

# The supervisory management styles model



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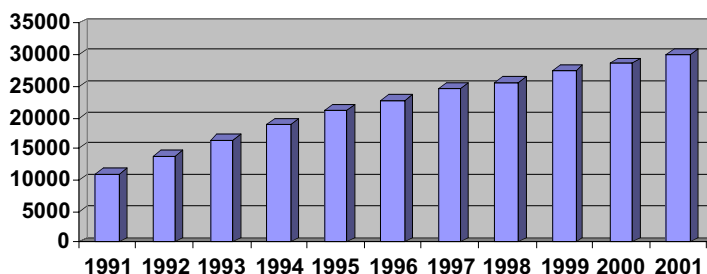
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**Abstract:** *There is a substantive increase in the number of candidates seeking Ph.Ds. Whereas the literature is relatively substantial and informative regarding advice to candidates and supervisors in many areas it does little to assist in providing understanding of supervisory styles and changes of style over the supervisory period. This paper attempts to close that research gap through examining 60 items of literature related to Ph.D completion. Eighty key variables were extracted from the literature and used to develop a four-quadrant supervisory style management grid. The grid was subject to a verification study through the results obtained from 12 in-depth interviews with supervisors. Further, a hypothetical model is developed to examine changes in supervisory style over time.*

**Key words:** *Supervision, grid, management styles*

The awarding of doctorates in Australia has a relatively short history with the first doctorate being awarded in 1948. The process of awarding the degree has been by international standards very slow. However, the increase in doctoral student enrolments over the last 10 years has been substantial. The growth rate has been approximately 300% during that period. The trend is indicated in Figure 1.



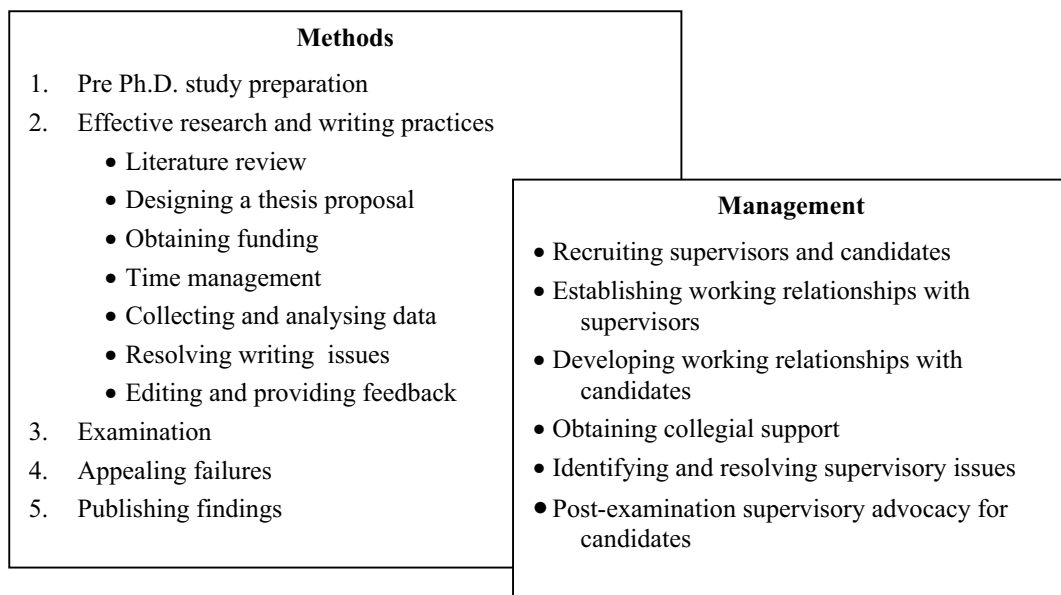
**Figure 1: Doctoral student enrolments in Australia** (Selected Higher Education Statistics 2001)

Along with the increase in the number of doctoral enrolments there is a natural corresponding increase in the number of research supervisors. The new breed of supervisors usually faces

increasing complexities and research diversities. The sparsity of literature available specifically directed to the supervisor provide the impression that supervisors are assumed that they know what makes supervision successful. In particular, the elements of the supervision process and the management styles that are more effective for a successful outcome. This paper explores the last two factors. The purpose to design a model that provides a theoretical explanation in the dimension of supervision management. The model is based on the literature and on a series of in-depth interviews with supervisors deemed to be classified as excellent in their supervisory craft.

