

Doctoral supervisor development in Australian universities: Preparing research supervisors to teach writing

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In recent years, Australian doctoral education has diversified and expanded, with concomitant shifts in the format and purpose of the PhD. While there is now a considerable body of research into what constitutes good quality, effective supervision of PhD projects within this environment, there is surprisingly little about the training or professional development supervisors receive in order to succeed in this demanding task. Even less is reported on how supervisors learn to develop their students' writing. This paper reports on an Australia-wide study that sought to find out how institutions support their research supervisors through centrally provisioned professional development, with a particular focus on elements of those programs related to doctoral student writing. We mapped the current supervisor development offerings in Australian universities through a study of publicly available websites and interviews with key personnel involved in organising those programs. Our research reveals the enormous diversity of the preparation that research supervisors receive, and points to the opportunities this might afford for Academic Language and Learning specialists to play an important role in the professional development of supervisors.

Key Words: supervisor training, academic development, research supervision, HDR supervision, doctoral writing.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Over the last decade, Australian doctoral education has diversified and expanded; at the same time doctoral programs and supervisors have been subjected to a growing level of scrutiny by governments and a growing range of demands from employers (Hammond, Ryland, Tennant, & Boud, 2010; McCallin & Nayar, 2012). On the one hand there is a recognition that a doctoral degree should ensure thorough training in research techniques; on the other are demands that doctoral graduates have a range of generic skills that will facilitate employment in industry, business and the professions. These competing pressures have led to a reconsideration of the nature of doctoral supervision and growing interest in the professional development of supervisors. As research education, and particularly doctoral education, undergoes significant changes globally and in Australia (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Kehm, 2006; Lee & Danby, 2012; Nerad & Heggelund, 2011; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2009), there is increasing scope

for academic language and learning professionals to contribute (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Aitchison & Paré, 2012; Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; James, 2013).

In the competitive and pressured environment of contemporary doctoral study, writing becomes positioned and constrained in particular ways (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2013; Starke-Meyerring, Paré, Sun, & El-Bezre, 2014). In countries like Australia where there is no viva or oral defence, the display of 'doctoralness' and dissemination of research findings relies unduly on written texts such as the thesis, plus scholarly publications and increasingly newer forms of public works. Internationally, research publications are now high value cultural and social capital – for example, for institutions seeking research funding, supervisors seeking tenure and promotion, and for scholars hoping to secure employment (Aitchison, 2016). So, how are institutions preparing supervisors for these new pressures on doctoral writing? How often is writing the focus of supervisor training and development?

This paper reports on the findings of an Australia-wide study, and in so doing, also conducts a discussion of the wider implications and contextual considerations that shape the provision of supervisor development and the changing demands on doctoral writing. As an Australian study, we refer to higher degree by research (HDR) students – which includes both doctoral and Masters candidates – who are writing a research thesis for examination. In this context too, the term supervisor 'training' continues to be the dominant descriptor for the provision of what we prefer to call supervisor 'development' in recognition that what occurs in this learning and teaching space is far richer and more diverse than simply 'training'. This study compiles both publicly available information and individual interviews with university personnel in order to identify general trends regarding attention to writing in supervisor development programs.

1.2. Professional development for doctoral supervisors

Changes in researcher education necessarily require changes in research supervision. In an attempt to control the type and quality of doctoral supervision and research training, many universities have introduced supervisor training programs (Brew & Peseta, 2004, 2009; Lee, 2007, 2011; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Reid & Marshall, 2009; Wisker, 2012). Sometimes these programs are guided by frameworks that articulate the requirements for PhD supervision (Evans, 2009; Lee, 2008; Luca & Wolski, 2011; Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004); in other situations they are prompted by the challenges posed by government policies regarding research training (Baptista, 2011; McCallin & Nayar, 2012); still others are determined by the need to build national research capacity from a fairly small base (Bitzer, 2007; de Lange, Pillay, & Chikoko, 2011; Grevholm, Persson, & Wall, 2005). Importantly, alternative conceptualisations and models for supervision have been suggested (for example, see Creighton, Creighton, & Parks, 2010; Crossouard, 2008; de Beer & Mason, 2009; Fenge, 2012; Firth & Martens, 2008; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; Samara, 2006). Relying on supervisors' own experiences of being supervised (Hammond et al., 2010) is unlikely to be sufficient in this increasingly complex research environment, and many universities have introduced training and development programs to address this shortfall (Kiley, 2010). Recent research indicates that such programs do in fact have a positive long-term effect on the supervisory practices of participants (McCulloch & Loeser, 2016; Petrie et al., 2015).

