

# **Meeting students' and supervisors' expectations - findings from a pilot study done at Centre for International Health, University of Bergen**

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## **Introduction**

The style and method of supervision varies greatly (Kam, 1997). It may be a one-to-one approach (individual supervision), or a team approach involving a supervision panel, other students in the research group, or all members of a research program (collective supervision) (James & Baldwin, 2006). Whatever the style of supervision is chosen, the quality of candidate – supervisor(s) relationships has a major influence on candidates' completion of their program and on their satisfaction with their research education (Kam, 1997).

It is thus important to get the relationship off to a good start and maintain effective relations through the varying stresses and challenges of a research degree. An effective working relationship is easier to establish when candidates and their supervisors are clear about the expectations they have of each other and when they are comfortable about re-negotiating expectations during the candidature (Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary, & Ryan, 1999).

The University of Bergen has clear regulations and policies that establish a standard which supervisors and candidates are expected to meet (Bergen, 2003, updated 2006).

Both candidates and supervisors sign a contract at the beginning of the candidature that implies that they should be familiar with their duties and responsibilities. In general candidates want their supervisors to provide expert guidance and direction and supervisors want their candidates to progressively take control of their research and develop an authoritative voice on the topic.

However, supervisors and candidates might differ in their understanding of how much guidance is acceptable and how much autonomy is reasonable (Murphy, Bain, & Conrad, 2007). Very little is known about their real expectations of each other and to which extent their expectations are mutually acceptable, especially in an international context (Aspland & O'Donoghue, 1994).

## **Objective**

The present study was set out (1) to assess students' and supervisors' expectations from each other, (2) to compare them, and (3) to find out which aspects of the student - supervisor relationship need to be better addressed for assuring quality in higher degree research training at UoB from an international perspective.

## **Methodology**

### ***Study population***

Students and supervisors with projects related to the Center for International Health, University of Bergen, Norway participated to this survey as they comprised an accessible, reasonably large and diverse group of international students and supervisors / senior staff. Participation to the study was on a voluntary basis. The participants were informed of the aims of the study and about their right to withdraw from the study. They were ensured about their anonymity.

## ***Instrument***

A self-completed questionnaire (12 closed questions) based on an existing questionnaire (Edwards H. et al., 1995; Ryan & Whittle, 1997) was distributed to the participants. The questionnaire is based on the Role Perception Rating Scale – RPRS (Moses, 1985) as the instrument to measure students' and supervisors' expectations from each other. The scale comprises 12 items grouped into three subscales that measure the perceptions of the responsibilities on different aspects of organizational work settings: topic / course of study (1), contact / involvement (2), the thesis (3) (Table I).

<b><i>No. ctr.</i></b>	<b><i>Subscale</i></b>	<b><i>Item</i></b>
1.	Topic / course of study	The topic of candidates' research project
		The theoretical standpoint (working hypothesis)
		The time frame
		Access to facilities
2.	Contact / Involvement	Development of student-supervisor / staff personal relationships
		Initiating research meetings
		Work progress tracking
		Termination of candidature in case of slow progress
3.	The thesis	The methodology and content
		The presentation and writing / grammar
		Writing progress tracking
		Completion within the dead-line

***Table I RPPS subscales and items.***

The response to each item (question) had five categories on a Likert scale, with category 1 marking a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side, and category 5 marking a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 was neutral.

## ***Data analysis***

SPSS program version 13.0 (Chicago, Illinois, US) was used for data analysis. Since the data collected were ordinal data, frequencies (% of giving a certain response) and the

mode (the most common response) were chosen to be used for reporting the results. To investigate the extent of agreement between answers given by students and their supervisors, cross-tab analysis was performed.