## Literature Review

Sixty significant scholarly items of literature related to Ph.D supervision were reviewed. The full-annotated bibliography can be obtained electronically by emailing the principle writer. The bulk of the literature was directed mainly to the candidate but some material can clearly be directed to the supervisor and applied to the supervision process. In the main, the body of the literature can be grouped according to the clusters of those which deal with the 'method' of thesis writing, and those which focus on the 'management process' as shown in figure 2.



**Figure 2: Literature review classification**

The 'methods' title refers essentially to the sequential stages and the elements that form the thesis from the initial stage through to the post examination phase. The 'management' descriptor refers to the process of undertaking the task of thesis completion and supervision. It should be noted that the publications which form the descriptors seldom focus discretely on one or a few aspects. The literature often provides advice on a broad range of principles and issues; examples of these composite works include those of Davis and Barker (1979) and Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry (1997). Others are positioned within a specific discipline and include the works of Carpenter and Hudacek (1996) and Alpert and Eyssell (1995). However, these tend to be in the style of commentaries and lack conceptual frameworks.

## Research Focus and Questions

This research is intended to establish a conceptual model from which to analyse the supervision process and to examine changes in supervision management processes over time. The research questions that direct this research are:

- Are there identifiable supervisory styles?
- What are the elements that comprise the supervisory management process?
- Is the management process static or does it change over time?
- Are there substantive management process differences that exist between supervisors?

The research comprised three separate stages: firstly, establishing a theoretical framework for examining the elements related to the Ph.D process and supervisory styles; secondly, to examine the reliability and applicability of the framework; thirdly, examining the process dynamics of changes over time.

### Creating a Theoretical Model

Sixty books and journal articles were reviewed and textually analysed to establish an array of variables that were deemed to be significant to the doctoral process. Two individuals, one the writer of the article, the other a senior researcher, identified 80 variables that were deemed to be significant. The method employed utilised a quasi Delphi technique in which the researchers worked on the documents simultaneously, and yet iteratively, made reasoned judgements through the comparison of differences that arose. In search of more comprehensive descriptors, the 80 variables were further clustered into eight groups. Each of the groups, was factored according to whether they were classified as ‘structural’, ‘support’ or ‘exogenous’.

The 'structural' factor is defined as those elements supplied principally by the supervisor(s) in negotiation with the candidate. They are generally directive aspects and incorporate the variable groups of the organisational process, the accountability stages and skills provision. The elements of this factor assist in the management process of the thesis. The arrangement of the groups and their variables are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Structural Factor**

Organisational Process	Accountability and Stages	Skills Provision
Selecting candidate	Contractual arrangements	Methodologies
Identifying roles	Negotiated meetings	Writing
Negotiating meetings	Setting milestones	Statistics
Setting the topic	Establishing time frames	Computer software
Setting stages and goals	Staged write-up	Oral presentations
Scheduling group meetings	Supervisor turn-around time	Time management
Recording meetings	Supervisor stage feedback	Short training seminars
Progressive reports	Candidature reports	
Supervisor availability	Oral defence	
Consistent contact	Colloquiums	
Supervisor input	Conference presentations	
Changing supervisor role	Publications	
Maintaining focus		
Colloquiums and conferences		
External reference		
Group supervision		
Informal structure		
Time flexibility		
Supervisory model		

The ‘support’ factor is comprised of the elements supplied by the institution and supervisors that are non-directive, optional and discretionary. These include variables that can be grouped into areas such as pastoral care, material requirements, financial needs and technical support. The arrangement of the groups and variables are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Support Factor**

