

Research higher degree supervision in the Philippines: exploring possibilities for research

Angelito Calma
Centre for the Study of Higher Education
The University of Melbourne

Abstract

Research into research higher degree supervision (RHD) has attracted considerable interest in recent years. However, there is less evidence on how it is practised in the Philippines. First, this paper looks into the nature of RHD supervision, its many conceptions, and the characteristics of effective RHD supervision. It then discusses the many issues associated with RHD supervision and the rationale for doing research on this area in the Philippines. It concludes by proposing some possible areas for research.

Introduction

Internationally, RHD supervision has attracted considerable interest in recent years. Evidence to support this includes the numerous published papers and presentations over the past two decades. The research covers a wide range of topics across discipline areas and institutions. The specific focus of these investigations also vary and include, for example, effective supervisory practices, supervisory styles and their effects on student outcomes, supervisors' management of differing roles during stages of students' candidature, candidates' experiences, supervisors' experiences, supervision models, evaluation of supervision, epistemologies of supervisory practice, issues associated with supervision, and so on. These investigations have been focussed predominantly on the PhD, although some researchers also incorporated Masters by research level studies.

In the Philippines, significant developments have taken place in recent years to improve its higher education system. The establishment of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in 1994, as a spin-off from the Department of Education (DepED) and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) was a major step. With its establishment, higher education reforms have focussed on the following areas: (1) promoting quality and excellence, (2) promoting relevance and responsiveness, (3) broadening access, and (4) improving efficiency and effectiveness. However, despite the expansion of research in the area of RHD supervision as well as reforms within the CHED and HEIs, there has been little attention drawn into the investigation of the experiences of Filipino research supervisors and students.

Aligned with the CHED's four development areas, and as a respond to the problem of 'limited and underdeveloped graduate education' (Congressional Commission on Education, 1992 cited in Borromeo, 2005), research in RHD supervision is worth pursuing. Not only will it provide an understanding of how RHD supervision is practised in the Philippines, benchmarking against effective practices from developed countries can also be made. This can determine the gaps and limitations in postgraduate research curriculum and help identify the needs of academic staff and research students. Such research may also identify the need for the development of new policies or revision of existing policies related to RHD supervision.

Given that the Philippine higher education system is embarking on ways to ‘[promote] research to push forward the frontiers of knowledge and to develop a culture of research among [HEIs]’ (CHED, 2007, para. 2), developing RHD supervision capacity must be given high priority. By examining the possible areas of inquiry proposed here, a better understanding of the current state of RHD supervision can be achieved. It will also lead into examining current models, approaches, or processes employed, and how effective are these in building a rich research culture amongst HEIs.

Overall, RHD supervision in the Philippines needs rethinking. Such rethinking is timely, not only as a response to the development aims of the CHED and HEIs but also in appropriately training future academics who will push the boundaries of knowledge for the Philippines to use, particularly towards socio-economic development.

It is not possible to describe in detail the many areas and issues discussed in the literature in this paper. Instead, the focus of this paper is on the nature of RHD supervision and how possibilities for research into RHD supervision in the Philippines can be explored.

Defining RHD supervision

RHD supervision refers to university academic staff supervision of postgraduate students undertaking Masters by research (or Master’s, as popularly used), PhD, or doctorate degrees. (‘Masters by research’ in the Philippines can be synonymous to ‘Master’s by thesis’.) Thus, it refers to the supervision of candidates during the development of their thesis and dissertation research. It does not, however, necessarily refer to ‘research supervision’. This is a much broader term that may encompass supervision of the research of academic staff such as when they (e.g. professors, post-doctoral fellows) are commissioned by and report to national or institutional agencies. RHD supervision must not also be confused with clinical supervision, trade apprenticeships, personnel supervision in workplace settings, or supervision in general training.

The literature also mentions terms equivalent to RHD supervision such as ‘postgraduate supervision’, ‘research higher degree supervision’, ‘higher degree research supervision’, ‘doctoral supervision’, ‘PhD supervision’, and so on. In the Philippines, its counterpart term could well be ‘graduate supervision’ because we rarely use the term ‘postgraduate’ due to our American form of education. However, ‘thesis advising’ (used for either thesis or dissertation) or ‘thesis supervision’ is more popularly used.

Despite the many terms associated with RHD supervision, there is a common consensus that it carries some conceptions that include the following:

- the induction of the student into a scholarly community
- the preparation for research at the postgraduate level
- the manner of providing an environment that encourages student completion of research; and/or
- the training of the student with appropriate skills and competences needed for academic and professional use.

Some of these conceptions are interwoven into other disciplines such as management, psychology, or sociology and there are different ways in which these conceptions have been studied. Some studies have looked at the supervisor, the student, or the institution as units of analysis whilst others have focussed on processes, assumptions or outcomes of supervision.

Based on the foregoing, RHD supervision can be defined as *the process of providing the necessary environment that encourages the completion of research by RHD students*. Providing the necessary environment includes education and training of RHD students and the monitoring and evaluation of their research.

Why it is important to improve RHD supervision

There have been a number of studies that suggest that graduate student attrition is associated with poor supervisory arrangements (see McCormack, 2005). Some other studies report on student satisfaction, which impacts on the completion of thesis or dissertation (see for example, Heath, 2002) while some refer to supervisors' need to develop supervisory skills (see for example, Cryer & Mertens, 2003). Perhaps one of the most important functions of supervision lies in the transformation of novice students into competent researchers, as Green and Lee (1999, cited in Malfroy & Yates, 2003, p. 127) pointed out, 'What is at stake in doctoral work and postgraduate supervision...is precisely the (re)production of an intelligible academic identity---a certain kind of licensed personage.' This makes RHD supervision even more critical since it involves the training of future academics and practitioners from different disciplines.