## **Results and discussion**

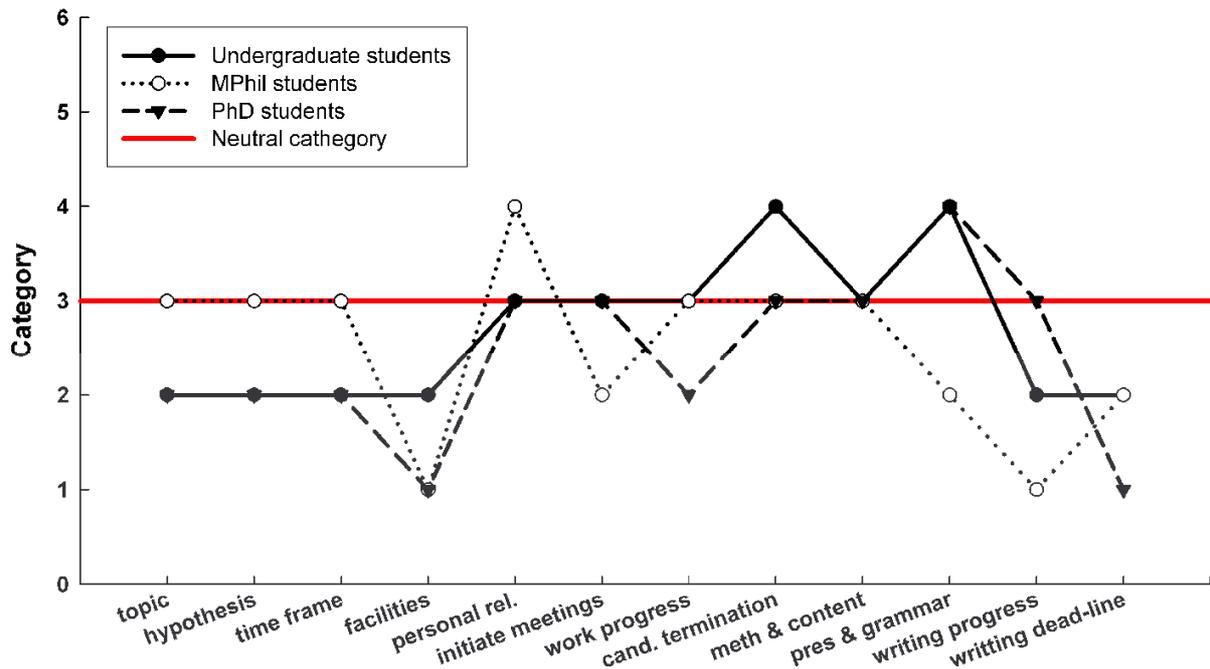
The questionnaire response rate was 46.66% for students and 35.71% for supervisors. 40% of the responsive students were undergraduate students working on research projects for their graduation paper, 40% were enrolled in an MPhil research project and 60% were students enrolled in a PhD research project. 16.66% of the responsive supervisors were involved in supervising undergraduate students, 33.33% were involved in supervising MPhil students and 50% were involved in supervising PhD students. With the exception of the undergraduate students that were all Norwegians, all the other students and supervisors had a diverse international background.

15% of the responsive students were at the beginning of their study, 40% were at the middle of their study and 40% were towards the end of their study. 33% of the responsive supervisors were supervising students at the beginning of their studies, 27.77% were supervising students at the middle of their studentship and 33% were supervising students at the end of their studentship.

### ***Students' expectations***

Generally, the students had moderate to high expectations from their supervisors (categories 2 and 1 on the Likert scale – the lower half of the graph, under the neutral red line of the graph illustrated in Fig 1). The highest expectations from their supervisors concerned the access to the necessary facilities and responsibility in writing the thesis. Most of the students considered that the termination of a candidature is not a prerogative

of the supervisor, nor is the presentation and grammar of the thesis (category 4 on the Likert scale).



**Fig. 1 Students' expectations from their supervisors** on a scale from 1 to 5 where category 1 marks a very strong believe that that responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.

As it can also be seen in Table II, undergraduate students and PhD students expect more from their supervisors in terms of choosing the topic and during the course of the study (category 2 on the Likert scale) compared to MPhil students that think of it more as a shared responsibility with their supervisors (category 3 on the Likert scale). The finding that the undergraduate students consider these items more of a supervisor responsibility is not surprising since they are at the beginning of their research carrier and thus more likely to be insecure on choosing the topic and adopting the theoretical frame of their research project. In contrary, at the first look the finding that the PhD students have the same perception is rather unexpected since they are further in their research carrier and thus expected to have a topic of research or at least a theoretical standpoint by their own. However, if one takes into consideration the policy of the University of Bergen in recruiting PhD students that consider the connection of a new PhD candidate to a recognized

Research School at the university and its link to an on-going research projects as essential factors for the candidate admission in the PhD program (Bergen, 2003, updated 2006), these findings might not be so surprising.

