

IMPROVING CLUSTER SUPERVISION

SOME IDEAS

Make the virtues and the core scope of cluster supervision (co-responsibility, active learners, "multivoicedness", negotiation etc.) visible to all students in order to meet the potential lack of engagement and clash of expectations

Students' engagement is crucial for a good experience with cluster supervision!

Provide individual sessions once or twice (preferably in the end of the semester)

Provide a fair and clear structure for each session

Clarify and adjust the various expectations and notions of "good feedback" in the cluster. Many students seem to favor the view that feedback should be instrumental and "troubleshooting". This view clashes with the educative ideal of cluster supervision

Provide education to the students on giving and receiving peer feedback (in order to meet i.e., the Google-challenge)

Work with supervisor's own attitude: Be aware of not articulating cluster supervision as second-rate

Exploit the comparative possibilities of the cluster format and be careful not only to provide individual supervision in a cluster setting

Take the importance of the relational elements (mutual trust, sensitivity, good and encouraging atmosphere) into account

CLUSTER SUPERVISION OF MASTER'S THESIS STUDENTS AT THE SRM-PROGRAMME: *Experiences, Expectations and New Departures*

Abstract

This report concerns experiences with cluster supervision of master's thesis students at the Master's Programme, *Security Risk Management*. I set out to investigate some of the scholarly arguments for suggesting an increasing provision of supervision in clusters at higher educations. A common argument is that cluster supervision breaks down the supervisor-student-dyad, where the student is often passively receiving the feedback from the authoritative supervisor and thus that cluster supervision to a larger degree enables co-creation, co-responsibility and the emerging of knowledge in dialogue. Secondly, I set out to identify some of the experiences with the cluster supervision format via a questionnaire addressing all master's thesis writers at the master's programme (25 students in total, whereas 13 students replied). One of the interesting findings is that there seems to be clash of expectations (between a majority of the students and the scholarly literature on cluster supervision) about what "good feedback" is and what the core aim of supervision should be. In the scholarly literature virtues such as "multivoicedness", dialogue, process- and student-orientation and a broad notion of the learning actors characterize cluster supervision. On the other hand the students reflect a notion of good feedback emphasizing instrumental, troubleshooting, product-oriented virtues of supervision, where only the one receiving feedback is regarded as the learning actor. The reports suggests various ideas in order to improve future cluster supervision: Addressing the disagreement of expectation and notions of "good feedback" seems to be a good place to start.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cluster supervision and peer feedback are two buzzwords in the current teaching and learning landscape at university level. Restructuring supervision into groups rather than giving individual feedback is not simply a prevailing answer to the request for better completion rates at higher educations. The bulk of scholars working professionally with supervision seem to agree that supervision in clusters increases the learning outcome of the students (Jensen 2015; Barker et.al. 2014; Dysthe et.al. 2006).

At the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen the format of cluster supervision has recently gained ground as a supplement to individual supervision when setting the scene for supervising master's thesis students in general. The international master's programme, *Security, Risk Management (SRM)*, which is hosted by the Department of Political Science, has gone even further in this regard and offers only master's thesis supervision in clusters. The first class of students are just about to finish this course (August 2016), and the first experiences with cluster supervision of these master's thesis students will constitute the main empirical focus of this TLHE-project.

Hence, in this project I wish to investigate the dynamics of feedback when supervising master's thesis students in clusters. More specifically I want to focus on the following questions:

- What constitutes some of the pedagogical arguments for providing supervision in clusters?
- How do students at the SRM-programme perceive various aspects of the cluster supervision format i.e., the emphasis on peer feedback?
- What are the main challenges relating to the cluster supervision format?
- How could students' experiences with cluster supervision of master's thesis be enhanced?

The findings of this project will be useful when the SRM-team will evaluate and potentially adjust the cluster format for the coming semesters and when future supervisors plan their cluster supervision. This small study will in this way hopefully benefit the Department of Political Science, when considering changes in the current approach to master's thesis supervision.

2. A SHORT THEORETICAL OVERVIEW: CLUSTER SUPERVISION AND PEER FEEDBACK

2.1 What is good feedback?

In the following I will use "supervision" and "feedback" as referring to more or less the same thing. The role of supervision in the course of writing a master's thesis can of course entail many additional aspects than core feedback, and the feedback can serve many purposes. Yet, feedback is in my view constituted by the acts of communication (both orally and written) taking place before, during and after the supervision sessions and all the actors attending the supervision sessions are thus providers and achievers of feedback. The aim of feedback is then broadly speaking related to the specific learning outcome of the involved actors i.e., in the course of conducting and supervising a master's thesis and more generally feedback is broadly speaking intended to enhance the general development of the involved actors.

The million dollars question in order to provide supervision is: What constitutes good feedback? It would be somewhat naïve to claim the existence of a clear-cut answer to this question, and one's notion of "good feedback" will depend on a variation of factors such as the student's and the supervisor's expectations,

experiences, level of ambition, the format of the feedback sessions and much more. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick have listed seven different answers to the question regarding good feedback and the replies range from the notion that good feedback “helps clarify what a good performance is” to good feedback “facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning” and “provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance”.¹ Even though these replies differ a lot, recent scholarly work on feedback seems in general to suggest that if the student is made *co-responsible* for her work, she become a “more effective learner” (i.e., Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006: 203). Thus students’ *responsibility* and *autonomy* are often mentioned as crucial elements when addressing questions such as: Which factors contribute to high quality and high efficiency of learning (i.e., Dysthe et. al. 2006). The core notion of students’ responsibility and autonomy relate to the concept of *active learning*, which again constitutes one of the buzzwords when approaching the academic field of teaching and learning, and active learning is additionally a concept of main attention at the TLHE-course. A pertinent question is then: How can we as university teachers enhance student’s learning in the course of writing a master’s thesis by enabling a teaching and learning environment where the students become active learners?

2.2 Cluster supervision: from monologism to dialogism

When this question is posed in the setting of supervising master thesis’s students, the *cluster supervision* format constitutes a frequent reply. Providing supervision in a cluster is not only seen as a reply to better completion rates and as a shield against the potential loneliness of writing a thesis (“specialesump”), the format is regarded as a way to obtain more active, and hereby better, learning. Olga Dysthe is one of the leading researchers in the field of supervision, and she has for example pointed out that our common notion of supervision and of the provision of feedback is constituted by a so-called “the supervisor-student dyad” (Dysthe et. al. 2006). By this term she refers to the fact that supervision and feedback is most often conducted individually, where the supervisor does most of the talking and the student then is a passive receiver of the provided feedback. Dysthe (et.al. 2006) has emphasized the potential weaknesses of this format in terms of “overdependence on supervisor” and “lack of ownership” of the project (from the student’s perspective) (Dysthe et. al. 2006: 300).

Dysthe and her colleagues have done different studies in order to try out the virtues of cluster supervision in practice - for example by changing the format of supervision of master’s thesis students (at the Master of Education Programme at the University of Bergen) from individual supervision to a set-up including three different elements: 1) *Supervision in groups (2-3 students + 1 supervisor)*, 2) *Student colloquia (same students – no supervisor)* and 3) *Individual supervision* (Ibid.). In order to assess this new format, Dysthe and her colleagues draw on the conceptual framework of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s framework addresses how knowledge emerges, and it entails the distinctions between *monologism* and *dialogism*. Monologism is characterized by the notion that “knowledge is given” which is, in the view of Dysthe, reflected in the

¹ “Good feedback practice:

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching.” (David J. Nicol & Debra Macfarlane-Dick 2006: 203)

“traditional”, individual supervision and feedback format where the authoritative supervisor “transmit” feedback to a more or less passive student. *Dialogism* is on the other hand characterized by the notion that knowledge emerges when voices interact, which would resemble the cluster supervision format where the students are themselves active in providing and receiving feedback and where knowledge emerges as a result of co-construction and negotiation (Ibid.). Below the concept pairs of Bahktin are listed in a table in order to illustrate the characteristics of respectively the supervisor-oriented (monologism) and the student-oriented (dialogism) approach to supervision (Dysthe et. al. 2006: 303):

Monologism	Dialogism
Supervisor-oriented	Student-oriented
One-way transmission of knowledge	“Multivoicedness” and the notion that “knowledge emerges from interaction of voices”
The students are passive receivers of feedback	The students are active participators, and the setting is characterized by “mutual engagement, negotiation and practices of repertoire in use”
Authoritative	“Internally persuasive” – “co-construction of knowledge”

The question then is, whether a cluster format for supervision will automatically be a way of transforming supervision from monologism into dialogism? The answer is “no”. Naturally, a cluster supervision setting can be more or less constituted by mini-lectures of the supervisor and can then rather be seen as a transmission of monologism into a cluster setting, where the students will in fact not be activated or regarded as co-responsible for the feedback sessions. Additionally, some individual supervision settings could easily be conducted in a way, which enhances dialogue and the cluster is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for obtaining the virtues of dialogism. Yet, it seems likely that the cluster setting would enhance and enable dialogism over monologism, since more actors are involved and active participation most often constitutes a requirement of this format.

