

**Supervising master's theses in international master's degree programmes: Roles, responsibilities and models**

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## ***Abstract***

This paper provides insights into thesis supervisors' perceptions of the supervisory relationship and process in English-medium international master's degree programmes (IMDPs). It contributes to the field of supervisory pedagogy in master's level education by examining how supervisors perceive their supervisory practices and what they consider to be the most important features for successful supervision. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with thesis supervisors employed in five different Finnish universities. Qualitative content analysis was conducted. The results revealed that most of the interviewees perceive supervision as an asymmetric relationship in the context of a teaching model similar to Dysthe's (2002). Trust, topic selection, supervisors' support and the initial stage of supervision were regarded as the most important features during supervision. The article concludes with the recommendation that supervisors should have more opportunities to reflect on their supervisory practices.

## **Keywords**

Master's thesis supervision, supervisors, Finnish universities, international master's degree programmes, supervision pedagogy, thesis models

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to explore how master's theses supervisors perceive their role, the process and relationship of supervision in the international master's degree programmes (IMDPs) at Finnish universities. This study is conducted at a time when Finnish higher education is transforming into an increasingly market-oriented system as a result of the influence of European market-driven policies (Rinne 2000; Ylijoki and Ursin 2015). The working life in higher education is shaped by the governance, policy and funding reforms that have accommodated growing competition between and within institutions (Ylijoki and Ursin 2013, 2015). These recent trends have extended to activities related to internationalisation of higher education institutions, such as the rapid expansion of English-medium international degree programmes (IDPs) and the competition for international students. At the management level of the universities,

internationalisation has been linked to result-based funding schemes and financial incentives. In particular, the number of international degree students and graduates affects the university funding (Kauko and Medvedeva 2016), with the number of IDPs considered to be an indicator of the internationalisation of higher education (Airey, Lauridsen, Räsänen, Salö, and Schwach 2017).

The proportion of universities in Finland and their English-medium programmes rank Finland as the leading provider in the European context (Wächter and Maiworm 2014). In addition, Finland is the fourth leading country in the overall ranking of higher education in English, which includes the proportion of universities' providers, programmes and students, after the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden (Wächter and Maiworm 2014). Currently, there are more than 400 English-medium programmes available in Finnish higher education institutions, at bachelor's, master's and doctoral level (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018).

While a substantial body of literature exists on the supervisory relationship, pedagogy and expectations in English-speaking countries, such as Australia, the U.S., New Zealand and the U.K. (e.g., Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin 2008; Barnes and Austin 2009; Grant 2003; Guerin, Kerr, and Green 2015; Pilcher 2011), little research has been published on thesis supervision in English-medium programmes in non-English-speaking countries (e.g., Dysthe 2002; de Kleijn, Meijer, Brekelmans, and Pilot 2013). Similarly, despite the developing interest in thesis supervision in Finland (e.g., Pyhältö, Vekkaila, and Keskinen 2015; Vehviläinen 2009; Ylijoki 2001), research on IMDPs and their supervisory pedagogies can be characterised as scarce (e.g., Filippou, Kallo, and Mikkilä-Erdmann 2017).

In an attempt to bridge these research gaps, this study explores the thesis supervisors' pedagogical approaches and perceptions of supervision. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to investigate and extend our understanding of the supervisors' views regarding the process and roles in master's thesis supervision and also to identify which supervision models they exercise. The supervisors' roles are examined through Brown and Atkins' (1988) classification and Dysthe's

(2002) models of supervision. Drawing from their studies and reflecting on the supervisors' experiences will assist in increasing awareness of pedagogical approaches in supervision.

This article is divided into five sections. The following section contextualises the IMDPs and provides information about the general content and the thesis supervision process in the programmes. Thereafter, the previous studies regarding the process, relationship, perceived roles, responsibilities and models of supervision are discussed. The subsequent section presents the methods, data collection and analysis processes that were followed for this research. Then the findings are presented and discussed in consideration of the IMDPs context and previous research. The final section concentrates on limitations and possible directions for future research.

