



## ENCOURAGING DIALOGUE IN DOCTORAL SUPERVISION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FEEDBACK EXPECTATION TOOL

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	This paper introduces the Feedback Expectation Tool (FET) as an easy-to-use and flexible pedagogical tool to encourage dialogue on feedback between supervisors and candidates. The main aim of this pedagogical innovation is to allow negotiation to understand expectations and establish boundaries through transparent practices.
Background	Feedback is a key element of learning and development and vital to developing scholarship. The literature indicates that supervisors and candidates often have different expectations about feedback. We developed the FET as a tool to encourage dialogue on feedback between supervisors and candidates so that they could understand each other's expectations, negotiate, and work together in the most beneficial way possible.
Methodology	We sought qualitative survey data from doctoral supervisors and candidates attending two universities. Participants identified key issues they faced with feedback. Based on current literature, qualitative survey data, and our insights as feedback researchers and academic developers, we developed a list of 13 conflicting statements. From this, we created the FET.
Contribution	This paper shows how the FET evolved as an educational, developmental tool. It includes the tool (the FET) for easy and immediate use by supervisors and candidates. The FET makes an innovative pedagogical contribution to supervision practice and the wider body of knowledge around these practices.
Findings	The paper presents and discusses the 13 FET statements that are the synthesized result of the literature review, the analysis of the qualitative survey data,

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	and our experience. Each statement has contradictions that offer opportunities for dialogue between the supervisor and the candidate.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Supervisors can use the FET successfully as a pedagogical tool when talking with their doctoral candidates. Every supervisor and candidate will use the FET in a way that works best for them both.
Recommendations for Researchers	Researchers could conduct studies in other research sites and countries and in specific disciplines. These studies would help us better understand the FET as a pedagogical tool so we could develop it further.
Impact on Society	The FET is designed to help learning take place. It achieves this by creating a common understanding of the complexities in the feedback process. To keep up with ongoing changes in society in general, and in Higher Education and doctoral education in particular, we present the FET as a living document.
Future Research	The authors are conducting follow-up research to discover how useful the FET is as a tool to help achieve more open and collegial feedback practices in doctoral supervision.
Keywords	dialogue, doctoral supervision, expectations, feedback, Feedback Expectation Tool (FET)

## INTRODUCTION

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This paper introduces a new tool called the Feedback Expectation Tool (FET). The aim of the FET is to improve feedback practices by encouraging dialogues in supervision practices. The FET has statements about feedback issues gathered from the literature and from qualitative survey data provided by supervisors and doctoral candidates. The assumption is that this tool will allow supervisors and candidates to negotiate feedback practices in a transparent manner.

The supervision of doctoral candidates entails a complex form of teaching, as it involves developing and imparting sets of skills to emerging researchers. The supervisor plays many guidance roles to make sure the researcher develops the right skills. Typical roles include

Teacher (of research techniques), Guide (suggesting timetable for writing up, giving feedback on progress, identifying critical path for data collection), Critic (of design of enquiry, of draft chapters, of interpretation of data), Freedom giver (authorizes students to make decisions, supports student's decisions), [...], Friend (extends interest and concerns to non-academic aspects of student's life) [...] (Brown & Atkins, 1988, p. 120).

The pivotal role for a supervisor is that of a guide, or feedback provider, while developing the thesis and shaping the candidate's identity as a researcher. Feedback is embedded in supervisory relationships (Carter & Kumar, 2017). As such, when providing feedback, the supervisor needs to play all of the above roles. It is essential to develop an appropriate communication style so that the supervisor and candidate benefit from the practice of giving and receiving feedback. This is not as easy as it seems, as supervision is the result of negotiated practice that may benefit from a peer-to-peer model of collaborative development (Carless & Boud, 2018; Molloy et al., 2019). Other supervisory styles (for instance, structure-free, master-apprentice, expert-novice, teacher-student) (Gatfield, 2005) and elements of power and hierarchy (Guerin & Green, 2015) may influence supervisory relations and limit a collaborative relationship.

Expectations play a crucial role in a supervisory relationship. Some tools already developed use dialogue as a way to reduce tensions and to encourage transparency between supervisors and research students. The Role Perception Rating Scale (Brown & Atkins, 1988) is used to negotiate supervision

practices to ensure that practices are transparent. The Role Perception Rating Scale has three sections with 11 statements that cover the topic/course of study, contact/involvement, and the thesis itself. It requires the supervisor and the candidate to read pairs of conflicting statements and to estimate a position and mark on a 1-5 Likert rating scale. To reach a compromise, they then discuss the position and the mark. For instance, they may discuss and then decide how often to hold meetings, what the supervisor's role is in assisting the candidates with their writing, and which of them should choose the topic.

Another tool used to clarify expectations is the Student-Supervisor Agreement (for instance, see the University of Otago's agreement at <http://www.otago.ac.nz/graduate-research/policies/otago252208.pdf>). This tool also clarifies expectations and allows negotiations. For example, the supervisor and candidate can discuss how often to hold supervisory meetings, the criteria for confirmation as a doctoral candidate, and aspects of authorship on publications during candidature. The drawback of both tools is that candidates in their first year of candidature may not feel confident enough to take a position when negotiating terms. Further, the Role Perception Rating Scale and Student-Supervisor Agreements have limitations. Even so, many universities have put procedures in place for supervisors to consider using these tools regularly with their candidates.

However, both tools are generic to supervision and do not particularly emphasize the fundamental role of feedback. Neither do they draw on the literature about the role of feedback in the supervision process. There is a need for deeper conversations in supervision to go beyond general expectations and generic skills—to explore ways to enrich feedback practices. One reason for focusing on feedback practice is because it is “through feedback that the supervisee is able to understand [that] writing is a form of learning, as revising drafts after feedback can lead to a process of discovery, [and this is] an integral part of PhD education” (Kumar & Stracke, 2007, p. 462). Also, through feedback the candidate understands the criteria for performance, deepens understanding, and gets a sense of achievement (Brown & Atkins, 1988).

