THE COHORT SUPERVISION MODEL

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES IT FACILITATE
DOCTORAL SUCCESS?

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The cohort supervision model for master's and doctoral students is employed in various permutations in many different countries in the world. This is reflected in some of the recent literature that refers to cohort supervision occurring in Australia (Carson 2012), New Zealand (McDonald & Kēpa 2012), Norway (Dysthe, Samara & Westrheim 2006; Samara 2006), South Africa (De Lange, Pillay & Chikoko 2011; Samuel & Vithal 2011), the UK (Fenge 2012; Wisker, Robinson & Schacham 2007) and the USA (Holloway & Alexandre 2012; Santicola 2013; Tuckwiller & Childress 2012). Undoubtedly, this supervision model is probably applied in many more countries and is reported on in literature that was not consulted.

Research on the cohort supervision model, as reported in the literature, covers a number of aspects and makes some significant recommendations. Some studies highlight the challenges related to this supervision model, which include finding time to participate (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27; Dysthe *et al.* 2006:300), being committed to the model (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27; Dysthe *et al.* 2006:300), the quality of supervisors' participation (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27), finding the ideal size (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27) and the ideal programme for a particular group (Tuckwiller & Childress 2012:51). These are seen to be challenges since they might differ from one cohort to the next, dealing with conflicting ideas (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27) and exposing cohort students to academic opinions from outside the particular cohort (Tuckwiller & Childress 2012:51). The advantages of this supervision model are indicated in some studies, these including that it offers an opportunity for scholarly development for both students and supervisors (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27; Dysthe *et al.* 2006:300; Samara 2006:115), provides sustained support (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27; Wisker

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et al. 2007:309), promotes increased completion rates (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27), develops a community of practice (COP) (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27; Wisker *et al.* 2007:309), is regarded as convenient (Tuckwiller & Childress 2012:51) and provides a plan of progress in advance (Tuckwiller & Childress 2012). The objectives of such groups are described as to improve students' academic writing, to provide support to students throughout all the stages of their research and to promote timely completion (Dysthe *et al.* 2006:300). Some authors argue that timely completion is probably due to the relationships that develop over time in this supervision model (Tuckwiller & Childress 2012). Other objectives are to "support intellectual development and knowledge production" through a community of practice, to provide "a safe and critical space for learning to work together" and to promote the renewal of research (De Lange *et al.* 2011:17). The value of peer learning is the focus of the study reported on by Fenge (2012:401) while Holloway and Alexandre (2012:88) report on an investigation into relational structures in cohort supervision. The characteristics of graduates from a doctoral cohort programme emerged from a study by Santicola (2013:260-262), namely they are all committed and disciplined, they prioritise the doctorate, they prefer to work alone and independently and they are usually employed full time.

Although the cohort model of postgraduate supervision is used widely internationally and research has been conducted on its objectives, advantages and challenges as well as on how to improve specific cohort programmes, the ways in which it facilitates doctoral success in particular have not yet been investigated. This chapter aims at filling this gap in the research spectrum by identifying the ways in which cohort supervision may facilitate doctoral success. Examining what doctoral success exactly entails and how it can be measured, falls outside the scope of this chapter; instead it will focus on applying Bitzer's conceptual framework for exploring doctoral success through a small-scale empirical study as well as exploring some literature. While the empirical research provides data from two South African universities, thus supplementing the South African-based literature, most of the literature reports on an international perspective on this matter. The potential significance of my small contribution lies in some emerging pointers towards a supervision pedagogy that may better enhance doctoral success.

In the context of this chapter it is worthwhile to note the various forms of supervision that include more than one student and/or more than one supervisor, therefore a brief overview is presented below of such supervision forms as described in selected literature. This is followed by an exposition of Bitzer's conceptual framework for exploring doctoral success, which is subsequently mapped onto the outcomes of

a small-scale empirical study, thus identifying ways in which cohort supervision facilitates doctoral success. Confirmation and expansion of the mapping outcomes are sought in the literature, hereby providing insights into the South African as well as the international context of cohort supervision. Finally, the chapter is concluded by presenting some suggestions for improving the cohort supervision model in the form of emerging pointers towards a supervision pedagogy that enhances doctoral success, nationally and internationally.

