

The Responsibilities of Graduate School Supervisors in Australia

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Upon reviewing the pertinent policy documents of the “Group of Eight” universities in Australia, it was found that graduate supervisors are required to fulfill five key responsibilities: academic guidance, professional support, moral and ethical cultivation, safety supervision, and daily management.

Keywords: Australia, graduate student, supervisor, responsibilities

Introduction

Australia boasts several exceptional universities and research institutions globally, including the Australian National University, the University of Melbourne, and the University of Adelaide. These institutions are renowned worldwide for their high-quality talent cultivation. The success and quality of postgraduate education significantly depend on graduate supervisors providing high-quality and efficient supervision. Enhancing the quality of postgraduate education greatly hinges on the recognition and fulfillment of responsibilities by the group of supervisors. Consequently, analyzing the duties of postgraduates is crucial for promoting the improvement of postgraduate education quality.

The Text Regulations and Characteristics of the Guidance Responsibilities of Australian Postgraduate Supervisors

Research Design

In Australia, there are eight prestigious research universities responsible for postgraduate education collectively known as the “Group of Eight” (Go8). The Go8 is an academic consortium consisting of Australia National University, University of Sydney, University of Melbourne, University of Queensland, University of Western Australia, University of Adelaide, Monash University, and University of New South Wales. All eight universities are highly esteemed in Australia for their teaching and research. Therefore, it is reasonable to select the policy texts governing the responsibilities of postgraduate supervisors from these institutions as the objects of text analysis. The policy texts regarding the duties of supervisors at the “Group of Eight” universities (refer to Table 1) were obtained from the official websites of these universities.

Table 1

Overview of the Text on the Responsibilities of Graduate Supervisors at the “Eight Elite Universities” in Australia

School name	Document name
The Australian National University	“Procedure: Higher Research Degree-Supervisor Guidance”
The University of Sydney	“Higher Research Degree Guidance Policy 2020 Edition”
The University of Melbourne	“Postgraduate Research Training Policy (MPF1321)”

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Table 1 to be continued

The University of Queensland	“The Qualifications and Roles of Higher Research Degree Supervisors”
The University of Western Australia	“The University’s Policy on Postgraduate Research Training”
The University of Adelaide	“Appendix 2: Supervisor Responsibilities” in the “Graduate Handbook”
Monash University	“Graduate Supervision Program”
The University of New South Wales	“The Program for Guidance of Higher Research Degree Supervisors”

Research Encoding

Open-source coding. The grounded theory was developed by Strauss and Glaser (1968) in their collaborative work, involving the collection of original data through interviews, texts, and observations, and subsequently conducting hierarchical analysis and coding to construct a thematic theoretical model. In this study, we will select content from the text regarding the responsibilities of graduate supervisors based on the theoretical framework. The content will be edited and saved in Word, and then imported into Nvivo 12. Utilizing Nvivo12’s word frequency query function to conduct word frequency analysis on the text, meaningless words are removed from the word frequency results, forming a word cloud. From this we can infer it is apparent that terms such as “supervisor”, “student”, “research”, “supervision”, “monitoring”, and “support” are mentioned frequently, reflecting the primary responsibilities of supervisors.

Next, employing Nvivo 12, a “bottom-up” inductive analysis of the text is conducted. The text is coded sentence by sentence to obtain first-level coding, resulting in 140 open codes, i.e., coding reference points. Based on the principle that “third-level nodes can cover and subsume the corresponding coding reference points”, these concepts are further refined, resulting in 45 basic concepts, constituting third-level nodes and comprising the three main components of supervisor responsibilities.

Associative encoding. Researchers applied principles such as “logical association” and “repetitive occurrence of similar meaning” in conducting relational coding on the basis of open coding, aiming to identify the “class-subclass relationship” among the third-level nodes. Ultimately, they condensed the initial 45 third-level nodes into 12 second-level nodes, including academic guidance content, methods of academic guidance, academic ethics cultivation, academic communication and exchange, progress monitoring, quality control, resource evaluation, resource provisioning, professional networking, professional development training, research ethics, relationship ethics, awareness cultivation for research health and safety, practical cultivation of research health and safety, administrative requirements, and team management.

Core coding. Selective coding involves a systematic analysis of the existing secondary node system to derive the “core categories” that encompasses all secondary and tertiary nodes, forming a qualitative theoretical model. After comprehensive induction and generalization of 15 secondary nodes, researchers formed five highly generalized core categories: academic guidance responsibilities, career support responsibilities, moral and ethical cultivation responsibilities, safety supervision responsibilities, and daily management responsibilities. These core categories constitute the overall framework of the responsibilities of graduate supervisors in the “Group of Eight” universities in Australia and establish a systematic tertiary node coding system.