Not only is feedback a central aspect of the supervisor's role as a guide (Brown & Atkins, 1988), it is, in a more general sense, indispensable “educative work that prepares doctoral graduates” (Boud & Lee, 2009, p. 1). Focus on feedback practices is also needed because these could lead to discrepancies (Hoomanfarid et al., 2018) when the perspectives of the supervisor and candidate conflict: “a student may favor their own voice . . . and feel that their academic identity is being defaced by supervisory red pen or tracked changes” (Carter & Kumar, 2017, p. 69).

Recently, Xu and Grant (2017a) drew attention to the “gap in expectations,” in particular “feedback expectations” (p. 23). Within a pedagogy of explicitness, they reported on the (initial) use of a “600-word document called ‘Guidelines for Feedback on Writing in Supervision’” (p. 24) in which the supervisor clarified that she “was only prepared to read a full proposal or chapter drafts twice” (p. 24), but happy to look at shorter texts in between. Such an expectation can be challenging, if not scary to candidates from a “high power-distance culture” (p. 28) such as Chinese culture.

Building on the earlier work about supervision expectations, and in line with Xu and Grant's (2017a) call for a pedagogy of explicitness, we introduce the FET as an easy-to-use and flexible pedagogical tool to encourage dialogue on feedback between supervisors and candidates. We have adopted the format (of conflicting statements) of Brown and Atkins' Role Perception Rating Scale. The main aim of our pedagogical innovation is to allow negotiation to understand expectations and establish boundaries with an exclusive focus on transparent feedback practices, not expectations in supervision practice in general.

Our FET paves the way for a respectful, clear, and open peer-to-peer approach to providing and receiving feedback. Before we describe how we developed the FET, a brief review of the literature on issues about feedback that supervisors and candidates have reported on in doctoral supervision is essential to set the background.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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Feedback is a key element of learning and development for both the supervisor and the candidate. In the doctoral context, giving and receiving feedback, as well as dealing with the emotional aspects of feedback, is crucial for development. The main issues with feedback reported by supervisors and candidates in the literature focus on issues with content (and medium), linguistic accuracy, direction of feedback, the (critical) language used in feedback, emotions in feedback, and the supervisory relationship.

### *ISSUES WITH CONTENT (AND MEDIUM)*

Giving feedback on content—what and how supervisors provide this type of feedback—is an important aspect of doctoral supervision. The student candidate develops an elevated level of scholarship through content feedback, which enables a sense of achievement (Taylor et al., 2018).

Yet some supervisors believe that providing written content feedback is not always essential. Bitchener et al. (2010) report in their New Zealand based study that some supervisors in the humanities strongly believed that “major written content feedback should not be required if supervisors meet often with their students and discuss the content expectations before their students start writing” (p. 87). Views vary about which medium (oral or written, or both) is the most appropriate to give feedback about content. Given these differing views, some negotiation between supervisor and candidate about this aspect might make the feedback clearer to both.

### *ISSUES WITH LINGUISTIC ACCURACY*

Linguistic accuracy, understood in this context as the level of correctness at which a writer uses the language system (in areas such as grammar or vocabulary), is also a main area of concern in feedback practices. Several studies have highlighted that many graduate students start their research journeys without adequate writing skills (Alter & Adkins, 2006; Delyser, 2003; Surratt, 2006).

Bitchener et al. (2010) reported that most of the supervisors they surveyed (33/35) gave linguistic feedback to their candidates, yet also felt that their role did not include providing feedback on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. However, some candidates expect supervisors to play the roles of editor and proof-reader (Carter & Kumar, 2017). In contrast, other candidates consider editorial comments in the first draft of their thesis as irrelevant (Kumar & Stracke, 2007).

In some instances, difficulties with language may impede a candidate understanding what a supervisor has written. This situation negatively affects feedback about content. Clearly, linguistic accuracy is another area where a supervisor and a candidate need to make expectations clear and negotiate how each can work best with the other.

### *ISSUES WITH THE DIRECTION OF FEEDBACK*

Another main issue with feedback that supervisors and candidates reported is how directed the feedback is or should be. In other words, is the candidate clear about what they need to do with the feedback? Feedback “is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level” (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4). The feedback process is a process that closes the gap between current achievement and expected achievement (Jawah et al., 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Doctoral candidates must receive well-directed feedback if they are to close the perceived gap. This could include feedback that provides a clear sense of direction about what the candidate needs to do, or feedback that prompts them along their path of research discovery.

Wang and Li (2011) observed that while a supervisor might want to empower a candidate to continue their research independently by providing thought-provoking and critical feedback, the candidate may see this as the supervisor not providing clear feedback. Another instance of different under-

standings of the direction of the feedback provided is where the supervisor's feedback concentrates on editing and correcting grammatical errors, while candidates prefer specific comments on the content and overall structure: "stuff that kind of went deeper into the ideas and into what a thesis is about" (Stracke & Kumar, 2016, p. 131). A candidate will also find it hard to act on vague feedback, such as when annotations or questions are unclear (Wang & Li, 2011).

The direction of the feedback provided and its uptake are central aspects of feedback. The supervisor and candidate should negotiate these aspects. Both should also believe these aspects are transparent. As noted, our FET aims to help achieve this negotiation and transparency.