<b>Pastoral Care</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Financial</b>	<b>Technical</b>
Proactive supervisor	Office space	Research funds	Statistics
Sensitivity to candidate needs	Equipment	Conference funds	Software
Mentoring	E-mail	Industry funding	Network support
Guidance; keeping on track	Photocopying	Scholarships	Supervision training program
Morale raising	Policy manual		
Encouragement	Ph.D handbooks		
Confidence building			
Inspiring to persist			
Positive feedback			
Problems assistance			
Group support			
Two-way commitment			
Interactivity			
Complementary research sharing			
Supervision sharing			
Exposure to academics discipline			
Informal meetings			

The third factor is comprised of ‘exogenous’ elements. These are neither 'support' nor ‘structure’ variables as they are relatively fixed. The arrangement is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Exogenous Factors**

<b>Candidate variables</b>	<b>Various</b>
Research skills	Second supervisor contribution
Organisational skills	Shared supervision intra-departmentally
Self directed agenda	Committee or referents input
Academic development	
Research independence	
Interpersonal skills	
Respect in relationships	
Dependency on group or supervisor	

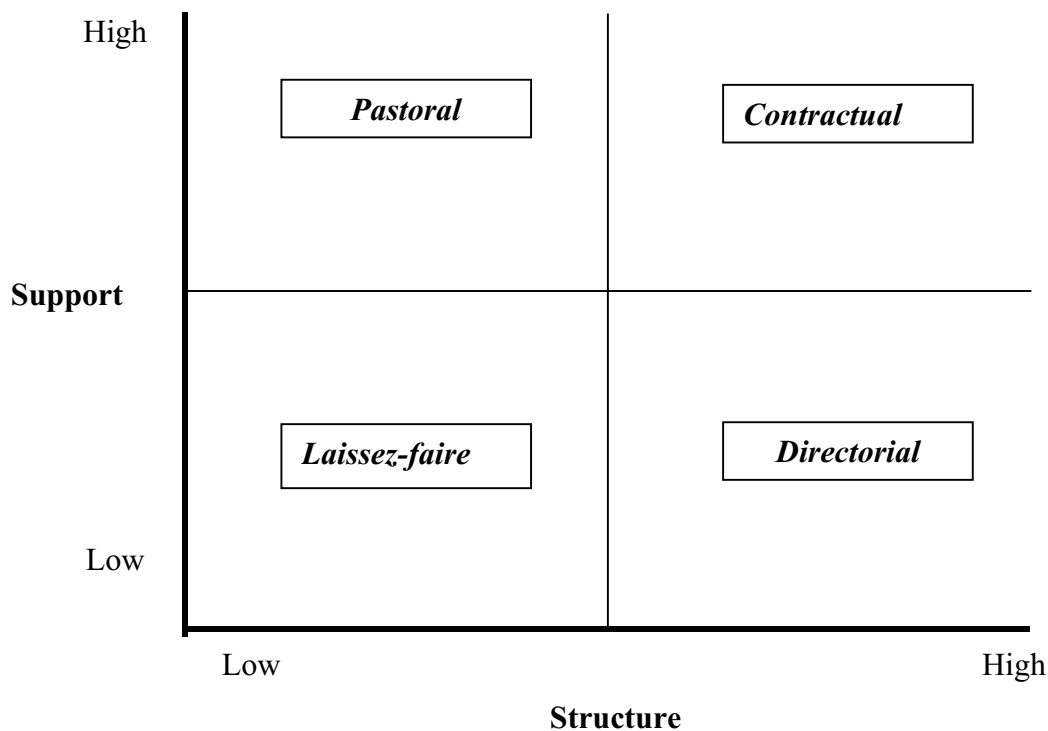
It should be noted that there were occasional difficulties experienced in ordering and clustering the variables due the vagary of the English language, the nature of personal supervisory traditions plus the respect for different institutional arrangements. This is one set of limitations discussed in the final section of this paper.

To develop the conceptual model the two sets of factors comprising ‘support’ and ‘structure’ form axes in a two-dimensional space. The third dimension, the ‘exogenous factor’ is not

incorporated as the elements are, to a large degree, fixed and brought to the equation. The model is conceptually built on the principle of the Blake and Moulton's (1964) 'managerial grid'. Their classic and pioneering work examines management styles by using two axes, one for 'concern for people' on the Y-axis and 'concern for production' on the X-axis. To these two dimensions they assign four separate quadrants. The quadrants are titled: 'team management' having a high-high index score; 'country club management' which corresponds to a high concern for people and a low concern for production; 'authority-compliance management' which has a high concern for production and low concern for people; and finally, 'impoverished management' that corresponds to low-low index score. The object is to analyse and assign to individuals a preferred management style based on objective criteria.

