Slide 1

Supervising Qualitative Research: The Facilitator's Guide

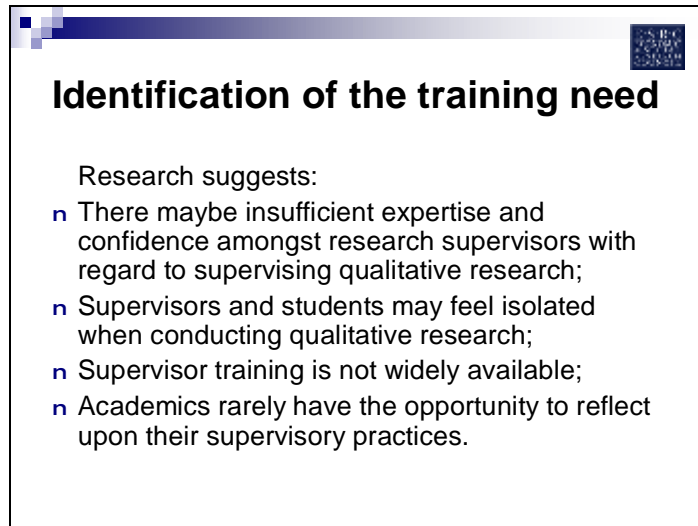**Pre-reading:** There is no pre-reading for this workshop, though other workshops cover issues of interest to supervisors. >>If the
supervisor has had little experience of qualitative research, then it would be expected that they complete other workshops in addition to this one.

Handouts: N/A

Target audience: The target audience for this workshop are those who are new to supervising, or are interested in supervising, students conducting PhD research using qualitative techniques of data collection and analysis.

Any thing else to note? N/A

.

Slide 2

Identification of the training need

Research suggests:

n There maybe insufficient expertise and confidence amongst research supervisors with regard to supervising qualitative research;

n Supervisors and students may feel isolated when conducting qualitative research;

n Supervisor training is not widely available;

n Academics rarely have the opportunity to reflect upon their supervisory practices.

Additional Comments:

This training need was identified in the accompanying study carried out by Cassell et al 2005 entitled 'Benchmarking Good Practice in Qualitative Research'. >>

Slide 3

Workshop aim

This module aims to address these issues by providing an environment where supervisors, and potential supervisors who may be unfamiliar with qualitative research, can reflect upon some of the issues involved in supervising qualitative research, and their own supervisory practice.

Slide 4

Workshop objectives

At the end of the workshop participants should:

n Be aware of some of the key elements of the supervisory process;

n Be aware of some of the issues within the research environment which may impact upon the PhD student conducting qualitative research;

n Be familiar with the ways in which students choosing to conduct research using qualitative research methods may justify their approach;

n Understand how a potential 'contribution' in qualitative research is defined;

n Be aware of some of the problems that students conducting qualitative work may face.

Slide 5

Why is supervision important?

n Within the academic context, conducting postgraduate research can be a lonely process therefore the supervisor is the key agent in enabling the supervised to make sense of their research

n The supervisory relationship is a key place for learning, development, guidance and support

n Increasingly the postgraduate research process is more formally time bound. Therefore the supervisor can help monitor progression towards deadlines.

Additional Comments:

The supervisory relationship is a very significant one for both the supervisor and the student. The student's success is inevitably bound up with the quality of the supervision they receive. Therefore supervision is of key importance for both student and supervisor.

Slide 6

Outline of the workshop

n The nature of the supervisor's role
n Addressing common concerns:
 ¨ Why choose qualitative research?
 ¨ Defining a contribution
 ¨ Potential problems faced
 ¨ Where to go for extra help
n Conclusions
n Further reading

Additional Comments:

The workshop starts by considering the nature of the supervisor's role more generally, before moving on to discuss topics which may be of particular concern to those not used to supervising qualitative research. These include reasons for choosing to conduct qualitative research, what would be considered a contribution specifically in qualitative research, and the potential problems that qualitative researchers face.