### ***ISSUES WITH THE (CRITICAL) LANGUAGE USED IN FEEDBACK***

Literature on the pragmatic functions of the language used in feedback finds that candidates prefer language that motivates and encourages (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Candidates with limited academic experience reported that they prefer to receive positive and encouraging feedback along with critical comments. Similarly, Can and Walker (2011) reported that candidates value feedback when they think that supervisors believe in their potential, try to help them, and care about improving their skills and how their skills have improved. Further, candidates find it more helpful if supervisors use specific comments to support their encouraging comments (Eyres et al., 2001).

However, critical feedback that challenges the candidates and allows for reflection is also valuable. This starts a process of discovery that leads to clear thinking. Sambrook et al. (2008) found that feedback within doctoral supervision can be a problem, as genuine constructive critique is often viewed as negative criticism. The authors suggest that supervisors need to make clear to their candidates that negative feedback is actually positive because it offers learning opportunities.

### ***ISSUES WITH EMOTIONS IN FEEDBACK***

Another contentious area in feedback practices is the emotion attached to feedback. Feedback has socio-emotional connotations (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013; Can & Walker, 2011; Carter & Kumar, 2017; Stracke & Kumar, 2016; Wang & Li, 2011). At times, a supervisor may not know whether a candidate will find their feedback emotionally constructive or destructive. Stracke and Kumar's (2016) qualitative interview study with doctoral candidates shows that "expressive types of feedback are dense with emotions" (p. 135) and, as such, supervisors need to be more aware about the language they use.

Some candidates in their study described feedback as "hard to have" and "challenging" (Stracke & Kumar, 2016, p. 133), while others emphasized its "motivating" and "really positive" (p. 133) impact and reported that feedback "made [them] happy at the time" (p. 130). The study also reported that candidates who lacked self-confidence and academic competence were easily upset by critical comments.

Clearly, emotions can impede or facilitate the developmental benefits of feedback and therefore are an area that supervisors and candidates need to acknowledge and clarify. Interestingly, while most studies on emotions in feedback have highlighted the plights of candidates, few have reported on the emotions of supervisors.

### ***ISSUES WITH THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP***

Related to the discussion of emotions is the importance of the supervisory relationship (for a brief overview, see Sambrook et al., 2008). We noted above that power and hierarchy influence supervisory relations and can hinder a collaborative relationship. Remarkably, the nature of the power balance between supervisor and candidate influences how candidates receive feedback. Candidates who received mainly negative feedback reported they had an unequal power relationship with their supervisors. In this relationship, the supervisor was considered the authority and the candidate lacked a

strong sense of ownership of their own research. This included candidates who commented that tensions and mismatches of expectations existed between them and their supervisors.

In contrast, candidates who commented they had positive feedback experiences also thought their supervisory relationship was more one of equals — of mentor and mentored (Lindén et al., 2013). Further, candidates supervised by more than one supervisor often find the difference in advice and direction confusing. This situation points to the need to develop a pedagogy to “promote collaborative practices and processes of collegial argumentation” (Guerin & Green, 2015, p. 330).

### ***FEEDBACK IS VITAL TO DEVELOPING SCHOLARSHIP***

Our brief review of the literature on feedback issues in doctoral supervision focused on six main areas that supervisors and candidates have reported on. We cannot discuss in depth other issues mentioned to a lesser extent in that literature. However, some of these issues have contributed to the FET statements. Examples are the supervisors’ workload (often mentioned when we work with colleagues), the importance of peers (Kumar & Aitchison, 2018; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2012; Stracke, 2010), and cultural differences that can act as intensifiers and make challenging supervisory situations even more complex or difficult (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014).

The important thread across all these issues is the need to acknowledge that feedback is vital to developing scholarship. Giving feedback is one of the central roles of the supervisor to help their doctoral candidate become part of the scholarly community.

The literature indicates that supervisors and candidates often have different expectations. This study analyses these differences in expectations. Such differences are also the reason why we developed the FET as a tool to encourage dialogue on feedback between supervisors and candidates so that they might understand each other’s expectations, negotiate, and work together in ways that most benefit both. The **Appendix** shows the FET for use by supervisors and their candidates.

## **METHODOLOGY**

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When developing the tool, the literature gave us useful background to our understanding of the views of supervisors and candidates about feedback. At the same time, we were mindful that the literature might not reflect full currency; constant institutional change might influence the way supervisors and candidates view feedback.

Further, as feedback researchers and academic developers, we used the insights and experience gained from developing and offering an estimated ten professional development workshops about feedback in postgraduate supervision. Such insights and experience encouraged us to seek some current empirical data about the views of supervisors and candidates about feedback so we could be sure that the FET would be as comprehensive as possible. For this reason, we conducted an online qualitative survey with supervisors and candidates at two public universities in Australia and New Zealand. Both institutions granted ethics approval.

In ten local and international round tables, workshops, and presentations we also piloted earlier versions of the FET to an estimated 200 participants to seek feedback about the developing tool from candidates, supervisors, and academic developers. We noted comments from participants about any unclear statements. As an example, the original version of statement 1 was “Feedback can be provided on any aspect of the thesis” and “Feedback should be provided only on aspects requested by the candidate.” Our workshop participants encouraged us to strengthen the statement by using active voice and adding an example for clarity, leading to the statement in its current form: “The supervisor should give feedback on any aspect of the thesis (for instance, content and language)” and “The supervisor should give feedback only on aspects the candidate asks about.”

Before sending the survey out, we further piloted the survey with candidates (N = 7) and supervisors (N = 5) to make sure it worked well for both groups. No major issues emerged; the pilot participants

reassured us that the questions were “very clear and easy to understand” and “easy to navigate.” We then used SurveyMonkey to send the electronic survey to the respective university’s graduate schools for all doctoral supervisors and doctoral candidates to complete.

In the following sections, we present the qualitative survey before discussing each of the 13 statements of the FET.