The conceptual model of this research is illustrated in Figure 3. The space created by the two axes is divided into four quadrants in a similar way to Blake and Mouton's 'managerial grid'.

**Figure 3: Supervisory management grid**



The characteristics of supervision styles are:

***Laissez-faire style***

- Low structure low support
- Candidate has limited levels of motivation and management skills
- Supervisor is non-directive and not committed to high levels of personal interaction
- Supervisor may appear very caring and non-interfering

***Pastoral style***

- Low structure and high support
- Candidate has personal low management skills but takes advantage of all the support facilities that are on offer
- Supervisor provides considerable personal care and support but not necessarily in a task-driven directive capacity

**Directorial style**

- High structure and low support
- Candidate highly motivated and sees the necessity to take advantage of engaging in high structural activities such as setting objectives, completing and submitting work on time on own initiative without taking advantage of institutional support
- Supervisor has a close and regular interactive relationship with the candidate, but avoids non-task issues

**Contractual style**

- High structure and high support
- Candidate highly motivated and able to take direction and to act on own initiative
- Supervisor able to administer direction and exercises good management skills and interpersonal relationships
- Most demanding in terms of supervisor time

However, in line with most scholars in personality theory development, the four descriptors used are best-termed 'preferred operating styles'. It is suggested that although supervisors may have a propensity to prefer one type of style it does not preclude movement as needed to other styles.

**Qualitative Empirical Investigation and Application of the Model**

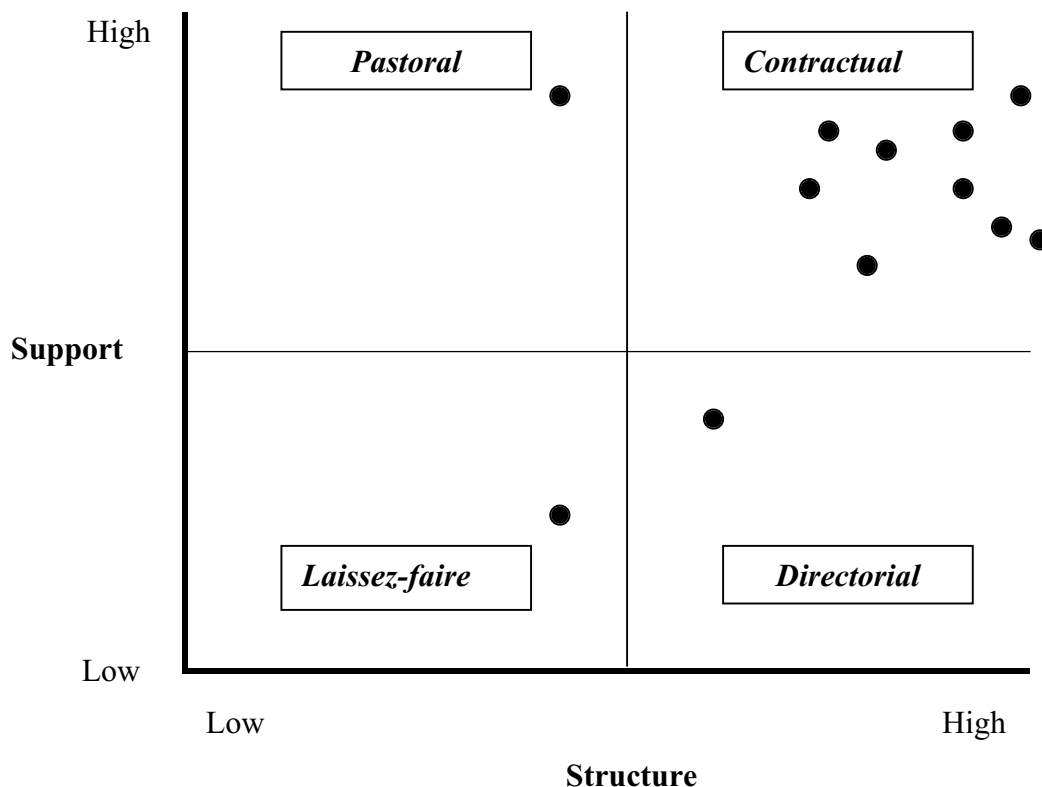
In order to examine the reliability and applicability of the model, current practices and past experiences of supervisors was utilised. This was examined through interviewing supervisors and using textual data values to plot them on the previously constructed grid using their most-preferred operating style.

