POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION AS TEAMWORK:

'THE AFRICANISATION OF BIBLICAL STUDIES' PROJECT – A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore possible benefits, but also challenges and risks, of group supervision, as experienced by participants in a particular project, namely the 'Africanisation of Biblical Studies' project. The project involved the writing of three doctoral theses by three African students from Madagascar, Tanzania, and Uganda respectively. The four main sections of the article contain a brief overview of extant studies on group supervision; the structure of the case study project; a discussion of the results of a questionnaire on the participants' experiences of the group supervision aspect of the project; and a summary of the benefits, challenges and risks of group supervision according to the participants in the project.

Keywords: Teamwork; Biblical Studies; Cross-institutional Research; Benefits and Risks

Introduction

The structure of a particular postgraduate research project determines whether group supervision is possible or not. It also has an influence on the kind of benefits and risks of group supervision that might be experienced by those participating in the project. The purpose of this study is to share with the academic community the benefits and risks of group supervision as experienced by the participants in a particular project. Our findings will not apply to all projects involving group supervision. However, we trust that our study will provide useful information on group supervision as a phenomenon, but also on how postgraduate projects can be structured in order to make the most of the opportunities available for group supervision.

A questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions on postgraduate supervision as teamwork was composed and was administered at the end of the four-year period. The group consisted of three African male doctoral students (two Lutheran pastors and one Roman Catholic priest); two female promoters and one male promoter from Unisa (RSA); a Norwegian co-ordinator of the project (who launched the project), who also served as joint promoter; a Norwegian organiser and administrator of the project; and an African co-ordinator. Everybody but the latter completed the questionnaire. Participants' statements were analysed, using methods of qualitative content analysis.

Attention was mainly given to aspects such as the participants' reflection on the structure and the opportunities created by the project for group supervision; the possible skills that the participants developed during the multi-voice supervision process; the perceived strengths and weaknesses of group supervision; cross-cultural, cross-institutional, and cross-gender aspects of multi-perspective supervision and possible future opportunities created by the project for the individuals, as well as for the group as such.

Group Supervision: Extant Studies

Extant studies have focused on different aspects of group supervision. These studies also represent diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks, varying from phenomenological attitudes expressed through qualitative research (e.g. Samara 2006) to reflective approaches (McCormack & Pamphilon 2004; Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985) and more specifically, post-modern, narrative approaches to group work (McCormack & Pamphilon 2004), also called the story-dialogue approach which encourages participants to examine the metaphors and myths that construct the experience of postgraduate research.

The following broad categories represent some of the aspects of group supervision that have received attention in extant studies:

▪ How the group is constituted and who takes up the supervisory role

Groups consisting of peers only versus groups including peers and supervising lecturers or tutors, and even groups consisting of one student and more than one supervisor or promoter

Several studies focus on the role of supervisor taken up by peers (cf Boud 2001; Conrad & Phillips 1995; Falchikov 2001; Hewett 2000; Hortmanshof & Conrad 2003; Jacques 2000; Peterson 2003; Samara 2006). In these studies students present their material to peers or to peers and lecturers or tutors (cf. Samara 2006:116). Peer groups either discuss the research topics of common interest, or comment on each others' texts, apart from playing a supportive role in other respects. The collaborative, supportive, and non-hierarchical nature of group supervision are emphasised in these studies.

Collective forms of supervision, where students are organised into research teams that are supervised by one or a number of lecturers, are quite common in the natural sciences (cf. Samara 2006:116). The case study under discussion is an example of such a research team, although the team consists of theologians in the field of Old Testament Studies.

The familiar version of group supervision where the team consists of one student and two co-promoters does not feature prominently in literature on this topic.

Faculty-initiated groups versus cross-institutional groups

Most of the research into group supervision has tended to focus on faculty-initiated groups (cf. Conrad & Phillips 1995:314). However, there have been some cross-institutional support groups, for example in Australia, where a national conference for postgraduate students in marketing gave postgraduate students an opportunity to present a report on their research to both peers and established academics in their field. This project was studied by Conrad (1991; cf. also Conrad & Phillips 1995:314).