### **The IMDPs Context**

The IMDPs have expanded rapidly, alongside the internationalisation of Finnish universities. These programmes were developed to attract international students to Finnish institutions, and in 2018, international students constituted 12% of all master's degree students in Finnish higher education (OECD 2018). Even though, the IMDPs are provided in parallel with the local languages programmes, which is a common practice in universities in non-English-speaking countries, Finnish students can also apply and study in an IMDP. This differs from programmes in English-speaking countries, which aim to attract both local and international students and do not provide separate programmes for international students.

The designed length of IMDPs is two years for full-time students, who have a maximum of four years study-right to complete the programme. During these two years, students are supervised by one or two supervisors and attend thesis seminars with their classmates (Filippou et al. 2017). Thesis seminars provide a pedagogical space for a group of students and supervisors to present and negotiate their practices and expectations. The thesis discussions and seminars usually start in the first semester of the programmes. The students are expected to attend thesis seminars, complete

coursework and write their thesis (Filippou et al. 2017). Regardless of the field of study, the purpose of a master's thesis is to demonstrate students' understanding of the research topic, proficiency in applying research methods and mastery of academic writing (Ylijoki 2001).

The diversities of the IMDP population can be observed in the students' nationality and cultural and linguistic background, but age and educational background vary as well. These diversities suggest the need for varied pedagogical strategies (Robson and Turner 2017) and, consequently, varying supervisory practices. Previous studies on IMDP students showed that students' academic self-efficacy varied slightly according to their background information (Filippou 2019) and, to a larger extent, according to their expectations concerning their supervisor's responsibilities (Filippou et al. 2017). Recognising the pedagogical approaches of supervisors in a culturally diverse environment such as the IMDPs is deemed important for the support and development of the supervisors' skills.

### **Supervisory Relationship and Process**

Supervision is a pedagogical relationship in which both supervisor(s) and student have an active role (Grant and Graham 1999). Grant's work on the pedagogy of supervision analyses the different levels of power relations it involves and its complexity (Grant 2003; 2005), which can affect both students' and supervisors' experiences (Grant and Graham 1999). Supervision is considered to be more complex than formulaic since it includes multiple and various responsibilities, as well as intellectual and affective dimensions (Barnes and Austin 2009).

Strauss (2012) argues that the supervisory experience can be challenging due to linguistic and relationship issues and that it can become even more difficult when the student and supervisor have different expectations and assumptions for the thesis process. A study by de Kleijn and colleagues (2013) highlights the different goals of supervisor and student. Their findings show that there are important mismatches between student and supervisor expectations. For example, the students are

often unaware that they are expected to work relatively independently and tend to focus their attention on acquiring knowledge, while the supervisors concentrate more on how the knowledge is applied (de Kleijn et al. 2013).

### **Perceived Roles and Responsibilities**

Many research-based studies (e.g., Anderson et al. 2006; Barnes and Austin 2009; Grant 2005) have investigated the supervisors' roles, perceived responsibilities, functions and characteristics. Earlier, though, Brown and Atkins (1988) proposed ideas and practical guidelines on teaching that included identification of several roles that a supervisor can adapt and revisit in different stages (see Figure 1). Over the years, various studies have applied or examined Brown and Atkins' (1988) practices and suggestions (e.g. Grant and Graham 1994, 1999; Sayed, Kruss, and Badat 1998). The present study wishes to discuss and develop these elements further as they relate to particular research contexts.

**[Figure 1 near here]**

Adjusting supervision according to the student's needs has been widely discussed as an important part of effective supervision (Barnes and Austin 2009; Todd et al. 2006). This role, also known as the 'elusive chameleon', describes supervisors who rapidly adapt and evolve according to their student's needs (Pilcher 2011). Supervisors strive to develop students' critical thinking and academic role (Anderson et al. 2006). However, their goals regarding the thesis and student development vary; some focus on the student's intellectual evolution and others on the practical impact of the thesis (Anderson et al. 2006). In this context, Woolhouse (2002) stresses how important it is that supervisors are capable of balancing the pressure they exert on and the freedom they provide to their students.