The Dean of the Business Faculty at a metropolitan university in Brisbane nominated 12 supervisors who were classified as being 'excellent' in their supervisory skills. The key criteria used were:

- achieving high completion rates;
- having candidates submit within the normally expected time frame;
- engaging in multiple supervisions;
- receiving excellent supervisory reports.

Supervisors were interviewed with each session lasting from 45 to 100 minutes. The sessions were tape recorded and later transcribed. The interviewees were asked a series of semi-structured and open-ended questions relating to their supervisory practices. Through an examination of the transcript interview data a relative position was made of each of the selected supervisors. This was achieved through two researchers using the criteria previously generated for developing the 'supervisory management grid'. Although numerical values were not utilised there was an effective agreement reached in all cases. The supervisors' positions are shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Supervisory management grid and relative position of 12 interviewed supervisors**



The data to support the above was taken from a holistic perspective, in that what emerged was based on a constellation of statements and principles taken together. However, in order to demonstrate the above classification system a number of verbal statements taken from the in-depth interviews are provided for illustrative purposes.

#### **Laissez-faire**

*You've got to be prepared to support candidates to run at their own pace...support the student and allow them to develop....most of us get bogged down with other work and our feedback to the students is too slow....Certainly in terms of writing and conceptual skills, you need to support them there.... it's a developing process and, again, you've got to work at their pace.*

*The whole process is so undefined...*

#### **Directorial**

*... time lines can be of help but I think it is more important to get out quality. I will say to take another six months because it is not quite finished and will more insist on quality rather than meeting bureaucratic deadlines...it is an interactive process.*

*Again one of my criticisms is academics who let the student do all the running to find the gap in the literature. I think that is the job of the academic to already know what those gaps, to guide students to the gaps that are there.*

*...I have a milestones idea in my head. I have ideas of where they're going and where they need to be up to. I'm pretty much keeping them up to my timetable. ...we don't*

*really write it down...we talk about whether they're ahead or behind so that we do have a structure there.*

### **Pastoral**

*I think they [supervisors] should have the skills to make collaboration take place, to mentor, to be able to assess strengths and weaknesses so that they can see where students need some assistance or some further development...and why is someone doing a PhD? ...The environment is one that would involve gentle challenging, learning about all aspects of research, not just the mechanics, the publication, the communication of it as well.*

*I think we drive each other, the students and I. The thing that marks the way that I work the PhD students is fairly high levels of contact...that's mutual. I try and keep in contact with them..and anticipate and attempt to respond to reasonably high levels of contact from them. I do view them as a priority and so we have pretty high levels of contact...[Contact] would be more than once a week. It would not be daily necessarily, although there are times when it has been daily... You'd certainly talk about more than once a week..even two maybe three days... 'on the run'. For specific set times...once a month...*

### **Contractual**

*My role is to facilitate...by assisting in identifying and clarifying what the structure is...and in putting that structure together. [With my best student] that structure was embedded in the write-up and from the early days there was a paradigm of data, there was a paradigm to explore. There was a problem identified, there was a paradigm to collect the data, there was a paradigm for the time frame and now it's a paradigm for the write-up, and it's a structure. We are talking about scholarly structure of the thesis and the research endeavour and talking about managing that structure in an efficient, timely fashion. The two compliment each other. You can have a great management plan but if the thesis doesn't have a real structure, [or] you can have a great structure but if you have poor management of it, it can come undone...*

*...one of the hardest things that students find is there aren't those kind of structured goals along the way, so I've been working towards changing my practice to put in more structure [like] confirmation of candidature...providing some structure, a clear goal to achieve... twelve months into it they know where they're going...*

The model, although only validated by qualitative data, demonstrates its ability to differentiate the preferred operating styles of supervisors. The most preferred style was 'contractual'. There is an inherent logic in this preference given the nature of the axes positions corresponding to high structure and high support. However, as all the supervisors were deemed to provide examples of best practice, it is suggested that there is no 'one-best' style of operation, as all of the quadrants are represented. Further, the textual data suggests that, although there is one preferred style of supervision, the style as a single entity is not deterministic but contingent on the situation. This theme is developed in a following section.

