Effective Research Supervision

Stuart McLeod Blythe

This is a research paper report into what constitutes the effective supervision of international, part-time, PhD theological students in a largely distance learning environment. A qualitative research case study was carried out among students and supervisors at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre (IBTSC) in 2016. From the responses, I identify the importance of supervisory knowledge, skills, attributes, and the two key practices of timely and detailed feedback, along with managed team supervision, as central to effective research supervision. In addition, I highlight the significance of the part-time and largely distance, international, and theological nature of the student participants. In discussing these findings, I relate them to wider educational research and literature on research supervision.

Keywords

Research supervision; theological education; qualitative research

Introduction

In 2016, I researched the supervisory experience of PhD students and supervisors at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam (IBTSC). IBTSC offers PhD studies in conjunction with the Faculty of Religion and Theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU). The research was carried out for a dissertation required to complete a Master of Education at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS). The research question was: 'What constitutes the effective supervision of international, part-time, PhD theological students, in a largely distance learning environment?'[1] My motivation was personal and professional. On the one hand, I wanted to enhance my practice as a research supervisor. On the other hand, as the then Rector of IBTSC, I wanted to be able to develop research-led policy concerning the practice of supervision in this specific context.

In an article published in *Practical Theology*, entitled 'The Research Supervisor as Friend', I present some data and offer an explicit theological reflection upon my findings.[2] In that article, I seek through the metaphor of 'friend' to offer a theological, ethical, and vocational understanding of

[1] It is now the practice of IBTSC to refer to PhD 'students' as 'researchers'. I will retain the language of 'student' in this paper as it is consistent with my research question.
[2] Stuart Blythe, 'The Research Supervisor as Friend', *Practical Theo*logy, 11 (2018), 401-411.

research supervision. In this article, I will do something different. First, I introduce my research methodology and methods. I do this because methodology and methods have become increasingly important in research into practice at IBTSC. I hope, therefore, that exposing the strengths and weaknesses of my approach may be helpful to others. Second, while repeating some data, I present a fuller summary of my findings than has hitherto been published. Third, in the presentation of my findings, I discuss how my findings relate to those in broader educational literature. In all of this, I acknowledge my continuing reflexivity as an ongoing participant in IBTSC beyond the specific period of the research and my original reporting.

Research Process

The research I carried out in 2016 involved fifteen students and thirteen supervisors. The students were all international, part-time, PhD theological students, in a largely distance learning environment. They were all students who had been registered with IBTSC and VU by the end of January 2015. Since IBTSC students are supervised in teams consisting of IBTSC supervisors and VU promoters, both groups were invited to participate. In response, nine IBTSC supervisors and four VU supervisors agreed to participate.

The research was a small-scale, qualitative, 'instrumental' case study.[3] The choice of the qualitative methodology can be explained in part with reference to epistemology.[4] On the one hand, I was quite content to adopt an approach to educational theory which is 'grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly "interpretivist" in that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted'.[5] On the other hand, this way of approaching the social world and the qualitative or ethnographic approaches it fosters is variously advocated and supported by proponents of practical theology as particularly suited to the nature of theological knowledge and pastoral practice.[6] These epistemological reasons notwithstanding, the qualitative case study also had the 'practical' advantage that it fitted the situation I was exploring.[7] The research being pursued aligned more closely with the nature of qualitative

[3] David. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 4th edn (London: Sage Publications, 2013), p. 143.
[4] Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd edn (London: Sage Publications, 2002), p. 16.
[5] Mason, *Qualitative*, p. 13.
[6] See for example Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2008); *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Pete Ward (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2012); J. Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn (London: SCM Press, 2016).
[7] Silverman, *Qualitativ*e, p. 122.

rather than quantitative research interests in terms of the 'question being asked'.[8]

In carrying out this research, I sought to adhere to widely recognised standards of ethical research.[9] The research design was approved and guided by the Ethics Committee of the School of Education, UWS.