The project, on which our case study focuses, is also cross-institutional. In fact, five institutions on two continents are involved, which is extraordinary in view of the extant research on group supervision. When compared with the Australian example, our case study project also has a much longer-term view.

The PhD 'cohort' working in a specific area on distinctive problems versus groups in which people in different programmes work together.

A PhD 'cohort' involves continuous relationships between postgraduate students supporting each other in groups. Phillips (1989) describes such a cohort, consisting of 8-12 students who elected to work in a specific area on distinctive problems. The

cohort was led by two members of staff. The cohort met regularly, perhaps every two weeks, to talk in a workshop format of their progress, problems and thinking. The continual sharing and interchange of perspectives allowed the group to become a support network that functioned outside the formal meeting times as well (cf Conrad & Phillips 1995:314). To a certain extent, our case study group functioned in a similar way.

Another example, in some respects similar to our case study group, was studied by Conrad (1992). It was a group of three Master's students whose theses were distinct applications within the same theoretical framework. They met with their supervisor approximately monthly at the thesis-writing stage.

Distinct from the 'cohort' groups, are those groups in which people in different programmes work together. Perry and Zuber-Skerritt (1990) studied a postgraduate management research programme in which a group of eight PhD and Master's students and their thesis supervisors formed a work group that met regularly. The group discussed matters of mutual interest to all the students, for example research methodologies, theories, and thesis-related issues such as time management, thesis design, rationale, structure, and writing.

Informal peer support networks
Students sometimes form their own small support groups to provide assistance to each other through personal relationships with a professional dimension. Friedman (1987) studied such a group. Our case study group could hardly establish such a group, since group members (especially the students) moved from country to country (and even continent to continent) every few months.

Groups bringing together both the formal and informal
Phillips and Pugh (1994) recommend formal induction groups arranged by the institution, as well as informal student-initiated self-help peer support groups. They argue that a dyad is one useful type of peer support group, providing feedback on written work before it is shown to the supervising lecturer.

- Parties that benefit from group supervision
  Most of the studies obviously focus on the benefits of group supervision for the student(s). McCormack and Pamphilon (2004), however, studied the benefits of group supervision with a view to the professional development of the supervising lecturers. We would like to point out that some postgraduate students are in the academia themselves, which implies that their professional development too is supported by the process?

- Gender issues
  Conrad & Phillips (1995), for example, argue that gender issues need to be taken into consideration. Women prefer to work in groups that provide a sense of community and where a collaborative approach is used (cf. also Phillips 1989). According to Conrad & Phillips (1995:313), such groups should also be consistent with the cooperative and non-hierarchical directions feminists have urged for higher education in general, since group settings have frequently been a mechanism of women's oppression.

▪ Benefits and risks of group supervision

Most studies on group supervision refer to, and some focus on, certain benefits and potential weaknesses of group supervision. Conrad (1992), for example, lists nine benefits of group supervision reported by three Master's students whose dissertations formed part of a single research project. They found the benefits to be (1) support; (2) help in gathering materials; (3) seeding of ideas, stimulation; (4) the alternative perspectives that others provided; (5) a timetable and pressure; (6) experience in 'thinking on your feet'; (7) elimination of blocks to writing; (8) encouragement to write; and (9) help in clarifying and communicating ideas.

Samara (2006:116) draws our attention to research that emphasises the instructional and social benefits of group supervision that impact on students' academic work and environment. She also refers to the work of Hortsmanshof & Conrad, who pointed out that group supervision counteracts isolation, achieves learning of collaborative skills, and creates an arena for the students to share their research and study experiences (Samara 2006:116). The results of her own study show that group supervision enables the development of supervision skills, has an impact on the students' writing process and facilitates the students' enculturation into the particular discipline (Samara 2006:115).