In terms of students’ involvement in the supervision, the study of Dysthe and her colleagues show:

“One of our clearest findings was that students benefited from involvement in fellow student’s projects. Many students were surprised that reading and discussing peer projects was so useful for their own” (Ibid.).

Thus the core inclusion of the students in the feedback process and the ability of the students to actively contribute to the provision of feedback to other students were in their study proven to be a defining elements for good feedback and a high learning outcome.

The findings from the study on the three different supervision formats also show that the shift between the different formats had a positive effect on the level of self-confidence of the students and that it helped the students to voice “their own opinions” without being over-dependent on the words of the supervisor (Dysthe et. al. 2006: 314). Additionally, the study showed that one of the most important element in order for any feedback format to succeed is constituted by the “relations component”. The student reported that “trust, safety, sensitivity and respect” are the key conditions in order to enable good feedback in groups

(followed by elements such as structure, dialogue and engagement). Thus, when creating a good framework for active learning the personal and relational aspects should not be underestimated. One of the most crucial findings is that good cluster supervision “does not happen by itself” – it will need attention paid to a range of critical factors (Dysthe et. al. 2006: 313).

Dysthe et. al. provide a list of some of the “critical factors” which could potentially hinder successful supervision in groups. I have included them below, since they may be useful when assessing our own experiences with cluster supervision at the SRM-programme, and because they – combined with the findings from my own mini-survey - can serve as inspiration for the future way of structuring the cluster supervision sessions. The seven factors are:

1) *Motivation*: understood as emphasizing “the value of participating” in the supervision 2) *Engagement in peer projects*: understood as “developing mutual knowledge and interests among students in each other’s research projects”, 3) *Training in feedback strategies*; 4) *Commitment*: understood as “mutual obligation and personal commitment”; 5) *Clear routines*; 6) *Multiple perspectives*: understood as bringing together “different research traditions in the same group”, 7) *Realistic time allocation* (Dysthe et. al. 2006: 315-16).

After this brief theoretical introduction, I will now move into some of the specific experiences in regards to the cluster supervision format at the SRM-programme.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to identify some of the experiences with the cluster supervision format, I have included the following empirical material:

- **A mini-survey** addressing all master’s thesis writers (spring semester 2016) at the SRM-programme (25 individuals were invited to respond via Absalon). These 25 students are divided into four clusters with four different supervisors. 13 students, affiliated with different clusters, have responded (see questionnaire and all responses in appendix 1). The questionnaire includes questions related to the students’ notion of good feedback; their experiences with the feedback provided by respectively their supervisor and their peers; and their general experience with the cluster supervision format.
- **My own course of supervision** of five master’s thesis students (spring semester 2016) is likewise included in order to supplement some of the replies in the questionnaire i.e.,:
 - The written peer feedback (student to student)
 - Minutes of a cluster session from one of my students
 - My supervision letter, where I set the scene for the cluster meetings of our particular group in terms of my expectations, rules of engagement, feedback structure, structure of the meetings etc.

The findings of this report are thus very limited due to the limited number of sources, which makes it impossible to generalize. However, the findings may give no more than some tentative indications with regard to the students’ experiences with the cluster supervision format at the SRM-programme. These indications may give us some ideas when planning and conducting future courses of cluster supervision.

4. SOME FINDINGS

The findings reported here mainly pertain to the students' replies to the questions in the small survey. I have not included all replies, but only focused on some of the ones I find most important i.e., students' notion of good feedback, their experiences with respectively supervisor and peer feedback, and their general perception of the cluster format supplemented with my own experiences with the format.

4.1 Students' pre-understanding of good feedback is product-oriented and equals troubleshooting

The students' replies to the first general question regarding their notions of good feedback entail a lot of interesting perspectives. A common element of most of these replies is that their notion of good feedback is *instrumental* and *product-oriented*. The feedback should in the view of the students in some way or the other point out flaws, misconceptions, unclear parts etc. in the provided text and the feedback session should additionally suggest ways of improving the text via new ideas and perspectives (in a constructive way). The product-oriented focus of the students is not surprising, since the final master's thesis constitutes the main concern of the students. However, an underlying assumption of this notion of feedback seems to be that the provider of feedback (most often thought of as the supervisor) is responsible for identifying potential flaws, misconceptions, unclear parts etc. Therefore the common understanding of good feedback amongst the students seems to resemble Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's sixth type of good feedback constituted by the provision of opportunities "to close the gap between current and desired performance" rather than the broader notions of "good feedback" concerned i.e., with the facilitation of self-assessment skills (type 2), or the creation of a dialogue about their general learning (type 3 and 4).

Yet, this rather narrow and instrumental notion of feedback as *troubleshooting* reflected in the students' replies might potentially conflict with some of the broader virtues connected to the cluster supervision format. Such broad virtues are i.e., obtaining skills connected to giving feedback to the peers (which also change the roles and responsibilities of the thesis), and the ability to translate the feedback provided to others into one's own specific case. The latter is again related to taking on the responsibility of the thesis and letting some of the dependence of the supervisor go. Thus in order to succeed with the cluster format, a lot of attention needs to be drawn to the core adjustment of scope and expectation connected to the provision of feedback at the supervision session. Such talks about expectations and discussions of good feedback could potentially ensure that the supervisor and the students are on the same page, when starting up the cluster meeting and that they agree on a compromise between the product-oriented, instrumental and troubleshooting function of feedback expected by most of the students and the more educative virtues connected with the cluster supervision format, where co-responsibility and co-creation of knowledge are valued.

4.2 Students are in general satisfied with the feedback styles and with the feedback from the supervisors

Moving on in the questionnaire, the replies of students reflect some diversity in terms of the feedback styles followed at each of the four clusters. These styles differ from oral feedback by the supervisor to oral and written feedback from both peers and supervisor, a shared google document with all feedback, stringent structure to more loose forms. All clusters seem to share the format of taking departure in the provided texts written by the students and the questions/meta-texts, which are likewise delivered before each session. Each cluster likewise seems to assign feedback responsibility and thus responsibility to the students in the feedback phase.

In general, the students are very satisfied with the feedback provided by the supervisors (7 student give medium score, 4 give a high score and only 1 gives the feedback from the supervisor a low score). The rather high scores for supervisors' feedback are i.e., argued for by referring to the fact that the supervisor points out where the text can be clearer, and by referring to the fact that the supervisor adds new titles and authors for the student to consult in order to proceed. The lower scores are followed up by comments such as preferences for individual feedback and that the supervisor is "too nice" (not critical and specific enough).

4.3 Students' experiences with peer feedback are more mixed

The questionnaire emphasizes various aspects of the students' experiences with peer feedback. In terms of the quality of the feedback provided from the peers, the experiences of the students differ, though 5 out of 13 respondents rate the peer feedback in the lowest category (4 in the middle and 4 in the top ranking).

The negative comments differ and include the notion that peer feedback as such is: "a useless concept on a fundamental level", i.e. because "the supervisor can say the same things – in a better way", "the peers don't read the material", the peers provide only stylish and superficial comments (something they Google just the day before supervision), and finally that the provision of peer feedback is very "time consuming" and "resource intensive".