Slide 7

Additional Comments:
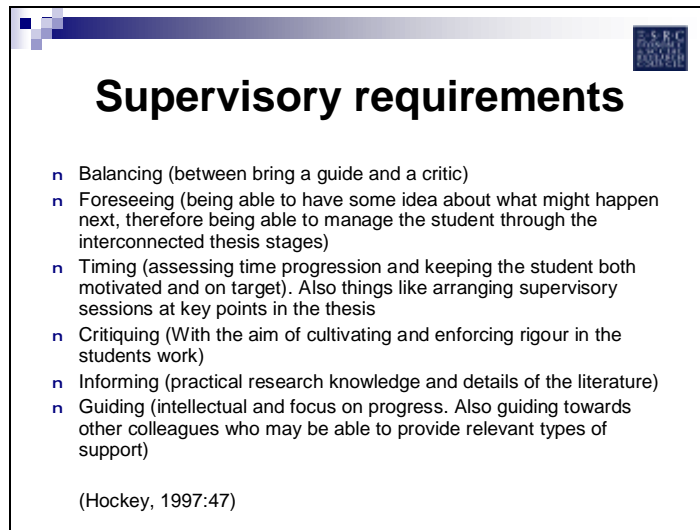
There are a variety of different ways of conceptualising the role of the supervisor.

This is a useful one in that it provides a metaphor to hang it all on. Using the metaphor of craft also demonstrates how explaining to people how to supervise is not an easy process, rather it is a complex task that improves with time.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using such a metaphor: what does it suggest about the extent to which supervisory skills can be learned?

We could also ask what other metaphors characterise the nature of the supervisory role?

What about supervision as guidance for example?

Slide 8

Supervisory requirements

n Balancing (between bring a guide and a critic)
n Foreseeing (being able to have some idea about what might happen next, therefore being able to manage the student through the interconnected thesis stages)
n Timing (assessing time progression and keeping the student both motivated and on target). Also things like arranging supervisory sessions at key points in the thesis
n Critiquing (With the aim of cultivating and enforcing rigour in the students work)
n Informing (practical research knowledge and details of the literature)
n Guiding (intellectual and focus on progress. Also guiding towards other colleagues who may be able to provide relevant types of support)
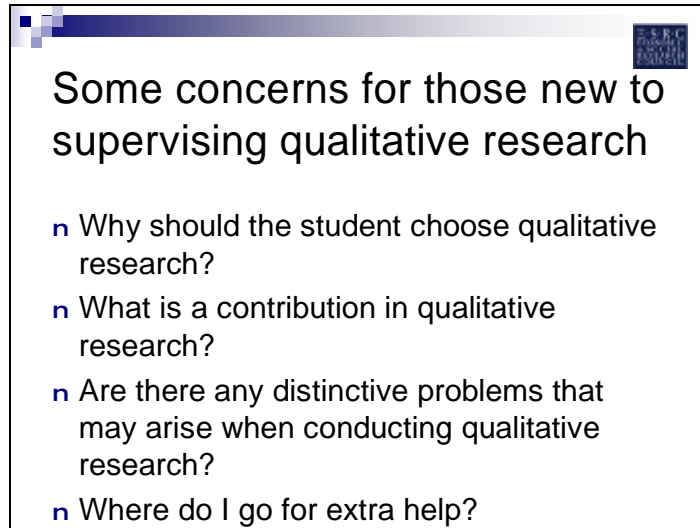
(Hockey, 1997:47)

Additional Comments:

This slide helps to highlight the range of tasks involved in the job.

Good supervision would include all of these elements.

Workshop attendees may also like to think about other supervisory requirements they may like to suggest to add to this list.

Slide 9
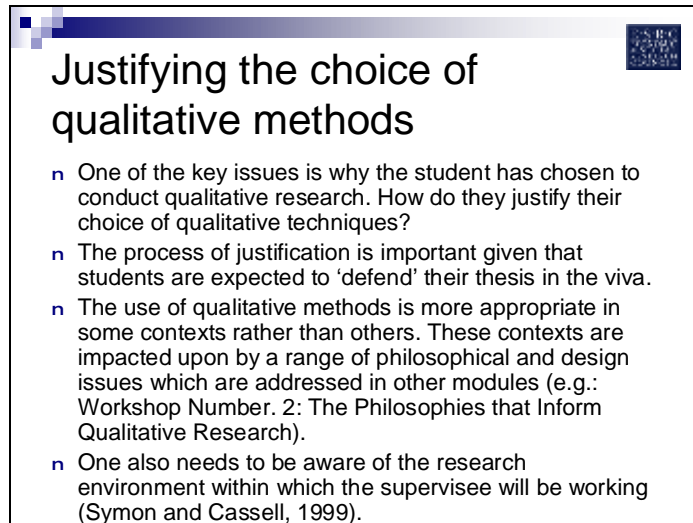
Some concerns for those new to supervising qualitative research

n Why should the student choose qualitative research?