Samara (2006:127), however, concludes that while the findings of her study as it was conducted are entirely positive, indicating the value of group supervision for learning in a number of ways, this does not mean that all group supervision experiences everywhere will be positive. Due to personal and cultural factors, not all students will be prepared to participate actively in such a group. The group atmosphere is also important. A feeling of security and mutual trust must be present for the group to function effectively. The act of sharing a text with others can be a very sensitive and difficult process for some.

Our research is based on a single case study that exemplifies many of the aspects of group supervision referred to above. The case study involves a project in which group supervision played a major part. In the next section, we will demonstrate how the structure of the project made room for group supervision.

The Structure of the Case Study Project

Purpose and general structure

The project under discussion is entitled 'The Africanisation of Biblical Studies'. The project was structured around three doctoral thesis projects in the field of Old Testament Studies. The three theses approached the theme of the Africanisation of the study of the Bible from three different angles: Using Africa to interpret the Old Testament, using the Old Testament to interpret Africa, and finding Africa in the Old Testament. Three doctoral students (from Uganda, Tanzania, and Madagascar respectively) participated in the project. Each student had a main promoter from the University of South Africa, where the degrees would eventually be conferred, and one from the School of Mission and Theology in Stavanger, Norway, who served as co-promoter for all three students.

The main aim of the project was capacity building, which would be achieved through (a) assisting the three students in obtaining their DTh degrees in Theology, (b) giving them teaching experience in the field of Old Testament, (c) establishing network links with Old Testament scholars on different continents, and (d) providing exposure to the wider field of Old Testament scholarship.

The project covered all travel, accommodation, and daily living costs of the three students during their visits to Norway and South Africa, as well as the other participants' travel and accommodation costs when attending the annual colloquium weeks. The project also paid the three students' salaries during the periods at their home institutions. The project was generously funded by the Norwegian Education Council (NUFU).

Questionnaire Results: Postgraduate Supervision as Teamwork

As mentioned above a questionnaire[1] consisting of open-ended questions on postgraduate supervision as teamwork was composed and was administered at the end of the four-year period. Participants' statements were analysed, using methods of qualitative content analysis. Although we had specific ideas about the information we required, we tried not to inhibit, dominate or restrict the participants in their answers. For example, we did not insist that they answer all the questions and asked them to 'speak' freely. Consequently, not everybody actually answered all the questions.

Once the information was gained the actual words of the participants were retained as far as possible. Obviously, the interpretation of the information by us could have altered the original somewhat. Here and there, explanatory notes were added and indicated by means of brackets, but overall we endeavoured to keep as close as possible to the original, thus veering away from editing the language. In this way our own world-view or viewpoints should have a minimum impact on the text. A draft of this article was then sent to the respondents, together with a letter of thanks for the opportunity to 'interview'. This courtesy gesture could allow the participant to check the transcript for accuracy and to change if necessary.

Reflection on the Structure of the Project and Group Supervision Opportunities
In this section the focus will be on how the structure of the project and the opportunities created for group supervision were experienced by the participants.

The students spent four months per year in Norway for the first three years and four months in Pretoria during the last year of the project. A *one week colloquium* was organised during each four month period during which all the role players were invited to participate. Most of the participants attended the four colloquiums, three of which were held in Norway (Stavanger), and one in Pretoria. During these colloquiums 'both the students and the promoters presented their progress reports to the whole group, and continuous feedback and inputs were given by all project members' (D7). Already during the first annual colloquium the sentiment was expressed that the annual one week colloquiums were not enough to do justice to student-promoter contact (D3). The main promoters had very limited time with their students – one week per year for three years (for the time spent in Norway) and four months for the time spent in SA (D3).

