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**Forfattere** Kira Vrist Rønn og Karen Lund Petersen

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# Collective supervision of Master's thesis students: Experiences, expectations and new departures from the Security Risk Management programme

*Kira Vrist Rønn, Assistant Professor, Department of Management and Administration, University College Copenhagen*

*Karen Lund Petersen, Professor (mso), Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen*

## Research article, peer-reviewed

*Collective supervision has become a common way to provide supervision at schools of higher education. This is also true for the supervision of master's thesis students on the Master's Programme, Security Risk Management at the University of Copenhagen. Based on experiences with collective supervision of master thesis students, this paper engages with the many understandings of feedback and learning in play in the teaching situation. In the scholarly literature, features such as multivoicedness, dialogue, process- and student-orientation are emphasized when addressing collective supervision. Yet, our findings show a clash of expectations between a majority of the students (and supervisors) and these ideals of collective supervision. Indeed, many students still believe feedback should be troubleshooting and product-oriented. In the final part of the paper we outline a handful of ideas on how to improve future collective supervision to explicitly address the gap between expectations and conceptions of good feedback.*

## Introduction

Collective supervision and peer feedback are two catchwords in the current teaching and learning landscape at university level. Restructuring supervision into groups rather than giving individual feedback is not simply the prevailing answer to a request for better completion rates. The bulk of scholars working professionally with supervision seem to agree that collective supervision increases the learning outcome of the students (Jensen 2015; Barker et.al. 2014; Dysthe et.al. 2006).

In the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen, collective supervision recently gained ground as a supplement to individual supervision for master's thesis students. The international master's programme, *Security Risk Management*, hosted by the Department of Political Science, has gone even further in this regard and offers only collective supervision for students on the programme. The first cohort of students to experience the collective supervision approach completed

their masters' qualification in the summer of 2016 and this paper is based on the authors' experiences with this first cohort and the students and supervisors' comments about collective supervision.<sup>1</sup>

The paper sketches out some of the core dynamics of feedback when supervising master thesis students in groups, including the fact students and supervisors often view this approach to supervision as second-rate supervision. The hope is that by prompting those involved to put forward their points of view the ground will be laid for discussions that could impact the implementation of collective supervision elsewhere in the future.

This paper is written in three parts. The first part briefly covers the key findings and arguments in the academic and pedagogical debates on collective supervision, in order to secondly discuss these findings in relation to the survey conducted amongst the students at the University of Copenhagen. This survey mainly focuses on the students' understandings of good feedback, peer feedback, their perception of the course design and their suggestions for how to improve it. Based on the survey findings, the conclusion highlights some of the issues for course design and communication on feedback that teachers need to address.

### **A short theoretical overview: collective supervision and peer feedback**

#### *What is good feedback?*

The role of collective supervision in the writing of a master's thesis entails many additional aspects than core feedback,<sup>2</sup> and the feedback itself can serve many purposes beyond that of writing a good paper. In the course of writing and supervising a master's thesis, the aim of feedback is often narrowly related to the specific learning outcomes, yet it also serves the broader function of helping to enhance the students' skills for and engagement with lifelong learning. Thus, the process of giving and receiving feedback is, in and of itself, a 'technique' and a competence, envisioned to be useful later on in the professional life of students. Feedback is, in other words, both a means to writing a good paper (about the effectiveness of teaching) and an objective in itself (*something* to be learned).

Most scholars agree that this 'technique' of giving feedback is constituted by the acts of communication (both orally and written) taking place before, during and after the

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was initially written as Kira Vrist Rønn's final report for the TLHE-course (Universitetspædagogikum) at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Copenhagen in June 2016, and Karen Lund Petersen served as the academic advisor for the project.

<sup>2</sup> In the following, we will apply the terms 'supervision' and 'feedback' more-or-less interchangeably. Yet, 'feedback' is primarily used when addressing the specific task of commenting on others' written work, whereas 'supervision' is used about the entire session, including general suggestions.

supervision sessions. And that all the actors attending the supervision sessions, provide and receive feedback.