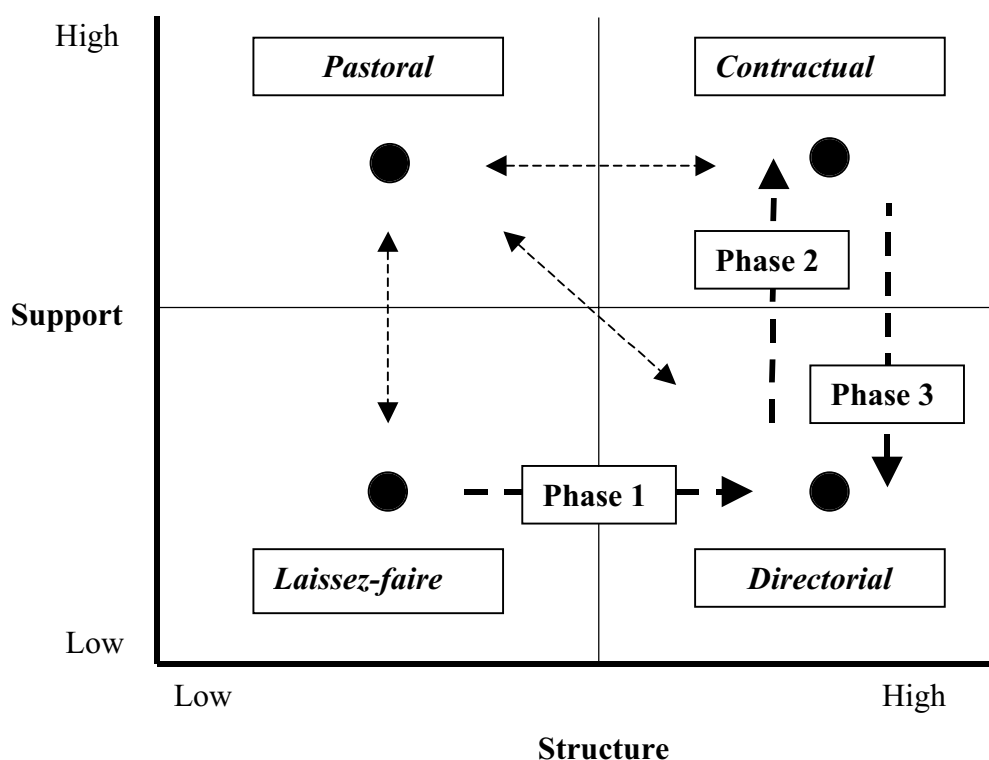
## **The Supervisory Process and Dynamics**

The interview data also suggests that often there was a transition to different styles at different times during the supervision period. This was seen in two main areas. The first was indicated in abnormal conditions such as a candidate being in crisis and need of pastoral care or a

significant change in the thesis direction. The second was indicated when the candidate makes a transition through the various phases of thesis research, such as the literature review or problem identification, through to the research design and data collection, etc. This principle accords again with management and leadership theorists such as Feidler (1978) and Hersey and Blanchard (1988) who take a dynamic contingency approach to management style changes.

