information and consent forms were sent to all interested students to ensure they were fully apprised of the project with regard to anonymity and confidentiality within this work.

Of the eight students recruited, all attended the focus group. All participants were female. (compared to 91.4% of the final year cohort altogether). The age range of participants was 20-49 years and was representative of the cohort's mixture of younger and more mature entrants to the programme.

<u>Data Collection</u>

Data were collected through a focus group based around semi-structured questions and lasting for approximately one hour. This approach was selected as a tool to offer the opportunity 'to listen and learn from people' (Morgan 1998). This fitted with the aim of the current study, as the intention was to listen to the student and understand their perceptions of the academic supervision practices delivered to them.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used. The recorded interview was conducted by the lead researcher and aided by a colleague who helped with recording and note taking. The focus group was undertaken in a room away from teaching areas. The questions asked consisted of open and closed format questions primarily in three sections: Understanding, expectations and experiences of academic supervision. A question exploring suggested areas for improvement was also included.

<u>Data analysis</u>

The discussion was audiotape recorded, and then transcribed. Transcription notes and audio recordings were studied for content analysis and coding. Themes were drawn from the data and categorised. Manual analysis and coding was carried out by the lead researcher (LG) and reviewed independently by the second researcher (DB). As supported by Kitzinger (1995), full use of data was made such as questions generated by the participants, jokes, anecdotes, censorship, mind changes and deference to other's opinions.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the focus group transcript generated three main themes with regard to the students' perceptions and expectations of academic supervision practices and how effective they were:

Relationship with supervisor

The building of a relationship between supervisor and supervisee was reported by students as being an extremely important element in the development of high quality academic work. Participants described how the quality of the interaction depended on the development of a

strong relationship. When supervisor and supervisee did manage to establish a good relationship, this seemed to enhance academic supervision and allow trust to develop to promote confidence in seeking support:

"You build a rapport…build a rapport with the supervisor where you feel like you can ask them questions, and because you have got that rapport, because you have asked them about other things, they know you"

"…when you get feedback from your personal tutor…..that's always good because you built up a rapport with them, you know what they want…..and you have got a relationship there…. You know you can approach them. It makes a real, real big difference."

Other participants described examples of dysfunctional relationships and the impact that this would have on their overall experience of academic supervision.

"…in my first module [the supervisor] was just not approachable at all……they were obviously a little bit flustered and shouted 'Just shut up, can't you just all shut up' … you just think, I am only asking you a question"

"I think sometimes you get aggressive emails back as well when you feel actually quite frightened to approach because you know they are not interested…"

"…they said you shouldn't be emailing me those sorts of questions and it makes you scared to email them…"

"…some are not approachable at all…. Very aggressive""

"… [some supervisors are] quite frightening"

In those instances where the relationship with an academic supervisor was dysfunctional, students reported seeking advice from members of staff with whom a strong relationship was already in place. For example, there were reports of students seeking academic advice from their personal tutor (a member of staff who provides individual pastoral support to a student for their full three year programme of study) as an alternative source of supervision.

"I think some people can go to their personal tutors. I would feel I would be able to go to mine… [rather than allocated academic supervisor]."

Conversely, where a strong, constructive relationship had been forged, students reported the development of a virtuous circle where feedback from supervisors motivated them to put additional effort into their work:

"...it makes you work harder as a student as well because you will go away and you will dig further and you then think 'Oh God , yeah I could put that in and I could do that with it'...so it expands you...."

The group all agreed that there was an element of predictability regarding the development of the relationship, based on previous knowledge of the academic staff within the organisation. Some students outlined their feelings when supervision allocations were published:

"........then you go down the list and you look at your neighbour and you think "get in there" I'm going to be alright"

"........or you feel, oh no! "

".......... just see that name where you think 'oh my God, here I go.'"

Variation between supervisors

In addition to different levels of relationship between supervisors, students also reported variation in the feedback provided on draft work. In some cases, this variation related to amount and depth of supervision provided. Some supervisors were reported as being willing to provide regular, detailed feedback, whilst other staff were perceived as being less engaged and only willing to give minimal advice:

"...it doesn't seem like all members of the module team that are marking are engaged at the same level. It almost seems like some members have been drawn into marking, do it because they have to and give you the minimum supervision because it is impacting on their life and that is exactly how it makes you feel."

Participants also described variation in terms of the specific advice given in relation to assessment tasks and general academic presentation:

"It doesn't seem as if there is any consistency"

"Like you have got the guidance of what should be in the assignment but everybody looks for different things I mean even going to referencing, one person accepts one thing whereas

another wants another, but there is guidance there, but people are still looking for different things."