Despite this agreement on the main elements of feedback, in order for it to be a competence and to be effective, there needs to be a way to define what good feedback actually entails, now and later in life. It would be somewhat naïve to claim the existence of a clear-cut answer to this question. One's notion of *good feedback* will depend on a variety of factors such as the student's and the supervisor's expectations, experiences, level of ambition, the set-up of the feedback sessions and much more. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick have listed seven different answers to the question regarding good feedback and their replies range from the notion that good feedback 'helps clarify what a good performance is' to good feedback 'facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning' and 'provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance'.<sup>3</sup> Even though these replies differ a lot, recent scholarly work on feedback seems to agree that if the student is made *co-responsible* for his/her work, s/he becomes a 'more effective learner' (i.e., Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006: 203). Thus, students' *responsibility* and *autonomy* are often mentioned as crucial elements when addressing questions about which factors contribute to high quality and high efficiency of learning (i.e., Dysthe et al. 2006). The core notion of students' responsibility and autonomy furthermore relates to the concept of *active learning*, which again constitutes one of the catchwords when approaching the academic field of teaching and learning. A pertinent question is however how university teachers might enhance student's learning in the course of writing a master's thesis by providing a teaching and learning environment in which the students can become active learners, be responsible and take change?

### **Collective supervision: from monologism to dialogism**

When asked how to support active learning during the writing of a master's thesis, *collective supervision* is a common reply (Wickmann-Hansen et. al 2015; Nordentoft et al. 2013). Supervision in groups is not only seen as a way to enhance course completion rates or as a shield against the potential loneliness of writing a thesis ("spécialesump"), the collective set-up is regarded as a didactic tool that encourages more active, and hereby better, learning (Jensen 2015, 2018). Olga Dysthe, one of the lead-

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<sup>3</sup> All seven statements about good feedback practice are presented as follows:

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching. (David J. Nicol & Debra Macfarlane-Dick 2006: 203)

ing researchers in the field of supervision, has pointed out that supervision often is understood to rely on a 'supervisor-student dyad' (Dysthe et al. 2006): On the assumption that supervision and feedback are individual processes where the supervisor does most of the talking and the student is the passive receiver of the provided feedback. In her work, Dysthe emphasizes the potential weaknesses of this set-up in terms of an 'overdependence on the supervisor' and a 'lack of ownership' of the project (from the student's perspective) (Dysthe et al. 2006: 300).

Dysthe and her colleagues have tried out different set-ups for collective supervision in practice - for example by changing the supervision of master's students (on the Master of Education Programme at the University of Bergen) from individual supervision to a set-up including three different elements: 1) Supervision in groups (2-3 supervisors and their master's students), 2) Student colloquia (same students - no supervisor) and 3) Individual supervision (Ibid.). In order to assess the impact of these various forms of supervision, Dysthe and her colleagues draw on a conceptual framework developed by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>4</sup> The transfer of Bakhtin's framework to learning theory (initially proposed by Per Linell) addresses how knowledge emerges in different contexts and suggests a distinction between *monologism* and *dialogism*. *Monologism* is characterized by the understanding that 'knowledge is given' which is, in the view of Dysthe, reflected in 'traditional' individual supervision, where the authoritative supervisors 'transmit' feedback to more or less passive students. Monologism thus supposes a scenario with a send-receive form of communication. *Dialogism* is, on the other hand, characterized by a notion of knowledge as something that emerges intersubjectively in the interaction. This understanding of knowledge as fundamentally co-constructed and negotiated resembles the one assumed in a collective supervision set-up where the students are themselves active in providing and receiving feedback (Ibid.). Below, the characteristics of the conceptual pair, monologism and dialogism are listed in order to illustrate, respectively, the supervisor-oriented and the student-oriented approach to supervision (adapted from Dysthe et al. 2006: 303):

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<sup>4</sup> Per Linell initially transferred some of Bakhtin's distinctions i.e. 'monologism' and 'dialogism' from Bakhtin's literary critic to pedagogical theory. We, like Dysthe et al., draw on Linell's application of Bakhtin's conceptualization in the context of learning theory when using the two positions presented below.