During their four months' stay in Stavanger the co-promoter organised *weekly workshops* which were mainly attended by the three students and the one co-promoter. In Pretoria, the weekly workshops were usually attended by the three students and their three promoters. These meetings usually ended with a discussion of dissertation criteria which not only touched on individual responsibilities but on those to be assigned to the department, faculty or institution (D6; D5). It allowed the students to participate in an academic team and entry into the world of scholarship was promoted (D6). The eight months in between were spent at their home institutions.

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[1]   Cf. Appendix I

The annual (one week) colloquiums (which included all participants), as well as the weekly workshops during their four months' stay at one of the host institutions became a research vehicle in response to the issues raised by the participants (D6; D5). The idea is also raised that it would have been helpful if the promoters could have spent some time with their students at their home institutions as well (D3; and met their families; D7), or that they all had a co-promoter back home who could have assisted the students to be more 'accountable for the time they spent at their home institutions' (D3). Some of the students were much less productive during the periods spent at home (D3; D7). For some students the period spent at their home institutions was most beneficial since it allowed much freedom for independent research (D3). They were 'forced' to develop the capacity for working independently (D6).

The time spent at home also 'revealed weaknesses of their home institutions which challenged them to try to come up with some solutions to improve the situation where possible' (D3). In addition, this period was ideal for those who were involved in field research; and the transcribing and, where necessary, the editing of interviews (D4; D5; D6). Unfortunately it occurred that the home institutions 'lack the understanding that the eight month period was for research, not for heavy teaching obligations' (D2; D7). At least, the period at home 'removed undue anxieties about family attachments' (D4).

The project also made it possible for the group to attend and present papers at two international conferences, namely the OTSSA (Old Testament Society of SA) in Johannesburg and the Network of Theology and Religious Studies in East and South Africa, in Kampala, Uganda (D5; D6; D7; D8). 'Useful feedback on the thesis projects was received' (D7).

The group supervision aspect of the project allowed for promoters (and the rest of the group) involved in the project to assist a colleague's student in the absence for some reason of that particular promoter (D7; D8). This happened twice during this four year period. In the first case a promoter accepted a teaching opportunity in the USA for a period of 18 months (during the second and third years of the project) and in the second case a promoter had to leave for a conference abroad after she had already spent an additional six months with her student at Unisa (D6; D7).

Skills and Knowledge gained from the Group Supervision Process

All the participants listed desirable knowledge and skills in research, in thesis and time management, in knowledge of resources and procedures, and in interpersonal relationships. An analysis of these skills yielded a threefold classification: research knowledge and related skills; management skills; and interpersonal skills and emotional support (cf. Mc Michael 1993).

Research Knowledge and Related Skills
- Reflection and dynamic dialogue during group supervision were reported to be well suited as methods of support in the development of insight into their subject, integration of theory and practice, and the development of skills (D6). The process of group supervision broadens the students' experience, sense of responsibility and self-assurance.
- The high degree of involvement in the students' work by supervisors and other participants was also mentioned. There was exchange of ideas, resulting in a generally supportive and fertile research environment (D6; D4; D5). In the group context everybody worked together and everybody was inclined to be interested in what

everybody else was doing (D6; D3). This fertile environment enabled students to pursue a topic of personal interest in depth and in their own way (D6).

- Students and promoters mentioned the much wider exposure to academic input by different promoters and students ('a variety of experienced scholarship' D3; cf. D2), skills, perspectives, knowledge and problem solving (D6; D3; D4; D7; D8). Close working relationships with students during the team work sessions provide opportunities for learning the norms and methods of their discipline and lead to a fuller educational experience (D6; D5).

- The promoters specifically indicate how much was learnt from the research skills and knowledge of both colleagues and students (D6; D7; D8). Students were encouraged to provide a contribution to knowledge. It enabled the students to demonstrate a capacity for thinking critically and they were encouraged to generate and evaluate solutions to problems.

- Valuable perspectives were gained from the group supervision as far as their research methodologies are concerned (D3; D4; D5; D6; D7). Students were trained in research skills and 'ability in academic writing'. It was echoed by all the participants.

