

Managing Supervisory Loads by Centrally Limiting Student Numbers: An Investigation into practice in institutions in the UK

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INTRODUCTION

Research supervisors play a key role in supporting students to complete their research projects and gain their degrees. Numerous studies (see for example Bair and Hayworth 2004, Smith et al 2006, Lovitts 2008, Cohen 2011, Wadesango and Machingambi 2011. Carter et al 2017) have shown that supervisors having the time to spend with their students is crucial in terms of the quality of the student experience and in supporting timely completion. The need for institutions to ensure that the quality of supervision was not put at risk because of excessive workloads has been highlighted in successive editions of the Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice including the most recent (QAA: 2018: 8) which stressed that 'The overall workload of the individual should also be taken into account to ensure supervisors have time for sufficient contact with, and support of, each research student'.

There are various ways in which supervisory workloads can be managed by institutions, including limiting the numbers of students that supervisors can supervise. While in many institutions the determination of such limits is devolved to departments or schools, in others they are set centrally by the institution as a whole. In the former case, information is not usually available outside the institution, but centrally-set numerical limits are often embodied in publicly-available documents, including research degree regulations, codes of practice, and supervisor and student handbooks. The present paper seeks to use these sources to explore the numerical limits set centrally by higher education institutions in the UK.

METHODS

In all, there are 149 higher education institutions in the UK which provide research degree programmes. Of these, 143 provide public information about such programmes on their web sites and, during January and February 2021, a search was made of all of these sources with a view to identifying institutional limits on numbers of research supervisees.

Of the 143, there was no mention of limits in the documentation of 45 institutions, and in the documentation of a further 28 it was stated that the setting of limits had been left to academic units, mainly faculties and departments/schools or in a few cases research groups. The rationale for this was, as stated in the University of Sussex's (2020) 'Information for Supervisors', was that while 'No supervisor should undertake as main supervisor the supervision of more than a limited number of Doctoral Researchers' the 'limit will vary from one subject to another and according to factors such as a supervisor's experience and other duties' so that '...each School should have a normal maximum to be exceeded only in exceptional circumstances.'

Excluding the missing data, the institutions where there was no mention in the documentation of limits, and those where setting the latter were devolved left in all 70 institutions which did specify central limits in their public documentation and these form the basis for this study.

FINDINGS

In setting limits, Institutions varied according to whether they 1) set limits for all supervisors, regardless of category or 2) only for principal supervisors/directors of studies (PS/DoS) or 3) for both or 4) differentiated between experienced and inexperienced supervisors.

Limits for all supervisors regardless of category of supervision

In all, 37 institutions specified limits for supervisors regardless of category of supervision, i.e. there were no distinctions between PS/DoS and second supervisors.

Of these, by far the largest group were the 20 institutions specifying that supervisors in any capacity could only supervise up to limit defined as full-time equivalent (FTE) (in all cases with two part-time students counting as one FTE). Of these institutions, 18 defined the maximum as six FTE, while in two it was eight FTE.

A further eight institutions limited the number on the basis of a headcount, i.e. a maximum number of students. In one the maximum was six, in six the maximum was eight, and in one it was nine.

In a further seven institutions, there were dual criteria specifying both FTE and a headcount limit as well. There was considerable variation within this sub-category, with the lowest institution having an FTE limit of four and a headcount of six while the highest had an FTE limit of 8 and a headcount of 15.

There were two further institutions which specified both FTE and headcount limits and allowed supervisors to supervise up to whichever was the greater. Both of these had limits of five FTE or six candidates in total.

Limits only for PS/DoS

20 institutions specified limits only for this category of supervisors.

Of these, 12 institutions specified limits in terms of FTE. Nine specified a maximum of six FTE and three eight FTE.

A further six institutions defined a limit for PS/DoS in terms of a headcount. In five, the maximum number they were allowed to supervise was six and in one it was eight.

Two institutions specified both FTE and headcount limits for PS/DoS, in both cases a maximum of six FTE and a headcount of 10.

Limits for PS/DoS and second supervisors

10 institutions specified separate limits for both categories of supervisors.

Four institutions defined limits for both PS/DoS and second supervisors in terms of FTE. In two, academic staff could be PS/DoS for six FTE and second supervisors for a further three FTE, while in one the limits were six FTE as PS/DoS and four FTE as second supervisor, while the highest allowed six FTE for a PS/DoS and six FTE for a second as well.

Four other institutions defined limits for supervisors in terms of FTE for PS/DoS with a numerical cap on total numbers of supervisees. In all of these, academic staff were allowed to be PS/DoS for up to six FTE; in three cases, numbers overall were capped at 10, and in one at 12.

In addition two institutions had points systems.

In one, being PS/DoS to a full-time research student counted for two points and second supervisor as one point (with half these points for part-time students) and the limit was normally six points.

In the other, being PS/DoS counted for four points and being second supervisor counted for two, and the upper limit was 40 points.

Limits for PS/DoS and second supervisors according to experience

Finally, in three institutions, limits were varied according to the experience of supervisors.