In the past, supervisor training programs have emphasised the administrative and policy compliance aspects of research supervision; in contrast, many programs now concentrate on the pedagogy of supervision, and also reflect on the pedagogies informing that professional development. Following Clegg (1997), Manathunga (2005, p. 22) calls for supervisor training that focuses on a pedagogy that can 'value, explore, and build upon academics' prior knowledge and understandings'. Reflective practice and the interpersonal and emotional elements of research supervision thus become the key concerns (Brew & Peseta, 2004, 2009; Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007; Manathunga, 2005) in the explicit discussion of 'becoming a supervisor' (Halse, 2011). Taking this further, Guerin and Green (2013) report on 'collaborative critique', a pedagogy that takes an auto-ethnographical approach to supervisor development. Narrative, creative writing, drama and role plays are also harnessed in innovative professional development programs (Clarke, 2013; Manathunga, Peseta, & McCormack, 2010; Winka & Grysell, 2011).

Many models of professional development programs for supervisors exist: they are delivered at the local School or Faculty level, and also run from centralised units, with associated advantages and disadvantages (Boud, 1999). Conducting staff development activities within smaller groups of disciplinary colleagues allows for a focus on issues that are specific to that research group (Hammond et al., 2010); in general, collegially developed initiatives have a better chance of being taken up by the group than those introduced by a single individual bringing in ideas from an outside source. However, supervisor training that is conducted with only local colleagues tends to have fewer new ideas introduced and there is minimal cross-fertilisation of alternative practices from other parts of the university. The Irish National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL, 2012, s 2.1) explicitly recommends that ‘It is important to avoid isolating disciplines’ in supervisor development activities.

In the limited literature surveying university supervisor training, Hammond et al. (2010) asked supervisors themselves about their experience of learning to become supervisors, and Kiley (2011) has reported on the supervisor training programs at eight Australian universities. However, to date there has been no attempt to systematically record what supervisor development programs are offered by *centralised units* across all Australian universities, nor to systematically evaluate how such programs attend to questions of doctoral writing supervision.

1.3. Academic language and learning

Prompted by the growing diversity of doctoral students in terms of their educational, sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds, research into approaches to supporting these students has expanded in recent years. More than ever, teaching and learning within doctoral education is becoming dispersed and horizontalised (Boud & Lee, 2005, 2009), with input from peers, co-supervisors and centrally provisioned writing support, rather than only the supervisor. Increasing numbers of academic language and learning professionals have been engaged in assisting HDR candidates with research literacy skills (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Lee & Aitchison, 2009; Simpson, Caplan, Cox, & Phillips, 2016).

However, it is not enough simply for Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practitioners to work with the students themselves. We argue that ALL practitioners can play a valuable role in training postgraduate supervisors to develop in their students the advanced academic skills for successful and timely completion of doctoral projects. ALL practitioners can also provide a useful and complementary skill set when working closely with supervisors during the course of a student’s candidature as has frequently been demonstrated in the literature (Cotterall, 2011; Craswell, 2005; Cryer & Mertens, 2003; Dysthe, 2001; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Li & Vandermensbrugge, 2011; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; Paltridge, 2003; Starfield & Ravelli, 2006).

The current scoping study set out to determine the extent and nature of centrally provisioned supervisor development in Australia. In comparing the varied offerings at Australian universities, we were particularly interested in uncovering the degree to which research writing is included in these programs.

2. Methods

In order to establish the current state of HDR supervisor training and development programs in Australia, we gained ethics approval for a mixed methods approach. A table of relevant categories was determined according to those set out in the literature by Kiley (2011) and Manathunga, Peseta, and McCormack (2010), which was updated to include further details we regarded as useful based on the research team’s extensive combined experience in the sector. A pilot interview was conducted to confirm the validity of the categories to ensure our required data was captured, and category labels adjusted to ensure ready recognition of terms across institutions. The result was a table that recorded information under the following 11 categories:

1. Participants (new or experienced HDR supervisors)
2. Participation requirements (compulsory or optional)
3. Mode of delivery (face to face, online or blended)

4. Credit for a formal academic award program (for instance, credit towards a Graduate Certificate, Masters, etc.)
5. Providers (internal or external providers of modules, resources, etc.)
6. Facilitators (academic developers, graduate centre administrators, etc.)
7. A component or approach that focuses explicitly on writing or academic literacies
8. Quantity of training required or offered (number of modules, duration of sessions, etc.)
9. Program structure (content, evaluation of program)
10. Assessment of participation (tasks, responses, portfolios and their evaluation)
11. Strengths and areas for improvement.