- Maximum resources were made available to the students through this group project. 'The academic resources in the North and the South were brought together for realising a common goal with great success' (D3). The students were prepared to develop well founded arguments based on relevant literature.

- It seems that group supervision cancelled out the general confusion which students experienced in the early days of research (D6). As one student put it, 'the realisation that one was not alone on the long journey of thesis writing. It cut down on the idea of boredom…' (D4, D5). It became an 'exciting and encouraging work' (D5). Another student summarised it by saying that 'besides new knowledge acquired I have also been trained on research methodology on how to be a supervisor myself; how to write an academic paper, how to give a presentation and generally how to navigate in the academic arena' (D4; cf. D5; D7).

Management Skills
- Participants list that thesis management include the identification of researchable questions; the judgement of the validity of a research proposal; contribution to the focusing of a topic; help with the design and methodology; help in developing and maintaining a theme to the project. Students gained much motivation for prolonged and specialised study from the group context (D6; D7). The students worked according to a specific time schedule which was monitored on a regular basis (D7). The structured project created the conditions for disciplined and sustained writing. The students (and perhaps some of the promoters) developed the ability to plan and organise.

- Although most of the students agree that they gained much from the well managed and structured programme, some of them indicate that the 'tight group schedule and theme does not give enough room for divergence and relaxation during the whole course. One feels pressured and uncomfortable sometimes with the group when the work is not going well' (D3).

- As an increasing number of students are encouraged to enter higher education, supervisors are put under additional strains. They often have a large number of projects to supervise as well as their normal teaching, administrative and research commitments (D6). On the one hand, the project was quite intense and time consuming. On the other

hand, the promoters felt much less stressed than normally, since the promoters could consult each other and shared the responsibility for decisions that were made (D7).

▪ [T]he main disadvantage of group supervision is that not everybody receives all the time they need to express themselves. Some things are rushed through to meet time limits. Also, the tendency of some supervisors to dominate sessions was real (D4).

▪ A negative side to group supervision could be 'the lack of accountability as far as one's one work is concerned' (D7). This statement is based on the idea 'that there are others who will attend to your problems on your behalf and compensate for your shortcomings, since they will do anything to prevent the failure of the project as such' D7).

Interpersonal Skills and Emotional Support

▪ One of the promoters highlighted 'personal skills in interaction, for example knowing when to be assertive, being positive, motivating, being patient with problematic situations and showing empathy for students' concerns and skills as a committed listener' (D6).

▪ 'The basic experience was that of friendship which the group developed both at personal and group levels. For example, at every colloquium there were days for excursions and meals in which there was time enough to be together as a team of friends enjoying the country scenery. This approach helped to have a better understanding of each other more than merely being student and promoter. But also the lively correspondence concerning the projects between the student and promoter had an aura of respect and integrity embodying the spirit of support in treading the path of research with the student' (D3). The group attended to each other's problems and issues as far as possible (D3; D4; D5); they relied upon each other 'for assistance, advice and comfort in times of distress and sickness'; they 'shopped and cooked together' and they attended 'each other's church services in various denominations without discrimination' (D3; D6).

▪ They also experienced the support of their promoters who were there 'to encourage them, to challenge them and to put things into perspective' (D4). 'The support from the peers was basically the consciousness of the same goal and objective' [cf. D7].

▪ One of the students mentioned the risky security situation in SA (D3; D7). This particular student was unfortunately shot in a street and was critically injured (D6; D7; D8). In the absence of his promoter (who accepted a teaching opportunity in the USA during this four year project) and his family, the rest of the group had the opportunity to visit him, look after him, encourage him and care for him, and they did so far beyond what was expected of them. He fell behind with his studies, but the group supported him in such a way that he was in due course able to catch up with the rest of the students. The promoter could obviously not participate in the group supervision sessions. This situation caused tension amongst the group members. Fortunately this incident did not result in strained relationships in the long term, but such tension between members of a group might impact on the individual thesis projects.