n What is a contribution in qualitative research?

n Are there any distinctive problems that may arise when conducting qualitative research?

n Where do I go for extra help?

Additional Comments:

Many supervisors in the management field have been trained in quantitative methods, and are therefore sometimes more familiar with those types of approaches. Those new to supervising qualitative research may have a number of concerns but some common ones are outlined on this slide.

We will now address each of these concerns in turn.

Slide 10

Justifying the choice of qualitative methods

n One of the key issues is why the student has chosen to conduct qualitative research. How do they justify their choice of qualitative techniques?

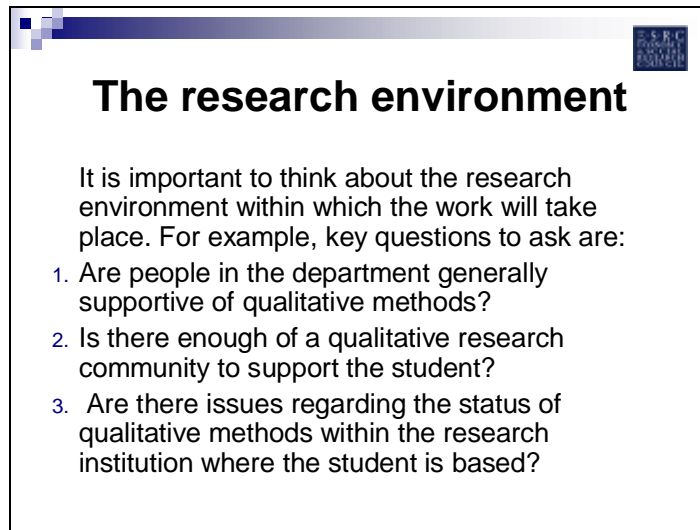n The process of justification is important given that students are expected to 'defend' their thesis in the viva.

n The use of qualitative methods is more appropriate in some contexts rather than others. These contexts are impacted upon by a range of philosophical and design issues which are addressed in other modules (e.g.: Workshop Number. 2: The Philosophies that Inform Qualitative Research).

n One also needs to be aware of the research environment within which the supervisee will be working (Symon and Cassell, 1999).

Additional Comments:

It is good practice for students to have a clear rationale for their methodological stance, therefore it is important to clarify why qualitative methods are the route chosen. Part of the supervisory process is about enabling the student to justify their chosen approach.

Research suggests that qualitative researchers are more likely to be expected to justify their methodological choices than quantitative researchers.

There are a number of environmental factors which are also important to consider. These are shown on the next slide.
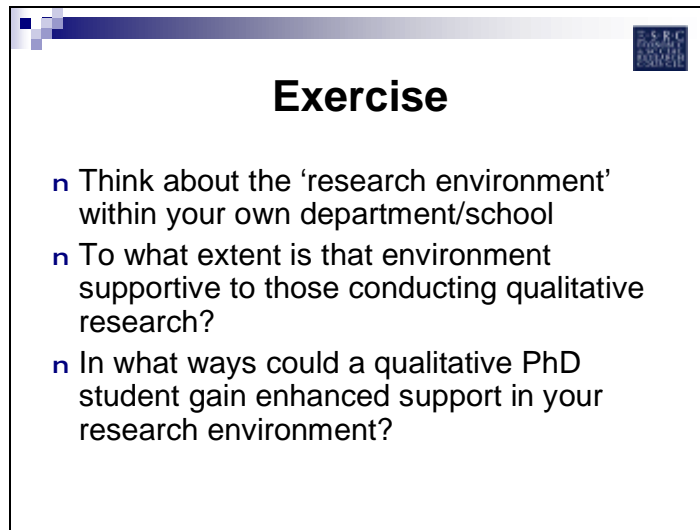
Slide 11

The research environment

It is important to think about the research environment within which the work will take place. For example, key questions to ask are:

1. Are people in the department generally supportive of qualitative methods?
2. Is there enough of a qualitative research community to support the student?
3. Are there issues regarding the status of qualitative methods within the research institution where the student is based?