Item / Student type	Topic / course of study				Contact / Involvement				The Thesis			
	Topic	Working hypot.	Time frame	Facilities	Personal rel.	Initiating meetings	Work progress	Cand. termination	Methods & content	Present & grammar	Writing progress	Writing dead-line
Undergrad. stud. (n=4)	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	3	4	2	2
Undergrad. superv. (n=3)	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
MPhil stud. (n=4)	3	3	3	1	4	2	3	3	3	2	1	2
MPhil superv. (n=6)	3	3	3	1	3	3	2	4	3	2	4	1
PhD stud. (n=12)	2	2	2	1	3	3	2	3	3	4	3	1
PhD superv. (n=9)	3	3	3	1	3	3	3	4	3	2	4	1

**Table II** Students' and supervisor' expectation from each other on a scale from 1 to 5, where category 1 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side, and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.

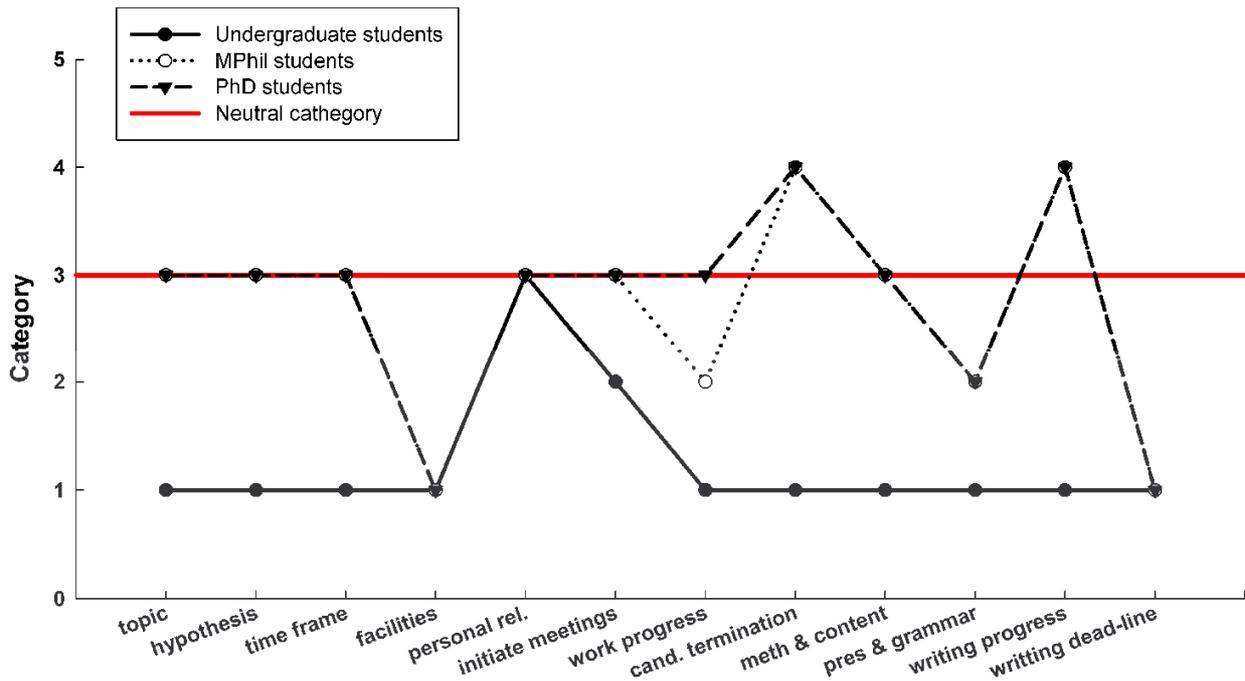
The MPhil students expect more than PhD students from their supervisors for initiating the research meetings and the responsibility of writing up the thesis (Fig. 1 and Table II). Interestingly, in contrast to undergraduate and PhD students, they consider the development of personal relationships between them and their supervisors as an important factor for a successful supervision (agreement to this statement category 4 on Likert scale). This might be explained in the view, again, that the MPhil students are earlier on their research path when compared with the PhD students that might feel more independent and with more initiative than their 'younger' MPhil student colleagues. From the same view, it is however unanticipated that the MPhil students showed less initiative and responsibility for writing up the thesis compared to the undergraduate students (Fig. 1 and Table II). There might be different explanations for these findings. For most of the