We used two main methods for collecting data to fill in this table of categories. The first involved the research team populating the table with as much data as was publically available from the 40 Australian university websites. In some cases, we easily found information published in university webpages or detailed in open-access HDR supervision-related policies or procedures, while in other cases the available online information was sparse or inaccessible. In the majority of cases, information about categories 1–5 were sourced online, while the other categories required closer institutional knowledge or internal access to information.

The second method of data collection involved identifying and interviewing key staff members in universities who were directly involved in organising and/or delivering supervisor development from central units in their institutions. These personnel were mostly professional staff in graduate schools or similar institutional units; a smaller number worked in learning centres or other support units. This allowed us to fill in many of the gaps in our table, particularly around categories 6–11, where information was less readily accessible on the university websites. We were able to follow up with 26 universities for this more detailed information retrieval. While two universities' representatives declined our interview request, they emailed detailed information regarding their programs. Representatives from 24 other universities agreed to semi-structured telephone interviews of up to 30 minutes each, which were conducted and recorded after participants' signed consent forms were returned by email; these recordings were later transcribed in full. The interviews provided information to fill out the missing details in our table, and provided extra qualitative information to explain the specific institutional context and rationale for their programs. During the interviews, particular emphasis was placed on eliciting information about what training supervisors received to help them develop their students' research writing skills; this was not usually a focus of the information available on university websites.

In all, we gathered information relating to supervisor training and development offered by central units at 38 of the 40 Australian universities. At the time of data collection we were unable to obtain any information from two universities, either from publicly available websites or from repeated attempts to contact relevant individuals within the institutions. In order to preserve anonymity in the following discussion, the list of universities was first arranged non-alphabetically and then each was allocated a number.

3. Results

At the centre of this research is a mapping exercise aimed at identifying the range of supervisor development programs – and their provision of writing development support – offered through central units at Australian universities. While we came across many pockets of faculty or school-based initiatives, for this research project we were focused on documenting the university-wide offerings for HDR supervisors as we considered that this information would provide a valuable insight into institutional expectations of their HDR supervisors' capacity and readiness to successfully manage their students' doctoral research and writing projects.

Although we present our findings as of mid-2015, it is important to emphasise the dynamic context – even during the months of data collection, many individuals and organisational units providing these services were restructured. Nevertheless, we are able to establish the general picture of the diversity of supervisor development provided by Australian universities.

The information we gathered from websites and individual interviews mapped a landscape of great diversity and instability: programs are extremely varied (ranging from a half-hour video induction for new staff to a full Masters-level subject in an accredited course) and subject to frequent change. Additionally, responsibilities around curriculum, pedagogy and delivery of the HDR supervisor training programs vary considerably, as do the institutional requirements for participation and accreditation.

3.1. Types of supervisor development programs

There appear to be three broad kinds of supervisor development programs: those aimed at inducting staff who are new to the university and/or to supervision; sessions designed for current supervisors seeking a ‘refresher’ and/or to maintain eligibility to supervise; and more extended professional development with an educational focus. Figure 1 displays the variety and combinations of these types.

Our study revealed that 14 (35%) Australian universities provided only an induction program for new supervisors, while three (7%) offered professional development programs that did not distinguish between new and experienced supervisors. The remaining universities provided both induction and further opportunities for supervisors to develop their expertise. In 12 cases (30%), this was presented as one-off ‘refreshers’ which were either optional or a requirement for experienced supervisors to remain on a register of eligible supervisors. At five (13%) universities, the program included an induction followed up by ongoing professional development opportunities, which in three cases involved credit towards an academic award, such as a Graduate Certificate or Masters. In four (10%) cases, universities provided a coordinated suite of induction, refresher and ongoing professional development programs for HDR supervisors.