Additional Comments:

It is important that the student is conducting qualitative research within a supportive environment, otherwise the supervisor has the additional task of re-assuring the student about their work on a continual basis.

In some Management Schools for example, status and credibility are associated with conducting quantitative work, and qualitative work may be discouraged. In this kind of environment the student will need extra support from their supervisor regarding the quality and appropriateness of their work.

Slide 12

Exercise

- Think about the 'research environment' within your own department/school
- To what extent is that environment supportive to those conducting qualitative research?
- In what ways could a qualitative PhD student gain enhanced support in your research environment?

Additional Comments:

The aim of this exercise is for supervisors to consider the context in which students conducting qualitative research will be working.

Divide the workshop attendees into groups of two, and ask them to firstly take 5 minutes each to reflect upon the research environment within which they work, and outline it to their partner. Secondly they can discuss the second question with their partner: what support is available within the department for those conducting qualitative research. Finally they should address the third question.

The facilitator can then bring the group back together and based on the discussions that have been had in the dyads, generate a list of ways of enhancing support for students conducting qualitative work.
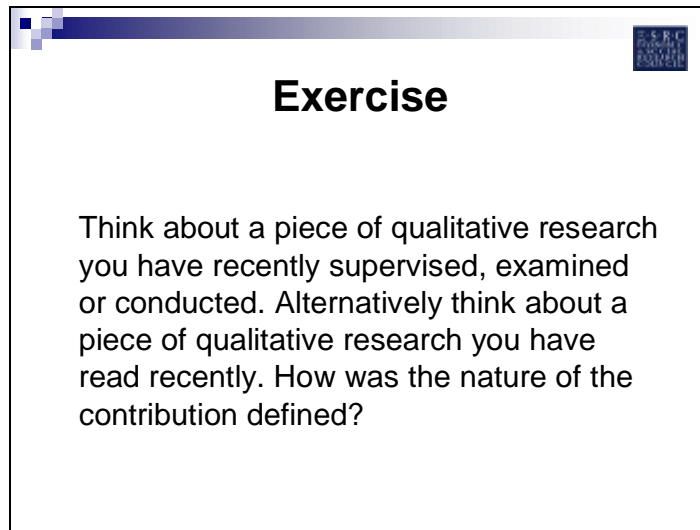
Slide 13

What is a contribution in qualitative research?

n The definition of a PhD is that the output makes a contribution to knowledge, though increasingly the production of a competent researcher is also seen as a key output

n A key concern often voiced by students and potential supervisors is what is viewed as making a contribution in qualitative research.

Additional Comments:

The first point focuses on the increased emphasis within PhD programmes on research training. Developments within research training within the management field are becoming more formalised as a result of the ESRC's 1+3 initiative, where it is expected that a student will do a one years research based masters, before starting their PhD work.

The second point is a key issue as contribution is what, by definition, makes a PhD

Slide 14

Exercise

Think about a piece of qualitative research you have recently supervised, examined or conducted. Alternatively think about a piece of qualitative research you have read recently. How was the nature of the contribution defined?

Additional Comments:

The aim of this exercise is to encourage participants to reflect upon their own ideas of what it means to make a contribution.

The facilitator should set up this exercise so that workshop participants talk in small groups about their own experiences of supervising or conducting research. In bringing the group together the facilitator can then highlight the various definitions of 'contribution' in use, and their subjective nature. This can be done by summarising the discussions in the following way:

List all the types of contributions stated

Discuss with participants the extent to which there is diversity in the notion of contribution

Ask participants what they think the significance of that diversity/ lack of diversity is.