The more positive rankings of the experience with peer feedback are i.e. followed up by the reflections: "Not shy peers in asking tough and critical questions"; "They [the peers] are really insightful and provide well thought out feedback. It is obvious that people have spent the effort to ensure they are providing feedback that is helpful". Additionally, one of my own students reflects on her surprisingly positive experience with the cluster format in her minutes from one of the first cluster meetings stating:

"Honestly, I have been very skeptical about doing cluster supervision as it is very time consuming and I was not sure how I would benefit from reading other theses that are not related to what I am studying. However, I must admit that I am very positive about this approach after this first real cluster meeting. Peers have seen ideas and implications in my draft that I have not been able to see myself and guide me in the right direction" (quote from student's minutes from a cluster meeting).

There seems to be no way of getting around the fact that the provision of feedback to the peers is time-consuming and that it would in fact be much more convenient for the students to show up at the supervision meeting only addressing his/her own project. However, the engagement in the projects of other students is at the heart of the cluster supervision format. Thus problems arise if, the students fail to see the point in engaging with the other students' projects (as reflected in the replies above) and if they in fact do not commit to and engage in the work provided by their peers. This would thus lead to a vicious circle where lack of engagement leads to bad peer feedback leading to further lack of engagement. When addressing the specific comment above, that the supervisor can state the points of the peers much clearer, proponents of the cluster supervision format, would say that it is in fact valuable, if the students can formulate feedback, which resembles the feedback of the supervisor. This ability of the student of providing good and useful feedback is an aim of the format in itself, even though some students might regard the repetition of the feedback as a waste of time. Additionally, this example serves as a perfect

illustration of the fact that many students see themselves as the main (and maybe only) learner, when their specific project is addressed at the sessions. Yet, the ideal notion of the learning actor(-s) is much broader in the cluster supervision format and entail all the other students during all sessions. This clarification might also be worth addressing, when presenting the cluster format in the start-up phase of the supervision process.

The point of criticism concerning the core quality of the feedback provided by the peers is another issue, which can in fact also be dealt with in order to improve the feeling of receiving high quality feedback from the peers. The quality of the peer feedback will naturally depend of the qualifications and academic level of the students providing feedback. However, a lot can be achieved by working with feedback formats and roles, and by encouraging the students to take on the role and responsibility connected to the provision of feedback. Some of the responses indicate that a main reason for the poor ranking of peer supervision is lack of engagement. So the problem might not be lack of ability to provide good feedback, it might more be the lack of priority on engaging in the cluster supervision as such.

In order to overcome this challenge, it might be worth emphasizing to the students some of the reasons, why time spent on giving and providing feedback is a crucial element, i.e., by underlining that the cluster format provides another way of thinking about supervision and feedback e.g., by carefully explaining the distinctions between *monologism* and *dialogism* and some of the findings from Dysthe's and others' studies on cluster supervision. This would also be a way of acknowledging that a good cluster supervision will not just happen by itself (as Dysthe noticed) – it will require efforts from both students and supervisors in order to make that happen.

In many cases, I have been very positively surprised with regard to the quality of the feedback provided student-student. In some cases the provided feedback was very similar to my own. In these cases I saw a good opportunity for the specific student to receive the same kind of feedback from different angles and thereby become increasingly aware of some of the crucial elements of his/her project. In other cases, I was beforehand worried about whether specific students would perceive my feedback as too harsh, and thus as demotivating. Yet, the fact that another students provided the same kind of critical feedback from the student perspective, actually seemed to make the student more aware of the specific subject matter than if I had only told him/her the issues myself. In other cases, the feedback from the students motivated changes very different from those motivated by my own comments. This could potentially be confusing and counterproductive, yet in the specific case, I have in mind, the feedback was of a very high quality and based on very specific and technological knowledge concerning the issues of the project of the peer, on which I am not an expert. This is just to provide some examples of good results of students' engagement, where the students did indeed not just Google the topic of the peers the night before in order to be able to provide some minimal feedback. Emphasizing such good examples and making it clear how good feedback can in fact look like, would be one way of working with the engagement-challenge related to peer feedback.

4.4 Students' general experiences with the cluster supervision format are quite negative

Only one student ranks highly the level of agreement in the phrasing: "cluster supervision enhances student's learning". When replying to the question concerning the "most helpful aspects of cluster supervision format", the students point to the enhancement of ideas, the fellowship with the peers and the view that giving feedback makes you think. However, in the replies from the students, there seem to be more negative than positive comments on the cluster format as such. The negative replies i.e., reflects the inflexibility of the format (in terms of fixed dates, not necessarily fitting the need for supervision of the individual projects); the lack of focus on the individual projects, the lack of structure of the meetings, the experience of inefficiency, a resource intensive format - just to mention some of the reflections. When replying to the question concerning the feeling of responsibility of the project, the students overwhelmingly feel that they are responsible for their own learning. This can both reflect the view that the students take the lead on their projects and become the active and responsible learners favored by the learning literature presented earlier. Yet, the reply can also reflect a feeling of lacking support from the supervisor. I do not know the core arguments behind these answers – since they are not elaborated. However, both options seem to be feasible. When looking at the suggestion for changes provided by the students, the provision of individual supervision sessions seem to be a common desire, which could support the later interpretation regarding lack of support in the cluster format.

Some of the responses in the survey are very negative towards the cluster supervision format. By way of illustration consider the following two replies:

- "It is a misconception that I should "learn" from the cluster sessions. I learn from writing the thesis and feedback should help make sure that I don't go down a wrong road. I think a lot of the time-waste associated with cluster supervision comes from the idea that I have any independent learning from the meetings themselves and from the experience of giving feedback to others. I don't".
- "Cluster supervision should be abandoned – I can't see how it is advancing the skills of the student nor saving money".

Naturally, these two quotes and the survey as such do not represent all the students. Yet, there is definitely a challenge related to working with and meeting these very negative attitudes towards the cluster format. It is quite clear that the pre-understanding of good feedback and learning as such expressed in the first quote differs from the ideal of good feedback and the notion of efficient learning underlining the cluster supervision format. The student expresses a quite instrumental understanding of feedback and learning, where the role of the supervisor is just to ensure, that the student does not go down any wrong paths (also reflected in the paragraph above on students' common pre-understanding of feedback as equaling troubleshooting).

Since the replies are anonymous, I do not know who replied in this very negative way. However, it seems as if the specific comments comes from a very independent student, who might not need supervision in order to write a good thesis. Yet, I would not conclude from this that the cluster format does not fit to the stronger and independent students as such. From my own cluster setting, I have experienced that one of the very advanced students puts an honor in providing very valuable feedback to the peers and still finds it rewarding to receive peer feedback even though one could imagine that the particular student would not benefit from the feedback from other students. It seems as if a place to start in this regard would be to

address such negative attitudes towards the cluster supervision format up front, by i.e., explaining the core thoughts behind this set-up and make an even bigger effort in order to explain and adjust expectations towards the cluster supervision format. However, it might be utopian to be in good grace with all the students, and some students might be critical towards the cluster supervision format no matter what is done in order to convince them otherwise.

Additionally, the negative attitude towards the cluster supervision format, does not necessarily only pertain to the students, and the attitude of the supervisor is indeed also important in order to ensure good conditions for the cluster supervision. Thus, the mind-set of the supervisor (and the importance of not phrasing cluster supervision as second-rate and a cut-back exercise) when starting up such sessions is crucial in order to increase the likelihood of the sessions being constructive and beneficial for everyone.

A final point, some students find the cluster format (potentially) unfair, since some students are very good at hijacking the attention of the supervisor, whereas others are less insistent. A good and fair structure of the sessions, which allow for the feeling of a fair distribution of the time at the cluster sessions, seems to play a crucial role for succeeding with the cluster format. This is also one of the critical factors pointed out by Dysthe et. al (2006) in terms of “clear routines” and “realistic time allocation”.

4.5 Exploiting the comparative possibility of cluster supervision

In my own planning of the structure and procedures for my group I was very aware of the need to meet the expectations of the students pertaining to receiving “enough” specific feedback on their individual projects, even though the format is cluster supervision. At each session I dedicate approximately 25 minutes for each project, where the other peers and I give feedback. Additionally the students receive written feedback from me (before the session) and from at least one peer (after the session). My reason for providing written feedback is that each student would feel that their specific project is addressed sufficiently, even though the allocated time for them at the meeting is rather limited. I have received positive feedback from my students on this format (though it is naturally very time-consuming for the supervisor), and the students find it comforting that they literally can take the feedback home. Yet, I have only later in the process noticed the value of including more elements enabling open comparisons between the projects. The cluster setting provides a unique opportunity to compare the projects in terms of approaches, structure, etc., and this could potentially be used much more than I did in my initial format, which would be a personal recommendation for further cluster sessions. I have only little experience with the comparative opportunity in my own supervision e.g., by providing a table showing the structure and elements of each of the five theses enabling a discussion and comparison of the different approaches. One of my students reflected positively on this by stating:

“It was very beneficial to see all the projects in the table that Kira made. Firstly, it was nice to realise that other people could find cohesion in the planned structure for each thesis. Secondly, it was great to see the different approaches that the theses take and how different elements are prioritised in each thesis” (quote from student’s minutes from cluster supervision).