MPhil students the beginning of a master project might be perceived as the starting point of a new path - the research carrier, fact that might not be viewed exactly the same by their undergraduate colleagues which, although earlier in the research path, they might think of their research project and graduation paper more as a completion of their studies and thus more of their responsibility than the MPhil students. On the other hand, cultural background might also explain these differences based on the differences in understanding the concept of 'student' and 'supervisor' in different types of society (McClure, 2005). The undergraduate students involved in this study were all Norwegians and, similar to the British ones, belong to a low power-distance society where the educational process tends to be more student-centered, with the supervisor encouraging students to question and critique the ideas being put forward. The MPhil students group participating in this study was a mixed group including students from both developed and developing countries. However, taking into account the aim of Centre for International Health, University of Bergen, that is to provide research training as part of competence building in low income countries (Bergen, 2007), the majority of them belongs to developing countries, which are high power-distance societies where the educational process tends to be teacher-centered with students following the intellectual path set by the teacher (Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002). Obviously the findings of this pilot survey are part of the very complex phenomenon to be simply explained only by the model of high and low power-distance societies, but the cultural bias should however be taken into consideration when interpreting these data.

### ***Supervisors' expectations***

In general, supervisors' perception is that they should have more responsibilities when supervising the undergraduate students than when supervising the MPhil and PhD students (almost all of the items for the undergraduate students have categories 1 or 2 that lay in the lower half of the graph in Fig. 2, under the neutral red line). As expected,

the supervisors have higher expectations from MPhil and PhD students than from undergraduate students, although only at a moderate level (category 4 on the Likert scale – Fig.2), and with not significant differences between MPhil and PhD students. The supervisors considered most of the items as shared responsibilities for both MPhil and PhD students, especially those related with the topic of the research project, the theoretical stand point and the time frame (Fig. 2, Table II).