## **Dysthe's Models of Supervision**

This study has been guided by Dysthe's research (2002) on sociocultural and dialogical perspectives in supervision which identifies three models of supervision: teaching, apprenticeship and partnership. These models are not mutually exclusive, and some aspects of supervision may appear in more than one model. Dysthe identified different models used in the same fields and supported that different supervision models could be used based on 'disciplinary, institutional, and personal factors' (Dysthe 2002, 532). Moreover, the supervisor's experiences influence the selection and use of the supervisory model (Dysthe 2002). Dysthe (2002) argues that the supervision models are complicated due to the challenging character of authority and the negotiating aspect of the relationships.

The *teaching model* derives from monologism and deals with the traditional asymmetrical roles in supervision and the student's strong dependency on the supervisor. It focuses on the knowledge transfer from the expert supervisor to the novice student. Dysthe's findings (2002) show that, in this model, the expert supervisor corrects the text, provides directive feedback and advises the student. Supervisors tend to adopt the teaching model and the apprenticeship model when students lack previous writing experience (Dysthe 2002).

In the *apprenticeship model*, the student and supervisor cooperate, but the supervisor assumes the leading role in the research project. The apprenticeship model is more prevalent in project-, team- and laboratory-based environments, where the student observes the supervisor and then performs similar operations. This environment generally involves a joint project and frequent group meetings. The students discuss several texts and exchange feedback in groups. Thus, they are not as dependent on their supervisor as in the teaching model.

In the *partnership model*, the supervisory relationship is seen as more symmetrical and promotes students' independence through collaboration with the supervisor. Both the partnership model and the apprenticeship model are based on dialogism, in which it is assumed that knowledge

emerges through interaction and explaining different views (Dysthe 2002). Dialogue is a key component of the partnership model. Obviously, there is a power and knowledge asymmetry, but the relationship is based on mutual respect and expectations. The two main actors (the student and the supervisor) share joint responsibility for the process, and they collaborate. Frequent meetings, especially at the beginning of the supervision process, are expected, as are clearly defined mutual expectations. Providing constructive criticism, aiming to develop independent thinking and encouraging students to take ownership of the process by exercising their own judgements and choices all characterise this model. There is a significant difference in the view of knowledge and learning between the teaching model and the partnership model. Dysthe (2002, 532) argues that ‘the partnership model and the teaching model can be seen as competing paradigms of supervision’. One of the differences between the apprenticeship model and the partnership model is that in the apprenticeship model, the supervisor has a clearer authority role.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Questions***

The research questions of this study are:

- (1) What are supervisors’ views on the supervisory process and roles during master’s theses supervision?
- (2) What models of supervision do supervisors exercise during the theses supervision process?
- (3) What aspects of master’s theses supervision do supervisors consider most important?

### ***Participants***

The data collection was carried out in the spring semester of 2016. The study participants comprised 20 thesis supervisors – 12 male and 8 female – from five Finnish universities. The participants represented six fields of study: business (5), humanities (3), IT (3), natural sciences (2), social



sciences (5) and technical sciences (2). Participants are referred to by an abbreviated number, for example SV01, SV02.

### ***Instrumentation and Procedure***

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The supervisors were contacted regarding the research via email. The main selection criterion was that they were currently supervising theses in an IMDP. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in face-to-face mode, and six interviews were conducted through Skype. During the interviews, open questions were asked, such as ‘Could you tell me how you supervise your students?’ and ‘In your opinion, what are the main responsibilities and roles of the supervisor and student during thesis supervision?’. The interviews lasted between 35 and 70 minutes and were audio-recorded digitally.

### ***Data Analysis***

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and content analysis was conducted. The interview transcripts were read thoroughly three times, phrases were underlined, and notes were written for thematic ideas. For the first research question, deductive content analysis was carried out to analyse the supervisors’ perceptions of the supervisory process, roles and responsibilities and compare them with the roles outlined by Brown and Atkins (1988). The data referring to the roles and responsibilities of the student and the supervisor were then selected, the interview transcriptions were read again, one by one, and sub-categories based on their common referred roles and responsibilities were created (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). The supervisors’ roles suggested by Brown and Atkins (1988) were subsequently used to identify if, when and in what case the IMDPs supervisors’ roles corresponded to those roles and whether any other roles, not mentioned by Brown and Atkins, were described.

