Creating a shared way forward with new research students

This is a guest post by Dr Duncan Cross (PFHEA), Senior Lecturer (Education), University of Bolton.

There are a range of complexities involved in effectively supervising PhD candidates that are recognised in the literature. Delany’s (2008) literature review highlights some of those complexities as ‘significant predictors of candidate completion’ which includes demographic data around age, funding and area of subject, and also, importantly, ‘the intellectual environment of the department …’.

The UK Quality Assurance Agency’s documentation supports this analysis, and adds that ‘Higher Educations providers accept research students only into an environment that provides support for doing and learning about research…’. The code also suggests that ‘Higher Education providers appoint supervisors with appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support and encourage research students…’, however what institutions deem as appropriate is potentially difficult to ascertain.

That an effective supervisor ‘achieves high completion rates, has candidates submit within expected time frames, engages in multiple supervisions and receives excellent supervisory reports’ (Delany again, but also language we see reflected in many institutional ‘Supervisor Statements’ and ‘Codes of Practice’) could be challenged as being a reductionive attempt to describe what is actually a highly complex relationship, with expectations to be managed on both sides.

There is a recognised need for research regarding the management of postgraduate research student’s expectations and tools to explore the supervisory relationship (e.g. Ali, Watson and Dhingra, 2016; Benmore, 2016). Yet there appears to be a reluctance or hesitation to take supervisory conversations into what may seem a less ‘academic’ place, engaging in personal dialogue that takes supervisors and students beyond personal and professional boundaries.

Gina Wisker (2003) states on p24 that ‘a good supervisor–student relationship can only thrive if both parties share mutual expectations and have established ground rules about the regularity, type and focus of supervisions’ and I would agree.

Though, for many the question is how do we do this?
A plethora of research on communication and consultation skills exists in a medical context with many of the models being transferable to the supervisory relationship. I have successfully adapted the Health Belief Model (Becker and Maiman, 1975) which originally gave clinicians a structured conversational model to explore the patients ‘Ideas, Concerns and Expectations’ (ICE) with regards to their health.

The ICE model of communication applied to supervision, gives a framework for a discussion that allows exploration and management of not only the student’s ideas, concerns and expectations of their studies and how life may impinge on those studies, but also the management of the supervisors own ICE for the period of study.

Each person in this relationship (and there may be multiple supervisors) has the ability to understand and manage Ideas, Concerns, and Expectations by contributing to the discussion in a meaningful manner: through active listening and participation. Through this we not only ‘manage’ expectations but we also ‘match’ our expectations through open discussion of our perceptions and the realities of each of our situations.

**The following scenario shows how the ICE model could be used to manage and match expectations.**

During the first supervision conversation the supervisor uses the ICE model to find common ground and understand the student’s perceptions and expectations of a PhD and their expectations of the supervisor using, for example, the following questions:

- What do you think a PhD is? (Idea)
- Are you worried about anything? (Concern)
- What do you think you’re going to be doing during the PhD? (Expectation)

By giving time to this basic dialogue the supervisor(s) begin to build a relationship with the student as they are all engaged in the process, the supervisor is able to explore and explain the requirements of doctoral study and manage the ‘idea’ of what the PhD journey is likely to entail.

By asking ‘worries’ the supervisor opens their office door to personal as well as professional worries – but worries exist whether they are vocalised or not. By discussing them the supervisory team can now anticipate whether personal challenges or barriers are going to impact on the student journey and how they can be managed by or with the student, or whether signposting is needed to support services.

By asking ‘what do you think you’re going to do?’ the supervisor(s) can appropriately manage (up, down or sideways) the student’s perceptions with the reality of what they may be doing during the journey through their PhD.

This scenario gives us an idea of how the ICE model could work and potentially deliver a less transactional ‘supervisor centred’ approach and allow supervisors to not only ascertain the student’s’ Ideas, Concerns and Expectations but it would allow them to manage their own expectations and those of the student in a more transformational ‘student centred’ approach.
The supervision journey can be a fraught experience and we’ve all heard a multitude of anecdotes of poor and of good experiences and their causes. Using Fleming’s quote ‘shaken not stirred’ as an analogy we can either violently shake or gently stir the ingredients together to gain our preferred Martini. Not every student will benefit from a violent shake up and the model above presents a less aggressive tactic for preparing our students as researchers.

We must also be careful that using the ICE model does not leave the students ‘on the rocks’. Ideas, Concerns and Expectations is a useful starting point but if there is no future engagement or exploration with the resulting conversation there is no point in making the student feel listened to, only to disappoint them through lack of follow up.

**We must ask ourselves how we would wish to be treated.** Using the ICE model gives us an opportunity to explore a situation and manage expectations not only of the research journey, but also to manage the expectations of the personal aspects of the supervisory relationship.

So I suppose the question is. How do you want your ICE, shaken or stirred?