FORMS OF SUPERVISION WHERE MORE THAN ONE STUDENT AND/OR SUPERVISOR IS INVOLVED

As mentioned above, it could be useful to take cognisance of ways in which the traditional one-to-one supervision model has been supplemented or replaced by other forms of supervision, mainly to improve the quality of the supervision and thus the student experience and development towards doctorateness. One of these attempts at improving quality is to add additional supervisors to support student development. Zhao (2003:191) refers to new supervisory practices that include joint supervision of one student by two or more supervisors and “committee supervision, which provides complementary expertise that students can call upon”. Watts (2010:335) worked on team supervision where supervision teams of two, three and four members are not uncommon, while Manathunga (2012) reported on team supervision in connection with supervisor support and development. Wisker *et al.* refer to guardian supervisors, who are expected to “encourage the work of the student group and of the individual students with their research and supervisor” (2007:309).

Creating contexts where students can draw on each other’s inputs, sometimes with supervisor guidance, is one of the quality additions in the supervisory spectrum referred to in the literature. Chisin and M’Rithaa report on the Design Research Activities Workgroup (DRAW) that was initiated at the Central University of Technology in South Africa “to support postgraduate students within the design departments and to improve supervision capacity” and which is based on a collective learning approach “while critically re-interpreting the interaction between supervisors and postgraduate students” (2012:88). Collaborative study groups (Abbey 1997, cited in Conrad 2003), research writing groups (Maher 2008, cited in Fenge 2012) and supervisory groups that involve “students in their own and other’s supervision” (Zhao 2003:192) are other variations of this form of support. Closely related to these is the workshop approach as mentioned by Zuber-Skerritt and Knight (1986, cited in Conrad 2003), Topping (2000, cited in Conrad 2003), Juniper and Cooper (2002, cited in Conrad 2003) and Burnett (1999, cited in Zhao 2003:192). Dysthe *et al.*

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(2006) explored alternative supervision practices, including student colloquia, which are also close to the workshop approach.

The above-mentioned supervision practices all involve either more than one student or more than one supervisor or both. For the purpose of this chapter the term cohort supervision will refer to those alternatives to the one-to-one supervision model that combines the inputs from student peers as well as supervisor peers, thus doubly enriching the student (and supervisor) experience and usually involving students that are in the same phase of their studies. Although the number of research publications on the cohort model is rather limited, there are some references to it in the literature. Work that focused on the cohort model of supervision was done by Teitel (1997), who 'took stock' of a doctoral cohort programme with the purpose of improving it and Zhao (2003:192) who identified various models of supervision, including a collaborative cohort model. Conrad reports on work done to identify "especially effective supervision and support by the department and faculty" (2003:2) and mentions a number of studies that highlight efforts to overcome isolation, usually by providing space for community; these studies refer to, *inter alia*, cohort supervision (Phillips 1989, cited in Conrad 2003; Witte & James 1998, cited in Conrad 2003). Dysthe *et al.* (2006) explored alternative supervision practices, including when there are two supervisors and their students, which can be regarded as a rudimentary form of cohort supervision. Wisker *et al.* (2007), who built their work about supervisory relationships around the theoretical framework of communities of practice, refer specifically to cohorts of postgraduate students in this context. De Lange *et al.* (2011:15) report on cohort supervision as having "great value in developing scholarship and reflective practice in candidates, in providing support and supervision, and in sustaining students towards the completion of their doctorates". Samuel and Vithal (2011:76) explore the cohort model as a context that promotes "multi- and interdisciplinary notions of responsiveness to knowledge production in community". Fenge (2012:403) highlights that some form of group supervision is likely to be of special importance in professional doctorates, as such students need to connect their research to their practice, specifically mentioning the cohort model. Other recent studies on cohort supervision include that by Holloway and Alexandre (2012) who explored relational learning and boundary crossing in cohort communities, McDonald and Kēpa (2012:1) who reported on a cohort study that "realises the potential of the Maori PhD candidate in the project", Tuckwiller and Childress (2012) who assessed a doctoral cohort programme with recommendations for improvement and Santicola (2013) who investigated student characteristics that contributed to persistence in a doctoral cohort programme. The above-mentioned conceptions of cohort supervision are all perceived in the literature to have distinct

advantages more so than disadvantages, thus making efforts to improve and revision the various models worthwhile for students, supervisors and universities.