Ensuring the reliability and validity of the coding. To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, the research employed the “constant comparative method”. Initially, the institutional texts related to the graduate supervisors from the “Group of Eight” universities in Australia were separately coded, and then the different coding results were summarized and compared to examine the degree of similarity of each coding system. The

analysis revealed that, other than minor differences in the sequencing and syntax of the nodes, the various coding systems exhibited high consistency and similarity. Additionally, the researchers used the “point-by-point comparison method”. Before constructing the coding systems at different levels, the researchers consulted domestic and international literature on the “responsibilities of graduate supervisors from the ‘Group of Eight’ universities in Australia” and found that the content of the relevant literature was included in the coding system.

Explanation of the Responsibilities of Australian Postgraduate Supervisors

The responsibilities of Australian postgraduate supervisors, encompasses academic guidance, professional support, moral and ethical cultivation, safety supervision, and daily management.

Academic Guidance Responsibilities

The core category “academic guidance responsibilities” includes four sub categories, amounting to 75 reference points, making it the core category with the highest number of reference points. This indicates that academic guidance responsibilities are fundamental duties that graduate supervisors at the “Group of Eight” universities in Australia need to fulfill. The subcategory with the highest number of reference points is “academic guidance content”, followed by progress monitoring, resource assessment and support, and academic guidance methods. Regarding academic guidance content, supervisors are required to regularly meet with graduate students and negotiate individual development plans with them (The University of Sydney, 2020). In terms of progress monitoring, supervisors are primarily responsible for establishing progress indicators, regularly evaluating progress, intervening in cases of poor research progress, and conducting quality control while managing progress. The aspects of resource assessment and support primarily include support for equipment and financial resources, as well as support from external organizations or institutions for academic cooperation. In academic guidance methods, supervision is characterized by two main features: regular guidance and differentiated guidance. Regular guidance necessitates supervisors to have regular meetings with students, while differentiated guidance involves providing tailored guidance based on students’ individual characteristics.

The Occupational Support Responsibilities

The occupational support responsibilities primarily include occupational counseling and training as well as professional network building. At the level of occupational counseling and training, mentors first assist students in completing skills assessments and developing a Career and Research Skills Training (CaRST) development plan. Furthermore, mentors not only have the responsibility of ensuring that postgraduates are aware of the occupational counseling services and resources provided by the university’s career center, but also making efforts to support students’ career aspirations, for example: by providing recommendation letters, assisting with paper publication, and facilitating further opportunities for advanced study after completing their papers (University of Western Australia, n.d.). At the level of building professional networks, mentors should encourage students to expand their connections within academic groups both on and off campus, seize opportunities to discuss their research with other faculty and students in related academic fields, and promote students’ connections with other researchers in related fields.

Responsibilities for Moral and Ethical Cultivation

Responsibilities for moral and ethical cultivation mainly include academic ethical cultivation and research ethics. At the level of academic ethical cultivation, the “Eight Elite Universities” have significant content discussing the cultivation of academic ethics within the supervision responsibilities of advisors, primarily

focusing on: (1) Honesty and transparency: Researchers should adhere to honest and transparent research practices, including accurately and comprehensively reporting research results, and not engaging in data fabrication or tampering; (2) Intellectual property rights and academic integrity: Advisors should urge graduate students to abide by the principles of intellectual property rights laws and academic integrity. At the level of research ethics, advisors should follow the university's conflict of interest procedures and supervisor-student personal relationship procedures, and refuse to enter into supervisor arrangements that may have potential or actual conflicts of interest (Monash University, n.d.).

Safety Supervision Responsibilities

Safety supervision responsibilities mainly include two aspects: cultivating research health and safety awareness and practical training in research health and safety. In terms of cultivating research health and safety awareness, advisors are required to ensure that graduate students understand and comply with all relevant health and safety policy requirements and provide advice to students on health and safety practices relevant to their research field. Practical training in research health and safety requires advisors to mandate students to complete mandatory Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) training and ensure that students are provided with Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) when conducting research involving professional equipment/technology, thereby ensuring that their projects comply with health and safety requirements.

Daily Management Responsibilities

Daily management responsibilities mainly include administrative management and team management. At the administrative level, the "Eight Elite Universities" in Australia generally impose administrative requirements on supervisors. Upon enrollment, supervisors are required to provide orientation to the graduate students. During the study period, any significant changes that would affect the graduate students' qualification for degree attainment necessitate communication between the supervisors and the graduate school. Additionally, supervisors need to promptly respond to changes in the students' registration, such as leaves of absence or departures. In the final stages before graduation, supervisors are responsible for guiding the graduate students' degree applications. The aspect of team management manifests in the supervisors conveying the roles and responsibilities of the team members to the graduate students, ensuring that the students understand their own rights and obligations, and promptly addressing conflicts within the team.

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