Conclude by suggesting that the various definitions of contribution highlight that the assessment of contribution is a subjective process.
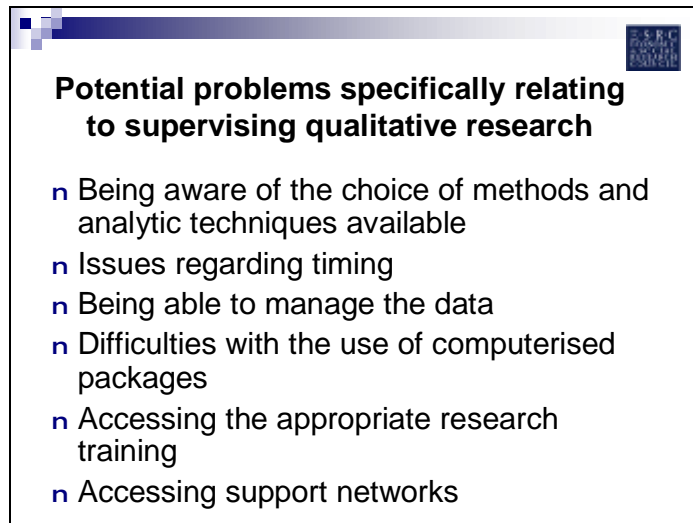
Slide 15

What is a 'contribution' in qualitative research? Some suggestions

- Telling something that isn't already known
- Applying a new method or epistemological approach to a particular area
- Telling something that advances or expands management knowledge
- Developing new theory in a particular area
- Providing longitudinal data where previously it has only been cross-sectional
- Providing novel insights into a particular phenomenon

Additional Comments:

Assessing the contribution of a PhD, or indeed any other piece of research, is a very subjective issue.

These are some examples of how a contribution is defined in relation specifically to qualitative work.

Slide 16

Potential problems specifically relating to supervising qualitative research

n Being aware of the choice of methods and analytic techniques available

n Issues regarding timing

n Being able to manage the data

n Difficulties with the use of computerised packages

n Accessing the appropriate research training

n Accessing support networks

Additional Comments:

These are just some of the problems that can occur. There may indeed be others, and as a way of furthering interaction, the facilitator could ask participants to indicate if they have experienced any others to add to the list.

Slide 17

Advising students on data collection

n Students should consider a range of potential techniques of data collection:
- There are many different techniques of qualitative data collection and analysis, and the wide range of techniques is under-utilised.
- Workshop 4: Qualitative Methods addresses the range of qualitative techniques available.
- Additionally there are now numerous texts available that provide advice on the different forms of data collection and analysis.

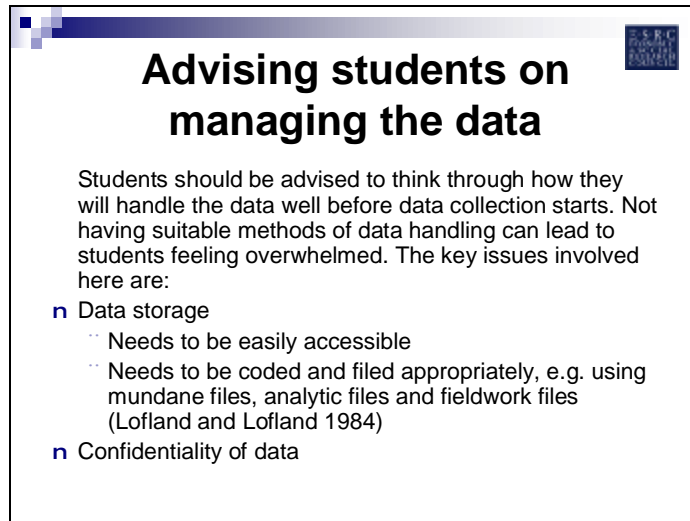**Additional Comments:**

In this context the role of the supervisor is to direct the student to sources that outline the different techniques available. Some of those sources are mentioned in the further reading at the back of this workshop.

Slide 18

Advising students on data collection

- n The data collection technique chosen should be justified (Pragmatically? Epistemologically?)
- n Need to read about the different approaches to sampling within qualitative research, rather than focusing on the sampling techniques traditionally associated with quantitative designs
- n Need to think through the ethics of the data collection techniques
- n Need to think about how the data will be both captured and stored
- n Also need to be thinking about the techniques to be used for data analysis at this stage.