<b>Monologism</b>	<b>Dialogism</b>
Supervisor-oriented	Student-oriented
One-way transmission of knowledge	'Multivoicedness' and the notion that 'knowledge emerges from interaction of voices'
The students are passive receivers of feedback	The students are active participators, and the setting is characterized by 'mutual engagement, negotiation and practices of repertoire in use'
Authoritative	'Internally persuasive' – 'co-construction of knowledge'

The question then is, whether collective supervision automatically transforms supervision from monologism into dialogism? Does collective supervision always result in co-production and negotiation, and are these attributes only associated with collective supervision? The answer to both these questions is 'no'. In some circumstances, a collective supervision setting could be largely made up of mini-lectures by the supervisor, and refer to clear hierarchies of knowledge, in which case it becomes monologism in a collective setting. In this kind of session the students would be neither active in presenting nor co-responsible for the feedback. Alternatively, it might be argued that, some individual supervision settings could easily be conducted in ways, which enhances dialogue, and therefore offer some of the alleged benefits of dialogism, without being collective supervision. Yet, it seems likely that in general the collective setting has the potential to support and enhance dialogism, since more actors are involved in active participation.

A number of scholars have studied the effect of active participation and dialogism on learning outcomes, most of which shows a positive relation. Dysthe et al.'s study on collective supervision is no exception. In their study on students' involvement in the supervision, they state that:

*One of our clearest findings was that students benefited from involvement in fellow student's projects. Many students were surprised that reading and discussing peer projects was so useful for their own (Dysthe et al. 2006: 303).*

Thus, the inclusion of the students in the feedback process and the ability of the students to actively contribute to the provision of feedback to other students were proven to be defining elements for good feedback and experiences of high learning outcome.

The findings from the study on the three different supervision set-ups (supervision in groups, student colloquia and individual supervision) also show that the shift between the different set-ups had a positive effect on the level of self-confidence of the students and that it helped the students to voice 'their own opinions' without being over-dependent on the words of the supervisor (Dysthe et al. 2006: 314). Additionally, the study showed that one of the most important factors for the success of any

type of feedback is the 'relations component'. The students reported that "trust, safety, sensitivity and respect" are the key conditions if group feedback is to succeed (followed by factors such as structure, dialogue and engagement). Thus, when creating a good framework for active learning the personal and relational aspects should not be underestimated. Last, one of the most crucial findings is that good collective supervision 'does not happen by itself' – a range of critical factors need to be taken into consideration (Dysthe et al. 2006: 313).

Dysthe et.al. also provide a list of some of the 'critical factors' which could potentially hinder successful supervision in groups. These are listed below, since they are relevant to some of the experiences of collective supervision reported by students on the *Security Risk Management* programme. These factors, along with the findings of the study under discussion, also provide a foundation for future designs of collective supervision sessions. The seven factors are:

1. *Motivation*: understood as emphasizing 'the value of participating' in the supervision
2. *Engagement in peer projects*: understood as 'developing mutual knowledge and interests among students in each other's research projects',
3. *Training in feedback strategies*;
4. *Commitment*: understood as 'mutual obligation and personal commitment';
5. *Clear routines*;
6. *Multiple perspectives*: understood as bringing together 'different research traditions in the same group',
7. *Realistic time allocation* (Dysthe et al. 2006: 315-16).

This paper will now consider some of the specific experiences from the initial implementation of collective supervision in the *Security Risk Management* programme at the University of Copenhagen.

### **Experiences from the Master's in Security Risk Management**

In the spring semester of 2016, 25 students, mainly from Western Europe, wrote their master's thesis as part of the international *Security Risk Management* programme. These 25 students were divided into four groups with four different supervisors. The collective sessions included the master's thesis supervisor and his/her 5-6 master's students.<sup>5</sup> Thirteen students, affiliated with different groups, responded to

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<sup>5</sup> Our set-up differs from the study reported on by Dysthe and her colleagues, e.g. in the sense that only one supervisor was included in the collective sessions. This fact could raise a discussion on whether the core idea behind the two versions of collective supervision are in fact compatible, since one of the most important issues connected to Dysthe's study was the disagreement between the supervisors and the contesting



a questionnaire relating to their experiences of collective supervision. The questionnaire was sent out in May 2016 and it included 19 questions - 13 questions were designed with a multiple-choice answer and 6 questions invited elaborations in free text. The answers to the latter questions were subsequently grouped into themes (such as positive and negative experiences with feedback respectively from peers and the supervisor at the collective setting). The questionnaire was divided into the categories: 'The feedback at the collective supervision', 'General conditions for learning at the collective sessions' and 'The learning process in general', and it entailed questions designed to identify the students' notion of good feedback; their experiences with the feedback provided by respectively their supervisor and their peers; and their general experience with collective supervision.