Research suggests that effective supervision results in timely completion of students, high completion rates, competent and professional staff, 'quality, licensed' graduates, and development of a rich research culture, to list a few. In order to move 'the frontiers of knowledge' (CHED, 2007, para. 2), understanding supervision can lead to rethinking the ways in which research students are trained in different disciplines, how prepared academic staff are for such training, and how equipped institutions are to become 'research universities' in the future.

Characteristics of effective RHD supervision

A number of authors have defined key practices that effective supervisors engage in (see for example, James & Baldwin, 1999; Benaquisto, 2000). These include:

- both personal and academic matches between supervisors and candidates
- commitment to agreed roles and expectations
- careful monitoring of the development of the research
- the provision of high quality feedback
- the development of a mentor role
- encouraging students to develop a structured plan for the research, and;
- positively affecting the personal and professional lives of students

By learning from these aspirations and desired outcomes of supervision, benchmarking institution performance can be made. Issues that arise can be spotted and strategies can be developed to improve practice.

Common issues associated with RHD supervision

Before considering research into RHD supervision in the Philippine context, it is helpful to consider the issues and problems associated with RHD supervision identified elsewhere. Some of the challenges and problems identified are:

- Unclear motives and purposes of supervision (Wallace, 2003)
- Insufficient time devoted to supervision (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987; Brown & Atkins, 1988, cited in Lee, 1998)
- Lack of communication between supervisors and students (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987)
- Supervisors' preference of some supervisory roles over other roles (Vilkinas, 2002)
- Lack of research training amongst supervisors (Cryer & Mertens, 2003; Brew & Peseta, 2004; Grant & Graham, 1999)
- Emotional and psychological problems faced by students (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987), including social and intellectual isolation (Conrad & Phillips, 1995)
- Students' personal difficulties (eg. financing, family issues) (Buttery, Richter, & Filho, 2005)
- Students' lack of capacity and preparedness for research and postgraduate study (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987)
- Sexual harassment (Lee, 1998)
- Gender issues in supervision (Over, Over, Meuwissen, & Lancaster, 1990; Smeby, 2000; Gordon & Wimpenny, 1997)
- Organisational factors (eg. work space, facilities)

These issues are recognised by many authors as requiring attention. Note too that these identified issues and problems come from different facets, such as those associated with the supervisor, the student, the relationship, the process, or the institution. Understanding these issues is essential particularly given that the Philippines is seeking to build a rich research culture amongst higher education institutions (HEIs) because of the recognition that by doing so socio-economic gains can be achieved.

The point in presenting these issues is to learn from other countries' experiences. We may find that some of these are also prevalent in our country's case and it will be worthy to add to the literature on how we might tackle these issues in our particular educational context. My assumption here is that we can learn from other countries' experiences but we must also be careful not to make hasty 'false paradigmatic' policy or practice solutions without regard to our unique higher education situation. We know from experience in other areas that adoption of Western influences and ideologies, without regard for our distinctive contextual features, can lead to further problems rather than solutions.

Possible areas of research

The literature in RHD supervision is mostly theoretical in nature. It is scarce in providing documented cases and empirical research that examine supervision per se, much less for providing cases in the Philippines or Asia. It is hoped that the following can be explored (Calma, 2007):

- 'Best practices' in supervision

- The possibility of developing a framework for the learning skills required by Filipino postgraduates
- Case stories of successful and unsuccessful research supervisors and students
- Differences in supervision between levels of study, disciplines, and institutions
- The effects of supervision on a candidate's work
- Postgraduate education culture in the Philippines and how might this influence supervision
- National and institutional policies on supervision; and
- Phenomenological studies on how supervision is experienced and what it means to participants

Given the research possibilities that could be explored, the following approaches might be considered: observations of supervision (note some serious ethical considerations as well as unwanted effects of observation), interviews with supervisors, interviews with candidates, discourse analysis of dialogues between supervisors and candidates, and policy analysis. These approaches are qualitative in nature and are recommended to encapsulate the essence and deeper meanings of personal and collective experiences of relevant participants. Mixed methods are also encouraged.

Conclusion

This paper began by exploring the range of studies made on RHD supervision internationally. It proceeded with describing the development aims of the Philippine Commission on Higher Education and how future research into RHD supervision is timely, befitting, and relevant. There is recognition that little has been explored in understanding RHD supervision in the Philippines. Thus, possibilities for research into RHD supervision have been proposed. The proposed areas reflect investigations not only on policies associated with RHD supervision but also on existing practices amongst HEIs. Specifically, investigations are called for in the areas of supervisory relationships, discipline and institutional differences, outcomes of supervision, and postgraduate research skills of Filipinos. Some methodologies have also been proposed.

The fundamental thesis is to rethink RHD supervision in the Philippines. This is because of the critical importance of RHD supervision in training students for research. In doing so, an exploration through research is needed to identify gaps and limitations, issues and challenges, and possibly trends. This also allows for benchmarking against outstanding research universities elsewhere, particularly on their pathways to success.

For many years, research into RHD supervision in the Philippines remained an unexplored area. The current understanding of supervisory processes is limited. It may be worthwhile to explore this area in support for developing a rich research culture amongst HEIs in the Philippines.

Note:

This paper is based on an earlier conference paper presented at the International Conference on Research in Higher Education Institutions (ICRHEI) organised by the

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