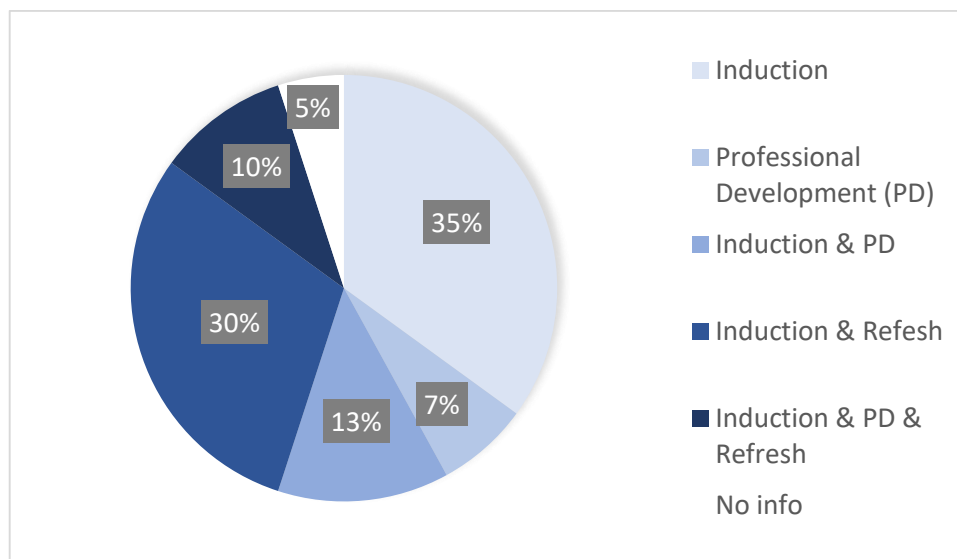


Figure 1. Types of supervisor development programs.

3.2. Participation requirements

Twenty-seven (68%) universities reported having at least some compulsory component that was often linked to being eligible to supervise. We found that 17 (45%) universities maintained a register of staff eligible to supervise HDR students, with this eligibility dependent on supervisors completing and/or updating their training. Of the 11 others, where participation was optional, we were told that supervisors were strongly encouraged to attend, and even that their institution was currently considering making participation compulsory.

Despite the high percentage of mandatory programs (68%), it was beyond the scope of this project to track compliance via rates of participation by supervisors. Discussion amongst some university representatives and the research team revealed that there is an uneven rate of compliance. For instance, in disciplines where there is an uneven balance of available supervisors and prospective

HDR students, it would be unlikely for a distinguished professor to be prevented from supervising if they didn't undertake the professional development program, despite the rigorous policy requirements at particular institutions. Indeed, the research team found that some universities' publicly available forms for 'supervisor accreditation' noted that waivers to avoid the training could be approved by Heads of School or Deans of Research.

Additionally, there seemed to be a great variation in the quantity and quality of the training offered to supervisors – in one institution it was mandatory to undertake training, but that training only involved watching a non-interactive 24-minute video. In another case, the compulsory program involved two days of face-to-face workshops, followed by participation in an online module across several weeks and the submission of a portfolio.

It is possible to identify trends in participation requirements across different university networks or groupings (see Figure 2). Following the Australian Education Network's (2016) directory, we categorised the 40 Australian universities into five groups: Group of Eight (Go8); Australian Technology Network (ATN); Regional Universities Network; Innovative Research Universities (IRU); and the others that previously belonged to the recently disbanded Australian New Generation Universities (NGU) network or are new and unaffiliated (labelled here as 'Ex groupings'). Of the Go8s, there was a 50/50 split between compulsory and optional requirements to participate in HDR supervisor development programs. However, both IRU and Regional universities made the programs mandatory.

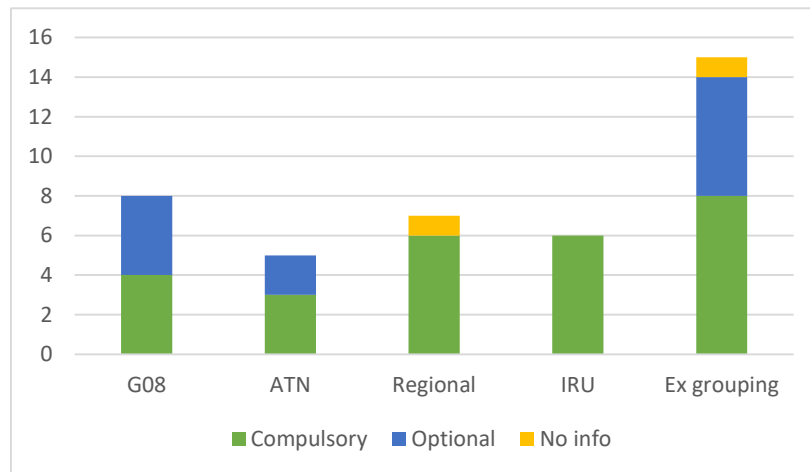


Figure 2. Participation requirements by university grouping.

It is perhaps not surprising that the Go8 universities would have faith in their research supervisors' capacity to effectively support their research students. We speculate that the IRU and Regional universities' emphasis on compulsory programs could arise from a number of reasons, including a desire to improve HDR completion rates and outcomes in competition with stronger research universities; concerns over ensuring consistency in the quality of supervision across widely dispersed campuses; creating the perception or reassurance that staff possess relevant expertise in research supervision; or perhaps these universities are simply more willing to engage with novel approaches to traditional practices. Further research is required to understand the rationale behind this profile.