In one, experienced supervisors (defined as those with two more successful completions) were allowed to be to PS/DoS to four students and second supervisors to a further three while inexperienced supervisors were allowed to be PS/DoS to two and second supervisor to one; in another, experienced supervisors were allowed to supervise up to six FTE and less experienced to four FTE; and finally there was one where 'ordinary' supervisors were allowed to supervise up to three students in any capacity, while senior ones could supervise up to six as Principal Supervisor and a further four as second supervisors.

ANALYSIS

Practice in setting limits for supervision is clearly very variable across the sector in terms of categories of supervisors and numerical definitions. The question which then arises is about how far these limits are comparable between institutions. In order to answer that, it is necessary to try and define them in a common currency.

Of the 70 institutions, 54 used a definition in terms of a maximum FTE which could not be exceeded, while 16 used other indicators including headcounts and points. For the 14 using headcounts only it can be assumed that these would also indicate the maximum FTE which the institution would permit, i.e. the headcount would equate with maximum FTE. In the cases of the two with points schemes, dividing the maximum number of points by the points per full-time student yielded a maximum FTE figure. In these ways it was possible to redefine the limits into FTE and compare them within categories of supervisors.

Table 1. Institutions defining limits for all supervisors regardless of category

Maximum FTE or equivalent	Number of institutions	%
5	2	5
6	21	57
7	1	3
8	11	30
9	2	5
TOTAL	37	100

So there was a range of between 5 and 9 FTE but 90% of institutions specified a limit between 6 and 8 FTE.

Table 2. Institutions defining limits for PS/DoS only

Maximum FTE or equivalent	Number of institutions	%
6	16	80
8	4	20
TOTALS	20	100

Here the range was even narrower at 6-8, with most institutions specifying the lower figure.

Table 3. Institutions which defined limits for PS/DoS and for second supervisors

Maximum FTE or equivalent	Number of institutions	%
3	1	10
6	4	40
9	2	20
10	2	20
12	1	10
TOTALS	10	100

In these institutions, there was a much greater range of variation from three to 12 FTE and a median of 8 FTE.

Table 4. Institutions which set limits for PS/DoS and second supervisors according to experience

Maximum FTE or equivalent		Number of institutions
Experienced	Inexperienced	
5.5	2.5	1
6.0	4.0	1
8.0	3.0	1

So the range for experienced supervisors was from 5.5 (PS.DoS to four = 4 FTE plus three part-time= 1.5=5.5 total) to 8.0 while that for inexperienced was 2.5 (PS/DoS to two=2FTE plus one part-time =0.5=2.5 total) to four.

Putting these together (taking the figures for experienced supervisors from the final category) gives an overall table as below:

Table 5. All institutions defining limits for supervisors

Maximum FTE or equivalent %	Number of institutions	%	Cumulative
3	1	1.4	1.4
5	2	2.9	4.3
5.5	1	1.4	5.7
6	42	60.0	65.7
7	1	1.4	67.1
8	16	22.9	90.0
9	4	5.7	95.7
10	2	2.9	98.6
12	1	1.4	100
TOTALS	70	100.0	

So, overall, two thirds of institutions had numerical limits of six FTE or less, and 90% eight or less.

DISCUSSION

Institutions clearly diverge significantly in their approach to limiting the numbers of supervisees with 37 (53%) applying common limits to all supervisors irrespective of supervisory status, 20 (29%) only applying limits to only PS/DoS, 10 (14%) setting different limits for PS/DoS and second supervisors, and 3 (4%) linking limits for both PS/DoS and second supervisors to supervisory experience. Two comments may be made on this divergence.

Firstly, it is at least arguable that, if institutions are going to try and manage supervisory workloads by setting limits, they should do so for all supervisors, and not just one category. In institutions which only set limits for PD/DoS, there is a danger that they could be overwhelmed by numerous additional roles as second supervisors, which could threaten the quality of their supervision.

Secondly, it would seem to be good practice to recognise the importance of experience in supervision in determining limits. Good supervisory practice can, to some extent, be imparted by professional development and mentoring, but there is also an element of learning the craft on the job (see for example Hockey 2003, Feather and McDermott, 2014). It can be helpful to inexperienced supervisors to be given the time and space to do that by limiting the number of supervisees until they acquire the knowledge and skills that only come through experience. However, while this is common in Australia (see Kiley 2018), it is followed by less than a handful of UK institutions.

But if there is variation in approaches, there would seem to be a strong consensus that maximum supervisory loads should be between six and eight FTE; of the 70 institutions, 59 (84%) had limits within this range. But there were outliers, including 4 (6%) where limits were less than six and, perhaps more worryingly, 7 (10%) where limits were greater than eight. This is not to say that supervising nine or more FTE is inherently over-burdening supervisors, but that it seems to be beyond the norm for the sector.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has sought to investigate how institutions in the UK attempt to regulate the workload of supervisors by centrally limiting the number of supervisees. It found that there were considerable divergences in terms of how limits were set between categories of supervisors, and it was suggested that there was a need to apply limits to all supervisors and perhaps to discriminate in numbers between experienced and inexperienced supervisors. But in terms of numbers of supervisees, it found a strong consensus across the sector that the appropriate number was between six and eight FTE students.

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