BITZER’S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING DOCTORAL SUCCESS

Bitzer developed his “preliminary theoretical or conceptual framework that might be useful for further investigating the phenomenon of doctoral study success associated with quality” (2011:425), by exploring factors that could possibly limit or promote success and quality in doctoral studies. These factors are categorised as the doctoral candidate’s personal context, support context, programme context and institutional context. The framework is shown below in Figure 10.1.

FIGURE 10.1 Bitzer’s conceptual framework for exploring doctoral success (Bitzer 2011:438)

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The doctoral candidate him-/herself is at the core of doctoral success. Thus the personal environment and the qualities of the doctoral student are crucial for attaining success in doctoral studies (Bitzer 2011:438).

The successful doctoral candidate is situated within the support or social context. Critical factors in this context are potential academic isolation, independence, student background (diversity) and financial support. It is important to note that none of these factors on its own is likely to explain doctoral success, but that how they relate to each other and the dominance (or not) of any one or more of the factors need to be taken into account (Bitzer 2011:438-439).

The third factor represents the programme context. The mode of study (examples of this include whether it is part-time (PT) or full-time (FT) study; research only, structured coursework only or a combination of the two) is a critical factor in this context. Other crucial factors in this context are the infrastructure offered to the candidate by the department or institution, the monitoring of the study and the extent of academic socialisation of the candidate (Bitzer 2011:439).

The widest environment that influences doctoral success in this framework is the institutional context. The doctoral candidate's integration into and participation in the institutional scholarly community is seen as critical to doctoral success (Bitzer 2011:439). It seems clear that all factors in this theoretical framework overlap with each other and that they are interdependent.

The above-mentioned four contexts of the doctoral candidate are now mapped onto the cohort supervision environment as it emerged from the outcomes of a small-scale research project, in order to determine the extent to which this kind of supervision facilitates doctoral success. The mapping is also confirmed and supplemented from selected literature on cohort supervision.

MAPPING THE CONTEXTS OF THE DOCTORAL CANDIDATE ONTO THE COHORT SUPERVISION ENVIRONMENT

The cohort supervision environment has been reported on in the literature; however, very little has been published on the South African context and although slightly more appears on the international context, the latter is also quite limited. To gain additional insights about the South African context, a small-scale empirical research project was conducted.

Small-scale empirical research

The empirical study was conducted to determine the extent to which the cohort supervision model, as it occurs at the specific site, facilitates doctoral success according to Bitzer's conceptual framework. A case study design was employed, contextualised in one faculty at a South African university with additional enrichment from the context of a second South African university. In the former faculty, the cohort supervision model is used for master's and doctoral students who prefer to participate in the group sessions, additional to the one-to-one supervision they receive from their respective supervisors. As the cohort supervision model has been initiated only very recently for the doctoral group in this faculty, they did not participate in the research and data was generated only from the faculty's master's group, for which programme cohort supervision has been conducted since 2007. Although Bitzer's theoretical framework focuses on doctoral success, it could be argued that much of the work done by master's students towards their dissertations is similar in nature to that done by doctoral students, with the main difference being in the level and originality of the work, thus justifying the inclusion of a master's group in the research.

Data was generated through questionnaires and individual interviews. Questionnaires were sent to all eight master's students and their supervisors who participated in the cohort supervision model in 2012. A relatively low response rate of almost 36% occurred, but due to the interpretive nature of data analysis, this could be regarded as an acceptable response rate. Individual interviews were also conducted with two cohort supervision coordinators, one coordinating the master's cohort at one university and the other previously coordinating the doctoral cohort at another university. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed within the pre-imposed categories and sub-categories of the selected conceptual framework. The analysis also aimed at identifying categories and sub-categories additional to the pre-imposed ones.

Both the questionnaires and the interview schedules were developed from Bitzer's conceptual framework for exploring doctoral success (2011), as described above. The questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions, each one addressing one of the four factors in the conceptual framework, namely the doctoral candidate's personal context, support context, programme context and institutional context. Table 10.1 shows the gist of the questionnaire questions; the interview questions were similar.

