

PATTERNS IN UNDERGRADUATE THESES SUPERVISION IN BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

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Abstract

Looking at three-year long BA (Hons) courses from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, thesis writing and supervision play a crucial part for both students and lecturers, especially in the second semester of the third year of the course. Through the guidance provided, effective communication and constructive feedback, tutors have the ability to influence students' perception of their learning process and contribute to their personal development, as well as build their self-confidence. The aim of this scientific paper is to present the advantages and disadvantages of thesis supervision, through discussion of published literature, as well as primary research result analysis. The literature review discusses the ever-changing roles of lecturers and students in the thesis supervision process, the similarities between thesis supervision and distance learning, as well as the advantages of individual meetings and group tutorials. The study uses a mixed research methodology: qualitative - a focus group with lectures from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and quantitative - a questionnaire aimed at third year Bachelors students. Ultimately, this study provides answers to a knowledge gap, aiming to support fellow teachers to improve their way of interacting with students during the final stage of their Bachelors program.

Keywords: Thesis Supervision, Bachelor Program, Business and Economics, Higher Education.

JEL Classification: A22, I21, I23

1. Introduction

The European Education System encourages student personality development, or the inner self, emphasizes both qualification and personal development, stimulates students to examine and explain their assumptions, ideas and answers (Shim, 2008; Pritchard 2004; van Veen, Slegers, Bergen, & Klaassen, 2001).

Looking specifically at three-year long BA (Hons) courses from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, thesis writing is the final assignment that a student needs to pass in order to graduate, representing a good opportunity for individuals to demonstrate that, throughout the course, they have developed all of the skills listed above. Producing such a paper is a complex process – in most cases, it is a one semester-long journey that a student completes with the support of a tutor.

Support in thesis supervision implies helping with topic selection, dividing the thesis into stages, holding meetings and keeping minutes, helping with deadlines, providing guidelines and feedback on drafts, explaining tasks and performance standards (Nerad and Miller, 1997; Dillon and Malott, 1981). Building a better relationship with the coordinated students, as well as achieving better results in terms of quality, time management, final grade and student satisfaction is something that all teachers desire.

The question is, how close is the relation between a supervisor and a student? What are students' expectations when selecting a topic, as well as deciding upon a teacher to support with their work? Are those expectations the same in the beginning and at the end of the collaboration? Do students have

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similar expectations or do they differ, influenced by various factors? The same questions apply to supervisors. Do they have the same expectations from students, or do these vary depending on different factors, such as age, experience and number of guided students? The aim of this research paper is to provide answers to all of these questions. The literature review presents different theoretical approaches to the student-tutor relationship, as well as different aspects related to Bachelors thesis coordination. The study adopts a mixed research methodology: a focus group with lecturers from the Tourism Geography Department (qualitative) and a survey amongst third year BA (Hons) students (quantitative). The rationale behind choosing to interact with both lecturers and students in the primary research is that of capturing ideas on the same issue – that of thesis writing/ supervision, but from different angles. Because of length restrictions, from the questionnaire, this article will only provide an analysis of the last question, an open-ended question asking students to provide any other relevant comments about their experience with thesis writing and supervision.

2. Literature Review

Unlike an end-of-year exam, a thesis may have a result that is useful for the student, the supervisor, the University and for the scientific community. For this particular reason, students and coordinators can be seen as co-workers, especially when the supervisor has a direct interest in the research results. Several studies state that both parties (student and supervisor) play an important role in this process (McAlpine and Weiss, 2000; Bailey, 2002).

Schmolitzky and Schümmer (2008) propose a guideline for thesis supervision in distance learning. Even though it has both advantages and disadvantages, this type of learning can be found in many universities worldwide. The guideline describes the bigger picture of thesis supervision by identifying several stages of interaction between the student and the teacher. Each stage starts with a context description and a problem statement. The authors then list a set of forces or conflicting requirements in the student-teacher interaction. The main goal of their proposal is to change the socio-economic setting of the process, in order to make those forces less conflicting. (Schmolitzky and Schümmer, 2008)

The thesis coordination process is somehow similar to distance learning. Students learn by themselves, at home, when they have available time. They email their draft paper to and have face to face meetings with their supervisor. This project stretches over more than half a year and supervisors have more students to oversee, with more or less regular meetings. The role of these meetings is to guide students through the learning process and to provide answers to their questions. These meetings are different from regular class meetings. In term of time allocated to home (individual) and class (guided) study, there is a prevalence of home study, which is very similar to distant learning. (Schmolitzky and Schümmer, 2008)

During the months of collaboration, the supervisor can wear multiple hats, including that of a trainer, leader, coach, boss, manager, evaluator and friend. But these roles very much depend on time and situation, as well as on the student's and teacher's personalities. The thesis can be seen as a half-year project and the supervisor has a guiding role from the begging, until the end (Holzbaur, 2006).