### ***DATA COLLECTION AND MANAGEMENT***

The qualitative survey asked supervisors and doctoral candidates to list “the top five issues” that they had faced when giving (supervisors) or receiving (candidates) feedback. We chose this approach because we were interested in getting in-depth information about the experiences of supervisors giving feedback and the experiences of candidates receiving feedback. Participants could provide up to five issues, but only one issue was required. Each participant was allowed to write up to 100 words for each issue. In the end, 96 supervisors and 144 candidates responded to the survey. Doctoral candidates noted a total of 365 issues, and supervisors 276 issues. SurveyMonkey allowed us to produce lists of all responses.

Given our interest in what the group of supervisors and the group of candidates separately perceive as an issue in their supervision practice, we produced two lists. One noted supervisor responses; the other noted student responses. The length of the answers provided varied from a few words to sentences and longer paragraphs. Two shorter responses from supervisors were “Timeliness on my part” and “Candidates thinking any negative feedback means their work is of poor quality.” A longer response was:

Taking responsibility. When I provide detailed and comprehensive feedback about writing style and grammar and so on, I expect the student to learn from that, and the writing to improve over time. I have had some students who felt they didn’t have to write well because I would fix it later.

The responses from candidates also varied in length. Two shorter responses were “Going off on tangents” and “Work is completely rewritten without a description as to why the changes made were better.” A longer response was:

The time you have to wait for a response varies and can be frustrating—I think it all comes down to having mutual respect. I appreciate their huge workloads over and above supervising me, and they appreciate that sometimes I need a faster response than they have given. Neither have a problem with me contacting them to expedite the process should the need arise.

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

Each response was read carefully by both researchers and coded independently. Each response went through several rounds of individual categorization. The researchers discussed these intensely before agreeing on an appropriate coding for each response. The categorization is firmly grounded in the data; however, the procedure should not be understood as an exercise in inter-rater reliability. Similar to Borg and Burns (2008, p. 461), we believe that such a categorization procedure is “rather [...] an opportunity to compare our respective interpretations of a set of qualitative responses,” and to reach consensus on the most appropriate code(s) through the discussion. Through consensus, these codes were later grouped into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As an example, we categorized these statements under the theme ‘Students ignoring feedback’: “Students reluctant to take direction,” “Ignoring advice,” and “Students’ glossing over feedback, acknowledging it but doing nothing with it in subsequent drafts.” We developed a list of major themes for supervisors (such as ‘Students ignoring feedback,’ or ‘Timeliness’) and for candidates (such as ‘Clarity of feedback,’ or ‘Lack of confidence’). Then we grouped all the themes for both groups under two major categories to provide a holistic perspective on the issues in feedback.

The first category is *About us*. It includes all the themes that focus on supervisors and candidates (the two main players in the feedback process), what they do (or often don't do), their ways of being, and how they work together (such as 'Students ignoring feedback,' or 'Lack of confidence'). We grouped themes such as 'Timeliness' and 'Clarity of feedback' under the second major category: *About the feedback*. This category comprises all themes that focus on, for example, the nature of the feedback provided, and its clarity, direction and timeliness. It was interesting to observe that most supervisors commented about their candidates, and most of these commented about where they believed the candidate had failed. In contrast, most candidates commented about the feedback. Even so, such (quantitative) tendencies need more investigation before any concrete findings about them are possible.

**Table 1** (Supervisors' issues) and **Table 2** (Students' issues) give an overview of the main themes and the two major categories that we discovered in the data. Themes under the category *About us* are in **the white cells**; themes under the category *About the feedback* are in **the shaded cells**. We illustrate each theme with a quotation from the survey data.

**Table 1. Supervisors' issues (N = 365)**

STUDENTS IGNORING FEEDBACK
"Feedback not being followed—detailed feedback is given to the student but the student does not take it on board or the changes are not made as agreed. Then the same feedback is given again and still it does not occur."
STUDENTS' LACK OF ABILITY TO ENGAGE
"Students listening to my suggestions, but not really understanding, and then trying to implement them in a way that actually doesn't make sense. I've had a student look for theoretical guidance and I've just made a suggestion about a place to look, and they've run with it even though they really don't seem to like it or find it totally useful. I've tried to talk to them about it and agitate a more critical engagement, but it doesn't quite seem to work."
STUDENTS REPEATING MISTAKES
"Student did not take seriously the feedback and kept repeating the same mistake. Difficulties acting on feedback—especially where a candidate seems to struggle to apply feedback beyond the immediate and particular context in which it is given. This is often a problem for quite 'mechanical' things such as spelling, punctuation, referencing, grammar, formatting, apostrophes etc—however, much of this can be dealt to by a proof-reader if necessary. I find it more frustrating when there are persistent difficulties with writing 'good' paragraphs, despite repeated feedback attempts."
STUDENTS' NEED FOR LANGUAGE SUPPORT
"Assisting ESL students with written expression—this can be very difficult and time consuming and I am not sure I have the right skill set."
STUDENTS' UNWILLINGNESS TO SHARE RESPONSIBILITIES
"There is a balance to be made between the student expecting the supervisor to make decisions and the supervisor leaving these to the student. It is the student's project, so most of the decisions should be theirs."
DEFENSIVENESS OF STUDENTS
"Student anxiety and hostility over receipt of feedback—as if they've failed or done something wrong, can end in tears or direct attack on the giver of the feedback (hasn't happened to me directly but to a co-supervisor in a meeting I was part of)."