The research took the form of two questionnaires with 'open questions'.[10] The questionnaires sent to students and faculty were similar but worded to suit their specific role. The first questionnaires were issued, received, collated, and initially coded and analysed before the second questionnaires were devised. These were then sent, received, coded, and analysed along with my initial results. While I did not strictly follow a 'grounded theory' methodology for the research, I followed in general terms a grounded theory approach to coding and classifying the data. The attraction of this approach is that it proceeds from more general to more specific concepts and categories and their relationship with one another.[11]

I had also planned to review institutional literature regarding supervision and to follow up on my analysis of the questionnaires with a focus group at the annual IBTSC colloquium. The primary IBTSC document, however, was somewhat dated, given the change to a new validating partner. It was also more of a formal policy document and as such gave little information regarding institutional aspirations or supervisory practices. Concerning the VU, in 2016 they had only recently introduced new policy and process for a 'graduate school' which was still mostly undeveloped. As a consequence, I was not able to triangulate institutional policy and aspirations regarding supervision with the quality of student experience. Also, an administrative delay in receiving ethical approval from UWS in 2015 meant that the timing of my research could not include the focus group without delaying the final submission of my dissertation. Following the submission of the dissertation in 2016, however, I was able at the annual colloquium in 2017 to report back my finding to students and faculty and engage in some conversation around my findings as part of my ongoing role as Rector.

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[8] Beverley Hancock, Elizabeth Ockleford and Kate Windridge, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (The NIHR RDS EM / YH, 2009), p. 6 <https://www.rds-yh.nihr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/5_Introduction-to-qualitative-research-2009.pdf> [accessed 30 January 2019]

[9] Stephen Webster, Jane Lewis and, Ashley Brown, 'Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research', in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science and Researcher*s, 2nd edn, ed. by Jane Ritchie and others (London: Sage, 2014), pp. 77-110 (p. 78).

[10] Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4th edn (London: Sage Publications, 2009), p. 156.

[11] Flick, *Qualitative*, pp. 306-318.

Findings and Discussion

Three significant features of research supervision emerged in answer to the research question. These were the importance of knowledge, skills, and attributes.

1. Knowledge

Supervisors expect to provide, and students expect them to provide, a variety of types of knowledge. One supervisor wrote:

> My academic experience should provide me with the knowledge of some field in depth, and also with a knowledge of belonging or/and the difficulties of belonging to an academic culture, and with knowledge of what has and what has not been helpful in helping someone else to grow into a mature teacher/academic.[12]

In turn, student comments regarding what they expect of their supervisors include: 'expert engagement', 'guidance in areas of methodology, method, theory, issues and sources in field of study (expertise in area of study)', 'knowledge about the subject area', 'direction toward relevant resources', 'expertise', and a 'high academic level'. While such comments relate to the content and method, a number of students indicated that they look to their supervisors for 'clarity about the processes of the seminary/university' including 'university rules and regulations, graduation requirements, etc.' This explicit desire for guidance about institutional knowledge would seem to relate at least in part to the fact that these students had recently relocated from one accrediting institution to another and were not clear on the process. One wrote, 'For me, the biggest hassle has been the boatload (i.e., colloquially referencing an overabundance) of ambiguity in what is going on'.

This emphasis on the importance of knowledge as highlighted by supervisors and students resonates with the work of Bastalich, who argues that some of the pedagogical approaches to research supervision unhelpfully downplay the necessity of supervisors having methodological, institutional, and subject-specific knowledge.[13] If, however, my research highlights the importance of high quality, multi-faceted knowledge as one feature of effective supervision, another is the presence of appropriate supervisory skills.

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[12] I have not corrected the spelling or grammar of responses.

[13] Wendy Bastalich, 'Content and context in knowledge production: a critical review of doctoral supervision literature', *Studies in Higher Education* (2015), 1-13.

2. Skills

The supervisor participants clearly understood that effective supervision requires more than providing knowledge. Instead, they require to practise what I am describing as 'skills' to motivate the sort of self-directed research, learning, and articulation required of a PhD candidate. One wrote:

> My task is to help the other person to see more clearly HOW to say things so that WHAT he or she wants to say may fall more easily into place. That he or she finds the right questions to ask, and the right methods for seeking the answers.