"What that person sees, they want from an essay is not necessarily what another academic supervisor (or marker) does."

In many cases, this variability became apparent when students talked amongst themselves about their experiences of academic supervision.

"It's not the same for everyone. When you talk amongst your friends if you have got different academic supervisors and you say well mine's asked for this.... somebody's guaranteed to say well mine's asked for that and then you start thinking 'oh I shouldn't have asked them that.'"

Whereas much of the inconsistency described related to the provision of one-to-one academic supervision, similar issues appeared to exist where support was provided through group tutorials:

"But even as coming down to them lessons that they broke us up last year, ...they were supposed to be exact same lesson but when you spoke to your friend who was in the other lesson there were two different lessons and it was supposed to be delivered the same."

Link between supervision and marking

Students identified a perceived relationship between the supervision provided and the mark that they eventually received for the assessment task.

"...it definitely, definitely reflects on your marks if you have a really good supervision where they've said you could expand or you could take things out it really does reflect upon you mark"

One particular issue related to this link was where supervisor and assessor (marker) were different academic staff. In some cases, the supervisor also marked the student's work, overcoming any worries over consistency. However, where the supervisor did not subsequently mark students' work, this led to further concerns regarding consistency and fairness. In some cases, there was dissatisfaction reported by students because issues not identified by their supervisor were cited by a marker as a reason for awarding a lower mark.

"I was under the understanding that the academic supervisor that you send your work to is usually the marker of your assignment"

"...that doesn't always happen. It's not always the same tutor that marks it."

"Yes if I have really, really homed in on the points made than I'm actually...disappointed with my grade if somebody else has marked it and that ..."

DISCUSSION

Exploration of student's perceptions and views around academic supervision identified a number of issues with the level and quality of academic support given to them. Specifically, the focus group identified the importance of forging a strong relationship with supervisors, issues with variability and consistency of supervision and the impact that this has on marks achieved.

The themes identified in this work point towards the relationship between student and supervisor as being core. It seemed that this relationship was often difficult to build and maintain due to issues such as interpersonal differences, supervisors who appeared demotivated, or organisational factors such as time availability. Data suggested that if supervisors demonstrated a lack of commitment, interest or enthusiasm then this would impact on the effectiveness of the relationship with the student and – ultimately – the mark awarded. This would support the findings of previous studies in higher education more broadly in which poor supervisor-supervisee relationships were associated with negative effects on student achievement (De Valero, 2001; Gurr, 2001). Within nurse education, but focusing specifically on PhD supervision, Gill and Bernard (2008) suggested that effective working relationships between student and supervisor are a major determinant of successful completion.

O'Shea (2006) identified that mutual trust and understanding were also pre-requisites for successful supervisory relationships. What was also noted within O'Shea's work was the need for these relationships to have the opportunity to build over time. For the students within this current study, in which academic supervision was a short-term arrangement, this was not an option, and may go some way to explain findings. Not only might the need for time highlighted by O'Shea (2006) explain the problems in relationship-building identified by participants in this study, but may also underpin the temptation to seek advice from personal supervisors with whom time has already been spent building trust and rapport. This provides

students with a quandary – they either seek the 'official' support from their academic supervisor, or they ask for help from a personal tutor with whom a relationship exists, but who has no mandate to offer help for the actual assessment task.

If mutual trust and understanding are a foundation of the supervision relationship, it is important that students have no fear of approaching their supervisor. Some of the students within this study did suggest that past experiences caused anxiety regarding seeking support. Gopee and Deane (2013) identified in their study that there was a fear of approaching tutors as the student worried they may be made to feel foolish which could, in turn, be a barrier to developing their academic writing.

Participants in the study identified that where the relationship between supervisors and students was more positive, they were more likely to put more effort into their work and to access support again in future modules. This virtuous circle of supervision has also been identified within previous studies (Duers & Brown, 2009; Gopee & Deane, 2013). At best, the supervisor-supervisee relationship becomes a constructive pedagogical partnership in which the individuals concerned work collaboratively (MacKinnon, 2004; Grant & Graham, 1999). Brew (2006) suggests that this relationship can move beyond a "learning alliance" to "a higher vision of academics and students (that) work collaboratively as members of knowledge building communities". This may be more applicable to the long-term relationship within PhD study however, at its most basic level, this could be applied to undergraduate study too.

The study suggested that the variability in the strength of supervision relationships explained some of the perceived disparity in the quality of the feedback and supervision given. However, another factor suggested by the data is the differing needs and expectations of individual students. Whatever the causes, the perception of variability from supervisors was a core theme within the study findings. In some cases, the variability related to the amount of supervisory support provided, whilst other participants reported a lack of consistency regarding the actual advice given. It is recognised that HEIs, students and academics will all experience common challenges and concerns related to supervision, which should ensure some degree of parity between supervisors (Todd et al, 2006). However, the findings from this study suggest that these commonalities do not result in consistent application of supervision guidelines or the experience of students.

