



Cluster Supervision in MSc Dissertation Supervision

Mogens Jin Pedersen & Rune Møller Stahl
Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen
mp@ifs.ku.dk | rms@ifs.ku.dk

Summary

- **Aims:** Expanding knowledge on the use of cluster supervision for supervision of MSc dissertations. Does cluster supervision work as intended in the eyes of the students? What are the pros and cons of cluster supervision? What should supervisors do for promoting student learning in cluster supervision settings?
- **Data:** Survey responses from a sample of Political Science graduate students writing their MSc dissertation with mandatory cluster supervision (n = 35).
- **Results:** Descriptive statistics show that students tend to prefer a mix of supervision modes involving more individual supervision than cluster supervision. They tend to think they learn more from individual supervision, but many also report that cluster supervision is associated with some learning gains. Based on our explorations, we provide "dos and don'ts" for cluster supervision.
- **Implications:** Supervisors should consider our findings when planning and conducting supervision of MSc dissertation students. We provide a brief check list that supervisors may use for improving their cluster supervision practice.

Motivation and Theory

Individual supervision is the common mode for supervision of MSc dissertation students, but some research suggests that cluster supervision may be more effective than individual supervision for promoting student learning outcomes [1-8].

In particular, scholars [3-4] highlight how cluster supervision may be the superior vehicle for providing the students with...

- ...insights into how to manage and structure the dissertation work
- ...awareness about the strengths and weakness of their dissertation project
- ...improved cooperation competencies
- ...a platform for social peer support.

We probe MSc dissertation students' attitudes and perceptions of cluster supervision—with the aim of providing supervisors with a brief check list for improving their cluster supervision practice.

Data and Design

We draw on survey responses from MSc dissertation students at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen. All students are mandated to actively participate in a cluster supervision programme involving two (and often more) compulsory cluster supervision sessions. A typical cluster comprises five dissertation projects (i.e., eligible supervisors are assigned five projects by default), and the cluster supervision sessions involve draft presentations and peer feedback.

We sent an e-survey invitation via Absalon to all enrolled MSc dissertation students in Fall 2020. The response rate was 26% (n = 35/133) with a sample population including potential "inactive" students and non-Danish speaking students who were asked to disregard the survey invitation.

Sample Characteristics

Respondents were mostly women (67%) with a mean age of 26.50 (SD = 1.22). The mean number of completed cluster supervision and individual supervision sessions was 2.94 (SD = 1.68, range = 1-7) and 2.93 (SD = 1.54, range 0-4), respectively.

Only 56% expected to complete their dissertation without delay, and 63% report having a job besides their studies involving 10+ hours of work/week on average (only 19% did not have a job).