Students indeed appear to be looking for such 'help', even if they use a fairly limited language to describe the skill required in providing it. Students frequently used 'guidance' to describe what they were looking for. Other terms included 'steer', 'encourage', and 'help'. One student wrote that an effective supervisor could 'inspire confidence', 'stimulate critical thinking', and 'help me keep focussed'. While there is some vagueness in the terminology, students are looking for their supervisors to be more than just knowledgeable.

Here again, the perspective of the supervisors can help fill out a bit more the necessary actions required if guidance is to be given and received. One supervisor wrote about the 'ability to motivate the student'. Others wrote about the ability to listen or to ask questions. As with the students, the general language of 'encourage' is used by a number. One supervisor, however, wrote more explicitly: 'Do not underestimate the primary psychological role/coaching function of the supervisor-Doktorvater. Sometimes, her/his academic research expertise even seems secondary.'

The language of 'coaching' was only used by one student and two supervisors. Yet, it appears to capture something of the essence of the desired proficiencies identified in my findings. The guidance sought is more than direction but accompanied by motivation and encouragement. In terms of the literature, along with the critical knowledge of 'content' and 'context', these sorts of required abilities can be related to the pedagogical 'skills' required in research supervision.[14]

3. Attributes

In addition to appropriate institutional and discipline specific knowledge, and pedagogical skills, my research indicates that students expect their supervisors to demonstrate certain attributes in effective supervision. These include: 'sincerity', 'openness', 'compassion', 'sympathy', 'honesty', 'respect', and 'availability'. One student wrote about wanting 'clarity and

[14] Bastalich, 'Content and context', p. 7.

openness…accompanied with encouragement and gentleness, but clarity and sincerity is very important'. Another wrote more critically, 'Even helpful and nice (as in compassionate) would be a novel nuance'.

The supervisors mentioned, but did not emphasise to the same extent, the importance of such attributes. They did, however, make some reference to characteristics such as 'pastoral sensitivity', 'trustworthiness', 'availability', and a shared context of 'honesty and integrity'. This said, the supervisors' responses indicate fairly high expectations concerning student attributes. Accordingly, they are looking for 'patience', 'creativity', 'openness', 'intellectual honesty', 'motivation', 'initiative', and 'stamina'. Supervisors, therefore, also see the importance of personal attributes in (their own) effective supervision but also in students.

The emphasis on attributes found in the research points towards the relational nature of research supervision. A variety of educational writers highlight this aspect of supervision. The relational aspect goes beyond the knowledge and skills of the supervisor. Perhaps the contribution of Mackinnon might be particularly attractive to a theological community in that she describes this as a 'fiduciary' relationship.[15] A fiduciary relationship is based on trust. It recognises the skill and knowledge of the academic and recognises the significant role of the student in decision-making, but the emphasis is very clearly on mutual obligations rather than on (potentially conflicting) rights. Both parties have responsibilities and legitimate expectations that they must consider, but the supervisor has a special obligation to the student, and the student places trust in the supervisor.

Practices

In addition to the knowledge, skills, and attributes discussed above, two inter-related practices were associated in particular with effective research supervision. These were timely and detailed feedback, and managed team supervision.

1. Timely and Detailed Feedback

In the first questionnaire, I did not ask any specific question about feedback. The term, however, appeared regularly in student responses. As a consequence, I followed this theme up in the second questionnaire to both students and supervisors.

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[15] Jaquelin Mackinnon, 'Academic Supervision: seeking metaphors and models for quality', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 28:4 (2004), 395-405.

In response to what constitutes effective supervision, the comments by this student reflect what others also foreground:

> Prompt response and evaluation of written work is very important. Communication even in the form of 'I'll get back to you in a few days' is needed, as lengthy delays are frustrating after working intensely to get material to supervisors for a deadline.