Slide 19

Advising students on managing the data

Students should be advised to think through how they will handle the data well before data collection starts. Not having suitable methods of data handling can lead to students feeling overwhelmed. The key issues involved here are:

n Data storage
  ¨ Needs to be easily accessible
  ¨ Needs to be coded and filed appropriately, e.g. using mundane files, analytic files and fieldwork files (Lofland and Lofland 1984)
n Confidentiality of data

Additional Comments:

Data storage needs to be considered in relation to how the data can be stored safely in a way that is easily accessible.
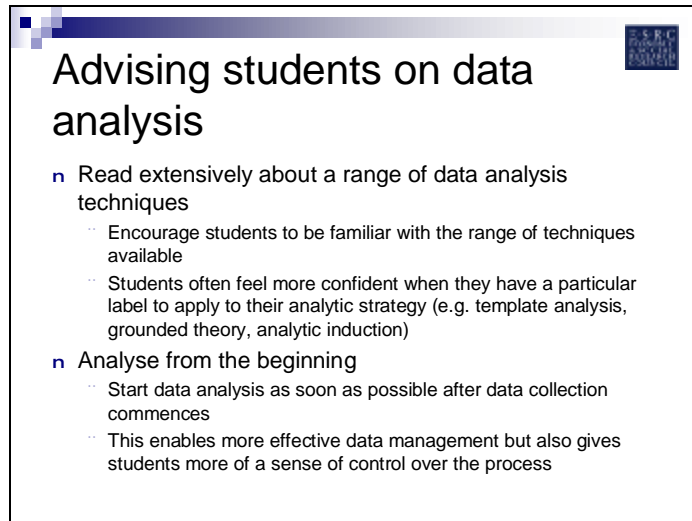
Different forms of storage relate to different types of qualitative research. One suggestion is that of Lofland and Lofland (1984).

Mundane files consist of a set of folders where the processed data (e.g. transcripts) are organised by categories e.g.organisations or events.

Analytic files consist of cut up photocopies of data segments relevant to a particular area of coding, e.g. those relating to one category in a template

Fieldwork files contain the material about the process of conducting the research, e.g. notes from a research diary

Confidentiality is an important issue. How the data will be stored to protect confidences should be discussed between the supervisor and student before the data collection process begins.

Slide 20

Advising students on data analysis

- Read extensively about a range of data analysis techniques
  - Encourage students to be familiar with the range of techniques available
  - Students often feel more confident when they have a particular label to apply to their analytic strategy (e.g. template analysis, grounded theory, analytic induction)
- Analyse from the beginning
  - Start data analysis as soon as possible after data collection commences
  - This enables more effective data management but also gives students more of a sense of control over the process

Additional Comments:

Many of these suggestions are aimed at preventing students from feeling overwhelmed once they have collected a vast amount of qualitative data. They are designed to engender comfort and confidence.

Labelling a process and then structuring it clearly means that the milestones within the analytic process are more evident and can be ticked off once they are achieved. Caution must be given with this recommendation however, as the analysis of qualitative data is more often an iterative process
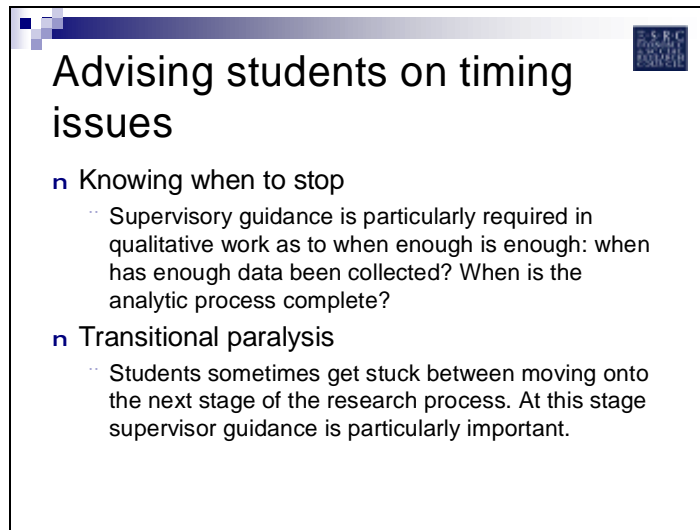
Students can also be referred to Workshop 5: Qualitative Data analysis. >>