Mouton (2001) sees the role of the supervisor as to provide emotional support, ensure scientific quality and guide and advise student. Fraser and Mathews (1999) and Hockey (1994) consider that a supervisor has a triple contribution in terms of support, expertise in the field of the thesis and maintaining the balance between critique and creativity. Deist (1990) considers that the role of the supervisor is to ensure that the student chooses an appropriate topic, has a clear understanding of the problem in the field of research, uses a proper approach in solving the problem, engages in extended literature research, and completes the thesis according to the university requirements.

Even though, as previously argues, a supervisor plays many roles that change over time, the great influence that the teacher has over the student during face to face meetings remains crucial at all stages of the process. Face to face meetings may occur whenever necessary, or on a regular basis, they can be held individually or in a group, they can take more or less time. Through these meetings, teachers can influence a lot of aspects of both thesis and student development.

Even though group supervision has its advantages, it is not a common practice in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, which is the focus of this paper. This method is used by some teachers, but even though more students are present during the meeting, the supervisor addresses each one of them individually. This type of supervision is somehow placed at the borderline between group and individual tutorials. It has some advantages, one of them being that students can interact with each other and ask questions and receive answers that could be of interest to all of them. They also receive individual answers for a specific problem. Some students are shy and don't feel comfortable in groups. For teachers, group supervision is less time consuming and it's a way to highlight individual progress of a specific student in order to motivate and stimulate the rest of the group. On the other hand, individual meetings between teacher and student play an important role in reducing isolation, enhancing understanding of different research methods, contributing to knowledge development and offering encouragement (Lessing and Lessing 2004).

Summed up in a few brief bullet points, supervision can be:

- A bidirectional process;
- A complex social encounter;
- A relation between converging and diverging interests;
- The key factor for a successful thesis;
- A mentorship program over a limited period of time (Alam et al., 2013)
- Hegel's figure of master and slave – a significant archetype for supervision (Grant, 2010);
- A form of teaching (Grant, 1999);
- A journey (Holzbaur, 2006; Bailey 2002)

If the process of supervising is manifold, so are the theses. Scientists have diverse opinions about what a thesis is. Lundgren and Halvarsson (2009) gathered different points of view and concluded that a thesis can be considered the first step into the continuous learning process, a method of pedagogy and a starting point for the process of change, an application tool for preparatory research and a way to gather more knowledge on a specific subject, as well as a method to measure the quality of education.

In terms of quality, a good thesis depends on the congruence between the student's learning goals and those of the supervisor, supervisory style and learning patterns and learning needs of the student (Hemer, 2012; Dysthe, Samara, & Westrheim, 2006; de Kleijn et al., 2012).

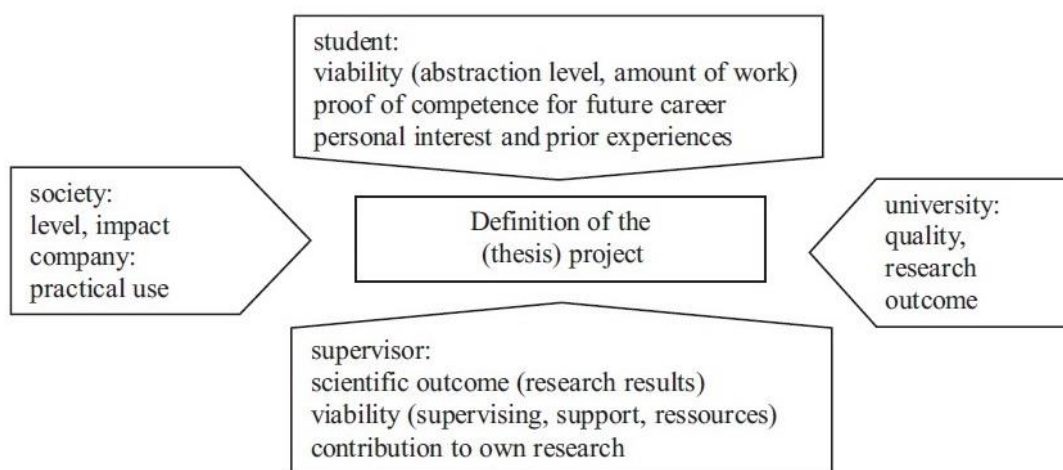


Fig. no. 1: Main stakeholders in thesis

Source: Holzbaur (2006)

As shown in figure 2.1. a thesis should address multiple issues. For students, it should be a proof of competence for their future career, in close connection with their personal interest, skills and company requirements, if there was one that allowed the student to do a proper case study.