3.3. Delivery mode and providers

Just under half of the programs in the study are delivered entirely or mostly in face-to-face mode. Of the 38 universities we know about, only four provide fully online courses. Conversely, 17 provide only face-to-face sessions; 17 provide a mix of face-to-face and online sessions (some of which involve only the compulsory induction component being offered online, with other sessions still face-to-face). Nine of the universities interviewed reported being in the process of introducing more online elements.¹

Editorial note: This paragraph has been slightly changed from the original publication as minor errors were found in some of the originally quoted numbers.

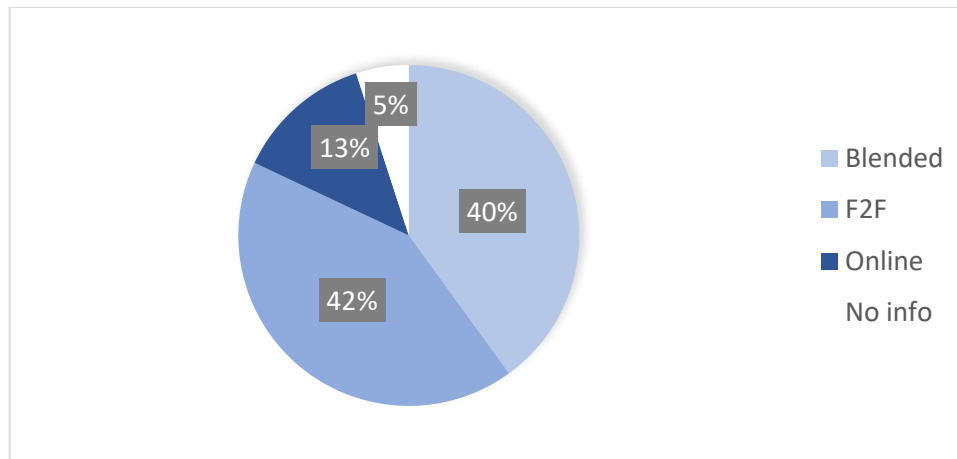


Figure 3. Modes of delivery.

There is a general move towards introducing at least some online provision, especially for induction and/or compulsory elements. The rationale for this would be that it is easier for participants to access online modules in their own time and around their other work commitments, than to commit to face-to-face sessions at a specific time and location. Indeed, Figure 4 below shows that when an online module is the only option offered by an institution, it is always made a mandatory requirement for supervisors, no doubt because online options are easier to access and therefore easier to ensure compliance. In one instance, this involved participants signing a form saying that they had watched an online video, and in another case it involved participants completing five two-hour online modules, followed by a two-hour face-to-face workshop every four years to maintain eligibility on the supervisor register.

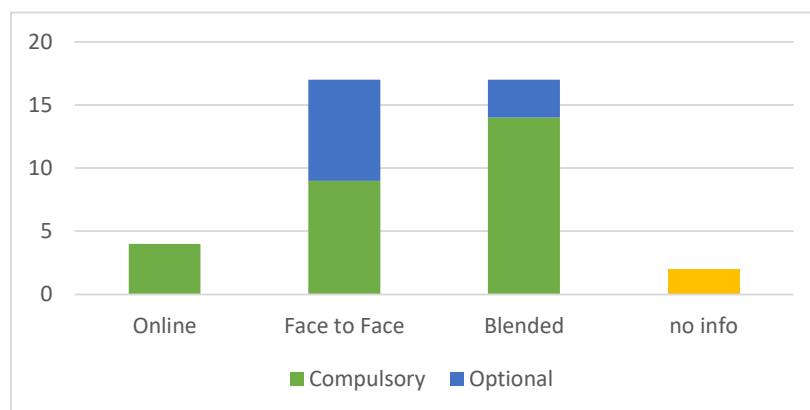


Figure 4. Comparing participation requirements by mode of delivery.

Out of the 21 universities that included an online component (either stand-alone or blended with face-to-face delivery), we identified 10 that used external providers. The most common external input was via online modules produced by the UK-based Epigeum or the fIRST website (for Improving Research Supervision Training), the latter being sponsored by the Australian Council of Graduate Research. Some universities had gained permission to use modules developed by another university, which was then adapted to their own institutional context.

3.4. Participant contact hours

The survey revealed enormous variation in the anticipated number of contact hours. One university provided a very structured program of a full semester of 13 two-hour face-to-face workshops; another offered four online sessions estimated at approximately 15-20 hours of engagement; while others provided more modest professional development programs of four or five workshops annually with each requiring two to three hours of participants' time.

Equally varied were the degree of structure and formality of the programs, where some universities presented the workshops as a series of linked development opportunities, while others took a more ad hoc approach, allowing the topics and frequency of workshops to be determined by staff needs and concerns or by facilitator availability.