I did not expect this exercise to be particularly rewarding for the students, but it turned out to be a very valued way of starting a discussion about choice and priorities between the five projects.

In an earlier minutes of a cluster session the same student referred to the fact that the cluster set-up rendered it possible for the students to see how far in the process the other students were and compare with their own situation as comforting, since she was stressed because she did not feel she had come far enough in the process:

“Strange as it may sound, the main energiser I got from this cluster meeting was the fact that no one else has really begun on their analyses. It gives the impression that it is still possible for me to turn in a thesis in three months that I am at least partly satisfied with” (quote from student’s minutes from cluster supervision).

One additional element of the structure of my cluster sessions is a recurring exercise (suggested to me by Hanne Nexø Jensen): At every 25th minutes where one specific project has been addressed, I have asked the students to do 1-2 minute of individual reflections, where the students write down, how the specific session could be useful for their own specific project. One of my students wrote the following in her minutes from one of the cluster meetings:

“It is not like the little two-minutes-exercise after each feedback round made me solve challenges or anything but it was a fun exercise that forced me into thinking about what I could use from the overall feedback my peers received” (quote from student’s minutes from cluster supervision).

4.5 Students’ ideas for improvement

The students additionally provide some suggestions in order to improve the cluster supervisions format. These include i.e., the suggestion of providing more coaching in giving feedback and better rules for feedback. Additionally, many of the respondents would prefer individual sessions besides the supervision in clusters. Others would prefer written feedback besides the oral feedback and others would prefer that the supervisor take more charge of the sessions.

Addressing the request for more education on the provision of feedback seems rather manageable when designing the cluster supervision format in the future. The question about the provision of individual feedback as a supplement to the cluster sessions is more debatable. In Dysthe’s study the supervision format was constituted by three elements, whereas both individual and cluster supervision were two of them. It might be worth reopening the discussion on the balance between individual versus cluster supervision sessions and, say, convert one of the six to seven cluster sessions into an individual supervision session. This would be a way of reassuring that each student is on the right track, since some students will need more attention from the supervisor in order to proceed in the writing process. I tried out converting one cluster session into individual sessions with great success. The individual session (in the last part of the supervision period) constitutes a good opportunity to ensure that all students are progressing and it serves as an opportunity to address some question, which some students would not feel comfortable addressing in the cluster. On the other hand, opening the door ajar for individual sessions could also run the risk of regarding the cluster sessions as second-rate-supervision, which could potentially damage the crucial engagement of the students in the cluster sessions even more. Thus, if individual sessions are offered, it should maybe only be offered in critical cases, where the students need specific attention in order to proceed, or as replacement of only one of the six to seven cluster sessions. The cluster format should

ideally constitute the “norm” or majority of the meetings in order to create a feeling of belonging and create an atmosphere of mutual trust and dependence.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the survey, my own experiences and the critical factors provided by Dysthe et.al., I have translated some of the critical points presented above into possible ways forward in order to provide even better cluster supervision of master’s thesis students in the future. First of all, it seems as if the students’ pre-understanding of good supervision / feedback put obstacles in the way for the cluster format as such being successful. When attempting to perform *dialogism in practice* by providing cluster supervision and emphasizing peer feedback, the good and wanted outcome will not just happen by itself. An effort needs to be done in order to succeed. This effort could for example include the following elements (see also the illustration on the front page):

- Make the virtues and core scope of cluster supervision (co-responsibility, active learners etc.) visible to all students (the cluster format is not a part of a cost-cutting-round, but is founded in studies on how students’ learn). This emphasis of the idea behind the cluster format could be a means to meet the potential lack of engagement of the students and the feeling that the provision of peer feedback is a waste of time.
- Clarify and adjust the various expectations and notions of “good feedback” in the cluster i.e., by taking departure in the types of good feedback identified by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick.
- Combine the cluster format with individual supervision – once or twice in the end of the semester (the cluster format should however be the main format in order to enable to students to see the progression of the other projects + create a feeling of belonging in the group).
- Provide education in the provision of peer feedback in order to enhance the quality of the peer feedback and thus enhance the engagement in the process.
- Provide a fair and clear structure for each session in order to ensure that each project is addressed.
- Take the importance of the relational elements into account when planning the cluster sessions: think about the fact that mutual trust, sensitivity and a general good atmosphere boost learning.
- Exploit the comparative possibility of the cluster format more and be careful not only to provide individual supervision in a cluster setting.

6. LITERATURE

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Nicol, David J & Debra Macfarlane-Dick (2006), “Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice”, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31:2, 199-218

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE AND ALL REPLIES FROM STUDENTS

Question 1) What is in your opinion good feedback? (for example: “good feedback helps clarify what good performance is” or “good feedback encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem” etc.)

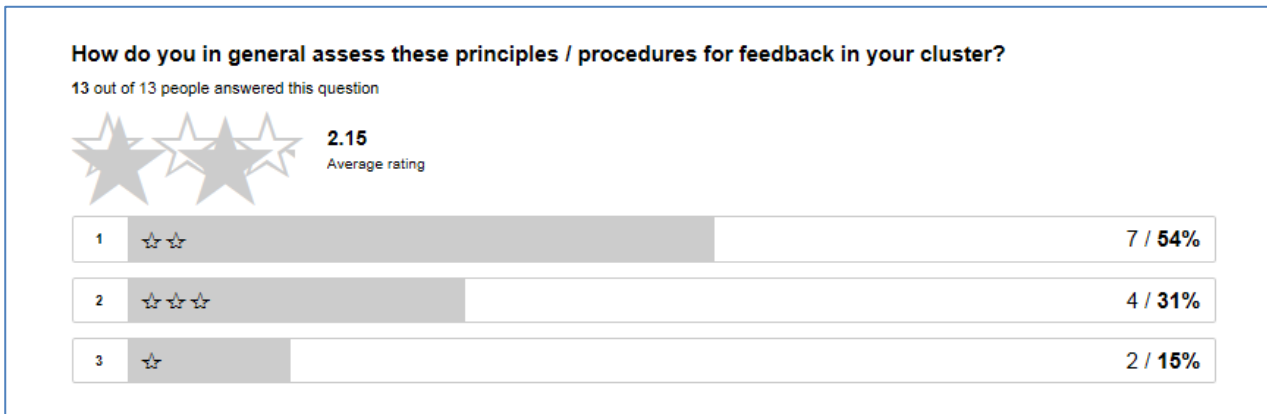
- 1) help me makes choices about which I'm in doubt or 2) points out mistakes or inconsistencies 3) stops me from going down a road that will lead to trouble later on (e.g. choices in theory that will make the analysis hard)
- Good feedback enhances progress by pointing out flaws in a constructive way.
- Constructive - makes you reflect on your style of work, and your assumptions. Helps you get new ideas. Points out towards how you can become better in what you are doing and does not only highlight your strong sides.
- Good feedback is constructive. Good feedback provides options for a person to consider to improve their work. Good feedback comes from a position where one genuinely wants to make the other person's work the best it possibly can be. Good feedback should not be perceived as a negative thing, but very positive as this only makes one's work better.
- Good feedback helps you see your thoughts from another angle and helps you spot mistakes if there are any.
- Clarification of the academic demands and expectations in order to avoid types of argumentation that leads to a lower grade.
- Good feedback addresses the unfinished or unarticulated parts of a text constructively and concretely, providing ideas or inspiration for solutions.
- It's critical, precise and well-thought. It should push to the status quo of the written product.
- Good feedback should add something new to the project. If you can get feedback that helps you think about the project in a different way then that will often be good feedback
- good feedback helps one understand what does not make sense
- good feedback is people actually having read your paper and providing comments to what you have written. preferably these critiques are constructive in the sense that they do not only outline critiques but provide possible ways of accommodating/overcoming such critiques.
- Good feedback validates good work and constructively points out areas for improvement.
- I believe a good feedback gives an alternative view on your product, opens for discussion on topics that could be included but were not considered or helps to find focus on issues that are seen as important. A good feedback gives for example positive motivation, helps find coherence and gives a critical but supportive perspective.