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TABLE 10.1 Questions in questionnaire

<p>Question 1</p> <p>Please indicate how you experienced the cohort group supervision model, as relevant to students’ personal context, referring to student personality; student thinking style(s); students’ knowledge of research and studies at this level; students’ ability to cope with the level of work; students’ motivation.</p> <p>Also indicate challenges you experienced and how you believe the cohort supervision model could be improved, relevant to the students’ personal context.</p>
<p>Question 2</p> <p>Please indicate how you experienced the cohort group supervision model, as relevant to students’ support context, referring to academic isolation (or not); financial support; independence; benefit (or not) from interaction with other students and supervisors.</p> <p>Also indicate challenges you experienced and how you believe the cohort supervision model could be improved, relevant to the students’ support context.</p>
<p>Question 3</p> <p>Please indicate how you experienced the cohort group supervision model, as relevant to students’ programme context, referring to study mode (full-time/part-time studies); academic socialisation (‘becoming an academic’); available infrastructure (internet, working space, statistical and language support, etc.); monitoring and progress.</p> <p>Also indicate challenges you experienced and how you believe the cohort supervision model could be improved, relevant to the students’ programme context.</p>
<p>Question 4</p> <p>Please indicate how you experienced the cohort group supervision model, as relevant to students’ institutional context, referring to students’ academic integration into the department/faculty; students’ academic integration into the institution’s scholarly community.</p> <p>Also indicate challenges you experienced and how you believe the cohort supervision model could be improved, relevant to the students’ institutional context.</p>

Permission was sought from the relevant university structures to conduct the research and the study was given ethical clearance after due procedure was followed. Ethical considerations were adhered to through anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation and by seeking prior permission from participants to use the information they provided through questionnaires and interviews, in the research.

The outcomes of the empirical study provided insights about cohort supervision (CS) and these are mapped below against Bitzer’s framework to reflect the ways in which the cohort supervision model enhances doctoral success.

Mapping the outcomes of the empirical research onto the four aspects of Bitzer’s framework and the international literature

The data analysis process included the matching of data from the interviews and questionnaires with the four factors, and their sub-factors, from the chosen conceptual framework. In many cases the data from the separate questionnaires and interviews confirmed and re-confirmed each other, therefore the data interpretation process

involved grouping the confirmations together and summarising these per sub-factor. The summarised interpretation of the participants' experiences is discussed below. The links between the interpretation and the empirical evidence are not provided in each case below, as this would result in continuous duplication, therefore some examples of such links are provided to illustrate the points under discussion.

FACTOR 1: THE PERSONAL ENVIRONMENT AND QUALITIES OF THE DOCTORAL CANDIDATE

Personality

From the interviews and questionnaire responses it was clear that both the supervisors and the students were of the opinion that students would benefit optimally from cohort supervision (CS) if they prefer working in a group, are outspoken, willing to take risks, need guidance and are open to receive it, and if they are open-minded and happy to accept and share ideas. Students would benefit less if they are reluctant to expose themselves, less secure about their own academic performance and more reserved. Such students need special support and reassurance. Those who prefer to work individually might drop out. One of the interviewees said that "student personalities are actually the driving force behind the model". The international literature also shows that CS lends itself strongly to participatory learning (Fenge 2012:409).

Thinking style

Supervisors were of the opinion that a variety of thinking styles is accommodated in CS through offering a variety of activities (work in plenary, smaller groups, presentations and e-mail communications), exposure to a variety of academic perspectives and thinking styles and by offering a safe environment.

Research knowledge and level

One interviewee stated that "students come in again with a whole variance of what they know and what they don't know" and that they "develop over time". Supervisors agreed that students are often very diverse in terms of research knowledge and level of academic abilities. They believe that CS supports students who need more time to develop or are underprepared; enriches academic discourses and knowledge of research methodologies; expects wide reading and advance preparation; promotes quality work through constant sharing; develops reflective assessment skills; enhances ability to develop an academic argument and supports academic writing skills.

PART FOUR • SUPERVISION STRATEGIES*Ability to cope with level of work*

The data clearly reflected that this ability is mainly a function of what students know and how they benefit from CS (come prepared, are motivated and use opportunities to grow). Unfortunately, according to a supervisor, some students “struggle to breach the gap between the requirements of working towards a master’s degree and completing an assignment” and they have difficulty in coping with the level of academic work. Supervisors and students agreed that CS facilitates improved coping through offering benchmarking against peers, a variety of perspectives and interrogation angles, diverse audiences, experiences in academic discourse and debates as well as the potential for support groups outside the CS meetings.