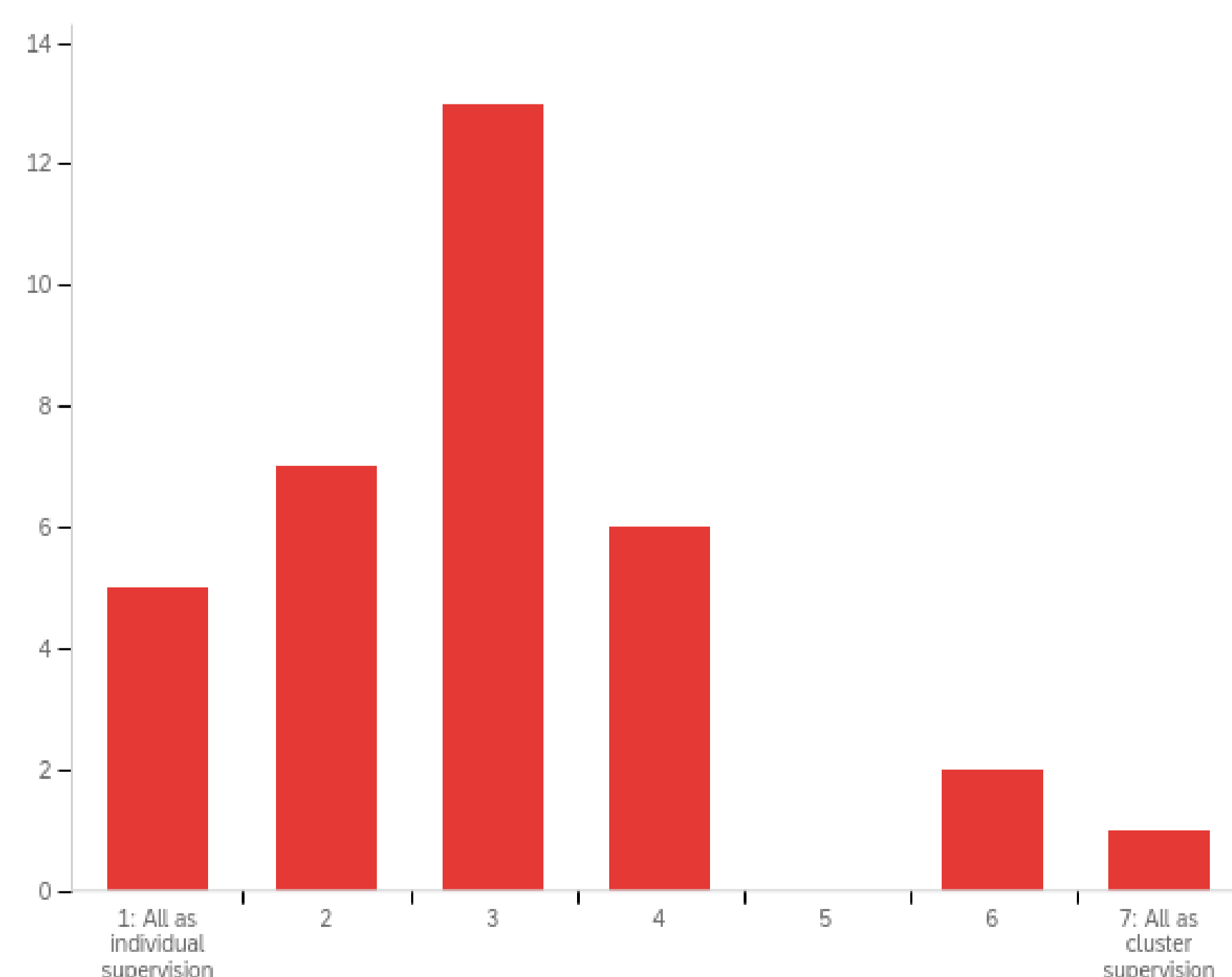


Figure 1: Preferred supervision mode

Item: "If provided with the choice, to what extent would you prefer cluster supervision relative to individual supervision (i.e., one-on-one meetings with your supervisor)?" n = 34 (1/35 answered "not relevant – no individual supervision, i.e., cluster supervision only")

Results

#1: Students prefer individual supervision mixed with some cluster supervision

As shown in Figure 1, students tend to prefer individual supervision over cluster supervision. Importantly, they do not necessarily wish for exclusive use of individual supervision: they prefer a mix of the two modes—but skewed toward more individual supervision.

#2: Students think they learn more from individual supervision

As shown in Figure 2, students tend to rate the overall learning outcome from individual supervision as higher than or similar to the learning outcome from cluster supervision.