A further area of inconsistency identified by the study was that between supervisors and markers. Students felt aggrieved that advice and feedback given by one academic did not match the expectations or marks awarded for their work by another academic. This issue has not been widely reported elsewhere in the literature – indeed, previous work comparing evaluation of undergraduate nursing student work by supervisors and markers has found relatively high levels of consistency (Lundgren et al, 2008). The lack of consistency between supervisors and markers identified in this current study may therefore be a result of organisational idiosyncrasies and processes. Regardless of the cause, the findings suggest that student expectations regarding the supervisors and markers need to be managed carefully.

The issues raised by participants in this study may also suggest that there are characteristics specific to undergraduate nursing students that complicate academic supervision. For example, many students accessing degree programmes within nursing may have not achieved their place on the programme through traditional educational qualifications. Rolfe (2002) suggests that those students commencing programmes of higher education from vocational backgrounds find the academic work demands challenging and require more academic support. Some of the sample within this study had indeed become eligible to join the programme of study through completion of 'access courses' due to a lack of traditional school-based qualifications.

The vocational aspect of the undergraduate nursing programme may also underpin some of the findings of the study. Whittaker (2008) found students within their first year of study of work- based learning programmes held a view that tutors were teachers rather than somebody to support their academic development. Whittaker (2008) also noted that when students were based at times in the workplace (as is the case with student nurses), that more flexibility is needed with academic support. This aligns with the findings of this study, where students reported feeling that access to supervisors was difficult and at times inflexible. Additionally, the interruption of study with placements may interfere with the development of the relationship between student and academic necessary for effective supervision to take place (O'Shea, 2006).

Implications for practice

It is clear from the results of this study that there is a degree of dissatisfaction with the provision of academic supervision to students within the sample. Students reported a lack of parity and quality between supervisors both with regard to the amount and accuracy of feedback that can contribute to their success or failure.

Most immediately, the work highlights the importance of HEIs ensuring that processes for providing academic supervision are robust. Academic staff need to provide support that is consistent, reliable and equitable.

Further work is required to validate the findings. This work should include further exploration of student perceptions with much greater participant numbers and a parallel study exploring academics' perceptions of the supervision they provide. This would then enable an in-depth understanding of the complexities of this vital practice and the pedagogical relationship between student and supervisor.

Once different perceptions are better understood there may then be opportunity to develop guidance which supports academics, delivers undergraduates' expectations and needs appropriately, and also allows development of a robust framework for ensuring and monitoring quality. Though there has been previous work that suggests a framework for promoting and recognising excellence in supervision of research students (Nulty et al, 2009), findings from this study will help to develop a similar tool that accommodates the specific needs and characteristics of student nurses, their supervisors and their programmes of study.

Study limitations

Although this study has captured the rich nature of the student perspective and perceptions of academic supervision, there are a number of limitations. Due to the nature of focus group work, the sample size is small and may not be fully representative of the students in the wider undergraduate cohort. The small sample also limits generalizability to nurse education more broadly.

Though there was an element of randomness within the sampling strategy, there was also some self-selection. The findings may therefore have been biased by students only agreeing to participate if they had particularly noteworthy (either good or bad) experiences of supervision to share.

One final limitation of the work is the fact that all the students involved in the focus group were female. Though the nursing cohort involved in the study consisted predominantly of

female students, approximately 8% were male. Attempts were made to recruit from this minority group, but, for reasons that are unclear, none volunteered to participate. Exploration of how male students felt about academic supervision – especially when their supervisors would be predominantly female – may add a further dimension to this work.

CONCLUSION

This study explored perceptions and experiences of undergraduate student nurses related to academic supervision. The key findings were the importance of building a relationship with supervisors and concerns regarding inconsistency in the support given. Students also raised concerns regarding links between supervision advice and feedback from markers.

The study has provided the starting point for more detailed exploration of the antecedents of effective, consistent academic supervision. Through additional study of this element of nurse education, greater understanding can be gained of how student and academic characteristics influence the development of a productive relationship that underpins success.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Successful academic supervision is dependent on a strong student-supervisor relationship
- Students become frustrated and disheartened if faced with inconsistent or inadequate supervision
- HEI's need to be cognizant of the fact that variations may exist in supervision practices, and put in place policies and frameworks to ensure consistency and parity
- Further research is required to explore the role and effectiveness of the academic supervisor role