STUDENTS (NOT) MANAGING DISAGREEMENT
“At my university, PhD students always have two supervisors. This could be a great advantage for everyone, however, sometimes students play the game of seeing supervisor independently, mostly when the reaction of one supervisor has not been as favorable as expected. However, this might cause confusion.”
STUDENTS’ UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS
“Unrealistic feedback expectations. Students handing in really messy drafts and wanting a lot of feedback in a very short period of time.”
STUDENTS’ EMOTIONS
“Supervisors need to be aware of the students’ ‘low’ periods (when it all seems pointless and they want to drop out) and how best to deal with this.”
STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC ABILITY
“Students saying they understand when their work suggests they do not—this can be culture specific or at times students are admitted without the right level of research understanding for the project.”
CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
“Overcoming fear of ‘loss of face’ associated with some cultures—students very real fear of failure or seeing contradictory results as a failure on their part, rather than something really interesting.”
COMMUNICATION ISSUES
“Students not communicating when they choose not to follow advice. I have no problem with students taking a different path, but it is important that they tell us what is going on.”
TIMELINESS OF FEEDBACK
“Making students understand that they need to turn in their drafts so that I have sufficient time to read and provide feedback. They tend to give me their work later than promised, which mucks up my schedule—the usual result is that I have to use evenings or weekend time to return feedback quickly and in this way, keep things in schedule. This is very tricky as I am a parent and I resent giving my evening and weekend time.”
CONVEYING FEEDBACK
“Allowing their individual expression to shine through without unduly influencing their thinking and writing style. Whether to heavily mark and comment on a section of their work, or go over a whole chapter.”
AMOUNT OF FEEDBACK TO PROVIDE
“I give too much feedback, and hence supervision work takes too long. I haven’t learnt how to change this, perhaps because I believe if I see a problem, it is my responsibility to explain how it should be fixed.”

**Table 2. Students' issues (N = 265)**

FEEDBACK FROM MULTIPLE SUPERVISORS
“Differing understandings of research directions from different supervisors. With feedback suggesting different directions it’s difficult to know what path to take.”
LACK OF CLARITY OF ROLES IN MULTI TEAMS
“Lack of co-ordination between supervisors. I’ve been told I can do things by my primary supervisor and then after working on it for weeks told by my secondary supervisor that she was going to be using that data or that there was a protocol I didn’t know about that I should have been using.”
SUPERVISORS’ DIFFERENT AGENDA
“driving the research agenda—trying to shape the research to her purpose (probably not consciously)”
STUDENTS’ LACK OF CONFIDENCE
“Learning how to respectfully say “no” as a student when you know that your stance/understanding may be the correct one (also known as establishing confidence in your “area of expertise”).”
EMOTIONAL IMPACT ON STUDENTS
“Coping with feedback that is quite blunt! When supervisors say things in a way that undermines you personally.”
SUPERVISORS’ EXPERTISE
“Being evaluated by someone who is an expert in landscape management and my project is about microbial genetic evolution increases uncertainty of what I am supposed to be evaluated for.”
COMMUNICATION ISSUES
“Lack of communication and transparency. When supervisor went on sabbatical, we as his students found out accidentally and were only informed weeks before he left. Some students would receive regular supervision meetings with support and guidance, while me (and others) did not.”
NEED FOR DIALOGUE
“Too little dialogue [...]. At times, there should be more of a dialogue and drawing out of what I think the ways forward are. I can do this myself and do offer these thoughts in meetings. However, if a supervisor raises a concern about an idea or a direction it seems like the right thing to do in advanced study to ask the candidate to respond to any concerns and muse over what could be done next.”
TIMELINESS OF FEEDBACK
“Receiving feedback in a timely fashion—one section of my thesis went unanswered for almost 5 months. I could carry on with some parts but the piece I was waiting on was crucial.”
DIRECTION OF THE FEEDBACK
“While doing my thesis, my supervisor kept changing methods/ideas/outcomes.”
CLARITY OF FEEDBACK
“comment saying ‘?’”

TYPE OF FEEDBACK
“Feedback can be too nice at times.”
ILLEGIBLE FEEDBACK
“awful handwriting”
AMOUNT OF FEEDBACK TO RECEIVE
“I received almost no feedback. I had a total of 60 minutes face to face over five years.”

We used, firstly, the six main areas identified in the literature review (content (and medium); linguistic accuracy; direction of feedback; the (critical) language used in feedback; emotions in feedback; and the supervisory relationship), secondly, the themes and categories that we found in the qualitative survey data, and finally, our own knowledge as feedback researchers and academic developers to develop key topics as conflicting statements. The statements cover the six main issues as discussed in the literature review as well as the themes and two major categories that emerged from the qualitative survey data. However, the FET does not include a statement that reflects the critique by the students and the supervisors of each other’s academic ability or expertise (as expressed under themes ‘Supervisors’ expertise’ and Students’ academic ability’). We omitted this topic because of its potential for confrontation. Further, while the format of the FET was inspired by Brown and Atkins’s (1988) tool and subsequent versions as discussed above, we changed their 1–5 Likert rating scale to a non-numerical scale made up of six dot points to signal that no position on the continuum is ‘stronger.’

## THE 13 FET STATEMENTS

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In the following section, we discuss each statement of the FET. We stress that each statement contains contradictions that offer opportunities for dialogue between the supervisor and the candidate. Statements are the synthesized result of the literature review, the analysis of the qualitative survey data, and our experience. Statements typically focus on one or more key issues as identified in the literature review. The supervisor–candidate relationship straddles most statements, in a more or less explicit way. Overlap occurs and also depends on how the statement is understood. However, different interpretations of the statements add to the strength of the tool, with the main aim being to encourage dialogue and advocate a more transparent and collegial peer-to-peer model of feedback practice. Feedback in the FET refers to written and oral feedback.