For the second research question, that is, to determine which model the supervisors were following according to Dysthe’s model (2002), theory-drive content analysis was applied. Based on

the supervisors' overall descriptions of how they supervise and what they expect from the process and their students, they were allocated to one of the three supervisory models. For the third research question, content analysis and quantification of the data were conducted. This strategy was chosen for systematising the data and highlighting the effect size of the responses through frequencies. Therefore, the features were listed, counted, summed up and converted into percentages. The aspects that were emphasised and mentioned more frequently were considered to be the most important.

## **Results**

The following results and quotes bring together the participants' perceptions of the main supervisory roles and responsibilities, while also illustrating a general timeline of the procedure.

### ***Supervisory Process and Supervisors Roles***

The participants' responses indicated that they were reflecting on the supervisory roles and their evolution during the supervisory process. At the beginning of the process, the supervisor seems to transition between the role of director and that of manager and facilitator. The student and the supervisor 'go through some formalities... fill in the required forms... discuss what the research plan will be' (SV07), and the supervisor clarifies 'the aims and learning outcomes' (SV13) of the research project. In some IMDPs, the procedure is strictly structured and starts with the thesis seminars, during which students get 'the same information about what a master's thesis involves, what is expected, how it is structured, what the workload is and are also given scheduled deadlines for research proposal presenting methods and... analysis and preliminary results and then, of course, the final presentation of the thesis manuscript' (SV13).

According to the supervisors, this stage is crucial due to the necessity of choosing a research topic in which the students are interested. SV03 emphasises, 'I always try to put forward the fact that students should like the topic and they should see the reason why they do it. This selection

might influence the whole thesis process and relationship.’ Some supervisors share background literature with their students to begin with (e.g., SV04), and some will help their students ‘to find literature for their thesis’ (SV02). Moreover, in the role of critic, informing the students about possible research limitations, the supervisor attempts to ‘convey to the student the real limitations of... research. Many times students come up with very good ideas, interesting questions, but then it turns out that it is very difficult to study this’ (SV01). One of the supervisors sets the communication terms early on and encourages the students to contact him/her when they would like to discuss something or when they face difficulties: ‘My message to the students is that they can contact me at any time and they should not hesitate in doing so whenever they have something in mind that they would like to ask’ (SV05).

The transcripts showed that often in the middle part of the process, the supervisor continues with the role of manager while setting deadlines as a regulating tool of the supervision process. For example, one supervisor notes that ‘the students need to have deadlines... A deadline for finishing the data collection, for example’ (SV20). Similarly, SV14 supports that s/he ‘learned that it is very good to have strict deadlines and... should have them even stricter with regard to the finalising of the thesis.’ The supervisors highlighted that the main actor of supervision is the student – ‘the whole project management is within the responsibility of the student...’ (SV15). All supervisors emphasised the students’ responsibility for conducting the research and putting effort into this middle stage. It is the ‘students’ responsibility to [make] sure that the work is done and the student is the person who will do the actual work, find the literature, read all the papers and write and do the analysis and write the results...’ (SV16).

As this stage, the supervisor shifts and even combines different roles, moving, for example, from the role of manager to that of adviser and supporter. As one interviewee explained, the adviser supervisor ensures that the student ‘is kind of educated in the fundamental techniques and the background knowledge which is required’ (SV07). Another interviewee explained that the main

role of the supervisor is ‘to support when there are any challenges or questions that they need answered’ (SV09). Another supervisor sought balance between the role of the supporter and freedom giver when stating, ‘Maybe that’s the most important thing finding a balance between letting them feel supported and giving them the freedom to do their own thing’ (SV04).