Cross-cultural, Cross-institutional and Cross-gender Aspects of Group Supervision

Cross-cultural aspects of group supervision

- Promoters and students indicated that cultural differences between project members living on different continents and belonging to different cultures enormously enhanced collaboration in the process of group supervision (D6; D3; D4; D8). For example, a male, Lutheran, African student from Tanzania was supervised by a female, African promoter from South Africa who belonged to the Assemblies of God, etcetera (D3). On the one hand the 'cultural differences critically questioned the African perspectives of the students which enabled them to apply critical thinking to their Biblical interpretation' (D3). The cultural differences fostered the ability to ask questions about the taken-for-granted (D6).

- Another participant stated that the 'diversity of the nationalities of promoters and students', as well as the 'gender balance' was very positive as they brought different points of view and perspectives into the project (D4).

- The highly refined sensitivity towards cultural differences exhibited by the Norwegians is quite remarkable (D7). Potentially highly explosive situations (mainly springing from cultural differences) involving some of the members of the group, were handled with the greatest care and ease(D7).

Cross-institutional research

- Cross-institutional research is 'one of the strengths of the project'. Students had the opportunity 'to make use of the resources of more than one institution on more than one continent'; promoters from two institutions 'shared the burden' of guiding these students and each student was still 'connected with an academic institution in his/her home country' (D7). 'All this exposure was mutually enriching' (D7).

Gender differences between project members

- A potential problem was already 'raised at the beginning when the one female [African] promoter asked whether African pastors/priests would acknowledge the two female promoters, taking into account traditional marginalising of women scholars' (D2). Although there was some hesitance among some of the male students regarding the competence of the female promoters, everybody in the group indicated that the gender differences enriched the process of group supervision. Some of the students confessed that they 'have greater respect for women now than perhaps before' (D4). The general feeling of all participants was that they managed to go through the project without any gender 'incidents' (D2; D3; D6; D7; D8).

Future Opportunities created by the Project

- The potential future networking between new friends, colleagues and connections in different institutions, countries and even continents was mentioned by both students and promoters. All the participants agreed that the African and North-South collaboration, the possible exchange of staff, programmes and research projects should continue in future.

- The realities are that a long-term research team, known as IRTAOTS (International Research Team for the Africanisation of Old Testament Studies), was established by the project members (D6; D3; D7) and that the success of the project made it possible for

the MHS (School of Mission and Theology) to succeed in their next application for NUFU funding – a joint project of the MHS, Makerere University, and Makumira University College, starting in 2007 and ending in 2011 (D1; D2; D7).

- The project strengthened the institutional network with Africa and established long-term relations with Unisa (D1). After the successful completion of the project one of the three doctoral students was elected as the new coordinator of the Network of East African universities (D6). Another result of the project is that Unisa was invited to become a member of this network (D6). Future research projects between the different institutions are envisaged (D4; D3; D6; D8).

- The continuation of students' membership of the Old Testament Society of South Africa (OTSSA) and the AOTP in Norway, to which they were introduced during the four year project, is of great importance to them all (cf. D3; D4).

- One of the students envisages the possibility of linking their home institution's libraries (and other African libraries) directly to the well-developed Unisa library (D3).

Benefits, Challenges and Risks of Group Supervision

Benefits of group supervision

The main benefits of group supervision, as experienced by participants in the 'Africanisation of Biblical Studies Project,' can be summarised in terms of a number of categories:

- First, *both students and supervisors may benefit from group supervision*. Constant exposure to several participants' inputs empowers both students and lecturers as far as acquiring and honing research and supervision skills are concerned.

- Secondly, *group supervision allows participants, especially students' exposure to the world of scholarship on more levels and on a larger scale than the familiar single promoter-student situation can achieve*. It provides opportunities for learning the norms and methods of their academic discipline, as well as training in writing skills, giving an academic presentation, and navigating in the academic arena generally. It also provides a rich research environment and broadens the participants' experience. Depending on how the project is structured, it may also go hand in hand with access to a rich variety of resources (in the case study, it includes access to the infrastructure and especially libraries in South Africa, Norway, and their home countries).