2) What are the principles / procedures for giving and providing feedback in your cluster? (e.g., written feedback based on your specific questions to the supervisor and the peers; Oral feedback based on your written paper etc. Please provide as many details as possible)

- Usually oral feedback based on stuff we've written for the thesis but we can include meta-text hinting at what questions we need help with

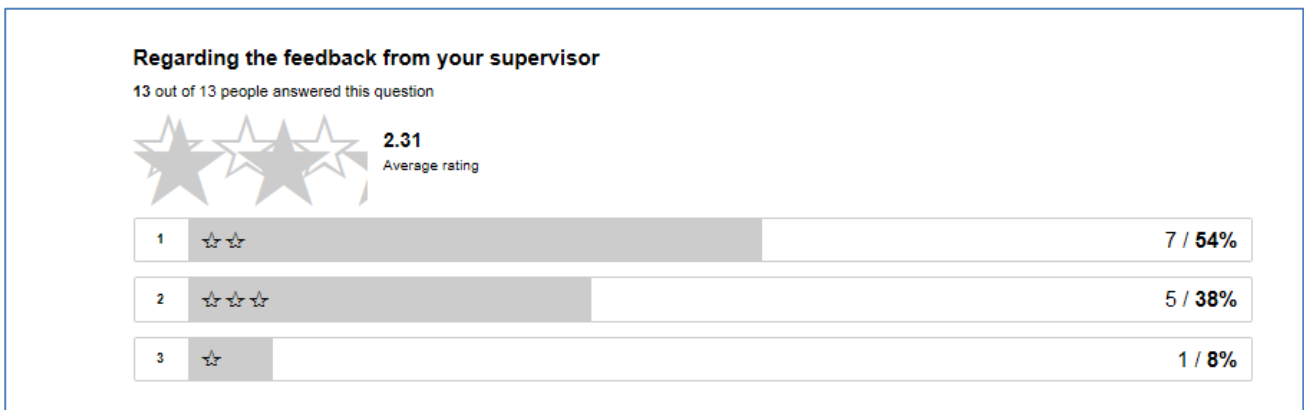
- After the written work has been submitted and everyone has had the chance to engage with it, the writer is given the opportunity in the cluster session to present the work again orally in a more specific and detailed way. Thereafter, everyone is encouraged to ask questions and point out some issues they have discovered or see the need to be addressed.
- Written feedback and oral feedback. We are assigned a thesis that we put extra focus on for every cluster session, that is, each student has to prepare written/oral presentation for the thesis of another student. However, we also give oral feedback to the other cluster members during the session. In addition, written feedback is done voluntarily to all members of the group after the cluster sessions.
- Written feedback and then oral during the cluster meeting. We all distribute our written feedback to one another. We also take notes in a shared Google document.
- We submit approximately 10 pages of written text for each session and are expected to read all the other students' 10 pages prior to the cluster. We give written feedback on those 10 pages for every student in advance of the cluster by uploading it on absalon. Then we take turns taking notes in a google doc during the cluster and also provide oral feedback during those 4 hours. At the end, we send each other a file with our personal updated feedback after the cluster.
- Oral feedback based on written pages.
- Everyone reads all papers and provides feedback based on questions provided by everyone concerning their text. Each student is responsible for providing more in-depth feedback to a different student, and all this is further supplied by the advisor's written and oral feedback.
- We are avoiding pedantic comments and corrections. At least in the first clusters, since they become more relevant later on.
- we give oral feedback based on a written draft. The person receiving feedback can begin by adding new thoughts on their written draft and then another cluster-member is the primary discussant, who will give the most extensive feedback. The others can afterwards add their feedback.
- I think the best is a combination of oral and written feedback. They both have their advantages: written feedback is usually more reliable, and one can always go back to the points stated. Oral feedback however, is more dynamic and allows the construction of new thoughts through discussion.
- oral feedback as a minimum - which is what everyone does (unfortunately, because I give and would also like to in return get written feedback and comments on particular text).
- We are each discussants on each other's papers. One principal discussant each session and then others can join in with their feedback. Our supervisor adds comments at the end of the discussions for each paper. Those who want send others written feedback but this is optional. We are free to submit whatever section(s) we want feedback on since we all have different approaches to our thesis. We have agreed that we clearly state in our submissions what we want feedback on/ questions/ unfinished sections etc.
- We give oral feedback in response to the questions provided by our peers in the beginning of their thesis draft. At each session, every student has the lead in providing feedback for one thesis draft. We also receive written and oral feedback from our supervisor.

Question 3)



Question 4) To what extend has the feedback on your texts /project (so far) been useful for you?

Question 4.a)

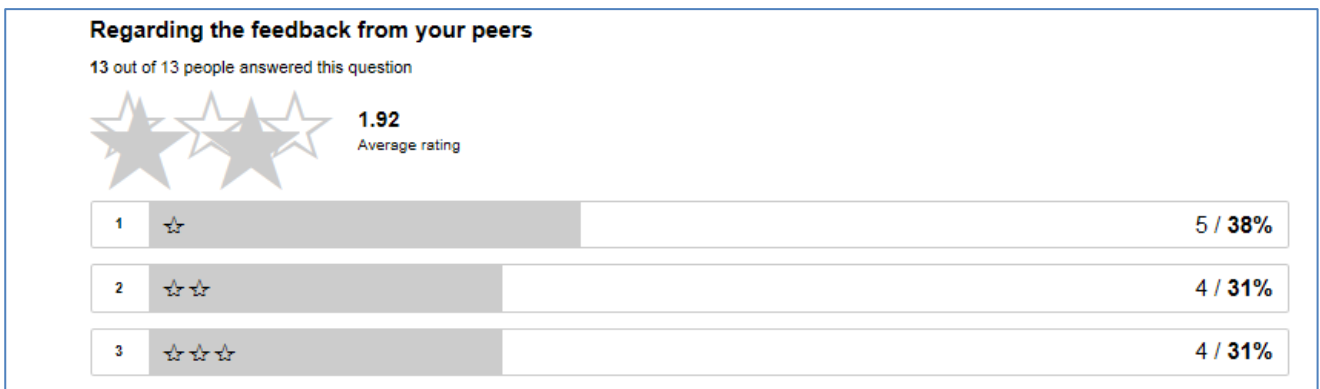


Question 4.b) Why has the feedback from your supervisor been useful / not useful?

- Feedback based on things we've written for the thesis is based on the assumption that we have things worth reviewing. I choose to focus on producing a lot of text of lower standard that I will then improve later. But that means that I can't use feedback on my text for much as I know all the problems with it already - I'm just not focused on correcting them at the moment. What IS useful about feedback is the assurance that the fundamental argument is not flawed and to figure out what my supervisor cares about so I can include that in the thesis.
- The feedback was especially useful in regard to the thesis structure and research question.
- We are in the starting process and the cluster sessions sometimes do not time very well with when we need some sort of supervision.
- The feedback ensures that we recognize and can overcome any obstacles that may emerge through the thesis writing process. There are always points we should consider and/or it is an opportunity to clarify what we want to do and how we plan to do it.

- I am really pleased with my supervisor- he is really patient, understanding, always listens to my point of view and gives his take on it and almost always has 1-2 additional authors to direct me to. Really really appreciate that!
- It's usually to the point but could occasionally be clearer.
- It is to the point and constructive, guiding the further process in a productive manner.
- The supervisor pretty much agrees with the thesis so far, so there have not been many comments
- I believe my supervisor gives excellent feedback, however I think it is a problem that my supervisor is the last one to give feedback and I would love to have individual feedback as well. The feedback has been useful because my supervisor manages to focus on overall theoretical and methodological issues that I had not thought about myself.
- Sometimes people are too nice, and critiques are important
- it is not very critical; mostly it just says 'fine'
- Limited but good feedback
- The feedback we received from our supervisor has been very useful, partially because it is written and we can re-read it later in the process. Also, it is always positive and supportive. We also received examples of a good master's thesis and on how to structure and work on our thesis.