Motivation

The data indicated that motivation seems to be driven by the demands placed on students in the CS, which have a constant rhythm of prepare-present-discuss; this in itself it constitutes a self-reward. CS is also driven by the set milestones, the idea of the collective and accountability for own progress. The international literature indicates that the doctoral student who participates in a CS model usually shows commitment and discipline (Santicola 2013:257-258), which could be linked to the qualities of the doctoral candidate.

FACTOR 2: THE STUDENT’S SUPPORT OR SOCIAL CONTEXT*Academic isolation*

Participants in the case study were of the opinion that CS complements one-to-one supervision and thus counteracts academic isolation, as illustrated by the statement that both students and supervisors “feel part of a group who share their concerns”. Wenger’s communities of practice (COPs) could be used as the underpinning binding theory. The data in the case study also shows that CS provides a sense of community and emotional support. COP with peers could be extended beyond scheduled group sessions. CS is very good in counteracting academic isolation, as it breaks down isolation and promotes academic cohesion. The literature confirms this, as the outcomes of a study reported on by Teitel show that CS promotes increased connections, support and networking among students (1997:77-79).

Independence

A supervisor indicated that “students who have completed group supervision sessions successfully are much less dependent on supervisors afterwards” and it allows students to find their own voices and own independent spaces. The data also shows that students are expected to collaborate and interact during group sessions,

but then to work independently in between; they become initiated in the rhythm of academic work at this level.

Diverse student background

A student has access to a team of experts as well as peer input, which can be used as a sounding board and helps to “shift my thinking”, as indicated by one student. Students learn from each other; they learn to listen, engage, critique and offer thoughtful response. “In explaining I clarify my own decisions”, one student explained. In one-to-one supervision all of this does not necessarily happen (the supervisor talks more, the student gets less opportunity to respond and articulate). CS has the potential for deep teaching and learning if participants are willing to share. Having a supervisory team is the norm in some countries, which has some of the benefits of CS, but not all of them.

Financial support

The case study showed that funding is not available via CS; however, CS facilitates improved throughput rate, thus decreasing the study period and financial obligation to studies. The possibility of outside funders for cohorts could be explored.

The literature confirms the above interpretation of the empirical research regarding the link of CS with support or social context: De Lange *et al.* (2011:27) found that CS provides support and supervision; CS offers a community of practice that supports learning, a place of safety, and an opportunity to compare oneself with others (Fenge 2012:408) and it also “facilitates gaining positively from power relationships through peer support” (McDonald & Kēpa 2012:154). The CS model is also shown in the literature to sustain “students towards the completion of their doctorates” (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27) and students eventually prefer to work independently (Santicola 2013:258, 259). Having a diversity of people together in the CS meetings is regarded as advantageous in the literature, as it promotes the cross-pollination of ideas (Fenge 2012:409) and “drawing from the pool of collective expertise” (McDonald & Kēpa 2012:154).

FACTOR 3: THE STUDENT’S PROGRAMME CONTEXT

Mode (Part-time, PT/ Full time, FT)

The data analysis clearly indicated that CS could be planned to suit both PT and FT students. One may ask whether these should be combined or remain separate in CS. The participants believe that it is important to consider student and supervisor needs when scheduling days and times for PT and FT. PT students are sometimes “a bit

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frazzled”, said one coordinator, and it is believed that FT students benefit optimally from CS.

Infrastructure (department or institution)

An interviewee indicated that CS space is usually available only in non-peak lecture times; it would be beneficial to educate authorities about the idea of officially scheduling time and space for master’s and doctoral meetings. Another interviewee felt that the ideal is to have a postgraduate lounge and secure, private work stations, but funding is often an issue. Supervisors indicated that students often need support with language and computer skills; these are essential for quality work.

Monitoring of study

The data from the case study showed that CS promotes improved progress through scheduled expectations. Scheduling space for inputs from students and supervisors about their needs at the end of each session promotes better monitoring and progress. Joint reflection in the group after each session about what worked and what did not work enhances the benefits of future sessions as indicated by an interviewee: “... trying to make sense that what we offered was meaningful; what were the shortcomings and what were the strengths and how to build on the strengths”. It is not always clear to the participants in the case study research who has the responsibility for monitoring progress: the supervisor or the CS coordinator? Slower students could continue to benefit if they stay in the CS group, while faster students could become frustrated, benefit less and eventually drop out (“wasting our time”, as one student indicated). Applying policy when progress is poor is essential for enhancing success.

