



**“THE ANSWER SHOULD ALWAYS COME FROM THEM”: NOVICE
ACADEMICS' PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERVISING UNDERGRADUATE
RESEARCH PROJECTS**

V. V. Medawattegedera* and D. Devendra

Department of Language Studies, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

The research project that typically forms one of the most important components of the final year of an honours degree is often seen as the culmination of the skills and knowledge that has been gained throughout the course of four years of undergraduate study. This component of the programme is also distinguished by the fact that it involves mentoring of a student by a member of the academic staff of a particular discipline. While supervision of students is often carried out by an academic with many years of experience, it is also important to develop the supervisory capacities of novice mentors (early career academics). This experience is often novel and challenging for these novice mentors, and this qualitative study focused on the experiences and perspectives of novice academic mentors in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences. This study, which viewed novice mentors supervising undergraduate research through the lens of the Community of Practice, utilized a structured interview, conducted with five participants. The interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis was carried out which yielded a range of thematic categories that focused on the perspectives and experiences of novice mentors. These included views on the undergraduate research project, expectations of research students, supervisors' views on their own role as supervisors, and impact on professional development. The results indicate that novice supervisors view their first experiences in supervision in a positive manner and that further training and guidance should be offered.

Keywords: undergraduate research project, novice supervisors, thematic analysis

* *Corresponding Author:* vvand@ou.ac.lk



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V. V. Medawattegedera* and D. Devendra

Department of Language Studies, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Often, the culmination of honours degree programmes is represented by the undergraduate research projects which warrant sustained supervision, which is different from other modules and coursework. While experienced academics often guide these projects, early career academics—novice mentors—also take on this role, encountering unique challenges, particularly when supervising second-language English learners in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) contexts. Such students face additional hurdles, including engaging with complex academic literature, writing in a second language, and managing independent research for the first time. When both supervisors and students are novices, these challenges are amplified.

Effective supervision involves shifting between directive and facilitative roles (Wisker et al., 2003) according to student needs and project stages. Studies reveal differing supervision models: Razali, Hawe, and Dixon (2020) describe a traditional, one-directional approach meeting cultural expectations, whereas Brewer, Dewhurst, and Doran (2012) emphasise adaptability and student responsibility. In Sri Lanka's ODL environment, De Silva and Devendra (2022) highlight the value of research experiences but also identify gaps in learner support, training, and resource access.

Despite growing research on supervision, little attention has been given to novice supervisors of undergraduate research in ODL settings with ESL students. This study addresses this gap, contributing insights into the experiences, challenges, and support needs of novice mentors in such contexts.

OBJECTIVES

Thus, the main objectives of this research are:

- 1) To investigate the learning processes and challenges encountered by young academics (novice mentors) when they are appointed to guide undergraduate research projects
- 2) To explore the perceptions of novice mentors of their evolving roles and identities in the context of undergraduate research supervision and how their mentoring practice and professional growth is influenced by such perceptions

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

From the perspective of Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998), undergraduate research supervision can be seen as a shared social learning space



where both students and novice supervisors participate in legitimate peripheral participation, gradually moving toward fuller membership in the academic research community. Students transition from novices to apprentice researchers, while novice mentors—although positioned as supervisors—are themselves acquiring the tacit knowledge, professional identity, and repertoire of practices associated with effective supervision.

METHODOLOGY

Given the exploratory nature of the research, it was decided to adopt a purely qualitative research design. The participants of this research were five novice supervisors who were involved in one of their first experiences of research supervision/mentoring. All the participants are currently enrolled in a postgraduate research degree and thus involved in engaged in their own research. They had all been paired with a senior colleague supervisor for the purposes of mentoring/supervising undergraduate research students. A structured interview schedule was used and interviews were conducted over Zoom. The recorded interviews were transcribed and then subjected to a thematic analysis. The analysis revealed several major categories of themes that pertained to the perspective of the novice supervisors.

RESULTS

A thematic analysis of the data revealed several key concepts in relation to participants' initial experiences with research supervision. Overall participants indicate a positive response to their research experiences citing such factors as a sense of satisfaction in helping students. Several major categories and constituent sub categories were identified. These major thematic categories and subcategories included views on the undergraduate research project (*importance of undergraduate research, form of assessment*), and expectations of research students (*content knowledge, language skills, student attributes*). Supervisors' views also focused on how they viewed their own role as supervisors (*guide, facilitators*), and the challenges they faced (*time constraints, unrealistic expectations of students*). One major category was participants' expectations of how this experience impacted on their own professional development (*gaining new knowledge and taking on new roles*). Overall participants indicated a positive response to their research experiences citing such factors as a sense of satisfaction in helping students.

Views on the undergraduate research project

The participants noted that the undergraduate research project was the culmination of four years of study and therefore of great importance to the undergraduate degree. This was also affected by their own experiences of their undergraduate degree. The research project was also seen as being fundamentally different to other types of assessments that form part of the evaluation process of the degree.



Expectations of research students

Novice supervisors had certain expectations of their research students. It was expected that students would have a knowledge of the subject, a good research problem and the academic language required for research work in the degree programme. It was also expected that students would be engaged and committed in terms of the time and effort that they would spend on this component of their degree.

The role of the supervisor

Primarily, these new supervisors saw their roles as guides and facilitators. They were keen to note that they were not there to spoon feed their students but to create conditions in which students could achieve their own goals. Participants were committed to create conditions that were optimal for their students so they would consider it a positive experience.

Challenges

Challenges encountered in research supervision also formed part of the experience of novice supervisors. Supervisors found giving guidance on a diverse array of topics to be challenging. Time constraints were also seen as being a major factor in providing effective guidance. It was also noted that students had unrealistic expectations of their supervisor which needed negotiations and reframing of expectations.

Professional development

Participants noted that the supervision experience was unique in many ways. They noted that it required them to update their knowledge in content as well as research methodology. They also felt that they had gained knowledge from the comments and observations made by their senior co-supervisor and the insights offered from students. Participants also believed that if they were given a short training prior to being appointed as co-supervisors, they would have been able to perform better as mentors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These findings demonstrate, from the perspective of the Community of Practice, that the identities of novice mentors progress through their participation in a community constituted of layers—interacting with students (as apprentice researchers) and senior supervisors (as experienced practitioners). Their learning was situated, relational, and shaped by shared goals. The findings reveal the positive benefits that can be accumulated if novice supervisors are given opportunities to participate in research supervision of undergraduate students. These experiences appeared to be mutually beneficial to both the novice academics and students. It is therefore important to consider how such supervisors can be best supported to further enhance their capacities and provide opportunities for their professional development.



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