The findings presented in this paper, although based on a relatively small number of respondents, provide some indications and ideas important for planning and developing future courses of collective supervision. The findings reported below are examples of how the students typically replied when asked about their understanding of good feedback, their experiences with the supervisor and peer feedback and their general perception of collective supervision.

#### *Students' pre-understanding of good feedback is product-oriented and equals troubleshooting*

The students' replies to the first general question regarding their understanding of good feedback included a lot of interesting perspectives. A common element in most of these replies is that their notion of good feedback is *instrumental* and *product-oriented*. The feedback should in the view of the students in some way or other point out flaws, misconceptions and unclear parts in the written text and the feedback session should additionally suggest ways of improving the text via new ideas and perspectives (in a constructive way). The product-oriented focus of the students is not surprising, since the final master's thesis constitutes the main achievement of the students, and this kind of student response is additionally supported by other studies from the scholarly literature on collective supervision (Wichmann-Hansen et al. 2015; Nordentoft et al. 2013). However, an underlying assumption of the students' notion of feedback seems to be that the provider of feedback (most often thought of as the supervisor) is responsible for identifying potential flaws, misconceptions, unclear parts etc. In this way, the common understanding of good feedback resembles Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's sixth type of good feedback as something that provides opportunities 'to close the gap between current and desired per-

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of authority that occurred in the wake of such situations. Our study did not entail a contesting of authority between supervisors in the same way; however, we did experience a move of authority from the supervisor to the students, since they were made responsible for the feedback on one of their peers.



formance', rather than having to do with the facilitation of self-assessment skills (type 2), or creation of a dialogue about general learning (type 3 and 4).

This rather narrow and instrumental notion of feedback as *troubleshooting*, reflected in the students' replies, conflicts with some of the broader virtues of collective supervision. Such broad virtues are that of (i) obtaining skills by giving feedback to peers (which will also change the roles and responsibilities of the thesis), and (ii) the ability to use feedback provided to others to reflect upon one's own work. The latter is again related to the students' ability to reduce reliance on the supervisor and take more responsibility for their theses.

Thus, in order to succeed with the collective set-up, a lot of attention needs to be drawn to the core adjustment of scope and expectation connected to the provision of feedback at the supervision session. This entails talks about how good feedback could potentially foster an agreement on a compromise between the product-oriented, instrumental and troubleshooting function of feedback and the more educative virtues, where co-responsibility and co-creation of knowledge are valued. This finding echoes recent studies on collective supervision where the importance of talking about the process when implementing collective supervision is underlined if one is to succeed with the collective set-up (e.g. Niclasen 2016).

#### *Students' experiences with peer feedback are rather mixed*

The questionnaire emphasizes various aspects of the students' experiences with peer feedback in the collective supervision process. In terms of the quality of the feedback provided from peers the experiences of the students are divided. Hence, five out of the 13 respondents rate the peer feedback in the lowest category, 4 in the middle and 4 in the top ranking.

The relatively high number of negative experiences with peer feedback differ in terms of content but tend to reflect the following statements that 'it is a useless concept on a fundamental level', because 'the supervisor can say the same things – in a better way'. That 'the peers don't read the material', and that the peers provide only stylish and superficial comments (something they Google just the day before supervision). Finally, time is an issue, as provision of peer feedback is very 'time consuming' and 'resource intensive'.