Other opinions concentrate on the relation between teacher and student. A successful supervision leads to a high quality thesis, which leads to both student and teacher satisfaction (Seagram, Gould, & Pyke,

1998; Knowles, 1999; Neumann, 2003). The most often cited reasons for issues in thesis supervision are the lack of rapport between the supervisor and the student and poor interpersonal relationships (Hill, Acker, & Black, 1994; Armstrong, 2004).

3. Methodology

Aiming to provide a detailed picture of current practices and perceptions from both the lecturers' and students' perspective, a mixed research methodology has been used. Firstly, a focus group with eight lecturers from the Business and Tourism Faculty has been organized, in order to discuss issues related to thesis supervision. After an extended review of the results from the focus group, a number of themes have been identified. These themes have then been used to design a questionnaire, which was sent to third year BA (Hons) students, studying on different courses from the Business and Tourism Faculty. The questionnaire had Likert-type scales, single and multiple-choice questions, rank order scaling questions and one open-ended question, at the end of the questionnaire. Because of length limitations, this article only provides an analysis of the student responses to the final open-ended question, where they were asked to provide further comments on their personal experience with thesis writing and supervision. The students were not asked to rate or comment on other individual's performance, because this was not the aim of this study. The aim was to capture their expectations and to help facilitate the student-teacher interaction during the supervising process. The questionnaire was sent electronically in the last two weeks of May 2019 and a total of 227 valid answers have been collected.

4. Results and discussion

For BA (Hons) courses at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, lecturers supervise a maximum number of 10 students for Bachelor level and another 10 for Postgraduate level. Teaching assistants can coordinate Bachelor theses in co-supervision with another Lecturer, associate Professor or full-time Professor colleague.

Completing a thesis is an individual task, not a group project as most of the first and second year projects. Students are responsible for their work, without the support of their colleagues, as in the case of group projects. Even though peer review is an important factor facilitating learning, particularly in Higher Education, it is not a common practice for undergraduate students at this particular stage of the course. At this point, students are expected to take initiative and take full responsibility for the whole process, from initial idea, through to the delivery of the final paper according to the official deadline.

Thesis supervision starts with the signing of an agreement between the student and the coordinating teacher. Usually, this agreement is signed anytime from the end of the second year or the beginning of the third year of study, until the final hand-in deadline. Based on the theme/title selected by the student and some discussions between the teacher and the student, the signed agreement will be the formal/official part of thesis supervision from this point onwards. Even though the student is in charge of choosing a topic they are passionate about, the supervisor plays a crucial role in supporting with this decision, as also stated by one of the students in the questionnaire: *"I think that the teacher has to guide the student in finding a theme they are passionate about."*

As shown in table 1, there is a perfect balance between the courses from the two departments (Business Department and Tourism & Geography Department) in the Business & Tourism Faculty. The teachers that have classes in the 4th and 5th semester have the highest number of students under supervision.

Table no. 1: Disciplines distribution in Business and Tourism Faculty

	2 nd Year, 2 nd Semester	3 rd Year, 1 st Semester
Business Department	Science of Industrial Commodities and User's Safety Information Systems and Applications for Business Administration Traineeship	Quality Management Logistics Design and Aesthetics of Commodities
Tourism and Geography	Business Administration Operation Technique for Tourism	Business Ethics Tourism Geography

Department	Ecotourism	Hotels and restaurants technology
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Source: Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Usually, a Bachelor thesis consists of three main chapters - an introduction, main body and conclusions, followed by the bibliography and an appendix, if applicable. In the B&T faculty, there is a similar approach in terms of structuring the Bachelor thesis. The first chapter is a theoretical one, the second chapter focusses on a business presentation (for microeconomics themes) or a destination presentation (for macroeconomics themes) and the third chapter is dedicated to a specific case study. The third chapter consists entirely of the students' contribution to the field of study. For most theses, the research is based on a methodology. For themes related to macroeconomics, the student is advised to do a prediction for some indicators or to propose a development plan based on theory and observation. In order to do this, the student will have to go to the destination they chose for the case study, in order to observe the tourism phenomenon as it occurs in real life.