1. *The supervisor should give feedback on any aspect of the thesis (for instance, content and language).  
The supervisor should give feedback only on aspects the candidate asks about.*

When a candidate gives a draft to the supervisor, the supervisor reads the draft and provides appropriate feedback based on the stage of the student’s candidature. If the candidate is in their early stages, most supervisors tend to provide formative and developmental feedback. In the candidate’s later stages, most supervisors tend to be more critical to encourage reflection and to ensure the scholarship is sound. However, the survey data indicated that some supervisors acted as editors, if not censors, by, for instance, providing a “complete overhaul of writing to suit [the] supervisor’s own personal style.” Yet some supervisors raised the issue that language issues impeded their understanding. They spent too much of their time correcting the language, which distracted them from the content. As a result, they could not focus on the candidate’s scholarship.

Some candidates who came from different traditions of learning expected supervisors to correct their language errors. Other candidates thought supervisors should focus only on the content and leave the editing to the final stages of writing. The conflicting views from supervisors and candidates provide opportunities for discussion.

2. *Feedback is an instruction to revise.*  
*Feedback is an invitation to revise.*

Supervisors aim to nurture their candidates so that candidates can understand their intentions and view feedback as an opportunity to develop their scholarship and independence. Remarkably, in the survey data many candidates indicated that a key issue for them was “lack of direction” and/or “lack of solution.” For many, the feedback did not give them a clear sense of direction, was too brief, or lacked specific details. In contrast, supervisors commented about the candidate’s lack of uptake of feedback. Candidates, they believe, are “reluctant to take direction,” are “ignoring” advice because they think “they know better,” or do not seek clarifications and therefore misinterpret feedback.

At times, supervisors may use questions or opinion-based feedback (Kumar & Stracke, 2007) to prompt a candidate’s thinking—indicating that supervisors consider feedback as an invitation to think differently. The survey data showed that some supervisors also thought candidates were unable to apply feedback beyond specific instructions from supervisors. Discussions on how the supervisor gives feedback and how the candidate could respond would help to pave the way for greater transparency.

3. *The feedback must tell the candidate what they did well and what they did not do well.*  
*The feedback must give a clear direction for the candidate’s future work.*

Emphasizing what worked well will boost the candidate’s confidence and mentor the candidate as to what needs to be done (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Such an emphasis also augurs well for the belief that supervision is a form of teaching. Using only negative, summative assessment fails to help the candidate close the perceived gap between the actual and expected levels of scholarly performance (Ramaprasad, 1983).

Even so, lack of clarity is a common issue in the candidate data. This might indicate that some supervisors do not provide the candidate with information about how to close the gap. Comments such as “saying ‘?’” do not give the candidate enough information for them to move forward. A discussion on feedback and feedforward—the specific information needed to achieve learning goals—provides an opportunity for the supervisor and candidate to discuss both.

4. *The supervisor is responsible for handling issues about language.*  
*The candidate is responsible for handling issues about language.*

We often hear in our roles as academic staff developers and supervisors that candidates have problems with academic writing. Paltridge (1997) highlights the difficulties of candidates, whether or not they are native speakers, to meet the language requirement expected at the doctoral level.

A significant challenge faced by supervisors in this study was providing feedback about English language issues. Grammar and spelling seem to be the most prominent aspects of such issues. Many supervisors spend hours correcting editorial matters. Yet language issues are hard to tackle as not all supervisors are trained to help candidates with the writing. Correcting language expressions can be very hard and time-consuming, as this supervisor admits: “I am not sure I have the right skills set!” Supervisors have also raised ethical questions about the amount of editorial work they do. The survey data showed that supervisors view misunderstanding advice and not acting on it as key issues. Discussions on language issues and the level of language feedback a supervisor can provide and the candidate can expect is vital to ensure the supervisor is not significantly pressured to deal with linguistic accuracy in writing.

5. *Handwritten and electronic feedback is the best way to give and receive feedback.*  
*Oral feedback is the best way to give and receive feedback.*

This statement is an invitation to discuss how supervisors and candidates feel about the need to have supervisory meetings in which they discuss matters, and the need for written feedback, and

how that written feedback is provided. Our experience tells us that the expectations of supervisor and candidate can differ. The survey data confirmed our impressions. For instance, if the feedback does not reach the candidate, action is needed. One candidate admitted:

The only issue that I have had in receiving feedback is in the method of transmission. E-mails go missing or get lost within the clutter of an inbox from time to time. This has been an issue at both my end and my supervisors' end.

We included the options of supervisors choosing between providing handwritten and/or electronic feedback to stimulate further discussion about these issues. Our survey data showed instances where candidates point out that the handwriting is "awful" or "not easy to read," which the supervisor needs to know about. While no medium for delivering and receiving feedback is right or wrong, it is vital that supervisors and candidates discuss preferences. Doing so will allow for and ensure the best possible learning experience.

6. *The supervisor should give, and the candidate can ask for, feedback about sections and chapters that are not finished.*  
*The supervisor should give, and the candidate should only ask for, feedback on sections or chapters that are finished.*

The survey data included many comments from supervisors that providing feedback is time-consuming and that candidates had "unrealistic" or "unreasonable" expectations about the amount of feedback they would receive about a draft as well as about the number of drafts that a supervisor should read. One comment that illustrates this belief is, "Students handing in really messy drafts and wanting a lot of feedback in a very short period of time."

Discussions are needed to ensure that both supervisor and candidate match their expectations (see Xu & Grant's, 2017a, suggestion above about the number of chapter drafts that a supervisor is willing to read and provide feedback on). These discussions will help to ensure that the candidate becomes independent and seeks feedback on sections only when necessary. They will also help to keep the supervisor's workload at a reasonable level.