The more positive experiences with peer feedback are for example described in the following way: 'They [the peers] are really insightful and provide well thought out feedback. It is obvious that people have spent the effort to ensure they are providing feedback that is helpful'. Additionally, one student on the programme, who had a surprisingly positive experience with the collective set-up, wrote in her minutes from one of the first meetings that:

*Honestly, I have been very skeptical about doing cluster supervision as it is very time consuming and I was not sure how I would benefit from reading other theses that are not related to what I am studying. However, I must admit that I am very positive about this approach after this first real cluster meeting. Peers have seen ideas and implications in my draft that I have not been able to see myself and [have helped to] guide me in the right direction.*

There seems, however, to be no way of getting around the fact that the provision of feedback to the peers is time consuming and that it would in fact be much more convenient for the students to show up to a supervision meeting that only addresses their own project. However, the engagement in the projects of other students is at the heart of collective supervision. Thus, problems arise, if the students fail to see the point in engaging with the other students' projects (as reflected in the replies above) and if they in fact do not commit to and engage in the work provided by their peers. This would thus lead to a vicious circle where lack of engagement leads to bad peer feedback leading to further lack of engagement. When addressing the specific comment regarding the claim that the supervisor can state the points of the peers much clearer, proponents of collective supervision, would say that it is in fact valuable, if the students can formulate feedback, which resembles the feedback of the supervisor. The ability to provide good and useful feedback is an aim of the collective set-up in itself, even though some students might regard the repetition of the feedback as a waste of time.

Additionally, this example serves as a perfect illustration of the fact that many students see themselves as the main (and maybe only) learner, when their specific project is addressed at the sessions. It reflects a tendency to individualize the relation between student and supervisor, making learning a monolithic enterprise. Yet, the ideal notion of the learning actor(-s) is much broader in collective supervision and would ideally include all the other students during all sessions. This clarification might also be worth addressing, when presenting the collective set-up in the start-up phase of the supervision process.

The point of criticism concerning the core quality of the feedback provided by the peers is another issue. There are, however, ways of dealing with this issue so that the general quality of peer feedback improves. The quality of the peer feedback will naturally depend of the qualifications and academic level of the students providing feedback. However, a lot can be achieved by working with feedback forms and roles, and by encouraging the students to take on the role and responsibility connected to the provision of feedback. Some of the responses from the mini-survey indicate that a key reason for the poor ranking of peer supervision is lack of engagement. So the problem might not be lack of ability to provide good feedback, it seems primarily to relate to students not making preparation for collective supervision a priority.

In order to overcome this challenge, it might be worth emphasizing to the students some of the reasons why time spent on giving and providing feedback is a crucial element, e.g., by underlining that the collective set-up provides another way of thinking about supervision and feedback and it might be useful to carefully explain the distinctions between *monologism* and *dialogism* and some of the findings from Dysthe's and others' studies on collective supervision (e.g. Wichmann-Hansen et al. 2015). This would also be a way of acknowledging that good collective supervision will not just happen by itself (as Dysthe et.al. noticed) – it will require effort from both students and supervisor in order to make it happen.

In the programme under study, the supervisors were often positively surprised with the quality of the feedback provided student-student, which in some cases was very similar to that given by the supervisor. In these cases, we saw a good opportunity for the specific student to receive the same kind of feedback from different angles and thereby become increasingly aware of some of the crucial issues related to his/her project. In other cases, there was concern that the students might find the supervisor feedback too harsh, and thus demotivating. In these instances, the fact that another student provided the same kind of critical feedback from the student perspective, actually seemed to make the student more aware of the specific subject matter than if only the supervisor had highlighted the issues. There were also some cases where the feedback from the students motivated changes very different from those motivated by the supervisor's comments. This could potentially be confusing and counterproductive, yet in one specific case, the feedback was of a very high quality and based on in depth technical knowledge about the issues that could arise in the project discussed in the thesis. These cases provide some examples of good results from collective supervision, where the students did not just Google the topic of their peers' projects the night before in order to be able to provide some minimal feedback. Emphasizing such good examples and making it clear what constitutes good feedback, would be one way of working with the engagement-challenge related to peer feedback.

*The students' experiences with collective supervision are quite negative*

Only one student who answered the questionnaire gives a high ranking to the statement: 'collective supervision enhances student's learning'. When replying to the question concerning the 'most helpful aspects of collective supervision', the students point to the enhancement of ideas, the fellowship with the peers and the view that giving feedback makes you think. Over all, however, the students' replies regarding the benefits of the collective set-up seem to be more negative than positive. The negative replies reflect the inflexibility of the set-up (in terms of fixed dates, not necessarily fitting the need for supervision of the individual projects); the lack of focus

on the individual projects, the lack of structure of the meetings, the experience of inefficiency, a resource intensive set-up - just to mention some of the reflections.