- Thirdly, *certain benefits have been pointed out on the levels of personal relationships and emotional support*. The presence of, and interaction between several participants promote working relationships characterised by respect and integrity. Furthermore, participants have pointed out that group supervision reduces anxiety, since participants, by consulting each other, can share the responsibility of making decisions on difficult matters and dealing with problems. It provides a support network on different levels: academic, spiritual, emotional, and even physical (in the case study, support was available when a main promoter could not be present for a certain period). It may also foster the communal aura of the group, which is an advantage in cases where students' individual projects contribute to a large, overarching project.

- Fourthly, *group supervision is a source of motivation and promotes a sense of responsibility among participants*. Participants are motivated by the consciousness of a common goal and objectives. Furthermore, knowing that several others are affected by and aware of one's performance promotes a climate in which individual participants feel obliged to maintain their momentum throughout the project. Group supervision,

therefore, promotes a sense of responsibility, not only for one's own work, but also that of others.

- Fifthly, group supervision provides *exposure to and opportunities for dealing with cultural diversity and multiple perspectives*, which invites the asking of questions about the taken-for-granted. Depending on the composition of the group, it may also provide exposure to, and encourage an appreciation of and sensitivity to gender issues.

- Sixthly, *group supervision may lay the foundation for future networking*. After the termination of the initial projects, the team which already constitutes a research network, could embark on new projects, benefiting from their existing group loyalty and experience. In cases where participants represent different institutions, not to mention different countries, participants could serve as contact persons that assist others in establishing new networks at their institutions or in their countries.

- Finally, *group supervision is usually associated with the kind of projects for which more generous funding is available* (because of their larger scope and collaborative nature). The more generous the funding, the more opportunities exist, including gaining access to more resources.

It should be noted that the potential benefits of group supervision depend on how a particular group supervision project is structured, such as whether more than one institution or even country is involved; whether the team consists of both male and female persons; and whether participants (especially students) stay together and share accommodation for long periods of time.

Challenges and Risks of Group Supervision

A number of challenges and risks have also been experienced by participants in the case study project.

- First, *the structure of a project may affect the effectiveness of group supervision*. In the case study project students spent one semester per year at their home institutions. Some of the students were much less productive during these periods. In addition, participants felt that the students could have spent some time with their main promoters at Unisa during the final stages of the thesis. The flipside of this potential challenge is that some participants spent long periods of time away from home. Family and work commitments might become a matter of concern.

- Secondly, especially during the initial stages of a project, *students may experience confusion when listening to participants advocating different views*, presenting different solutions to a problem, and offering different perspectives on a matter.

- Thirdly, a project that involves group supervision where a number of participants are involved, usually involves a tight group schedule and a very structured programme, which – if not applied with some flexibility – will leave *no room for considering the personal circumstances of individual participants and relaxation* for the duration of the project.

- Fourthly, a possible disadvantage of group supervision is that *certain individuals*, for a variety of reasons (personal, cultural, group dynamics, structure of the project, etc) *do not get opportunities, or do not use the opportunities, to express themselves*. Some things are rushed through to meet time limits. Supervisors sometimes tend to dominate sessions.

- Fifthly, a possible negative side to group supervision is that *certain participants are tempted not to take ownership of their own studies*, or to demonstrate a lack of accountability as far as their own work is concerned.
- Sixthly, *tension between members of the group* might impact on the individual research projects.
- Finally, *problems arise when, from the outset, there is no clear agreement between participants about communication protocols*, especially when the participants reside in different institutions on different continents. To whom must a student send his work, and who will respond to it? How will promoters, co-promoters, and other participants communicate their feedback and views with the student and others?