3.5. Assessment or credit

Very few Australian universities have supervisor development programs that are part of a formal academic award. Of the three we identified, the HDR supervisor development programs could provide credit towards either a Masters or a Graduate Certificate degree if participants completed additional evaluated assessment tasks. One university allowed for supervisor development to count towards Higher Education Academy accreditation. There are several universities that require follow-up assignments from participants, such as reflective journals, case studies, interviewing experienced supervisors, multiple choice quizzes, mini research projects and presentations. However, the vast majority of universities require only participation in the workshop itself.

3.6. Program facilitators

In keeping with the multiplicity of local historical, cultural and structural variations in the administration and oversight of HDR supervision, it was difficult to ascertain with great accuracy responsibility for curriculum design and delivery of courses. In many cases these decisions appear to be within the purview of Graduate School staff that may or may not be academics, nor have learning and teaching specialist skills themselves. We noticed that programs were often reliant on the personal drive and commitment of individuals, rather than a result of sustained institutional policy or practice. The study found that it was common for institutions to provide most of their own supervisor development, although a relatively high proportion (over one third) used both internal and external providers. Institutions typically engaged local staff from graduate schools for policy related informational sessions and disciplinary academics with good supervision track records or specific expertise such as language or academic developers to design and facilitate sessions/programs.

3.7. Focus on writing

We could identify only 35% of universities that had some writing focus or component in their supervisor development programs (see Figure 5). We did not identify any notable trends according to the type of training, as some attention to writing or academic literacies could appear in induction, refresher or professional development programs. There was also a relatively even spread across compulsory and optional, or online and face-to-face programs, inside the few that offered some focus on writing. What is perhaps more interesting is comparison within particular groupings, with the regional universities less likely than all others to offer a focus on writing. While it is beyond the scope of the current project, it would be interesting to compare this information about the lack of explicit focus on writing in supervisor training with the provision of writing support given directly to HDR students at regional universities.

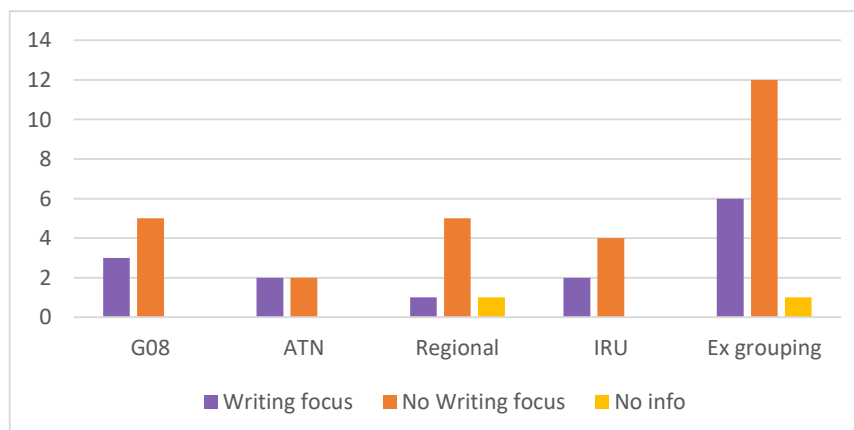


Figure 5. Comparing writing focus in different university groupings.

3.8. Content of writing-focused supervisor training and development

Supervising the writing process is ‘*one of the biggest challenges in the supervision process*’ (University 32) according to one of our interviewees. When asking institutional representatives about the scope of topics covered in relation to writing, we found considerable overlap between institutions across the wide range of topics listed. Some participants described this aspect of professional development in very general terms as ‘supporting the writing’, which was elaborated by others as helping students by identifying their writing needs, directing them to university support, explaining various techniques and tips, and discussing disciplinary differences. Other areas of writing-related provision included explicit work around the genre of the thesis and components such as research questions; writing scholarly publications; writing processes (including strategies for regular writing and to overcome writers’ block); plagiarism; and academic reading skills. In addition, institutions reported including discussion of issues connected to supervising non-native English speaking students, and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* editing. Importantly, many addressed ways in which supervisors can provide effective feedback to students on their writing. It became clear that writing-related issues were sometimes raised in sessions not specifically focused on writing, so omnipresent is thesis writing in supervision.

