

Co-Supervision at Postgraduate Level

Co-supervision - when a student has two academic mentors. Co-supervision occurs where two academic staff members share responsibility for the principal supervision of a student. In this situation, all the usual interpersonal complexities are multiplied, and the risks of things going wrong can be increased by mixed messages, not decreased by burden-sharing! It is important to make sure that co-supervision is academically rational, and a view from the literature is that it is much easier if one supervisor is the primary, with most of the responsibility; this avoids the confusion that can arise with 50/50 splits.

Roles of Co-Supervisors

Co-supervisor(s) responsibilities	
<i>Ethics</i>	To become familiar with, and abide by, the institution's regulations and procedures governing ethical behaviour in research
<i>Enhance supervision</i>	To enhance the effective supervision of the candidate by contributing a second opinion or additional area of expertise to that of the chief supervisor
<i>Continuity</i>	To provide continuity of supervision in the event of the absence or departure of the chief supervisor
<i>Meetings</i>	To participate in meetings between the candidate and supervisors as appropriate
<i>Assessment</i>	To participate in any assessment of the candidate's work
<i>Report</i>	To contribute to the chief supervisor's report to the examiners or submit a separate report if considered necessary

Benefits of Co-Supervisors

There are two possible developmental purposes for co-supervision:

1. as a safety net for students in case of academic moves, sabbaticals, and leaves;
2. to provide a mentoring environment for new supervisors.

Advice

Roles and responsibilities for both purposes should be defined institutionally, particularly since a focus on both simultaneously can confound the relationships.

Forms of co-supervision can vary to suit disciplinary cultures/pedagogies.
Minimal expectations should be defined institutionally e.g.

1. Maximum number of people;
2. Distribution of supervisory responsibilities with regard to the student in relation to
3. Institution regulations (e.g. who completes reports);
4. Relative status of team members (e.g. is one considered more senior with overall responsibility?);
5. Physical availability for meeting with student;
6. The student's responsibilities.

Each supervisory team can function differently in relation to their areas of expertise, dispositions, etc. In addition to the institutional points above, each supervisory team or partnership needs to clarify:

1. Actual distribution of skills, knowledge, experience expected of each member;
2. Frequency with which decisions about roles and responsibilities will be reviewed since needs change over time;
3. Whether all members of the team are present at every meeting with the student.

Questions that Co-Supervisors need to Clarify

The following questions, if discussed in the supervisory team at the beginning of the relationship, should help clarify where differences in the views of the relationship could create problems:

1. What expectations does the student hold of each member of the supervisory team? Are those expectations realistic?
2. What expectations does each supervisor have of the others, including the student?
3. What can be expected of a secondary supervisor compared with a primary supervisor?
4. How often will the supervisory team meet as a whole as opposed to having individual meetings with the student?
5. Whose responsibility is it to initiate and organise meetings? Is it the student's? Or the primary supervisor's?
6. How and by whom will the outcomes of joint and individual meetings be recorded and disseminated?
7. How will differences in advice to the candidate be handled? Will the student decide, the primary supervisor, or will different members of the team have the final say regarding their own area of expertise?
8. Who will read drafts of material and when?

Research on Co-Supervision (University of Oxford)

There is little research that directly addresses co-supervision although there is reference to it in general studies of supervisory practices. The following summarizes the very few studies over the past two decades that address co-supervision directly.

Both students and supervisors report co-supervision as beneficial: students because they feel better protected and get more than one point of view on their inquiry; supervisors because they see different supervisory practices and share responsibility for supporting the student.

Still, the following are **potential problems**:

- a) a fragmentation of supervisory responsibilities;
- b) conflicting advice to the student;
- c) an absence of overall perspective on the thesis; and
- d) conflict between supervisors.

In other words, while there are benefits, there are caveats; this is not surprising given that co-supervision involves a relationship with more individuals than the traditional one-to-one model.

Tools to help

A few strategies that have proved to be useful in clarifying mutual expectations are:

- completing an expectations questionnaire. The idea is that student and supervisor complete this questionnaire separately, then meet to discuss. One thing that works well is to leave a few blank items so that students can add items that are important to them.
- developing a memorandum of understanding. This would be different for each student, and can be revised annually. Each can be used as a model and modified to suit different circumstances and disciplines.
- using a Student Profile Proforma. This is another tool that may help students to plot their progression through the supervision experience through regular discussions with supervisors (see Aspland *et al.*, 1999 for the source of this tool).

References

Bourner, T., & Hughes, M. (1991). Joint Supervision of Research Degrees: Second Thoughts. *Higher Education Review*, 24(1), 21-34.

Spooner-Lane, R., Henderson, D., Price, R., & Hill, G. (2007). Practice to theory: Co-supervision stories. *The International Journal of Research Supervision*, 1(1), 39-51.

Further Resources:

Amundsen, C., & McAlpine, L. (2009). 'Learning supervision': trial by fire. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(3), 331-342.

Pearson, M., & Kayrooz, C. (2004). Enabling critical reflection on research supervisory practice. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 9(1), 99-116.