Pulling together the strands above, drawing on the interview data and reflecting on the contingency management theorists, the following hypothetical model has been constructed as shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Supervisory management grid and changes over time**



The proposed dynamic model has been directed to phases or stages in Ph.D completion. These may not necessarily be of the same duration of time. The concept of the model is built on the premise that in general a candidate will be most successful if a supervisor who can operate a range of supervisory styles. Consider that different supervision styles come into play at different phases of the process of completing the Ph.D. This is illustrated in one of the interviewees comments:

*...there's an initial phase...of context-setting and negotiating happening...the whole process of renegotiating what's possible, what's expected, negotiating the relationship between the candidate and the supervisor or supervisors, negotiating the relationship between the supervisors. There is the norming stage where you're looking at what's appropriate, what's possible, and then the performing stage, designing the studies, analysing. And then there's the time at the end when you look at team development...then exiting those relations until corrections and that sort of thing.*

At the start of phase one, candidates generally have limited focus and often search very broadly for a gap in the literature to discover a thesis topic. This usually involves very little 'structure' and limited 'support' as defined earlier in this paper, hence the term 'laissez-faire' style. As the candidate advances beyond that stage, the thesis subject, research domain and research questions usually evolve. In that situation the supervisor generally moves into offering more 'structure' to assist in formally assisting in the creation of the research design and aiding in methodological development. Hence the 'directorial' style of supervision comes into being. Next, the movement is towards the 'contractual' quadrant. In this situation, most likely, the candidate will be engaged in data collection and analysis. In this phase high levels of 'support' and high levels of 'structure' are most likely to be required from the supervisor. However, as the candidate moves into the write-up stage that situation is not likely to be maintained. The candidate will possibly have reduced needs of 'support' and yet still have high needs of 'structure'. Hence the supervisory style will possibly move back to the 'directorial' position.

The above are not a set of rigid principles. The model hopefully stimulates thinking on the types of supervision styles and the timing of their application. However, what is clearest is the minor dotted line indicating a potential need for the supervisor to temporarily engage in the 'pastoral' supervisory style. This may occur at a time of crisis, or discouragement, or frustration on the part of the candidate. This engagement is irrespective of the preferred operating position or the phase of the dissertation research. A recurrent theme in the in-depth interviews with supervisors is that there is occasional need to provide pastoral support as indicated by a few of the comments:

*...it really is a relationship. I do ask my students and I do expect my students to tell me things that are happening in their personal lives that are affecting their progress on their PhD...It certainly creates a level of intimacy of knowledge of their lives. My students do it because I ask them those questions. It helps me to be able to manage their progress because I know, for example, that they're breaking up with their girlfriend or they've just lost their casual part-time job or their Mother's sick, or whatever it might be. So the respect for the relationship.*

Another interviewee states:

*You have to be sympathetic to problems [candidates'] have got...not getting involved in trying to solve any of their problems but you've got to make allowances...you might expect slower progress for a while while they sort them out.*

## **Implications, Limitations and Future Research**

The conceptual model has demonstrated that there are clearly defined supervisory styles within the social science management discipline. However, these should be understood against the backdrop of the respective stages that the candidates/supervisors are engaged in. It would be of advantage for supervisors, and those in the apprenticeship stage of becoming a supervisor, to be given workshop training in supervisory styles and how to use them creatively in advancing candidates' progress. In addition, the model may be used for the purpose of matching new candidates with supervisors based on an understanding of supervisory styles. Although there is often a broad matching arrangement based on subject matter or on expertise in specific methodologies, the authors have not been able to cite any articles that deal with candidate/supervisor matching based on style of supervision. Further, university management can use the variables of the 'support' and 'structure' construct with a view to incorporating processes not included in the institution and strengthening the most desirable elements.

However, there are a number of limitations that should be given attention. The clustering and ordering of the variables is open to interpretation and may in part be dictated by different institutional arrangements. The conceptual model was verified using only a sample of 12 supervisors from one of the social science disciplines thus examination in other disciplines would be to an advantage especially in the hard science that usually adopt different research paradigms. Further, the study was based on a single university in Australia using only qualitative data. The model should be examined and tested in non-European style countries that adopt different practices. Finally, the research was conducted through a relatively small sample and only 60 items of literature. A larger sample and additional literature may provide additional variables not identified in this study.

The model is in need of replication and extension studies as suggested above. In addition, the model can be advanced considerably by developing and testing a verified numerical scale for the 'support' and 'structure' factors. This would simplify the instrument and enable it to be used more effectively by supervisors to measure and monitor their own preferred supervisory style.

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