4. Discussion: Writing and supervisor development

While the mapping has shown the wide range of writing topics addressed in HDR supervisor development courses, the depth to which these are explored varies tremendously between universities. Some programs devote considerable time to writing issues; others appear to do so in a fairly cursory manner; and yet others see the writing as integrated throughout the workshops rather than being an element of supervision that can be separated out from other issues. One interviewee explained how writing is woven throughout discussions about supervision:

‘critical reading and critical writing are two of the essential skills that students need to be successful and so the supervisors being able to scaffold that experience is really important. So an interesting—just an interesting example of that, this morning’s workshop was on scoping the—scope and focus of the project and I would say in the discussions probably 20 to 30 minutes of the hour of discussion was about writing and reading support.’ (University 32)

A curious ambivalence about writing emerges from these interviews in that writing is seen as central to successful research supervision but is not a substantial part of most supervisor development programs. This may reflect the specific expertise of the participants being interviewed: academic developers with a background in teaching academic language and literacy may be more likely to emphasise the details of the writing components than those from other fields (such as Human Resources or administrators responsible for candidature management). Despite this possibility, it would seem that many involved in supervisor development regard writing as a central concern for doctoral education – one of our interviewees went so far as to say: ‘*Supervisors have an enormous hunger for anything to do with writing*’ (University 13). Yet our study reveals that writing is rarely accorded a significant portion of the workshops or program being delivered, reflecting the ongoing problem of ‘an absence of attention to writing’ in discourses on doctoral education (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). Echoing Paré’s (2011) findings, one participant pointed out the necessity for workshops on writing because supervisors themselves are not always well equipped to develop the writing skills of their supervisees, explaining that she observes ‘*issues around supervisors’ confidence and ability to deal with writing issues*’ (University 37).

When supervisor development programs do include a substantial component on writing, there appears to be an enthusiastic uptake of the opportunity to learn more about how to develop HDR writing skills. One of the universities that offers a choice of workshops reports a tendency for supervisors to prefer the writing workshop: ‘*more doing this one on writing than some of the others*’ (University 1). Another interviewee reported:

‘we did get very, very favourable responses from that [workshop on writing], and we would have people getting back to us. This sort of [thing] rarely happened to me with anything else I’ve done ever in education. We’d have staff

getting back to us after a week or two weeks after the workshops, saying, “Hey, I’ve just worked with a group of HDR students, and I’ve tried out some of the exercises”. [...] And it would have dramatic, just sort of dramatic effects. So we got a lot of positive feedback about that.’ (University 7)

Despite the clear enthusiasm for such workshops, surprisingly few supervisor development programs consistently offer specific education for supervisors about how to develop good research writing skills in their students. Those that did listed a range of topics covered, ranging from authorial voice, topic sentences and writer’s block to copyright, publication processes and plagiarism.

Feedback on writing is a perennial concern in researcher education (Laurs & Carter, 2017). The interviews highlighted a common interest amongst supervisors for opportunities to discuss their practices in relation to feedback on candidate writing, concerns about supervisor roles *vis-à-vis* editing, and supervising culturally and linguistically diverse candidates for whom English wasn’t a first language.

Many of the interviewees spoke about feedback on writing as an important part of their supervisor development program. Interviewees reported that their workshops explored both verbal and written feedback, as well as focussing on what constitutes constructive, as opposed to unhelpful, feedback:

‘we identify for supervisors what is good practice and what students should be doing and then we talk about and engage with them on how are they going to provide this feedback? What are they going to say? How can they assess? What are the steps they need to put into place to ensure their student actually takes up this advice and those sort of things. [...] And we provide the advice on how to give feedback, how to identify how people operate and how to do something about it.’ (University 11)

The capacity to provide useful feedback is connected to appropriate supervisory relationships in which HDRs and supervisors enjoy clear communication with each other (Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Wang & Li, 2011). A prerequisite for being receptive to critique of writing is a trusting and respectful relationship between the parties involved. Thus, in emphasising that the supervisor/student relationship is critical to successful doctoral studies, supervisor development programs can link the concepts of relationships, feedback and writing development.

Closely linked to feedback is the question of how much intervention (generally described as ‘editing’) in writing is appropriate. This is a vexed question for many supervisors, and according to our interviewees was the cause of much debate in supervisor development programs:

‘how much is reasonable for them to do in terms of editing and how much the students themselves have to do, so there are some lines to be drawn there and we talk about that. It’s usually a really, really lively session because they’ve all got views on how much they should help with the writing.’ (University 32)

‘how much is too much, how much is too little, and what’s just right, because there seems to be a lot of confusion amongst supervisors about how much and what they should be doing.’ (University 31)

The boundary between offering detailed feedback and interfering with the writing is one that supervisors must negotiate with a close eye on policy imperatives – including the need to guarantee sufficiently high standards of writing – and ethical practice that is in the student’s interests to ensure those students develop into independent scholars in their own right.