Question 4.c)



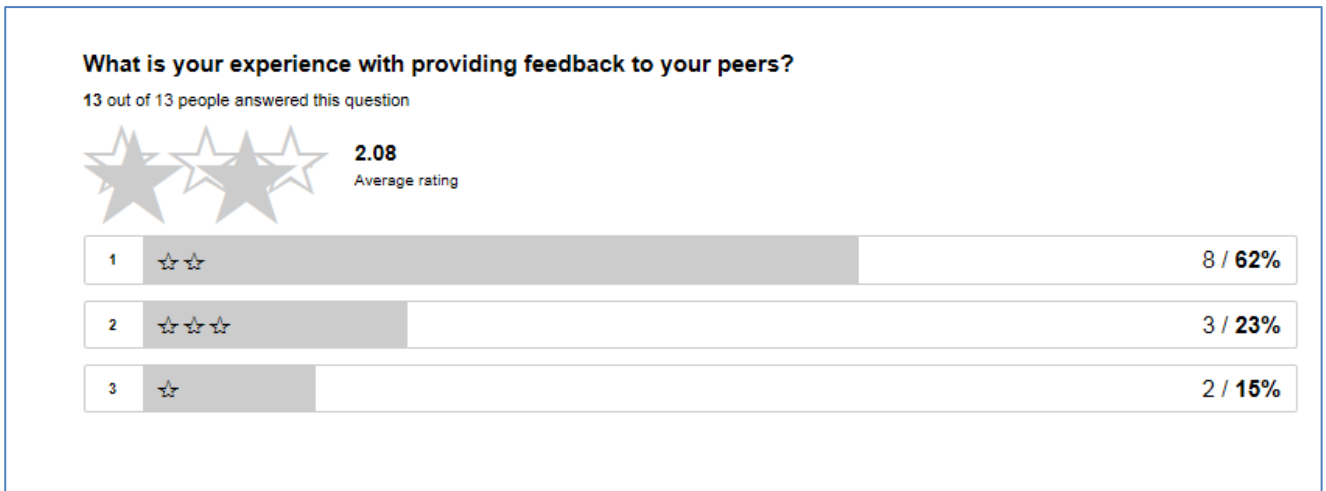
Question 4.d) Why has the feedback from your peers been useful/ not useful?

- Not a critique of my peers - they are at least as competent as I am - but I don't really use it for anything. Partly because of the reasons listed in 3.b. and partly because I think it's a useless concept on a more fundamental level. I have spent way more time with the thesis than them and on the short time they have to get an understanding of what I'm doing, they generally can't dream up interesting points that I haven't thought of myself. The supervisor has an asymmetric advantage by virtue of being in the field for longer than I have (even if he does not know my thesis as good as I do). My peers have no such advantage.
- My peers were not shy in asking tough and critical questions that helped draw my attention to inconsistencies within my thesis.
- Unfortunately not very useful so far, it feels like the focus has been more on superficial aspects of the thesis (eg. acronyms, where things should be placed, spelling mistakes) than about the actual material

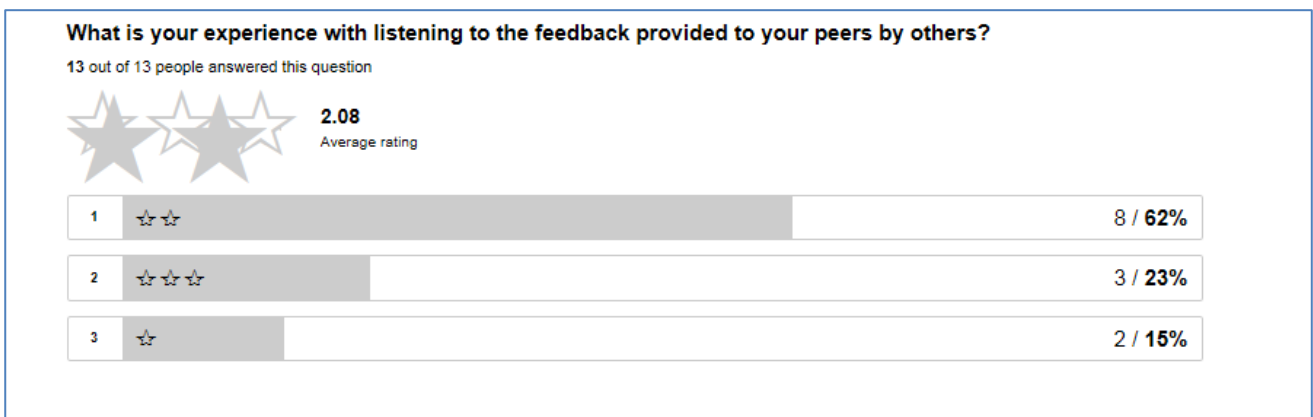
provided. However, we hope that this changes as we move on with the work and the red thread through the different chapters of the thesis is more visible.

- They are really insightful and provide well thought out feedback. It is obvious that people have spent the effort to ensure they are providing feedback that is helpful. However, I think some people are either really comfortable or gifted at providing feedback.
- the cluster sessions take too much time and none of my peers has a similar interest in the topic i am writing on. their feedback is generally stylistic or they try to come up with suggestions for theory or some method but they do it because it is compulsory to send me written feedback and oral as well. So it is obvious they take the time to google additional suggestions for me but it is just so they have something... It is the same for me- i have no knowledge of some of my peers' topic and i google and have to read a lot to come up with something to say during the sessions...it is really too much extra work and does not have that much effect in the end
- The level of detail is quite good but could be slightly better.
- It outlines the requirements from the audience, i.e. Shows what is understandable, what needs attention etc.
- They don't agree with/understand the approach of the thesis, e.g. that I don't strive for objectivity, but state clearly the political effects of the methods. So it is a bit difficult. Sometimes i also wonder if they read what I submit.
- During the first cluster I thought the peer feedback focused too much on smaller issues that were irrelevant. During the second cluster I believe their feedback added more value to my project by suggesting different changes.
- Same point, sometimes people should embrace critique and not just outline the good points
- because it appears they don't read my texts. I get very few to no comments of relevance, meaning that the comments I get are often random; targeted to what I say in the cluster, but not based on my texts. as an example, I write about airport control, and a typical question from my peers is 'so what kinds of control are there by the airport?' (you would know had you read my text, and then you could also question something like, 'why do you perceive that as control?'). what I am basically saying, is that I in no way feel challenged or generate reflection on the basis of these comments.
- It varies a lot. The most useful is the written feedback or comments/track changes in the submitted piece. Some are better at giving feedback than others. Perhaps more coaching in giving constructive feedback could be useful.
- I think receiving feedback from other students is a great value to our papers. However, as our drafts are becoming bigger and denser, it becomes increasingly difficult to provide feedback to our peers, which may have effect on the quality of the peer-to-peer feedback.

Question 5)



Question 6)



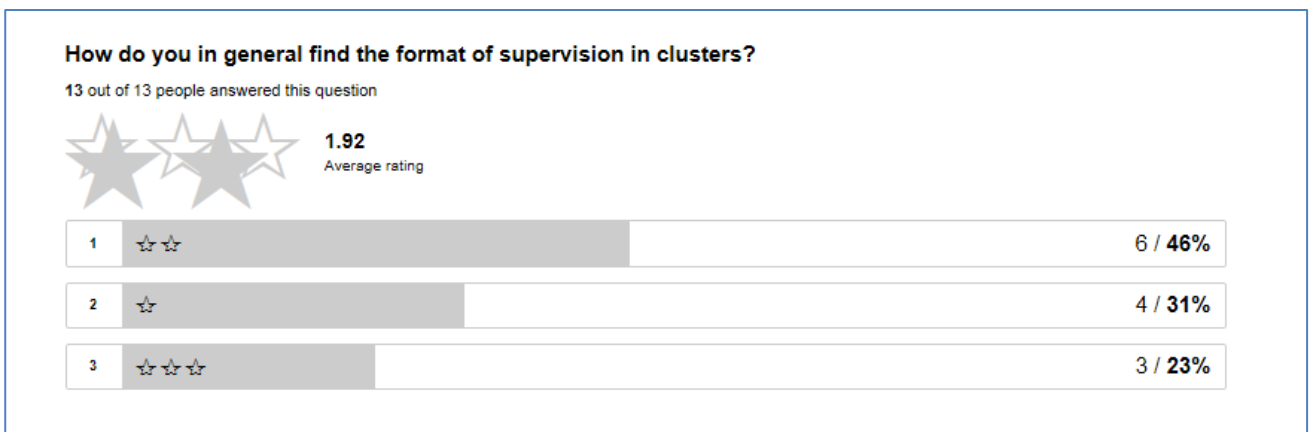
Question 7) Do you have any ideas for improving the feedback process at the cluster sessions?