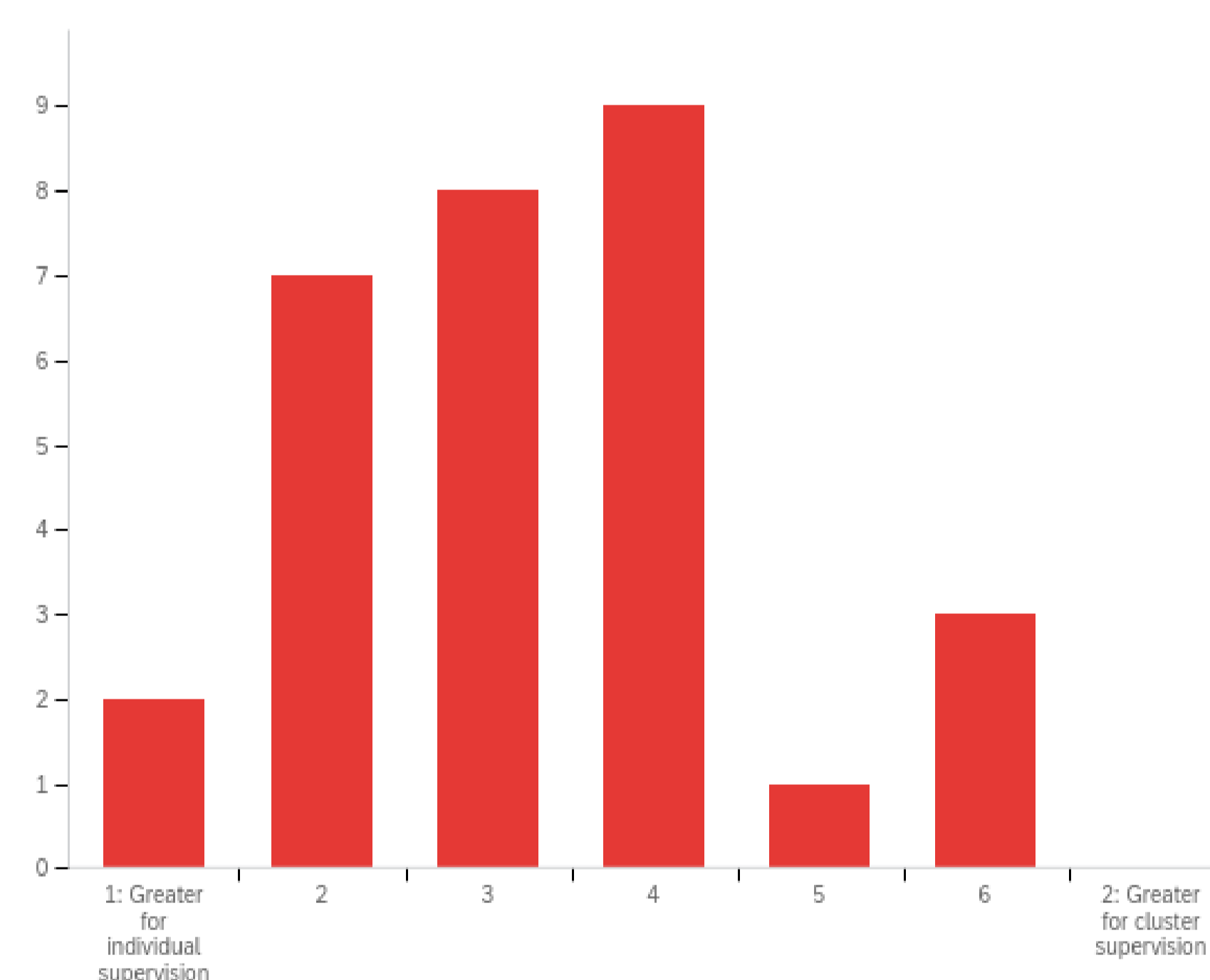


Figure 2: Perceived learning outcome

Item: "How would you rate the overall learning outcome [DK: "samlede læringsudbytte"] you received from cluster supervision relative to individual supervision (i.e., one-on-one meetings with your supervisor)?" n = 30 (5/35 answered "not relevant – no individual supervision, i.e., cluster supervision only")

#3: Students report that cluster supervision is associated with some learning gains

Irrespective of student perception of greater overall learning from individual supervision, many students report that cluster supervision provided benefits in line with some of theorized advantages of cluster supervision (cf. "Motivation and Theory" bullets a-c).

As shown in Figure 3, responses are denoted by substantial variance, but many students tend to agree that cluster supervision has (i) increased awareness about the strengths and weakness of their dissertation project, (ii) improved their ability to give and receive feedback, and (iii) provided them with constructive and useful feedback.

However, and contrasting research notions [3-4], we also see that cluster supervision fails to provide a social network for many students. One potential explanation is the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have pushed some of the cluster supervision sessions to online formats.