In a number of supervisor development programs, the issue of professional editing of theses is discussed, too, in light of the requirements of appropriate and ethical conduct:

‘basically you should not be writing your student’s thesis for them and neither should someone that they pay.’ (University 24)

'What are the sorts of the things that we could do to support them from day one, rather than sort of waiting until the final three months and having a professional editor as the default?' (University 24)

This topic is sometimes explored in terms of university policy as part of workshops aimed at orienting new supervisors to the broader policies and strategic directions of the individual institution.

Another common concern explored in supervisor development programs is the supervision of international students from CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) backgrounds (Wang & Li, 2011). Although universities might formally assess the language skills of HDR students, our study indicates that building understanding of how to respond to this information is rarely included in the supervisors' own training.

Interestingly, this study found that writing-related sessions were often delivered by writing experts either from other institutional divisions such as Learning Centres or a Linguistics faculty or by external providers. For example, at one university, their approach to the writing of international students was to work with both HDRs and their supervisors in workshops aimed at identifying interference from a student's first language:

'[We] get linguists in who understand the different language groups. Right? And to talk about the common writing problems of say Mandarin speakers. Anyone can come to that. Mandarin speakers or the supervisors.' (University 27)

Although we set out to investigate the provision of support to supervisors to assist them to develop their students' writing, we discovered that many Australian universities provide writing development direct to HDRs through research skills programs for students:

'we're teaching students to be able to write like that independently and take a long view to the development of students as writers. So we talk about that and also about the additional writing support that's available for students. Because the supervisor can't necessarily do that development work with all of their students.' (University 37)

There is increasing recognition that researcher learning is occurring in a wider pedagogical space than ever before. One university stated that the supervisor is:

"not the only person who is responsible" Like, the whole institution is responsible as well, in a way, and so they do tend to refer out and send students towards other opportunities to develop their writing.' (University 37)

While there is clearly an important place for this direct delivery to students, we would argue that there is value in supervisors being competent to add their discipline-specific knowledge to writing development for their own students. When faced with insufficient institutional support, HDRs may turn to external providers whose practices can sometimes pose challenges to academic integrity (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2016).

5. Conclusion

Research development and support for supervisors is an evolving space globally and this Australian study reflects the unevenness and volatility that exists where there is limited commonality of provision and curriculum in supervisor development and training across universities. Our study showed great discrepancies in what is required from supervisors in order to demonstrate their ability to provide effective supervision, and in the professional development that is offered to support this crucial aspect of our research training. By documenting existing professional development programs, our project represents an important step towards understanding how best to support HDR supervisors and hence their students, with a particular focus on how supervisors develop the writing skills of these novice researchers. Within this we see a real opportunity for Academic Language and Learning specialists to play an important role in developing and delivering professional development for supervisors as they learn to help HDRs develop their own

writing skills. While there is a growing literature about doctoral writing and on supervisor training as we have indicated already, there is yet to be a strong framing of these two literatures together. We know the vast majority of supervisors receive only limited training and of this an even smaller number receive support in developing their students' writing.

Many of our interviewees referred to difficulties in engaging time-poor staff in professional development activities, as well as resistance from those who are compelled to do courses. This may also be related to the institutional roles of the workshop facilitators – are academic staff dismissive of what can be learnt from people whom they regard as 'only professional staff' or administrators bent on compliance with policy being handed down from on high? Our study hints that this might be so, but further research into the pedagogies of supervisor development programs is required to tease out the nuances of supervisors' responses to their involvement in these programs.

This study revealed some strong views about the importance of student skills in writing for successful candidature; it also showed considerable divergence about how this recognition was taken into supervisor development programming. While writing is recognised as an important aspect of doctoral supervision, there appears to be ambivalence about who should support supervisors to develop the prerequisite skills and approaches for adequately supporting their students. It was not uncommon for our interviewees to refer to 'writing experts' such as ALL practitioners, supervisors and academics who are successful in publishing their own work, or external consultants invited in to deliver special sessions for supervisors.

We also note that the lack of formal recognition in the shape of some type of academic award for professional development courses is a missed opportunity. If participants were to gain formal credit for their work in such courses, the result may well be better engagement from staff who see greater benefit from the time they invest in this training. For example, the formalised recognition of teaching that is offered by the Higher Education Academy in the UK, or a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, could be used as incentives to undertake formal supervisor development.

A consistent, unified approach to HDR supervisor development programs would be hugely beneficial for those attempting to provide professional development in this area. This would provide ready recognition of competence for those supervisors moving between institutions; it would also go some way towards assuring research students of the quality of supervision they are likely to receive, regardless of their discipline or institution.

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