As previously mentioned, the first chapter focuses on a theoretical approach, similar to the literature review of a scientific paper. The student is expected to review specific scientific literature, relevant to their chosen topic. Reflecting on their personal experience with thesis supervision, the lecturers involved in the focus group have agreed that this is the most difficult part, because students lack the experience of writing a proper scientific paper. Some of the main difficulties discussed during the focus group are:

- Citing a book or another scientific paper;
- Finding the information and identifying where to search for it;
- Organizing the information into paragraphs;
- Maintaining a logical structure throughout the paper;
- Synthesizing the information, finding and choosing the most relevant ideas.

Even though challenging, the questionnaire revealed that the students understand the importance of a strong theoretical foundation for their future professional practice:

“Students should understand that academic studies form the theoretical basis they need to acquire if they want to become professionals, no matter what they choose to do in the future. All the knowledge acquired during University will come out at the workplace, in a business environment, supporting us in both professional and personal development.”

The second chapter, in most cases, is a business presentation: domain, number of employees, turnover, profit, organization chart, business evolution during the previous 3-5 years, a short description of the department on which s/he is going to focus in the third chapter research. Most of the students think that this is an easy chapter, because they have access to information. However, they sometimes end up with a lot of information that needs to be structured in order to maintain the length requirements. During the focus group, the lecturers agreed that throughout the years, they observed that students tend to lose focus and not concentrate on the ideas that are most relevant to the theme of their thesis or the research conducted in next chapter. They tend not to see the bigger picture and take whatever data they find or receive as it is, without exploring it extensively.

In the third chapter, as mentioned earlier, the student should conduct research based on the information gathered in the first two chapters, which is a challenge for most of them as they do not know how to conduct proper research. During the three years on the course, the students attend various sessions, such as Information Systems, Economic Informatics, Statistics and Econometrics to layer the foundation for the third-year thesis. After the literature review, the business/destination presentation and/or the analysis, it is time for students to put everything they learned from the previous chapters of the thesis, as well as the information they gathered during their Bachelors program into practice. They have to establish the research purposes, hypothesis and methods, prepare the tools for gathering information, collect information, arrange data and synthesize the results. Then they have to draw some conclusions and make some recommendations to improve the analysed topic. Data presentation is also important. Relevant tables and figures are necessary for a correct understanding of the results.

When all the three or four chapters are ready, the student must focus on other tasks. When writing the chapters, most of them do not use diacritics, so they have to proof read and review spelling in the entire paper. Fixing the thesis pagination is another important task before printing the paper. They

have to arrange the bibliography according to the requirements of a scientific paper, prepare the appendix and write conclusions for the entire paper. Finally, the paper is ready for antiplagiarism verification and then for printing. Whilst the written thesis is ready for submission at this stage, the students need to focus on one more element: the Prezi or PowerPoint presentation showcasing their research findings. Most of the times, they need help with synthesizing the relevant information, choosing the right combination of colours, the font, as well as making sure that they are able to present within the time limit.

This is the moment when the student-teacher collaboration ends. Submitting the thesis is entirely the students' responsibility. From my personal experience working with students, most of them tend to read the presentation rather than having a free speech. Very few of them follow their mentors' advice and rehearse the speech multiple times before the presentation. When prepared and rehearsed thoroughly, the presentation turns out to be a real success, in spite of all nerves.

As discussed throughout this paper, lecturers play a crucial role in supporting students to create a strong paper and deliver a successful oral presentation. However, student involvement in this process is equally crucial. Unfortunately, the latter is sometimes missing from the process. In the second semester of the third year, students have a class called Economic Projects, which consists solely of seminar activities. We have to guide the students and follow their evolution in writing the thesis. Some of the students are interested in different aspects related to thesis development, while others are totally uninterested. At one of our final meetings (in the middle of May) I had a conversation with one of my students about his thesis progress:

Student: I have my first chapter ready.

Teacher: Ready meaning you passed it to your supervisor and he said it is complete?

S: No, he didn't see the chapter. I finished it myself. And now I'm working at the second chapter.

T: That's great! Do you know where to find statistical data for your research?

S: Tempo online from National Institute of Statistics.