7. *The candidate should regularly ask for feedback from the primary supervisor.*  
*The candidate should regularly ask for feedback from all their supervisors.*

As for team supervision (Guerin & Green, 2015), our survey data and experience raise the issue about who should provide regular feedback. Should only the primary supervisor provide regular feedback or should the team delegate such responsibilities based on the expertise of the supervisor? Should supervisors consult each other before providing feedback? In the survey, candidates often commented about the "lack of co-ordination between supervisors." These issues can be resolved if roles and responsibilities are clarified early on in the candidature. Supervisors and candidates should work hard to resolve roles and responsibilities. Doing so may also prevent possible tension between supervisors, and between supervisors and candidates.

8. *The supervisor and candidate can ask other people (for instance, peers, other academics) to give feedback.*  
*The supervisor and candidate can only ask the supervisor team to give feedback.*

While the literature acknowledges the importance of peers, our survey did not provide much data about this. The likely reason is a perception that involving other peers or academics is outside the act of supervision. Some candidates commented that their supervisor was reluctant to involve others by "giving feedback in areas where they have no expertise, rather than referring on to someone who is better placed to give feedback." By contrast, one supervisor wanted others to be more involved so as to provide better "[c]ultural understanding in both parties, and with others involved in supervision, [...] to bridge critically the world of the scholarship and the world of the scholar." We agree that the doctorate is a collaborative learning process and included this statement in the FET. Our hope is that any discussion about supervision will cover this issue in more depth.

9. *The candidate should handle conflicting feedback from the supervisory team and decide the right direction to take. The main supervisor should structure conflict feedback from the supervisory team in a way so they can give the candidate clear direction.*

As foreshadowed in the literature review (Guerin & Green, 2015), data evidenced diversity of feedback as an emergent theme. Candidates often commented that having different people provide feedback led to conflicting, inconsistent, or confusing feedback. Some candidates commented that with different directions “it’s difficult [to know] which path to follow.” Yet others responded positively, saying that different views from the supervisory team enabled them to strengthen their thesis.

Supervisors and candidates would benefit from discussing how to deal with and respond to diverse feedback. Doing so can help to resolve contradictions that might lead to unwanted emotional stress and help to develop an “understanding that competing points of view are integral to academic life” (Guerin & Green, 2015, p. 332).

10. *Feedback is effective when it highlights the strengths of the candidate’s work. Feedback is effective when it highlights the weaknesses of the candidate’s work.*

Many candidates commented about the emotional impact of feedback. They felt that feedback which highlighted their weaknesses was sometimes “overly harsh” or “too harsh” and that judgmental responses or attitude could be “unmotivating and upsetting” causing them to have “feelings of incompetency.” By contrast, supervisors often commented about their candidates’ “defensiveness”, and sometimes “anxiety and hostility” when receiving crucial feedback.

Previous studies that looked at the link between language and socio-emotional aspects of feedback highlighted the role of expressive types of feedback that often cause intense emotions (Stracke & Kumar, 2016). While candidates need to realize that negative feedback from supervisors, while frustrating, may build their confidence as academic writers, supervisors need to realize that the language they use to criticize or praise will have an impact on their candidates. Supervisors and candidates would benefit from discussing the critiquing process in a transparent manner. Doing so would also benefit their relationship more widely.

11. *The candidate should expect to get feedback quickly. The candidate should not expect to get feedback quickly.*

Candidates and supervisors commented that timeliness is a major issue. Many candidates felt stressed and frustrated with delays in feedback. One candidate commented that “one section of my thesis went unanswered for almost 5 months. I could carry on with some parts but the piece I was waiting on was crucial.”

Interestingly, some candidates pointed out that supervisors have a duty to provide prompt feedback, as supervision is similar to a “contractual agreement;” yet they often “treated [feedback] as a favor rather than a paid obligation with reasonable time allocation.” By contrast, supervisors commented that their heavy workload prevented them from providing prompt feedback. One supervisor commented that “really good feedback takes a lot of time and effort,” and often supervisors lack that time. Supervisors and candidates would benefit from discussing timeliness and negotiating reasonable timeframes for delivering feedback.

12. *The supervisor and the candidate should consider emotions when giving and receiving feedback. The supervisor and candidate should not consider emotions when giving and receiving feedback.*

Our survey data confirm the need for studies that acknowledge the emotional impact of feedback in any learning and teaching context including doctoral education (Stracke & Kumar, 2016). Candidates show a high level of awareness of their emotions and the need to manage them. One candidate commented that coping with feedback was challenging: “Coping with feedback that is quite blunt! When supervisors say things in a way that undermines you personally.” Supervisors

showed some awareness that they might hurt their candidates' emotions. One supervisor commented: "Students not being resilient in the face of feedback. Some candidates will take the feedback personally rather than as me wanting them to improve their results." A few supervisors admitted struggling with their own emotions: "Giving calm, confident advice and guidance when you are often thinking 'Shit! What do we do now?!'"

We hope that our statement (about emotions) in the FET might allow the supervisor and candidate to openly discuss how important feelings are, when receiving and giving feedback, for developing and nurturing a respectful relationship that supports the candidate in their learning.

13. *The candidate should think about the supervisor's culture when receiving feedback from them. Supervisors should provide feedback that is culturally appropriate to the candidate.*

The literature emphasizes that cultural differences can intensify potential problems in supervision practice (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014). As universities have more and more staff and candidates attending from other countries and coming from a wide range of backgrounds, they must develop a high level of cultural sensitivity. Our survey data confirm this need. One supervisor reflected on their candidates' need for overcoming fear of "loss of face" associated with some cultures. This revealed itself as the students' very real fear of failure or seeing contradictory results as a failure on their part instead of as something really interesting and worth examining.