Academic socialisation

Some participants in the case study were of the opinion that CS facilitates student induction into academia, including ‘operating’ in an academic environment and becoming more comfortable with academic engagement. One of them said that “the sessions help students to collaborate with other academics.” Interaction with others and diversity promotes academic socialisation, especially in discussions and through the various discourses. The literature on the CS model reports on aspects that are relevant to programme context, as emerged from the empirical research. One example is that CS is appropriate for students who are in full-time employment (Santicola 2013:259). CS is also regarded as especially promoting academic socialisation as it is thought to have “great value in developing scholarship and reflective practice in candidates” (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27) and is “depicted as

having a key role to play on the doctoral journey on both individual and group levels" (Fenge 2012:407).

FACTOR 4: THE STUDENT'S INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Academic integration into the faculty/department

Students get to know the academics as well as the faculty and university structures: "It's not this scary place anymore," one student explained. Inexperienced supervisors are supported, for example, by listening to what kind of questions other supervisors ask students. Sharing of information about available resources enhances academic integration.

Academic integration into the institution

Cross-disciplinary or cross-faculty CS could benefit PhD students as one interviewee put it: "we may see things from different perspectives, but we can acknowledge a good argument, a valid scientific argument", but master's students might not be ready to handle this environment. Participants indicated that CS could accommodate the differences between disciplines through mutual respect for good academic argument and sound methodology justification. The literature also confirms the outcomes of the empirical research that relate to matters connected to integration into the institutional context. Teitel (1997:79-80) refers to CS encouraging deeper discussions in class, including those on sensitive issues, while Fenge (2012:411) states that it "appears to offer a type of support that is not provided by the normal supervisor/supervisee relationship, and therefore may enhance the overall student experience".

DOES COHORT SUPERVISION FACILITATE DOCTORAL SUCCESS?

The above exposition of the empirical findings and the international literature provides the means to determine whether CS facilitates doctoral success when the four factors of Bitzer's framework are used as criteria. The synthesis of the research results and the literature given below within the conceptual framework, presents an answer to this question.

In connection with the personal environment and qualities of the doctoral candidate, both the empirical findings and the literature show that CS is best suited to certain personality types. Through careful planning, CS has the potential to accommodate a variety of thinking styles and to support students' diversity of research knowledge and level of academic abilities. CS also facilitates improved coping with the level of work, and its inherent delivery nature and structure provides motivation.

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Relevant to the student's support or social context, academic isolation was shown above to counteract academic isolation. CS also promotes independence and could accommodate diversity in student backgrounds. Financial support is not available directly via CS and the finding of outside funders for cohorts could be explored to further enhance doctoral success.

The student's programme context as reflected in the mode of delivery (PT/FT) could be accommodated in CS through careful planning, although it seems to suit FT students better. Departmental and institutional infrastructure does not always cater adequately for CS. Cohort supervision provides an excellent vehicle to monitor studies, provided it is built into the planning and execution of the sessions. CS also has the potential to promote academic socialisation.

The student's institutional context relevant to the faculty and department is well supported through CS; however, it does not necessarily promote academic integration into the institution, but does have the potential to enhance the overall student experience.

From the above it is clear that CS has the potential to enhance doctoral success in most of the areas related to the four factors of Bitzer's framework. However, it is also clear from the above that CS is not the automatic solution to all the challenges in doctoral studies, as it would only provide the support and development required if it is meticulously planned and executed, with commitment from all participants. Some suggestions towards strengthening the cohort supervision model are provided in the next section.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE COHORT SUPERVISION MODEL TOWARDS PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

The findings of the empirical research and the consulted literature gave rise to a number of suggestions for strengthening the CS model, in many cases echoing or extending each other. When combining the recommendations from the empirical research with those from the literature, a picture emerges that reflects both a South African context and an international context, thus pushing the boundaries of postgraduate supervision that is relevant world-wide. The recommendations towards further enhancing the CS model of supervision are presented below in four categories, namely student orientation to CS, role of the coordinator, role of supervisors and programme planning.