This desire for a prompt response may have a particular poignancy for distance and part-time students, who have less opportunity for formal and informal face-to-face contact with supervisors and peers. This should not be underestimated, for as another student wrote:

> I would consider feedback to written work to be the most important feature. Since so much of the actual work is independent, supervisors function as the only tangible external voices that carry 'weight' or authority. They are the only tangible indicator of progress. A word from a supervisor carries incredible weight in a context where the vast majority of the work is done in isolation.

This quotation begs the question of what students consider to be good feedback. One summarised what several, if not many, of the students expressed:

> Effective feedback is prompt, detailed (e.g. written into the document, as well as summarized elsewhere), constructive (e.g. proposing alternatives), includes positives as well as negatives, clarifies which feedback 'must' be heeded and which is open to discussion or negotiation.

Time and again, students indicated the desire for honest, 'detailed' or 'specific feedback':

> Specific feedback includes not only a reference to statements made in the dissertation but why they are less than effective, why they need to be revised, and a suggestion of what that revision might need to be. Honest feedback, though painful, is something I want because it will prevent me from difficulty later.

Conversely, students considered general comments such as: 'I don't like the style of this paragraph', or 'chapter 5 is better but it is not quite there yet', or 'this is vague' unhelpful.

In response to the question: 'Can you describe what you consider to be the features of effective feedback on written work?' supervisors highlighted the following areas as requiring supervisory guidance: 'methodology', 'arguments', and 'presentation'. One described this in terms of 'the formal – affecting structure, style, footnoting, etc., and substantial – related to the flow of the argument in a particular chapter and of the dissertation overall'. Only a few supervisors mentioned the importance of recognising and praising good work.

The supervisors expect to give detailed feedback but did not mention the need for their feedback to be 'timely'. Some, however, expect students to respond quickly to feedback given. One supervisor responded to the

question, 'Can you describe what you would consider to be the features of good student response to feedback given on written work?' by saying:

> Timely reaction if it is a complex issue because we all are busy and it is difficult to recall what you did to someone's paper 3 months ago if there was no response. Generally, no response in two weeks means acceptance to me.

Reviewing the responses on feedback in the light of other responses, it appears supervisors and students may have a slightly different perspective of what is happening through feedback. While students appear to be looking for feedback that enhances their writing, supervisors want to provide feedback that develops the student as an independent researcher. Students are clear that they have a responsibility for their work. One student put it: 'My PhD, my problem if I fail, so my responsibility to make sure that all goes smoothly as possible'. Yet, it is not so clear students expect, as some supervisors expect of them, that during the process they will become 'colleagues', 'experts', if not the 'teachers' in the relationship. Insofar as supervisors see this as part of their task, it adds a complexification to what feedback is – beyond simply commenting on the work. Several supervisors, therefore, see feedback as 'dialogical', where students are invited to push back. One wrote: 'I want them to push back and defend their work so that we can come to a mutual decision'. Another said,

> The student, of course, is free to accept or reject the advice, and either is fine as long as they know why, and can defend their choice. It is nice to see when one's points are taken into consideration, and at least issues recognised, even if not dealt with.

Perhaps to facilitate such dialogue, several supervisors wrote of the need for written feedback to be accompanied and supplemented by some form of 'verbal', 'face-to-face' conversations, whether physically or virtually through 'Skype'. Several students also wrote of the value of face-to-face or Skype conversations, particularly in bringing clarity over difficult issues. This said, there is not a general agreement, certainly among the students, on whether Skype is an adequate substitution for physical, face-to-face meetings.

Given that IBTSC has an annual colloquium that facilitates physical face-to-face meeting, I would have expected more direct references to this in the responses, even though I did not ask any specific question about the colloquium. One student did write, 'My best times with supervisors have been during the annual colloquia where we meet face to face and discuss my work.' Some others did refer to the colloquium explicitly or implicitly. It is clear, however, that not all students felt the common group aspects of the colloquium were helpful, when supervisors not directly involved would give 'ad-hoc advice' in contrast to the detailed attention given by their supervisors.