Candidates in this study seemed less concerned with the issue of culture than their supervisors. Yet even they reported having experienced differences in personality during their candidature. While culture and personality are different constructs, both refer to the way a supervisor and a candidate do things in their own way. We are aware that candidates may find it hard to have dialogic conversations with their supervisors in some circumstances. They might be hesitant to disagree with their supervisors. This could be due to cultural traditions where filial piety is advocated. As an example, in the Confucian ideology, the teacher is "abstracted as the image of Confucius" (Xu & Grant 2017b, p. 571). As such, candidates "are not supposed to interact freely with teachers on the basis of equal status" (Hui, 2005, p. 22). Similarly, Islamic teaching advocates that "a good student is one who is receptive of the teacher's knowledge and wisdom" (Bee Eng & Kumar, 2009, p. 129).

Given these long-established traditions of not challenging the teacher, a possible concern is that candidates coming from these traditions may not engage in transparent dialogue to negotiate feedback expectations. We suggest an early and careful use of this statement about how supervisors and candidates think about and treat culture. If a university has not already done so, it should develop a high level of cultural sensitivity.

## CONCLUSION

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The FET is aimed at creating a common understanding of the complexities in the feedback process so that learning can take place. To keep up with the ongoing change in society in general, and in Higher Education and doctoral education in particular, we present the FET as a living document. We encourage supervisors and candidates to add items that are relevant to them and cater for their diversity or to delete items that are not relevant to them.

In our practice as feedback researchers and academic developers, we have started sharing the FET with fellow supervisors and students. The initial feedback from supervisors and candidates about the FET is encouraging. Candidates commented that the FET gave them an insight into the 'other side,' made them interrogate their own ideas, allowed for mutual understanding, and, most importantly, offered them the opportunity to negotiate with supervisors. Supervisors commented that the FET is a useful tool that gives a voice to the candidate so both can discuss responsibility and autonomy and can negotiate an enduring and worthwhile candidate-supervisor relationship. Some supervisors believe that the FET is best done at the start of the candidature and then later at intervals of six to

twelve months. Other supervisors believe the FET is best used towards the end of the candidature. We are confident that every supervisor and candidate will use the FET in a way that works best for them both.

We will do more research to discover how useful the FET is as a tool for helping to achieve more open and collegial feedback practices in doctoral supervision. Literature on the role of culture, equality, diversity, and inclusion suggests impact on supervisory practices. Future research could explore feedback as an integral part of such supervisory practices, as well as the views of supervisors and candidates about such issues when giving and receiving feedback, from these particular angles. While the qualitative survey generated in-depth data, an obvious limitation was the limited number of universities involved. Therefore, studies across more institutions, in research sites outside Australia and New Zealand, and in specific disciplines, will also add to our understanding and development of the FET as a pedagogical tool.

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## DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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The authors report no potential conflict of interest.

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## APPENDIX: FEEDBACK EXPECTATION TOOL (FET)

### *Feedback Expectation Tool (FET)*

Feedback is at the heart of any learning and teaching process. Giving and receiving written feedback during a doctoral candidature is a complex task that covers many issues. This *Feedback Expectation Tool (FET)* lists some important issues that the supervisor and candidate may face when giving and receiving feedback. The *FET* helps each to state their beliefs and expectations clearly and transparently. The *FET* aims to encourage discussion. Its objective is to establish a working relationship that is respectful during the research degree.

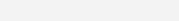
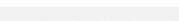
Each supervisor and candidate should complete the *FET* separately. They should discuss their responses at a supervision meeting. Both can use the *FET* at any time during the candidature, and as often as agreed. Both can add statements to the *FET* if these statements suit the supervisor's practice and the candidate's needs.

**Use the statements below to provide your views about feedback.** The statements are on a spectrum.

Circle the dot point on the far left if you strongly agree with the statement on the left.

Circle the dot point on the far right if you strongly agree with the statement on the right.

Circle one of the other dots along the spectrum if your view is somewhere in between.

1	The supervisor should give feedback on any aspect of the thesis (for instance, content and language).		The supervisor should give feedback only on aspects the candidate asks about.
2	Feedback is an instruction to revise.		Feedback is an invitation to revise.
3	The feedback must tell the candidate what they did well and what they did not do well.		The feedback must give clear direction for the candidate's future work.
4	The supervisor is responsible for handling issues about language.		The candidate is responsible for handling issues about language.
5	Handwritten and electronic feedback is the best way to give and receive feedback.		Oral feedback is the best way to give and receive feedback.
6	The supervisor should give, and the candidate can ask for, feedback about sections and chapters that are not finished.		The supervisor should give, and the candidate should only ask for, feedback on sections or chapters that are finished.
7	The candidate should regularly ask for feedback from the primary supervisor.		The candidate should regularly ask for feedback from all their supervisors.
8	The supervisor and candidate can ask other people (for instance, peers, other academics) to give feedback.		The supervisor and candidate can only ask the supervisory team to give feedback.
9	The candidate should handle conflicting feedback from the supervisory team and decide the right direction to take.		The main supervisor should structure conflicting feedback from the supervisory team in a way so they can give the candidate clear direction.
10	Feedback is effective when it highlights the strengths of the candidate's work.		Feedback is effective when it highlights the weaknesses of the candidate's work.
11	The candidate should expect to get feedback quickly.		The candidate should not expect to get feedback quickly.
12	The supervisor and the candidate should consider emotions when giving and receiving feedback.		The supervisor and candidate should not consider emotions when giving and receiving feedback.
13	The candidate should think about the supervisor's culture when receiving feedback from them.		Supervisors should provide feedback that is culturally appropriate to the candidate.

## BIOGRAPHIES

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Elke and Vijay have published their research on feedback and assessment at postgraduate level in international quality journals such as *Teaching in Higher Education*, *Journal for English for Academic Purposes*, and *Reflective Practice*.