Student orientation to CS

The empirical research showed that students need to participate in an advance orientation session before joining a cohort group as this could contribute to their benefitting optimally from the model. Students also need preparation in competences in research methodology, theoretical frameworks, academic writing and proposal writing, which could be part of an extended orientation or offered as short learning programmes. As time management is a crucial component of postgraduate studies, students need to be prepared for this aspect as well. Students could find the expectations in the CS sessions overwhelming and they need to be prepared for this as well. Another experience that is likely to occur in CS meetings and which many students might not be familiar with is the vulnerability that comes with exposing oneself in academic debate; they need to know that emotional support is available to cope with such situations. Students also need to be oriented to other aspects of academic debate, such as avoiding destructive competition.

Suggestions from the literature for enhancing the CS model in relation to students do not specifically refer to prior orientation of students; however, the literature highlights a number of matters in which students need to develop competence to benefit optimally from the CS model. These matters deal with the following:

- Deeper discussions that should include sensitive issues. These discussions ought to include strategies for encouraging deeper responses, while participating academics need to be flexible when such discussions take place (Teitel 1997:78-80).
- Participation in reflective practice, by reflecting on others' research, reflecting on others' critique of their own research and reflecting on their own competence to critique (De Lange *et al.* 2011:23-25).
- Being part of a community of practice that supports learning, offers the student a place of safety with a sense of belonging, a sense of learning and access to community supervision (De Lange *et al.* 2011:25). The community of practice is also referred to as 'cohortness', which "captures the shared journey that students take through the group supervision" (Fenge 2012:407).
- The ability to access the wisdom of many voices through a cross-pollination of ideas that could contribute towards transformative learning (Fenge 2012:409) is also crucial in CS. Linking with this, is McDonald and Kēpa's (2012:154) reference to the positive gain from drawing from the pool of collective expertise.
- Carson (2012:178) recommends having early discussions with individual students about "developing the 'identity-trajectory' of the candidate" as this would assist the student in deciding whether CS would suit her/his particular orientation. Fenge (2012:407) also identifies student identity as important in the CS model.

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- Finally, Santicola (2013:257-258) highlights the fact that commitment and discipline are key attributes for the doctoral candidate to attain success in the CS model.

Role of the coordinator

A second aspect that was highlighted in the empirical research towards improving the CS model of supervision is the role of the cohort coordinator. The coordinator needs to be aware in advance of the challenges that might arise and be prepared to meet them. These could include the mediation of diverse personalities and the interaction between them; mediating methodology issues; being competent in planning and executing a variety of appropriate activities; being able to deal with diverse opinions that could confuse students; managing a safe space for students and inexperienced supervisors in which to test and experiment and being skilled in bridging interdisciplinary issues. The coordinator must also be an experienced supervisor and be prepared to accept and cope with the additional load.

The literature confirms that the coordinator plays a key role in the handling of sensitive issues, facilitating the development of a culture of honest talk and strategies to solicit deeper responses about such issues in the CS sessions (Teitel 1997:78-79). The coordinator also needs to ensure that there a time and place set aside to clarify who will take responsibility for cohort conflict (among students, among academics and between students and academics), to develop guidelines for behaviour and decision-making (Teitel 1997:80-82). Tuckwiller and Childress (2012:52) foreground matters which the coordinator could take up towards improving CS, namely facilitating CS students to interact with academics who are not part of the cohort as well as with each other both on and off campus; also working on supervisor and administrator commitment. They also point out that it is necessary to acknowledge the possibility that students and supervisors could have a second-class mind-set in the group. I believe the coordinator has a role to play in this regard as well.

Role of supervisors

A third matter to be considered for strengthening the CS supervision model, as identified in the empirical research, is the crucial role of the participating supervisors and their advance orientation to participating in such a model. Their buy-in and commitment to the model are essential and they should be afforded freedom of choice regarding participation in the model. Their participation and support during the meetings are of utmost importance. They need to be respectful of what the student brings, be sufficiently critical to shift students' thinking, cooperate towards

creating a safe space and shifting the group forward and avoid destructive criticism. A quick turn-around time regarding feedback to students is also important. The CS offers (experienced and inexperienced) supervisors the opportunity to expand their repertoire of methodologies and theories, to learn about creating a safe space for students and asking students appropriate questions, to gain insight into what is good enough and what is cutting edge and to understand how to push the boundaries.