When replying to the question concerning responsibility for the project, the students overwhelmingly felt that they are responsible for their own learning. This can both reflect the view that the students feel that they take the lead on their projects and become the active and responsible learners favoured by the learning literature presented earlier. At the same time, the reply might reflect a feeling that there is a lack of support from the supervisor. The questionnaire did not request elaboration of these answers so the core arguments behind these answers are not known. However, both options seem plausible. When looking at the suggestion for changes provided by the students, the provision of individual supervision sessions seem to be a common desire, which could reflect a feeling of lack of support for the individual student in the collective set-up.

Some of the responses in the survey are very negative towards collective supervision. By way of illustration, consider the following two replies:

*It is a misconception that I should "learn" from the cluster sessions. I learn from writing the thesis and feedback should help make sure that I don't go down a wrong road. I think a lot of the time-waste associated with cluster supervision comes from the idea that I have any independent learning from the meetings themselves and from the experience of giving feedback to others. I don't.*

*Cluster supervision should be abandoned - I can't see how it is advancing the skills of the student nor saving money.*

Naturally, these two quotes and the survey as such do not represent all the students. Yet, there is definitely a challenge related to working with and meeting these very negative attitudes towards the collective set-up. It is quite clear that the pre-understanding of good feedback and learning as such expressed in the first quote differs from the ideal of good feedback and the notion of learning associated with collective supervision. The student expresses a quite instrumental understanding of feedback and learning, where the role of the supervisor is to ensure, that the student does not go down any wrong paths. Again these findings are likewise expressed in other studies on collective supervision e.g. in Nordentoft et al. 2013 & Wichmann-Hansen et al. 2015.

Since the replies are anonymous, it is not known who replied in this very negative way. However, it seems as if the specific comments might have come from a very independent student, who might not consider supervision as a necessary aspect of writing a good thesis. Yet, these comments should not automatically lead to the conclusion that the collective set-up is less suited to stronger and more independent students. From the collective settings observed for this study, it is apparent that

some of the very advanced students are proud to put effort into providing their peers with valuable feedback and also find it rewarding to receive peer feedback even though one could imagine that the particular students would not benefit from the feedback from other students.

Perhaps, therefore, the best way to avoid the negativity towards collective feedback is to explain to the students the core ideas behind the approach and make an even bigger effort to explain and adjust expectations towards collective supervision. Even so, it is important to be realistic and accept that some students might be critical towards collective supervision no matter what is done in order to convince them otherwise.

A final concern, raised in the survey, is the fairness of the collective set-up and the shared attention from the designated supervisor. Here the survey shows how the collective set-up seems unfair to some students, because other students are good at hijacking the attention of the supervisor. A good and fair structure for the sessions, which allows for the feeling of a fair distribution of the time at the collective sessions, seems to play a crucial role for successful collective supervision. This is also one of the critical factors pointed out by Dysthe et. al (2006) in terms of 'clear routines' and 'realistic time allocation'.

While the negative attitude towards the collective supervision set-up sometimes comes from the students, the attitude of the supervisor is indeed also – or maybe even more - important in order to ensure good conditions for the collective supervision. The supervisor is the main authority in the group and therefore extremely important not only for conveying the message that collective supervision is the pedagogically sound choice, but also for providing the necessary structure and taking leadership to ensure learning.

#### *Students' own ideas for improving collective supervision*

The students provide some suggestions in order to improve collective supervision, some of which target the role of the supervisor as respectively 'leader', 'manager' and 'organizer'. These include amongst others the suggestion that more coaching in giving feedback should be provided, there should be better rules for feedback and supervisors should play a bigger role in organizing the sessions. In addition, many of the respondents would prefer the supervision in groups to be supplemented with individual supervisory meetings. Others again prefer written feedback in addition to/as an alternative to the oral feedback.