Towards the end of the supervision process, the supervisors’ roles change significantly. At the final stage, the supervisor becomes the evaluator who ensures that the thesis ‘...is in a condition of being approved’ (SV10). Here, the role of critic comes into play again: ‘The research question, the methodology and the concepts need to match with each other... I always try to highlight... consistency’ (SV20). In some IMDPs the evaluation process finalises with students ‘presenting their main findings in the last seminar’ (SV01), so it starts and ends collectively. In this stage, SV01 acknowledged that ‘the best experience is always when a thesis comes to my desk... this student who came here two or three years ago is now handing in the thesis, and he is going to graduate’. A topic that came up frequently and divided supervisors’ opinions was language check; many supervisors expressed caution concerning what a supervisor should and should not do: ‘I shouldn’t be a language checker, but it’s more checking the content – scientific content – in the thesis and helping with the scientific writing’ (SV02).

### ***Models of Supervision***

In an attempt to understand the underlying principles of supervision in IMDPs, an investigation of the supervisors’ practices, based on Dysthe’s (2002) models, was conducted. The findings indicate that the supervisors’ practices closely resemble Dysthe’s teaching model (2002). Based on the supervisors’ descriptions, 15 mainly apply the teaching model, four practise the partnership model and one the apprenticeship model. There were cases of supervisors (e.g., SV04 and SV13) navigating between two models according to the thesis stage, which is to be expected since Dysthe (2002) explained that there are aspects that emerge in more than one model, and it is possible for a supervisor to shift from one model to the other.

The power asymmetry of the teaching model and the dependent relationship of the expert supervisor to the novice student were frequently highlighted by the supervisors of the teaching model. The supervisors within this model represented all fields of study, but there were also differences in supervisors' models within the respective field, as we will indicate below. According to SV17, the supervisor ought to push 'the student towards some new styles and look to more deep theory and problematise the thinking and challenge their own ideas and be self-reflective.' Similarly, the following supervisor quotation shows the directive side of the supervisor who is the authority in this process: 'The student is the person who will do the actual work... but the supervisor helps and gives some directions in what could be improved and what is ready' (SV16). The supervisors believed that through the learning process, the students transition from novice learners to explorers, workers, managers and researchers: 'The master thesis is the final work; the student really grows during the time' (SV03). However, supervisors mentioned that the student needs to learn how to be a researcher during this process while relying 'on supervisors' understanding [of] how the thesis should be' (SV17).

SV08 analysed the impact s/he wishes to have on students' development during the master's thesis process: 'We try to bring in a certain work ethic and certain way of making [the students] think.' SV08 also indicated the identity that s/he expects the student will develop under their supervision. From his/her point of view, supervision aims to enhance the professional researcher and not the student behavior. First, the supervisor facilitates:

Some space where they can create something ... I think that is the key essence of a university. This is not a school. School days are over. This is the university where you need to learn to be the person who writes the books instead of reading them. Of course you read all the time and you process all that, but you do a synthesis of all that and bring in your own thinking to the equation. (SV08)

The supervisors connected with the partnership model were from the fields of IT, technical sciences and business. These supervisors perceived supervision within a symmetric relationship and a collaborative procedure. This was indicated by the use of *we*, as well as the collaborative atmosphere they try to establish, for example: 'Because we always agree on the topic, then myself I'm also committed to engage in supervising the thesis. Then we have regular meetings, we keep progress reports...' (SV03). From this quote, the person-centred supervision that this supervisor wishes to establish with his/her student and the individual approach that s/he uses is evident. This cooperative relationship is also mentioned by SV06, who seeks to 'establish a collaborative atmosphere between student and supervisor. I think that's critical... In the end, we are working together in this, we have different roles, but we are working together.' The supervisors resembling Dysthe's (2002) partnership model were the ones who frequently highlighted the importance of adjusting supervision according to the students' individual needs (e.g., SV03 and SV12). Even though at the beginning of the supervision process SV04 practises the teaching model (e.g., s/he provides the students with the literature they need to become familiar with), as the process progresses, s/he shifts to the partnership model and adapts to the role of supporter and freedom giver.

The only IMDP supervisor identified using the apprenticeship model was from the field of natural sciences and often runs lab- or field-based research projects in which his/her master's students take part. The next quote, by SV07, highlights Dysthe's (2002) notion of an asymmetric relationship becoming symmetric over time:

We would go out to the field together, we work how the experiments are going to set out in practice and what's involved, and then the student would be given some freedom... but otherwise [I will] be available to offer advice... we will check everything is set as it should be, and usually there would be... more questions and difficulties in the first part of the project cause you are getting used to it, and then as things go on, I think

a routine is established... there should be fewer questions, and things can progress quite well, even with the student working independently or with me or with someone else in the team...