The literature confirms that the supervisors have a pivotal role to play in the CS model. Fenge (2012:411) states that the role of supervisors is “crucial in facilitating a creative environment in which the students feel safe to share in a collaborative learning experience”. Attributes that are essential in participating academics include flexibility, using conflict as teaching moments, buy-in and contributing to improving the model through reflection (Teitel 1997:78-82). De Lange *et al.* (2011:21-25) refer to their contributing to a supportive practice in the cohort, which includes respectful engagement (by modelling) and a high level of participation to enhance eventual emancipation. Tuckwiller and Childress (2012:52) also highlight supervisor commitment.

Programme planning

The fourth and final aspect that the empirical research showed to be crucial in CS is that of programme planning. Information overload should be avoided when planning the sessions so as not to overwhelm the students. Scheduling of sessions should as far as possible suit supervisors and students. University rules could be challenging as they have an impact on the start and end dates of meetings, the day of the week and the frequency of the sessions. The programme should be planned to include a balance in the nature of items, for example an overload of expert presentations and sufficient time for each student’s work. The programme should be extensive enough to support students until they complete their studies, while not holding them back. It could also be worthwhile to consider the benefits of smaller groups with related topics in comparison to larger interdisciplinary groups. I am of the opinion that one of the risks that need to be hedged against in smaller groups is that of plagiarism as students might be tempted into this when they have access to each other’s work. It is also crucial to accommodate a balance between student needs, supervisor needs and quality requirements in the programme.

The literature stresses the importance of thorough planning and organisation (De Lange *et al.* 2011:21). Teitel refers to the need to provide time and space for informal connections among students (1997:77), to include content on sensitive issues (1997:80) and to develop a curriculum map for the programme and a portfolio

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that describes each component as it is delivered (1997:82-83). Recommendations to improve admission to the CS programme have been made by Carson, who states that “tighter controls around student eligibility and admission” (2012:177) are required and that there is a need “for a developed admission process that did not rush supervision issues” (2012:177). Santicola identified attributes of students that are likely to benefit most from CS (2013:258-259); these could play a role in developing an appropriate screening prior to admission. The group size is crucial, as too large a group would not provide sufficient opportunity for meaningful and all-inclusive academic engagement, while too small a group would not serve the purpose of diverse opposing academic debate. The optimal size for the cohort group is reported to be six people (Fenge 2012:408); however, factors such as diversity of student research topics and methodologies, as well as number of students per supervisor, would co-determine the efficiency of any particular group. Tuckwiller and Childress recommend that attention to the physical context is crucial (classroom environment, access to accommodation and travel), as are the concepts of convenience, travel costs and flexible scheduling; also the availability and effectiveness of support and resources (2012:52). The same authors recommend improvement of CS through careful design and delivery (content, timing and sequencing of programme, adult learning and teaching techniques, flexible delivery and organisation) (2012:52).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

The CS model of postgraduate research supervision clearly has “great value in developing scholarship and reflective practice in candidates, providing support and supervision and sustaining students towards the completion of their doctorates” (De Lange *et al.* 2011:27). The essence of the suggestions made above can be summarised as follows:

- Accommodating diversity is at the centre of success.
- There is no one-size-fits-all in cohort supervision.
- Careful planning is essential.
- Special attention should be given to the selection of the CS coordinator, as this person’s role is crucial.
- Orientation of supervisors and students ahead of the first CS session is recommended.
- Commitment and participation by all parties are crucial.
- The need to create and maintain a safe space is very important. The supervisor should not be positioned as the ‘knower’.
- CS for master’s students provides excellent preparation for doctorateness and thus for eventual doctoral success.

The recommendations from the empirical research and the confirmation and extension of these recommendations in the literature provide particular pointers towards enhancing the modalities of cohort group supervision, thus further facilitating doctoral success. By combining the recommendations of the empirical research with those in the literature, an international picture emerges. This could be significant for master's and doctoral quality and throughput rates, while it could also inform the development of theory relevant to cohort supervision. Important follow-up research would include reviewing the cohort supervision model with the purpose of enhancing supervision capacity building towards similar practical and theoretical improvements in the model.

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