Discussions in educational literature support the idea that effective feedback requires written feedback to be followed by face-to-face meetings with 'feed forward' advice in what constitutes an ongoing conversation of learning and dialogue.[16] Technology can be used to close the distance and bring a presence. It may offer some advantages over physical face-to-face communication, in that sessions can be recorded, although different situations will require different and varied approaches.[17] 'To balance the supervisor work-load with students' needs and expectations, a blend of various feedback approaches in terms of speed, length, and depth should be performed.'[18] While there are many variables, it also appears from some broader research that student satisfaction with supervision is greater in 'blended' programmes with some 'residential' components than in programmes which are solely 'online'.[19]

2. Managed Team Supervision

If one practice which emerges from the data about effective supervision is timely and detailed feedback, another is managed team supervision. Team supervision was part of the practice of IBTS Prague before its move to Amsterdam. It is also a requirement of VU. One supervisor explained it as follows:

> VU Doctoral Regulations prescribe a minimum of two and a maximum of four (co) supervisors, not only to 'protect' the student from negative effects of single supervision (positive and negative bias, prejudice, neglect, violation of scientific integrity, tunnel vision of the supervisor, etc.), but also to enhance the quality of the supervision by complementary and expanded expertise/experience ('training' of starting junior supervisor).

Team supervision, therefore, is advanced not merely as a regulatory necessity but as a practice which contributes to effective supervision. Many supervisors support this idea. This is particularly so when the research topic is 'interdisciplinary' or requires a particular 'method' of research to which an additional supervisor may bring particular expertise.

However, despite most, if not all, supervisors supporting team supervision, there is also caution. One frequently identified danger is the

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[16] Martin East and others, 'What constitutes effective feedback to postgraduate research students? The students' perspective', *Journal of University Learning & Teaching Practice*, 9:2 (2012), p. 12.
[17] Roland Sussex, 'Technological options in supervising remote research students', *Journal of Higher Education*, 55 (2008), 121-137.
[18] Fuzhan Nasiri and Fereshteh Mafakheri, 'Postgraduate research supervision at a distance: a review of challenges and strategies', *Studies in Higher Education*, 40:10 (2015), 1962-1969 (p. 1966).
[19] Elizabeth Anne Erichsen, Doris U. Bolliger and Colleen Halupa, 'Student satisfaction with graduate supervision in doctoral programs primarily delivered in distance education settings', *Studies in Higher Education*, 39:2 (2014), 321-338.

'confusion' created for students in receiving 'contradictory' advice from different members of the team. Several supervisors, therefore, indicated the necessity of clarity in terms of coordination, roles, and leadership. The need for such coordination is perhaps why some supervisors argued that two or three should be the optimum size of a team. The difficulties in establishing such coordination are intensified by the physical distance of IBTSC and VU supervisors from one another, notwithstanding the distance from their shared students.

As with the supervisors, the students gave almost universal but qualified support for the benefits of team supervision. As above, the benefits are widely regarded as being the 'complimentary [*sic*] and expanded expertise/experience' with respect to discipline-specific subject matter, methods, and perspectives. Some describe team supervision as having been 'very' or 'extremely' 'helpful', 'good', or 'valuable' if not 'essential' to their research. While affirming the process, many students expressed the need for such team supervision to bring clarity rather than confusion. The dispiriting impact of such confusion was expressed very strongly by one student:

> Still, there are times when there are too many chiefs all wanting to change and start over which they decide to do after much work has been completed. Such actions cause confusion and much frustration.

Indeed, this student likened their experience to a comic 'state of disorder'. This following comment by one student in response to the question, 'From your experience do you think that 'team' supervision is helpful?', echoes the sentiments of several:

> Generally yes, provided that the supervisors know each other adequately and communicate with each other to check that they're providing coherent/consonant guidance, and provided that there is clarity about who is the team leader. When supervisors provide differing advice, they need to do some processing amongst themselves for the sake of the student's clarity. Also, they need to demonstrate appropriate give-and-take among themselves. In my case, receiving feedback from the various supervisors has enriched my work, but at times has created some confusion (mixed messages), so that I've had to go back and seek to find clarity and consensus amongst the supervisors.