Lastly, some supervisors were not consciously aware of the pedagogical approach they follow: 'I don't think I have a specific pedagogical model... I don't know if I know enough about that' (SV13).

### ***Important Aspects of Supervision***

To the question 'What aspects do you consider most important for master's thesis supervision?', the most frequent responses were trust (25 %), topic selection (15 %), encouragement/support provided by the supervisors (15 %) and the initial stage of supervision (15 %). These aspects were related to themselves (43.3 %) or to both student and supervisors (40 %). The supervisors mentioned very few aspects solely related to the student's personality and responsibilities (16.6 %). Not many supervisors had specific expectations about their students' characteristics/personal qualities, except SV11, who believed that students need to 'be ready to learn new things and be kind of open' as well as committed.

During the interviews, some other aspects were indicated as being important, even though they were not referred to when the aforementioned question was asked. Due to the emphasis that the supervisors placed on them and the further insights they provide, they have been included in this section. These aspects were adaptive approach, psychological skills and communication. Adjusting supervision according to the student's needs seemed essential for some supervisors. These supervisors indicated being a flexible supervisor who is aware of the guidance that 'fits to each student...' (SV12) and who 'have understanding that everybody has a little bit of a different learning style...' (SV03). Supervisors (e.g., SV02 and SV05) commented on the communication with the students and supported the idea that the students should initiate individual meetings with

their supervisors, due to the latter's busy schedule, thereby sharing the manager role with them. SV02 described that the students have 'the responsibility to answer the supervisor's mail and also to be active in this role of contacting the supervisor...' The frequency of communication also came up: 'regularly... have meetings often...' (SV08).

The emotional aspect of supervision is embodied in statements such as 'be interested in the student' (SV16) and 'try to understand the student' (SV01). SV19 supports the attitude that 'getting to know the student, their background and former studies' will help 'so the student can talk openly'. Even though the friend role is near to the aforementioned descriptions, it doesn't fit with Brown and Atkins' (1988) context of non-academic aspects. SV01 highlighted the importance of having 'some kind of psychological eye on the students, on what you probably can demand or ask them to do in order to produce at least a decent thesis.' SV13 adjusts the supervision process according to the individual student: 'You have to scan all and each and every student and sometimes you need to be more strict because otherwise nothing happens.' A participant described the necessity of respecting students' agency in the following terms:

I commented plenty of times [on] a draft, and I told the student quite many times [about] one thing, but she hasn't corrected it and now I decided that, okay then, it's her responsibility. So... one feature of good supervision is that you don't push it forever... not every student can become a PhD if that's not the objective of every student... the supervisors shouldn't be too ambitious (*laughing*)... when you supervise someone you want... that piece of work to become, of course, perfect because it's also kind of your work, but at some point [it] is worth giving up. (SV20)

The supervisors acknowledged the need for psychological skills in the process of supervision, especially in times of trouble: 'Once the process takes longer, [it] is much harder to keep that flame burning... the thesis becomes a problem instead of there is a problem in the thesis that needs to be



solved... And that's when you need more psychological skills' (SV08). However, the same supervisor struggles in determining the limits of the relationship: 'People are not machines and they have different situations, and the psychological side is something that is sometimes difficult because we are teaching them to think and we are not doing psychoanalysis' (SV08).