- Don't do cluster sessions. If we are forced to, then let the supervisor do all the feedback and then the other students can comment IF they have anything interesting to say instead of being forced to say things that are wrong/irrelevant or more imprecise than what the supervisor can say. When I'm giving feedback I gloss over their work to find one semi-intelligent thing to say but the supervisor can say the same thing in a better way.
- No. I am very satisfied with the established feedback process in my cluster.
- Yes - we all have very different styles of working, and the thesis is a very long process. Some students require more supervision than others. It could be an idea to do different clusters depending on how much supervision we think we need. For example, I think that 3 sessions instead of 6 would have been perfect - while others might need more. I know this is a balance and that resources are important, but I also know that other Master programs have this form of sessions as a voluntary option. It is really time consuming to give feedback to 4-5 students, and even more if we are to prepare "proper feedback". Unfortunately so far it appears that sometimes we give feedback for the sake of it, which might actually be counterproductive for both the thesis of our peers and for the time we use for our own project. This

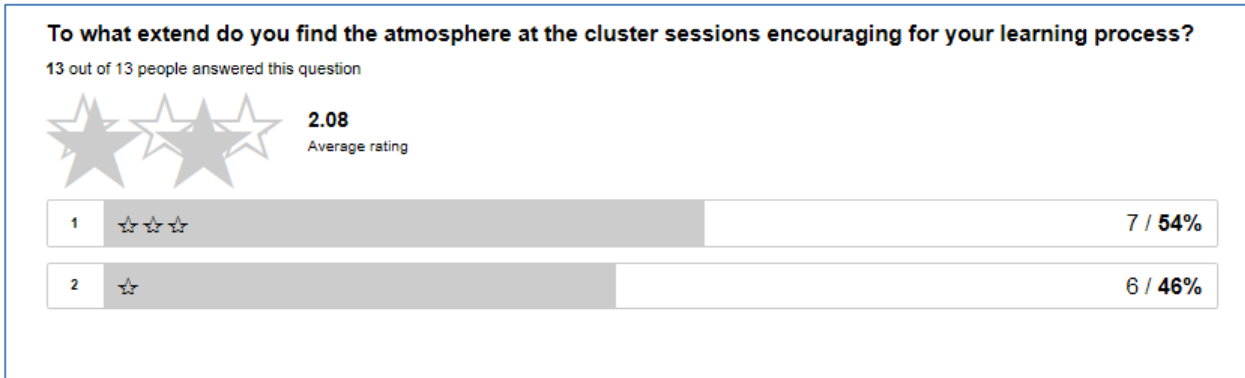
is likely to become even more evident as we proceed with the clusters and the written material becomes larger.

- I think we should have a cluster meet every month, but a one-on-one meeting with the thesis advisor (maybe just two for the entire semester will suffice) would be very beneficial for some students who need extra attention. I think some students feel there is an imbalance to the clusters and that there are students who "hijack" all of the time because they can't quite focus on the thesis or how they should approach the research. However, I don't really think this has been an issue in my particular cluster. I think our time has, for the most part, been evenly distributed.
- i think that meeting our supervisor individually is more rewarding. if we want to work together or help each other- we meet in the Black diamond or just on campus and write and google things together. Having the university oblige us to read and prepare for 5 other theses with feedback and suggestions is really really time-consuming and not rewarding at all.
-
- No
- Maybe that we could form our own cluster groups, so we are likewise ambitious.
- I would like for the supervisor to start with his/hers feedback. Furthermore, I believe individual sessions would be very useful. In my group I think the feedback process has been almost perfect. We aid each other and take pride in preparing good feedback. I believe it is necessary that everybody in the cluster take their responsibility serious.
-
- more stringent rules for feedback; clusters divided per theme or methodology rather than just having the same supervisor; and finally (i am principally against this, but...) clusters based on academic ambition. it is very demotivating being on cluster with people who simple don't care to make an effort (or for several reasons can't)
- Structure each session to utilise the time better. The sessions are long and they could be more efficiently utilised to ensure that each person gets and equal share of the supervisor's attention.

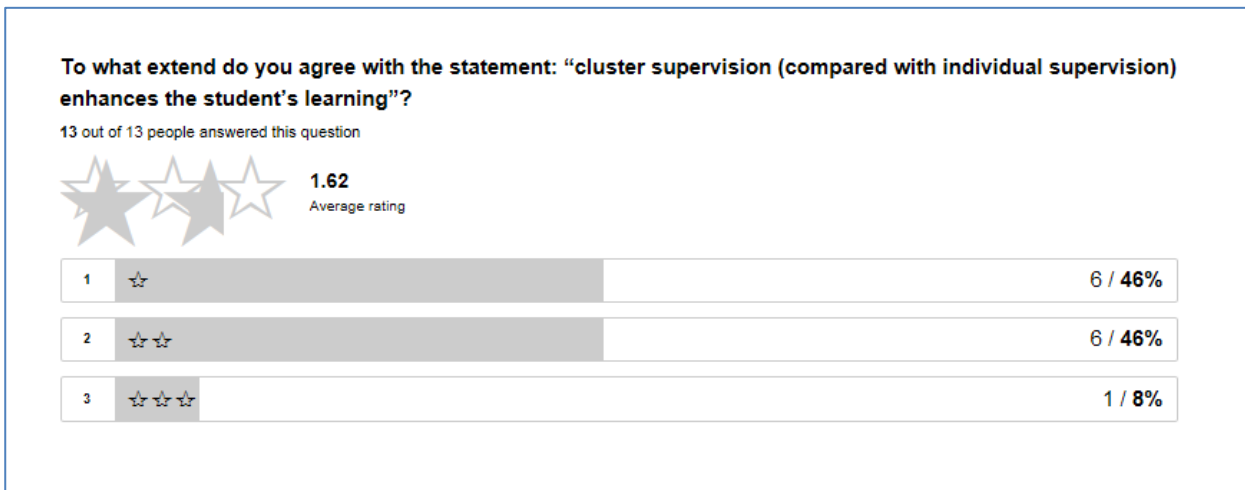
Question 8)



Question 9)



Question 10)



Question 11) What is in your opinion the "most helpful" aspect of group supervision?

- For most helpful aspect of supervision, see for 4.b. For most helpful aspect of GROUP supervision - I can't think of any.
- The most helpful aspect is that the peers are familiar enough with your ongoing work to give detailed advice when needed
- To exchange ideas.
- Getting peer feedback is extremely valuable. However, I recognize that people have to be dedicated and buy into this philosophy in order for it to work. I think I have gotten very lucky with my group as my peers have provided very helpful, and constructive feedback.
- if one chooses his/her own group of people within the class group supervision could be helpful because the student has selected those people for a reason. I also believe it should be voluntary and one should have the option to drop out if it is not beneficial to him/her.
- Allows one to see what others are doing and discuss difficulties in the group.
- The feedback provided to others is helpful for own reflections, both the feedback I give as well as the feedback given to others by others.
- That the supervisor provides feedback.