It appears clear that what students are looking for is not simply team supervision but helpful team supervision.

Furthermore, several students indicated that they have had to try and find ways to manage their different supervisors, not simply in terms of clarity but in terms of the nature of the different feedback they did or did not provide. While, therefore, students appreciate different perspectives on their research topic, ultimately they want to know which supervisor leads the team, not only in administrative terms but concerning authority in the direction they should follow. For the students, the potential for real confusion

is intensified by the IBTSC/VU relationship, as they want to complete their work in keeping with the demands of the awarding institution. One student wrote, 'it would be helpful for me to understand if there is (officially) a hierarchy of authority among my supervisors and what that is'. They then offered their suggestion as to how they thought this hierarchy worked, saying, 'This in view of the need to see the book be accepted in the context/culture of VU.' Students do not merely want to research, but to complete their PhD, therefore whom they are to follow, matters.

Some of the research on team supervision in the educational literature reflects the benefits and problems of team supervision found in my research. This more extensive research indicates that it is differentials in power and knowledge and the need for students to know that their supervisors are working for them that make disagreements among their supervisors unsettling, for indeed 'They are the bosses.'[20] Guerin and Green suggest, therefore, that effective team supervision requires: an agreed procedure for dealing with difference, student involvement in the decision making process, and a recognition that the differences can be threatening.[21]

Particular Issues

In the second questionnaires I asked explicitly about the perceived impact on effective supervision of the students being international, part-time, theological, and largely distance learning. I will discuss these issues here in what it appeared to me was their order of importance as revealed in the responses.

1. Part-Time and Distance

To some extent, the issues raised by part-time and distance students in terms of effective supervision relate directly to feedback as discussed above. Be that as it may, one student captured something of the dynamic of part-time, distance study from the student perspective:

> Students must be driven towards supervision. One cannot drop into office hours, and can easily avoid a supervisor, if little or no work is done. This can compound a lack of meaningful progress. Being part time often results in prioritizing the research below regular full-time work, family, or other more immediate and consuming responsibilities.

It would appear that the major impact on the vast majority of the students of their part-time and distance status is that their research is sporadic and

[20] Cally Guerin and Ian Green, '"They're the bosses": feedback in team supervision', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39:3 (2015), 320-335.
[21] Guerin and Green, 'They're the bosses', pp. 331-332.

prolonged. A number of students indicated that this sporadic nature of the work must make supervision much more difficult: 'Gaps in time make it more difficult for the supervisor to track with your thinking and work.' Several supervisors also echoed this sentiment. One supervisor conveyed the sentiments of many when they stated:

> The problem with part-time students is that they sometimes can only focus irregularly at their research and this influences the effectiveness, as well for the student as for the supervisor. Especially if there is a long time laps [*sic*] between supervision sessions.

This situation of the sporadic nature of part-time study is further complicated in that students and supervisors may be working with different rhythms to their year. A time convenient for a student to write may not be convenient for a supervisor to respond. Given the sporadic nature of work and feedback, a breakdown in communication can occur. This breakdown can lead to a situation of students feeling alone and powerless. One student wrote:

> I am an independent researcher and don't need my hand to be held. On the other hand, there were definitely times when it felt like I was on my own and wouldn't be getting much in the way of concrete guidance or suggestions. It was difficult to ask for increased 'attention' because of the power differential in the relationships.

This quotation perhaps illustrates the sort of 'isolation' spoken about in the educational literature when there is a lack of 'proximity' and it is simply not the case that

> the supervisor's office may be in an adjacent building; a learner encountering administrative problems with enrolment can pay a visit to the office; and questions about research methodologies are discussed over coffee in graduate student lounges.[22]

To be sure it could be argued it is a feature of a student becoming an independent researcher that they take the initiative. Given the power 'differential', however, I would argue in agreement with Watts that, given the challenges of part-time distance education, the responsibility for maintaining the communication lies with the supervisor and that 'communication, planning, and empathy' can help keep the progress on track.[23]

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[22] M. Gregory Tweedie and others, 'The "dissertation marathon" in doctoral distance education', *Distance Education*, 34:3 (2013), 379-390 (p. 385).