Slide 21

Advising students on data analysis

- **n** Remember that within qualitative research data analysis is an iterative process
    - ¨ Data analysis is ongoing and unlike quantitative research, the process is not necessarily linear
- **n** Structure the analysis clearly
    - ¨ Again with a clear structure and programme for analysis students feel more confident that they are achieving as they move through the process
    - ¨ Conduct the analysis in manageable bite siz e chunks
- **n** Keep a research diary
    - ¨ This enables the student to note the pathways through which the data analysis progresses
    - ¨ Is also useful for reflexive practice (see Workshop 3: Reflexivity)

Slide 22

Advising students on timing issues

n Knowing when to stop
  ¨ Supervisory guidance is particularly required in qualitative work as to when enough is enough: when has enough data been collected? When is the analytic process complete?
n Transitional paralysis
  ¨ Students sometimes get stuck between moving onto the next stage of the research process. At this stage supervisor guidance is particularly important.

Additional Comments:

It is difficult to give precise answers regarding timing as each PhD is very different, however there are a range of possibilities to address these timing issues.

With regard to knowing when to stop, some data analytic techniques come with advice about this, e.g. theoretical saturation in grounded theory. With regard to data collection, a rule of thumb is that enough interviewes have been conducted when the researcher stops hearing anything new. Other endings may come for pragmatic reasons, for example related to funding constraints or the ending of a particular project.

With transitional paralysis the student can become anxious about commencing the next stage of their research as it seems like too big a task. The supervisor needs to be aware of this possibility, and particularly monitor the student at the stage in the process when they are ready to move to another significant part of the PhD programme.

Slide 23

**Advising students about the use
of computerised packages**

- Learning to use a computerised package process
  - The supervisor needs to weigh up in conjunction with the student the extent to which using such packages is the best way forward for the research
  - Is it worth it? Useful issues to consider are the volume and complexity of the dataset.
- Availability
  - Does the department have access to the software?
  - Is there support available for using it?
- Coding is not analysis
  - The process of analysis and interpretation is still required once the data has been coded.

Additional Comments:

Sometimes learning to use a package can be very onerous on the student's time, and may not necessarily be worth it given the timeframe available

Often the coding process in itself can be seductive so that once this is done the researcher has a great sense of achievement and may feel that their analysis is complete. This is, however, only the start of the process as the interpretation of data in various categories then has to be done.

Again participants can be referred to Workshop Number 5: Data Analysis >>

Slide 24

And finally: the examination process

n Supervisors should choose examiners that have an interest in, or are sympathetic towards, qualitative research.

n In addition qualitative researchers should be prepared to defend their epistemological approach, and why they chose that route rather than any other (for further information see Workshop 2: The philosophies that inform qualitative research).

n Supervisors can help students in their preparation, by providing mock questions, or even conducting mock vivas

n Students should be encouraged to think reflexively about their work (see Workshop Number 2).

Additional Comments:

The first point is very important, as it is the examiner's subjective view of the piece of work that counts. Therefore finding an examiner who is sympathetic to the student's approach is crucial.

Students should prepare for the viva in the normal way (e.g.: thinking about what questions they may be asked; being clear about what the contribution of their work is; having a clear rationale for why they chose the particular methodological strategy etc.) It may be helpful for students to use Workshop Number 3: Reflexivity. >>

Slide 25

Where do I go for extra help?

There are three particular areas for extra support for students conducting qualitative research

n Research training support

n More general support networks

n Other modules in this programme

Additional Comments:

These three areas will now be examined in the next two slides

Slide 26

Accessing the appropriate research training

- n It may be that the research training programmes available to a PhD student are not sufficiently detailed in relation to qualitative research
- n This is particularly the case with regards to qualitative research where the nature of the research question, the method used, and the form of data collection, may change as the project progresses
- n Other sources of research methods training may need to be investigated (for example those available through the ESRC's Research Methodology programme)

Additional Comments:

At this stage the facilitator may want to ask participants about the research training in qualitative techniques available in their own institution – do they see it as enough?