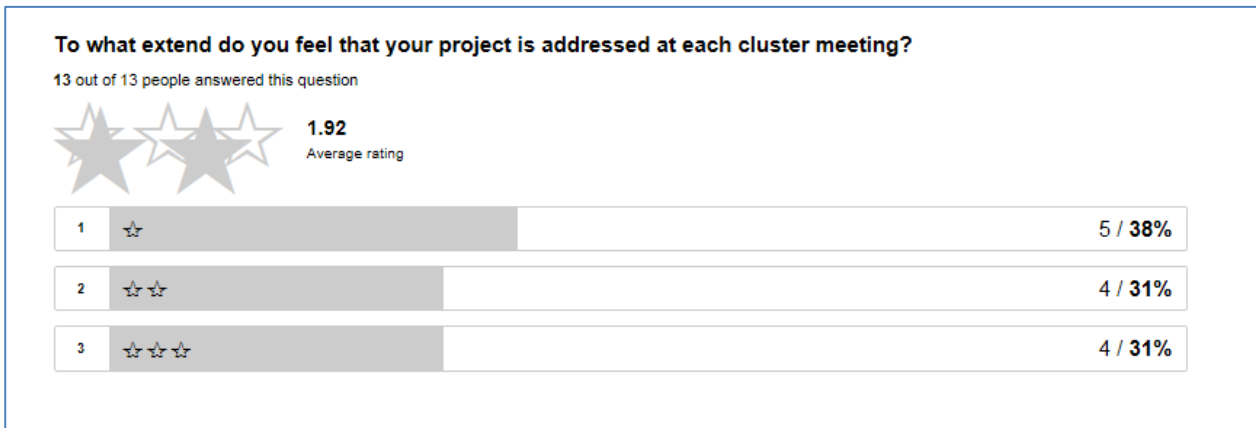
- The fellowship that you have with your peers. In your cluster we have managed to help each other not just in during the cluster meeting, but also during the rest of the writing proces.
- It helps to see how other approach their problem. Even though we do not have the same topic, through cluster session we understand better the process of thesis writing as a whole. However for some other points and more analytical approaches, I believe an individual session would be more supportive.
- i love the idea of it: exchanging knowledge, cultivating an academic culture, and learning to communicate academic problematics
- Giving feedback to others makes you think.
- The variety of opinions and time spent on reading drafts and giving feedback to others is useful for my own process.

Question 12) What is in your opinion the “least helpful” aspect of group supervision?

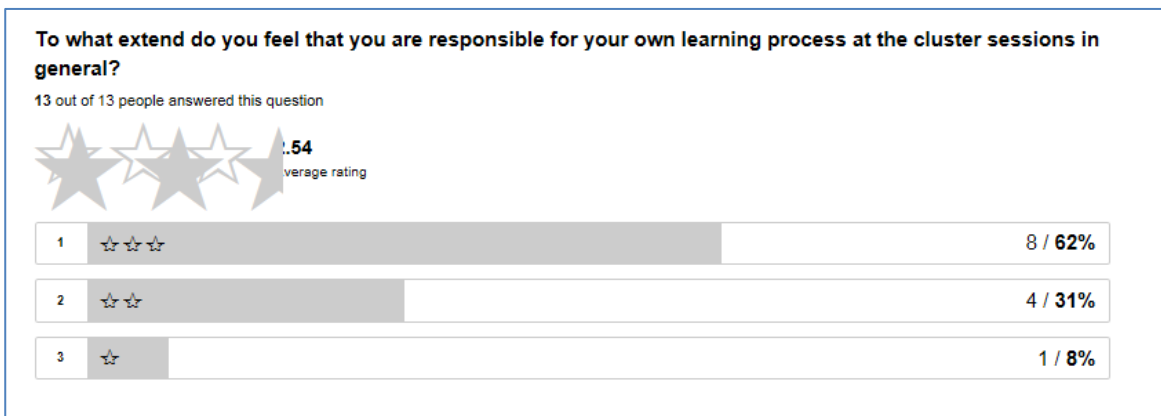
- It takes a lot of time for almost no added benefit. We have to allocate time for around seven days of meeting activity + reading and giving feedback to around 50 pages pr. session. That totals almost two weeks where I'm not working on my own thesis for maybe 5 hours where my thesis is in focus. I would rather be without feedback at all than doing it in clusters.
- One has to spend a lot of time to understand someone else's work in order to give good feedback, well beyond the 1-2 day interval between submission and the session.
- To spend a lot of time discussing about rather superficial aspects of the thesis that will probably fall in place in due time. I think another aspect which probably affects many is that it is easy to start comparing our work with that of others, which can create a lot of additional stress/pressure (even though the way other's approach their thesis might not at all suit ourselves, or might not be adequate for the specific aim of our thesis).
- The whole process fails if students do not participate or do not spend the effort to provide feedback.
- all my peers are stressed and frustrated like me because we are graduating soon and need to look for a job and write our thesis. Having to prepare for 5 more topics and write feedback on them plus also have some oral suggestions alongside that is really putting extra unnecessary stress. The cluster is really draining because it is too many students with different topics and far too much extra reading since each student has to upload approximately 10 pages of text per cluster... it takes me 2 days to prepare just for a cluster...
- It can occasionally be quite superficial.
- Inactivity by other group members.
- That we can't choose when to receive feedback . The last two clusters have been quite irrelevant for me. It is far more important to me to receive feedback in a couple of weeks. The way it is organized now, is wasting a lot of precious supervision time.
- That we as students do not have the same academic level and experience as our supervisors. Therefore, our feedback can be limited. Sometimes we lack the overview of the supervisor. I also believe that it is difficult to read another project while working on your own project.
- Forcing yourself to say something. The problem with group work is that one feels it has to comment on another paper. However sometimes this is not relevant and might create more problems than help the student
- when peers do not have the same ambition or interest in developing what could have been a great cluster session

- Inefficient use of time. Not enough attention from supervisor.
- There may be a loss of focus if one does not formulate and communicate the questions and problems that they want to discuss clearly. An individual supervision, I assume, would be much shorter, maybe also focused.

Question 13)



Question 14)



Question 15) How could your learning outcome of the cluster sessions be improved? (for example that the supervisor is more clear about the “good performance” of a master’s thesis, or that you to a larger degree is involved in defining the learning goals of the supervision process, etc.)

- "I think it is a misconception that I should ""learn"" from the cluster sessions. I learn from writing the thesis and feedback should help make sure that I don't go down a wrong road. I think a lot of the time-waste associated with cluster supervision comes from the idea that I have any independent learning from the meetings themselves and from the experience of giving feedback to others. I don't.
- With that in mind, feedback could be improved by reducing student involvement and focus on discussing consequences of choices. (e.g. ""this research question will be impossible to answer with quantitative/qualitative datasets"" or ""your question is too wide"" or ""these two theories are hard to combine because of ontological differences"")"

- The learning outcome as such in our cluster is determined by our own inputs. Therefore, the more precise and detailed it is, the better the learning outcome will be for the presenting individual.
- I am not entirely sure on this, as I personally believe that the learning outcomes would be more giving with individual sessions with our supervisor, and voluntary cluster sessions. I perceive that the cluster sessions force me to take a break from my own project. Maybe the cluster sessions could start later on when we have had some time to form our project and the feedback could be more constructive.
- I would like written feedback from my advisor rather than just to receive it orally since it is sometime difficult to capture all the points while note taking. I also think one-on-one sessions (like I mentioned earlier this does not have to be often, maybe just two) would benefit those students who don't function well in clusters. I think advisors have to hold students a bit more accountable if they are not participating to ensure that all students receive the best peer feedback as possible.
- This is my second master's thesis and i honestly prefer the method i had before. I would much rather have 1 meeting with my supervisor during his office hours per month and ask him/her specific questions. I go to his/her office- we talk for approximately an hour and then i just go home and continue my thesis. If i want to meet my fellow students- i arrange that myself.
- As mentioned above, the supervisor could be clearer on what a "good" academic performance is.
- In the whole, I think our cluster works extremely well, and the supervisor has hinted at a structure for providing feedback beyond answering the questions provided. Perhaps demanding that this form be followed in order to ensure that all students provide the same degree of feedback. That said, the general level of feedback is high, and making a fixed format could quench the creativity.
- Clusters should be abandoned - i can't see how it is enhancing the skills of the students nor saving money. Finally I would like to state that my supervisor is very nice, competent and helpful!!! It is the format of cluster supervision that i don't like!
- I think the supervisor should be more in charge of the cluster meetings and give his/hers feedback first. I don't need more information about good performance etc.
- I would need more guidance, as thesis writing is new and complicated, and there are some cultural differences to how to carry an analysis. I feel I am supported but not guided per se.
- frankly, i believe MY problem is with my peers. i love my supervisor and i see great potential in the format of doing clusters. my fellow students just do not engage or bring the ambition necessary.
- It would be nice if the supervisor was more structured, accessible and took more charge of the sessions
- I have no suggestions.