[23] Jacqueline H. Watts, 'Challenges of supervising part-time PhD students: towards student-centred practice', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13:3 (2008), 369-373 (p. 371).

2. International

Another specific particularity of this research relates to the international status of the students. In terms of how they perceived this to impact the effectiveness of their supervision, one or two students highlighted issues of having to adapt to a different institutional culture. Many students, however, were unable to articulate any apparent significant impact of their international status on their experience of effective supervision. These responses, however, are not straightforward because, despite the variety of nationalities who participated in my research, there was a large amount of broad European or North American cultural commonality. Some students, however, indeed indicated that studying in an international context has been the very thing that has enriched their overall experience and gives added value to their work. One wrote:

> Overall (despite the possibility of the occasional disconnect due to culture or language) it is enriching to engage with people from other countries and contexts. Particularly at the doctoral level, having exposure to those whose perspectives may differ from my own due to different socio-cultural and educational experience/formation, should help stimulate critical thinking.

This comment is interesting, not only because it speaks of perceived benefits, but because the student focused less on their own international nature and more on that of others. I will return to this issue of who or what is 'international' below.

Supervisors identified some issues in response to the question of the impact that they thought the international status of students had on effective supervision. These relate to a poor command of the English language, different educational cultures, different approaches to critical thinking, and different views of authority. Such concerns are reflected and discussed in the broader literature.[24] While supervisors raised issues that might need attention, none saw them as insurmountable if due supervisory attention was given to negotiating the situation. Indeed, for some supervisors, their own experience is enhanced through supervising international students with alternative approaches to knowledge and sources.

Following on from the above, one student made this comment:

> I don't believe that my supervision was impacted by the fact that I'm an 'international' student. This is largely due to the fact that both my supervisors have lived in multiple cultural settings and are highly sensitized to cultural issues.

[24] Margaret Cargill, 'Cross-Cultural postgraduate supervision meetings as intercultural communication', in *Quality in Postgraduate Research: Managing the new agenda*, ed. by Margaret Kiley and Gerry Mullins (The University of Adelaide: Adelaide: 1998), pp. 175-187; Yanjuan Hu, Klaas van Veen and Alessandra Corda, 'Pushing too Little, Praising too Much? Intercultural Misunderstandings between a Chinese Doctoral Student and a Dutch Supervisor', *Studying Teacher Education*, 12:1 (2016), 70-87.

This quotation raises the question of what is meant by the term 'international' students. This not least in an international institution where many of the supervisors as well as the students come from cultural contexts other than the one in which the institution is located. 'International' is something of a contested term. It is used in some contexts to define 'non-European' students but in others to define students who come from contexts where English is not the first language.[25] Who is or is not 'international' depends upon who is making the designation. In the literature, the problematising of the term goes further. For even if a context specific definition of international student can be reached, such students are not a homogenous unit.[26] To reflect upon inter-cultural supervision, therefore, can be very worthwhile. Manathunga, for example, points out that research studies can be a transformative event, a 'liminal space' in which students' identities experience '(re)formation'[27]. It is, however, not simply students who are transformed but rather through the experience of 'transculturation' supervisors can also be changed.[28] This understanding of variable and changing identities, however, need not concede to what Manathunga describes as 'a liberal *disavowal of difference*'[29] but indeed requires difference to be recognised.[30] All of which is to say that the 'transcultural' nature of IBTSC offers a particular environment, the challenges of which may offer rich opportunity beyond traditional categories of 'international' students.

3. Theological

The last particularity that requires some discussion is the fact that the students are theological students. Some students, when asked what impact they thought that this had on their supervision, made the point that they had no other experience to compare with it. Others said that it made no difference to effectiveness, not least as they were studying 'history'. Some, however, reflected that theology involves dealing with issues to which they have a personal convictional commitment. On the whole, the few who commented thought that this brought a commonality with their supervisors, even when differences existed, and as such enriched their experience.