T: Do you know what indicators to extract from there and what to do with them? Have you talked to your supervisor about your approach in this 2nd chapter?

S: I haven't talked with my supervisor.

T: And what are you waiting for? You should see your supervisor and receive feedback before you start working on second chapter.

S: I follow the table of contents agreed with my supervisor...

T: Since then have you met with your supervisor at all?

S: No

Writing a Bachelor thesis requires commitment and a strong will to succeed. Is the student the one to blame for not meeting with his supervisor? Is the teacher the one to blame for not overseeing the student's evolution and for not pushing them to write, ask questions and be more actively involved in the process? Is it the student's fault for losing interest because of a wrong selection of research topic and supervisor? Or is there a problem with the teacher's involvement? The issue is rather complex and, as a result, it is difficult to provide a straight-forward answer to all these questions. The issue is not simply black and white, but rather I would argue that there are infinite shades of grey, depending on student and teacher.

Some of the responses can be seen below. As mentioned before, the survey was anonymous in order to receive honest answers. Some of the respondents mentioned the importance of communication (face-to-face or via email) in the process of thesis writing, referring to both positive aspects (*freedom of speech, email collaboration, communication is very important, effective communication and constructive ideas*) and negative aspects (*waiting at the door*), as well as the chemistry between student and teacher. In terms of teacher-student relation, students mentioned:

- *Mutual respect;*
- *More time for individual meetings;*
- *The supervisor should provide more information to help the student;*
- *Supervision based on seriousness;*
- *More guidance in finding and selecting bibliography;*
- *Teacher level of involvement as key element for a good thesis;*

- *More patience and a higher level of empathy;*
- *Less theory and more practice;*

Throughout this article, reference has been made to European Education System, with different teaching methods that are used in other countries, but are not that common in Romanian Higher Education – such as group tutorials and peer-supported learning. In this context, there is a particular quote from the questionnaire that is worth mentioning:

*“After spending two years abroad with various international academic opportunities as a fresh graduate (2018), I can say that compared to other professors I worked with abroad, our teachers seem to be overwhelmed by thesis supervision. They do not know what language to use and what suggestions to bring to the drafts received. I think that looking at foreign Universities - **where Bachelor theses are more complex and critical, without classifications and obsolete theory** – as an example, could bring an improvement to our University both in the quality of the theses, which are far too easily marked with a clean 10, and in the development of critical thinking amongst students. It is an argument that my colleagues agree with – they complain that their supervisors fail to reply to their email, and they only have one or two face to face meetings during the thesis writing process. Of course, there are some good teachers with an international vision, who can supervise properly, but unfortunately, most of them aren’t like this.”*

Of course, this quote can be seen as biased and it is not enough to base an entire article on the opinion of one student only. However, the differences between European education and Romanian education could constitute a topic worth investigating in further details in future research, aiming to propose ideas of improving the latter through more practice-based learning or peer-supported learning.

5. Conclusions

As seen from literature review, thesis supervision is a difficult and challenging part of both students’ and lecturers’ lives. It is probably the activity with the highest impact over students’ academic journey, as well as an important stage preparing them for the professional world.

It is crucial for students to have a close connection with their supervisor and attend meetings on a regular basis. Students cannot receive guidance without keeping a close contact with their supervisor. From my personal, as well as my colleagues’ experience, as discussed during the focus group, this is something that rarely happens. Most of the students have four or five meetings with their supervisor, which should be enough to complete the thesis. The student must be interested and play an active role in these meetings, take notes and implement suggestions thoroughly at home.

As teachers, *we should play a more active role* in this process. Rather than waiting for students to ask questions, we can be the ones asking them about several aspects during every step of the thesis development. This way, we will be able to address and correct many any potential errors or misunderstandings from an early stage, bearing in mind that we are dealing with undergraduate, not postgraduate or Ph.D. students, who do not have the experience of producing a major project, which means we have to be very closely involved.

This paper provides answers to a knowledge gap, aiming to support fellow teachers from the Business & Tourism Faculty, Bucharest University of Economic Studies to improve their way of dealing with students during the final stage of their three-year Bachelors program. Building a better relationship with the coordinated students, as well as achieving better results in terms of quality, time management, final grade and student satisfaction is something that all of us teachers are aiming for. The supervision process, if properly managed can transform a mandatory activity in an enjoyable one. Through the guidance provided, communication and feedback we, as lecturers, can influence the student perception about this process and contribute to their personal development and boost their self-esteem.

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