## **Discussion**

This study examined IMDP supervisors' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities, their models of supervision and the elements they consider important. The participants' responses illustrated the overall thesis process and context of supervision in IMDPs in Finnish universities. Although the participants recognised the pressure caused by result-oriented and market-driven universities, it was not significantly reflected in their responses. The supervisors indicated that they adopt multiple roles according to the thesis stage and student. Most of the roles the supervisors referred to matched with Brown and Atkins' (1988) roles. The roles of manager, supporter and critic were evident during the supervisory process. A variation of roles, compared to the roles of this study and Brown and Atkins (1988), was noticed. In the interviews, the absence of the teacher role (of research techniques) and friend was noticeable. This might be due to several reasons. For example, in most IMDPs, there are compulsory methodological courses that aim to prepare students and teach them research techniques. Moreover, the supervisor is not expected to teach methods or writing skills but rather to support the process according to the students' prior skills and competencies (Vehviläinen 2009). The role of the friend (who extends interest and concern to non-academic aspects of the student's life) was not mentioned during the interviews. Previous studies confirm that students expect a friendly attitude and genuine interest (Anderson et al. 2008; Filippou et al. 2017), but clearly having a friendly attitude and actually being a friend are different things. Another variation of roles identified in this study is the role of the evaluator in the final stages of supervision, compared to the role of the critic. The supervisors in the IMDP context are required to evaluate the thesis together with another faculty member. The differences in the roles between this study and

Brown and Atkins' (1988) might be due to the different educational level the supervisory process Brown and Atkins (1988) originally refers to, that is, the doctoral level, as well as the different demands and the longer supervisory relationship that develops through this process at that level.

The supervisors reflected and analysed in detail how they supervise and clarified what they consider to be their own responsibilities, as compared with those of their students. During the interviews, the supervisors emphasised their own position and responsibilities, as well as the diversity of their responsibilities as they moved through the different stages of supervision. At the same time, the supervisors highlighted that in the Finnish university context and master's level studies, it is necessary that students do independent work and develop self-regulating skills. According to Filippou and colleagues (2017), students' continuous emphasis and extent of expectations of the supervisor instead of themselves was characterised as being asymmetric. In this study, the supervisors did not share multiple expectations of their students but highlighted that the students are responsible for working and writing the thesis.

Most supervisors' practices reflect Dysthe's (2002) teaching model during supervision. They described an inflexible and tailored process but also assumed that their students are novice researchers who are expected to familiarise themselves with the thesis and the process. However, as shown by Filippou and colleagues (2017), there is a great variation in IMDPs with regard to student population. This pedagogical approach of supervision in a culturally diverse environment highlights the need for providing more opportunities to the supervisors regarding the development of their pedagogical approaches, intercultural competences and consideration of their students' prior experiences, learning styles and expectations of the thesis process (Wisker, Robinson, and Jones 2011). The supervisors could explore new practices that aim to decrease the power asymmetry such as supporting students' agency and adapting a more collaborative approach, gravitating towards the partnership model. Considering the supervisor's roles according to Brown and Atkins (1988) and Dysthe's models (2002), it can be seen that some of the roles are more likely to appear in some

models than in others. For example, it is more likely that during the teaching model, the supervisor will adopt the roles of the director and manager. Similarly, the roles of the freedom giver and facilitator can be noticed in both the partnership model and apprenticeship model.

Considering the supervisors' background information, the findings of this study confirm Dysthe's view (2002) that different models can be used in the same field of study. This is in line with Harwood and Petrić's research (2017), which identified a variety of supervision practices even within departments. The supervisors linked with the partnership model were from the field of IT, technical sciences and business. Despite recognising the emphasis on teamwork and collaborative tasks found in some of the aforementioned fields, this result also implies that there are significant differences in how the supervisors perceive their role and the process of supervision, as well as a variety of pedagogical approaches in supervision even within the same field of study. Similar to Dysthe's point (2002), the only supervisor linked with the apprenticeship model was from the field of natural sciences, where cooperation and joint projects are expected.

Trust, topic selection, encouragement and focusing at the initial stage of supervision were the most important aspects of supervision for the supervisors. The initial stage as the base and beginning point of supervision is perceived as a crucial part for the rest of the supervisory process and relationship. This is due to the amount of information given to the students, the decisions that will be made (such as the topic selection) and the research plan that will guide the student in his/her subsequent steps. Thesis topic and frequent communication were also considered important aspects by the students (Filippou et al. 2017).