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[25] Viviene E. Cree, '"I'd Like to Call You My Mother": Reflections on Supervising International PhD Students in Social Work', *Social Work Education,* 31:4 (2012), 451-464 (p. 452).
[26] *The Doctorate: International Stories of the UK Experience*, ed. by Sheila Trahar (Higher Education Academy. Education Subject Centre, 2011), p. 5.
[27] Catherine Manathunga, 'Intercultural Postgraduate Supervision: Ethnographic Journeys of Identity and Power', in *Learning and Teaching Across Culture in Higher Education*, ed. by David Palfreyman and Dawn Lorraine McBride (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 93-113 (p. 94).
[28] Manathunga, 'Intercultural', p. 97.
[29] Manathunga, 'Intercultural', p. 95, italics original.
[30] Trahar, *Doctorate*, p. 5.

Supervisors' responses reflect similar views to those of the students. Some think it has little or 'no impact' or that it depends on the specifics of the discipline, such as whether 'historical' or 'ethics'. Some see a shared set of beliefs between supervisor and student as having the potential to help the process: 'There is an assumed camaraderie as part of the same faith-family, which engenders an immediate affinity'. One supervisor warned that this sort of affinity may make the supervisor not critical enough of the work. One or two reflected upon the possibility that exploring issues to which one is personally committed might mean students cannot be suitably critical or have to undergo a personal, painful transformation. One stated, however, that bringing personal perspectives to the surface can offer a student contextual grounding for their research.

One feature of qualitative research is 'reflexivity'. During the research, the responses to this question raised for me the wider question of what is 'theological' about theological education. Is it simply a matter of content or also of context and approach? The answers provided suggested primarily 'content', with rare implications that context and approach could be theologically significant. One student, however, wrote:

> There was for me a very strongly shared conviction – a sense of shared spirituality – between myself and supervisor (which I hope flowed both ways). Supervision in this sense moved well beyond the strictly academic project to open up a shared space of friendship which included reflection and discussion about the deeper journey of faith and the place of study as part of that journey.

Such comments were scarce. In the literature on theological education, the language of 'formation', relating not least to spiritual character, is commonly used.[31] The actual nature of such formation, the extent to which it can be achieved in a distance learning environment, and how such affective learning can be measured are all issues requiring some discussion. Perhaps an alternative approach to the 'theological' in theological education is to explore the nature of the learning community in terms of ecclesiology and the practice of supervision as an expression of that. This has been my own approach in my other writing on this topic. Significantly, one supervisor responded to the question regarding the theological nature of the students by saying, 'Wow – this is an IBTS questionnaire isn't it?' and went on to talk about the fact that one feature of the institution historically is that theology is expressed in and through practice. This emphasis being the case, further reflection on the theological understanding of the practice of research supervision would indeed appear warranted.

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[31] Marilyn Naidoo, 'Ministerial formation of theological students through distance education', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 68:2 (2011), 65-73; Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe, 'Spiritual Formation in Theological Distance Education: An Ecosystems Model', *Christian Education Journal*, 7:1 (2010), 85-102; Roger White, 'Promoting Spiritual Formation in Distance Education', *Christian Education Journal*, 3:2 (2006), 303-315.

Conclusion

The research which I carried out highlighted knowledge, skills, attributes, and certain practices as central to what constitutes the effective research supervision of international, part-time, PhD theological students, in a largely distance learning environment. While students and supervisors were mostly in agreement, at times they perceived these factors differently. Such differences in perception, although small, could be exacerbated in practice – not least through the lack of regular proximity. The findings generated were mostly consistent with other writing and research as reported in educational literature. As a consequence, there are steps which might be taken to enhance the quality of student experience through supervision, while securing the supervisory goals of the development of researchers seeking to gain a qualification. In addition, the particular international and theological nature of the institution may offer not only specific challenges but also opportunities for such learning communities.

Dr Stuart McLeod Blythe is Associate Professor in the John Gladstone Chair of Preaching and Worship and Director of Doctoral Studies at Acadia Divinity College, Nova Scotia, Canada. He was formerly Rector of the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, Amsterdam.