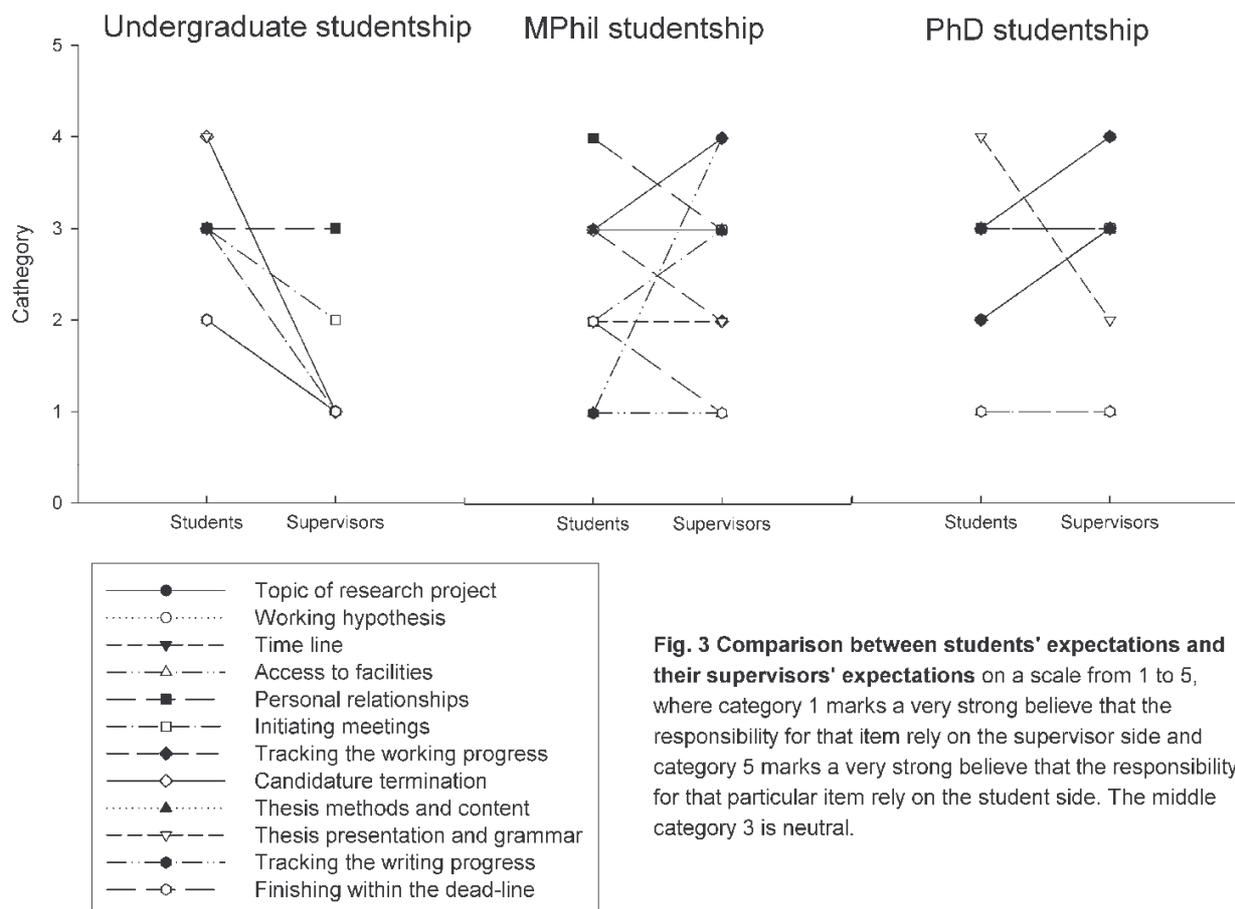


**Fig. 2 Supervisors' expectations from their students** on a scale from 1 to 5, where category 1 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.

Ensuring access to facilities is considered by supervisors entirely as their responsibility for all types of studentship (Table II), as well as meeting the dead-line with the writing up the thesis (category 1 on Likert scale). The supervisors of MPhil and PhD students consider that the decision of terminating a student candidature when the student does not meet the progress requirements should be more of a student's responsibility, as well as following the writing process (category 4 on Like scale).

### Comparison of students' and supervisors' expectations

The general trend, as depicted in Fig. 3, is that the undergraduate students expect less from their supervisors than the supervisors perceive they should offer. Particularly the writing of the thesis is considered by undergraduate students more of their responsibility than of their supervisors (see Table II). In contrast to their supervisors, the undergraduate students consider that the responsibility for the methods used and Thesis' content should be shared between them and the supervisors (category 3 on Likert scale), and that the presentation and grammar of the thesis is more of their responsibility (category 4 on Likert scale).



**Fig. 3 Comparison between students' expectations and their supervisors' expectations** on a scale from 1 to 5, where category 1 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.