Three supervisors acknowledged psychological skills in their supervisory duties and emphasised the emotional and interpersonal aspect of supervision. Studies have shown that students highly value emotional support (Sayed et al. 1998) and an interpersonal relationship with their supervisor (Filippou et al. 2017). Nevertheless, the supervisors' responses emphasized more the

process and content of supervision than the emotional support and interpersonal communication that students expect (Filippou et al. 2017; McGinty et al. 2010). These reports of mismatched views between the student and the supervisor recall the recommendations made in previous studies regarding early discussions about expectations throughout the process, in order to avoid miscommunication (Filippou et al. 2017; McGinty et al. 2010; Strauss 2012; Woolhouse 2002).

The supervisors argued that their role can be challenging when they need to establish limits. How much effort should they put into the process? How ambitious should they be? How close should they be with the student? How much should they push the student? This ‘balancing struggle’ of independence has been discussed in previous studies as well (Dysthe 2002; Guerin et al. 2015; Woolhouse 2002). In order to negotiate these tensions, university departments could facilitate the creation of an open and community-based environment, where supervisors could discuss and share pedagogical practices and experiences. Inter-disciplinary discussions could also bring to light the variety of supervisory practices. The fact that some supervisors were not aware of the supervisory model they follow is an indication of a lack of awareness and a possible space for the development of university and supervisory pedagogies. Almost all participants mentioned that they found the interviews useful because they had the time to reflect on their practices and roles. This result was similarly highlighted in the study of Robson and Turner (2007), in the U.K. context.

## **Conclusions**

This interview study of supervisors in Finnish universities has focused on understanding their views and experiences during the thesis supervision process. The supervisors’ position on the supervisory process was classified into the three supervisory models developed by Dysthe (2002), in order to increase the supervisors’ awareness regarding their own practices and assist them in becoming more conscious of their choices. The supervisors’ responses regarding the roles and responsibilities indicated flexibility. However, the process and practices as indicated by the majority of supervisors

seem to highlight students' dependency on the supervisor and reflect the power asymmetry and monologism of Dysthe's (2002) teaching model.

This article illuminates supervisors' need to reflect on their practices, while aiming to raise awareness about the various supervisory pedagogies, inform newcomers and locate challenges. This knowledge can also be used for preparing international students prior to their arrival, helping novice supervisors and as a starting point for negotiating of supervision in IMDPs. As Harwood and Petrić (2017) highlighted, the aspects of choosing the thesis topic and frequency of communication should be emphasised in department policies, supervisory training and guidelines. They also suggest that students should be allocated to supervisors according to their thesis topic and not based on the workload division between supervisors (Harwood and Petrić 2017).

### ***Limitations and Further Research***

This article offers a qualitative range of their verbal representations of supervisors' experiences. As with any research study, this study faced limitations that should be addressed. Firstly, it is possible that the supervisors who volunteered for this study were interested in the topic of supervision. Their own experiences as supervisees and field of study might have influenced their views regarding supervision. However, due to a relatively small sample size (especially when considering groups within the supervisors) the interpretations of the findings regarding the supervisors' field of study and the quantifying process conducted for the third research question should be carefully considered. The overall purpose of this study was not to generalise but to extend our understanding of the pedagogical approaches in supervision in the IMDPs context. Therefore, more studies with bigger samples could investigate the connections between the supervisors' experiences as supervisees and supervision models.

Secondly, the supervisors were interviewed only once, and the self-reported supervision that the supervisor analysed in this study might not reflect their actual practices. Thus, observations and

interviews after supervisory meetings could also be examined. Since the supervisors' views can be inconsistent or can change over a period of time (Pilcher 2011), more longitudinal studies could explore these changes.

In the Finnish university context, the students and supervisors are expected to openly discuss matters of supervision during face-to-face meetings or thesis seminars. Considering the power dynamics of supervision and the teaching model in a culturally diverse environment within the Finnish university context, it is deemed necessary to discuss and raise awareness regarding power relations in supervision, institutional cultural practices, students' and supervisors' prior experiences, beliefs and expectations of the thesis process. Future studies could also include reflection journals and group interviews to further discuss the reasons behind the supervisors' choice of practices that relate to the teaching model and the asymmetrical power relation. A future examination of the supervisors' roles, responsibilities and models between supervisors in IMDPs and Finnish/Swedish-medium master's programmes could also compare and analyse further their pedagogical approaches.

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