Again it should be noted that some of the above matters might become challenges and risks, depending on how the project is structured: Are participants forced to spend long periods of time away from home, or away from their supervisors/promoters? Do factors such as funding force participants to complete a project within a required time-frame? Whose responsibility is it to give feedback on a written submission of a student?

Conclusions

Many scholars have already examined sources of dissatisfaction amongst students and concluded that students expected more from their supervisors than their supervisors considered legitimate (cf. Welsch 1979, 1982). Supervisors do not always provide what students need. Investigations have shown that students and their fellow students were the main sources of information on research techniques, the organisation and management of the thesis, and on other information sources. As far as their anxieties are concerned, students usually mentioned issues related to academic expertise, appropriate standards, institutional climates and infrastructures (Wright & Lodwick 1989). In view of the results of our study, we believe that group supervision can be used to deal with some of these problem areas. 'It is clear that group supervision cancelled out the general confusion which students experience in early days of research. It seems openness in initial discussions may save years of frustration. Such openness may include discussions by supervisor and student competence and limitations, as well as available facilities and resources' (D6).

All the participants greatly appreciated the value of group supervision, based on their experiences during a period of four years. No one indicated that he or she would prefer individual supervision to group supervision. All the participants experienced group supervision as an excellent experience and most of the participants indicated that they were grateful for the opportunity to have been part of it.

The outcomes of this project are quite exceptional: it delivered three doctoral students, and one book and fourteen articles in an accredited journal were published in four years. Although quite demanding as far as deadlines etcetera are concerned, the momentum set ultimately paid off as it was possible to finish the work in the stipulated time.

APPENDIX I

QUESTIONNAIRE

1   GENERAL AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name and surname:

Gender:

Institution:

Country:

Involvement in project (Underline one or more   student, promoter, co promoter, organiser, co ordinator)

How did you get involved in this project?

What would you have done differently as far as the structure of the project is concerned?

E.g.   The four month study periods in Norway/SA

The eight month period back home

Practical aspects such as your family affairs back home

Financial aspects

2   THE PROJECT AS SUCH

2.1 If applicable, please list any positive aspects concerning your involvement in this project

2.2 If applicable, please list any negative aspects (deficiencies) as far as the project is concerned

3   GROUP SUPERVISION/MULTI VOICE/MULTI PERSPECTIVAL SUPERVISION

3.1 List ALL the opportunities during the four year period created by the project for group/team supervision

3.2 How would you describe your experience of the group supervision/multi voice/multi perspectival supervision?

3.3 What are the advantages of group supervision/multi voice/multi perspectival supervision? Give examples

3.4 What were the disadvantages of group supervision/multi voice/multi perspectival supervision? Give examples

3.5 List everything pertaining to the project that you experienced in a group context (more than merely student plus promoter)

3.6 In hindsight, would you have preferred individual supervision (one promoter only, without the rest of the group)?

3.7 Did you develop any skills during the supervision process? Explain

3.8   How did you experience emotional support?

3.8.1   From your peers

3.8.2   From the members of the group

4   CROSS INSTITUTIONAL/ CULTURAL/GENDER ASPECTS OF GROUP SUPERVISON

4.1 Did cultural differences between project members living on different continents and different countries enhance or impair collaboration in the process of group supervision? List examples

4.2 Did cross institutional research pose any challenges or did it contribute to the supervision process? Substantiate your answer

4.3 Did gender differences between project members enhance or impair collaboration in the process of group supervision? List examples

4.4 List all possible future opportunities created by the project for you or your institution (as a result of the team work that took place)

4.5 Anything else that you would wish to add?

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Documentation of questionnaires

D1:   Norwegian, male administrator of the project
D2:   Norwegian, male co-ordinator of the project and joint promoter
D3:   African, male student from Tanzania (Lutheran pastor)
D4:   African, male student from Uganda (Roman Catholic priest)
D5:   African, male student from Madagascar (Lutheran pastor)
D6:   White, female South African promoter
D7:   White, male South African promoter
D8:   African, female South African promoter
D9:   African, male co-ordinator of the project