Attendees may also wish to advise each other on further sources of help.
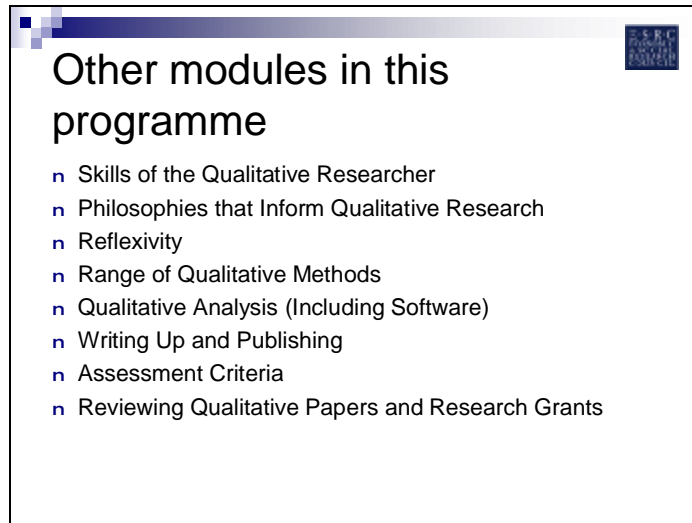
Slide 27

Accessing support networks

- n The PhD process can sometimes be a lonely one for all students
- n More generally there are a range of networks available for students conducting PhD work. Some of these are located within particular Universities, and supervisors could investigate the availability of these
- n Other networks are more generally accessible eg: the chat room at www.findaphd.com
- n Involvement in those networks can be useful for those engaged with qualitative work

Additional Comments:

This is particularly important in this kind of work.

There are also specific self-help groups on particular forms of data collection or analysis, for example template analysis.

Additionally a supervisor may want to consider setting up and in-house network themselves, or indeed a self-help group for qualitative supervisors!

Slide 28

Other modules in this programme

- n Skills of the Qualitative Researcher
- n Philosophies that Inform Qualitative Research
- n Reflexivity
- n Range of Qualitative Methods
- n Qualitative Analysis (Including Software)
- n Writing Up and Publishing
- n Assessment Criteria
- n Reviewing Qualitative Papers and Research Grants

Additional Comments:

Each of these workshops addresses particular aspects of the qualitative research experience and will provide a useful source of support for students.

Each workshop also comes with a Facilitator's Guide to allow the supervisor to run the workshop themselves, if they so wish.

Slide 29

Conclusions

- n Although supervising all research is a challenge there may be additional issues in supervising qualitative research

- n The key issue to address is any potential sources of support for both the student and the supervisor, within their own department or elsewhere.

Slide 30

Further sources

- n Hockey, J. (1997) 'A complex craft: United Kingdom PhD supervision in the social sciences', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education,* Vol. 2, No. 1, 45-69.
- n Delamont, S., Atkinson, P., and Parry, O. (1999) *Supervising the PhD: a guide to success*, Milton Keynes: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- n Frost, P.J. and Taylor, M.S. (1996) *Rhythms of academic life: personal accounts of careers in academia,* Thousand Oakes: Sage Publications.
- n A number of other Universities conduct training workshops on how to supervise PhD students. These may be in-house staff development activities, or open to externals. Examples of courses for externals include Lancaster www.lancaster.ac.uk

Slide 31

References

- Cassell, C.M., Buehring, A., Symon, G., Johnson, P. and Bishop, V. (2005) *Qualitative Management Research: A Thematic Analysis of Interviews with Stakeholders in the Field,* Report for the ESRC.
- Cassell, C.M. and Symon, G. (2004) *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research,* London: Sage Publications.
- Lee, T.W. (1999) *Using qualitative methods in organizational research,* Thousand Oakes, Cal: Sage Publications
- Lofland, J. and Lofland, L.H. (1984) *Analysing Social settings: a guide to qualitative observation and analysis,* 2nd edition. Belmont, Cal: Wadsworth
- Robson, C. (1994) *Real world research,* 2nd edition, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Silverman, D. (2004) *Doing qualitative research: a practical handbook,* London: Sage Publications.
- Symon, G. and Cassell, C.M. (1999) 'Barriers to innovation in research practice', In M. Pina e Cunha and C.A. Marques (Eds.) *Readings in Organization Science: Organizational change in a changing context,* Lisbon: ISPA.

Contents

Introduction and user instructions