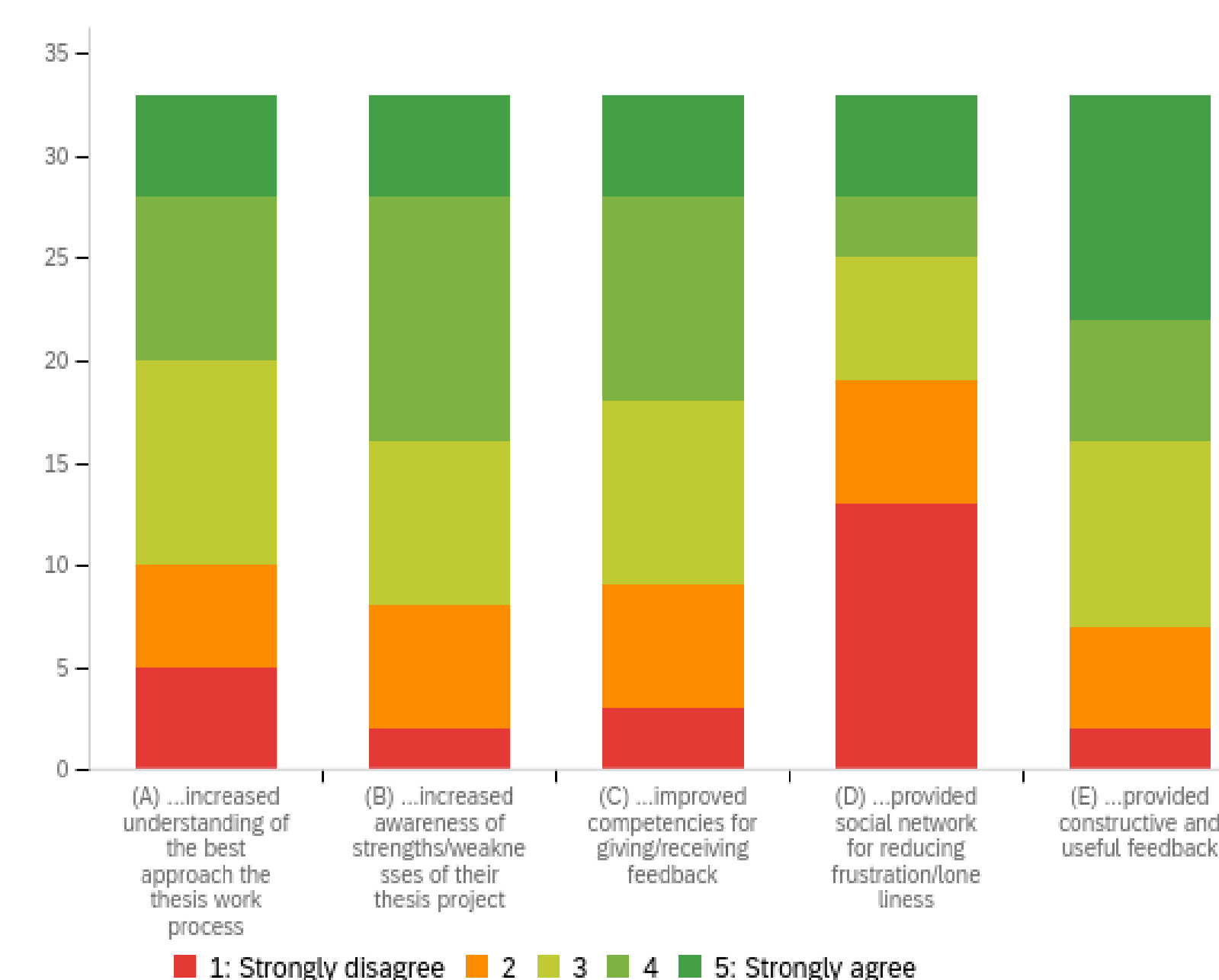


Figure 3: Perceived cluster supervision benefits

Item: "To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your yield [DK: "udbytte"] from the cluster supervision sessions you have attended?" "The cluster supervision ... (A) ...helped me understand how to best approach the thesis work process; (B) ...increased my awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of my thesis project; (C) ...improved my competencies for giving and receiving feedback; (D) ...provided a social network that helped me reduce feelings of frustration or loneliness in the thesis work process; (E) ...provided me with constructive and highly useful feedback on my thesis project." n = 33.

#4: Students provide insights into cluster supervisor "dos and don'ts"

For understanding what cluster supervisors can do to promote student learning in cluster supervision settings, we also asked the students to rate various features of the cluster supervision sessions they had attended (10 items – not shown).

The response distributions revealed one notable insight in particular: *Most students were missing more and clearer instruction in how to give and receive feedback.*

Moreover, the survey involved two text response items asking for qualitative feedback on what cluster supervisors (a) should do and (b) avoid doing. Students' input can be summarized as follows:

- Supervisors must be flexible and cluster supervision sessions should accommodate individual student differences (e.g., in terms of needs, present challenges, and where each student is in the dissertation process)
- Supervisors must exercise active cluster supervision leadership and –participation (e.g., cluster supervision sessions should not be driven mainly by peer feedback and discussion; clear and substantial supervisor feedback is also needed)
- Supervisors must provide clear instructions in how to give and receive feedback
- Supervisors must clearly communicate the structure of the supervision process (plan, session flow, expectations, etc.)
- The initial supervision session should be early in the semester ("the sooner the better").

Conclusion

Our descriptive analysis show mixed results. Our sample students prefer a mix of supervision formats involving more individual supervision than cluster supervision. While the students perceive that individual supervision is associated with greater overall learning outcome, they also report that cluster supervision provides some learning gains. Moreover, the students emphasizes important action points—"do's and don'ts" to promote better results in cluster supervision.

Thus, our findings does not favour dismissal of cluster supervision in MSc dissertation supervision. But they do suggest that supervisors should consider a mix of supervision modes, with cluster supervision playing a supporting role, and that effective cluster supervision requires deliberate and specified effort on behalf of the cluster supervisor.

Check List for Cluster Supervision

For assisting MSc dissertation supervisors' efforts in providing effective cluster supervision, we have compiled a brief 7-point check list. These points are based on our findings, as well as what the research literature highlights as essential components for the successful design of cluster supervision [3-4; 6-8].

7 important points for cluster supervisors

1. Start the supervision process early in the semester
2. Provide the students with a clear, detailed, and structured supervision plan from the beginning of the supervision process.
3. Clearly communicate your own role and responsibilities as supervisor.
4. Clearly communicate the students' roles, tasks, and responsibilities.
5. Give clear instructions to the students on how to give and receive feedback.
6. Make sure the supervision process is flexible and adapted to the individual needs of your students.
7. Take leadership as supervisor and play an active role in all parts of the supervision process.

The check list could be disseminated at the department level. Moreover, cluster supervisors could highlight our results—especially those reported in Figure 3—as a means for making new students more open to cluster supervision.

References

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