The request for more education on the provision of feedback is quite straightforward to satisfy when designing collective supervision in the future. The question about the provision of individual feedback as a supplement to the collective sessions is however debatable. In Dysthe's study, the supervision was made up of three ele-

ments that included both individual and collective supervision. It might be worth reopening this discussion on the balance between individual versus collective supervision sessions and, say, convert one of the six to seven collective sessions into an individual supervision session. This would be a way of reassuring each student that they are on the right track, since some students will need more attention from the supervisor in order to proceed in the writing process. With the *Security Risk Management* programme, something along these lines was tested when one of the collective sessions was converted into an individual session, and this proved to be a great success. The individual session (in the last part of the supervision period) constituted a good opportunity to ensure that all students were progressing and it served as an opportunity to address some of the questions that students feel less comfortable raising in the group (this point is likewise emphasized in Niclasen 2016). On the other hand, opening the door ajar for individual sessions could also run the risk of the collective sessions being seen as second-rate-supervision, which could potentially damage the crucial engagement of the students in the collective sessions even more. Thus, if individual sessions are offered, it should maybe only be offered in critical cases, where the students need specific attention in order to proceed, or as a replacement of only one of the six to seven collective sessions. The collective set-up should ideally constitute the 'norm' or majority of the meetings in order to create a feeling of belonging and create an atmosphere of mutual trust and dependence.

### **Some ideas for developing future collective supervision**

Based on the survey, the authors' own experiences and the critical factors provided by Dysthe et.al., it has been possible to suggest some possible ways forward in order to provide even better collective supervision of master's thesis students in the future.

First of all, *the students' pre-understanding of good supervision and feedback* seems to be a main obstacle to the success of the collective set-up. When attempting to perform *dialogism in practice* by providing collective supervision and emphasizing peer feedback, the good and wanted outcome will not just happen by itself. An effort needs to be made in order to succeed, which is likewise in line with the scholarly literature on collective supervision. This effort could for example include the following six elements:

1. Make the virtues and core scope of collective supervision (co-responsibility, active learners etc.) visible to all students (the collective set-up is not a part of a cost cutting round, but is founded in studies on how students learn). This emphasis of the idea behind the collective set-up could be a means to meet the potential lack of engagement of the students and the feeling that the provision of peer feedback is a waste of time.



2. Clarify and adjust the various expectations and notions of good feedback in the group i.e., by referring to the types of good feedback identified by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick.
3. Combine the collective set-up with individual supervision – once or twice at the end of the semester (the collective set-up should however constitute the main supervision set-up in order to enable students to see the progression of the other projects and create a feeling of belonging in the group).
4. Provide education in the provision of peer feedback in order to enhance the quality of the peer feedback and to enhance the engagement in the process.
5. Take the importance of the relational elements into account when planning the collective sessions. As suggested by Dysthe and her colleagues, we should think about the fact that mutual trust, sensitivity and a general good atmosphere boost learning.
6. Exploit the comparative possibility of the collective set-up more and be careful not only to provide individual supervision in a collective setting.

Secondly, despite the fact that collective supervision seeks to challenge the authority of the supervisor and share the responsibility of feedback and supervision between all the participants in the group, it is important not to forget *the role of the supervisor* as the primary asserting authority. The supervisor leads the sessions, provides the structure of the course and is the final examiner. In other words, a power structure is embedded in all kinds of dialogism, which is not to be misused but has to be used constructively to create a structured learning space. This involves, at a minimum:

1. A fair and clear structure for each session in order to ensure that each project and their commonalities are addressed.
2. Prepare not only for individual comments, but use the set-up to enhance the understanding of 'shared knowledge'.
3. Take the peer-feedback serious and take ownership by continuously trying to improve the quality.
4. Stick to the outline and the rules set up in the beginning of the course.
5. Use the student evaluations constructively.

### **Concluding remarks**

The experiences with initiating a collective supervision set-up at the *Security Risk Management* programme discussed in this paper, do indeed echo Dysthe's claim that good collective supervision will not just happen by itself.

Implementing collective supervision successfully requires a lot of attention and focus from both students and supervisors. Both parties need to change the way in which



they usually think about good feedback and both need to engage actively in order to make the virtues of collective supervision flourish. Some experiences of adapting to the new set-up for the *Security Risk Management* programme have been discussed and ideas for new initiatives, which could fertilize the ground for good experiences with collective supervision in the future, have been highlighted.

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