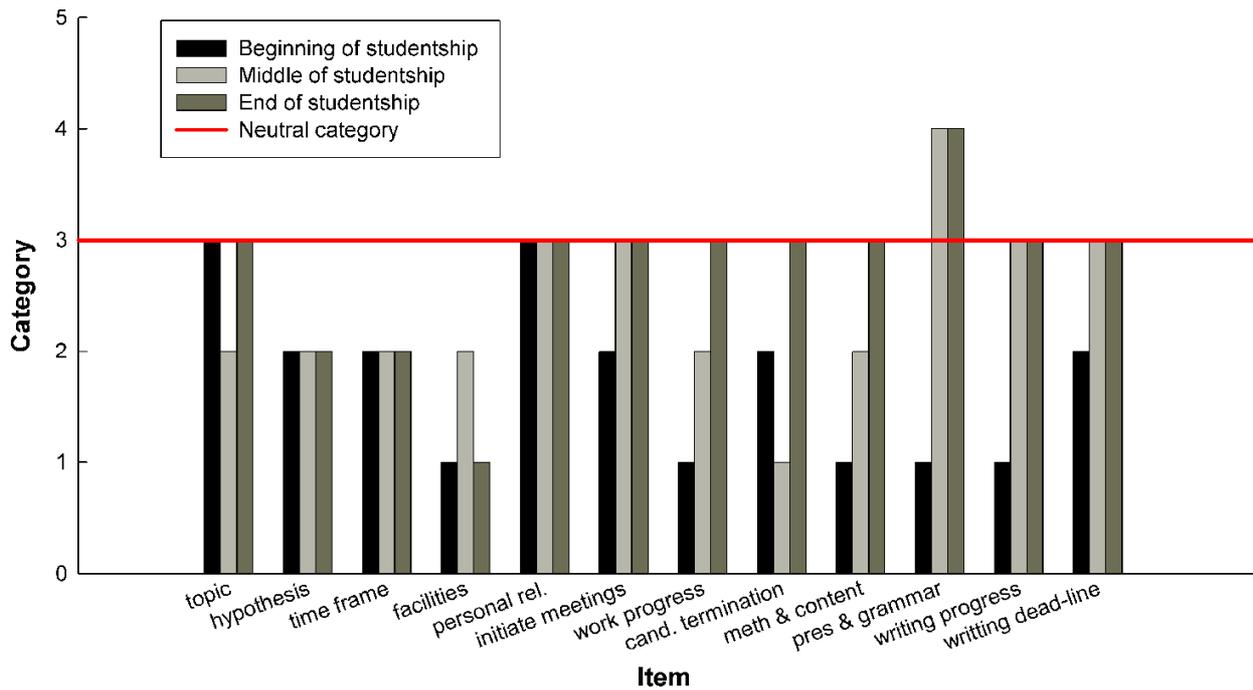
**Fig. 3 Comparison between students' and their supervisors' expectations** on a scale from 1 to 5, where category 1 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.

The comparison between students' and supervisors' expectations shows a more complex picture for the MPhil level (Fig. 3). For most of the items there is a complete agreement between MPhil students and their supervisors, as for example for sharing the responsibility on topic / course of the study (category 3 on Likert scale), for considering a supervisors' responsibility ensuring the facilities for the study (category 1) or for the presentation of the thesis (category 2). However, there are some items that show disaccord between MPhil students and their supervisors, mainly concerning initiation of meetings, that MPhil students consider it as a supervisors' responsibility while the supervisors consider it as a shared responsibility between them and the MPhil students. Interestingly, MPhil students perceive as a supervisor responsibility the tracking and checking of the writing progress of thesis, but they consider their supervisors less responsible for the working progress of their data collection.

The PhD students seem to expect more responsibilities to be taken by their supervisors than the supervisors feel is their duty (Fig. 3). Especially when concerning choosing the topic of the research project, the theoretical frame of the project and the time frame, the PhD students consider them more of a supervisor prerogative than of a student (see Table II). The PhD students also consider that the supervisors should be more involved and have more responsibilities in tracking their work progress (category 2) than the supervisors themselves think of (the supervisors consider it more of a shared responsibility – category 3). Discrepancies occurred also when concerning the tracking and checking of the writing of the Thesis progress. The PhD students consider it a shared responsibility (category 3) while the supervisors consider it more of a student responsibility (category 4).

### ***Students' expectations at different periods of their studentship***

Students at the beginning of their studentship think that they should need more help from their supervisors in terms of writing the thesis as compared with later stages of their studentship (Fig. 4). At the beginning of their studentship they consider their supervisors responsible for all items of the thesis subclass (category 1 and 2), for checking the work progress (category 1), and for initiating the research meetings (category 2). More they progress in time in their studentship, more responsible they become, at least in initiating the meetings (shared responsibility with their supervisors - category 3), following the working progress (shared responsibility with their supervisors - category 3), or writing up their thesis (categories 3 and 4).

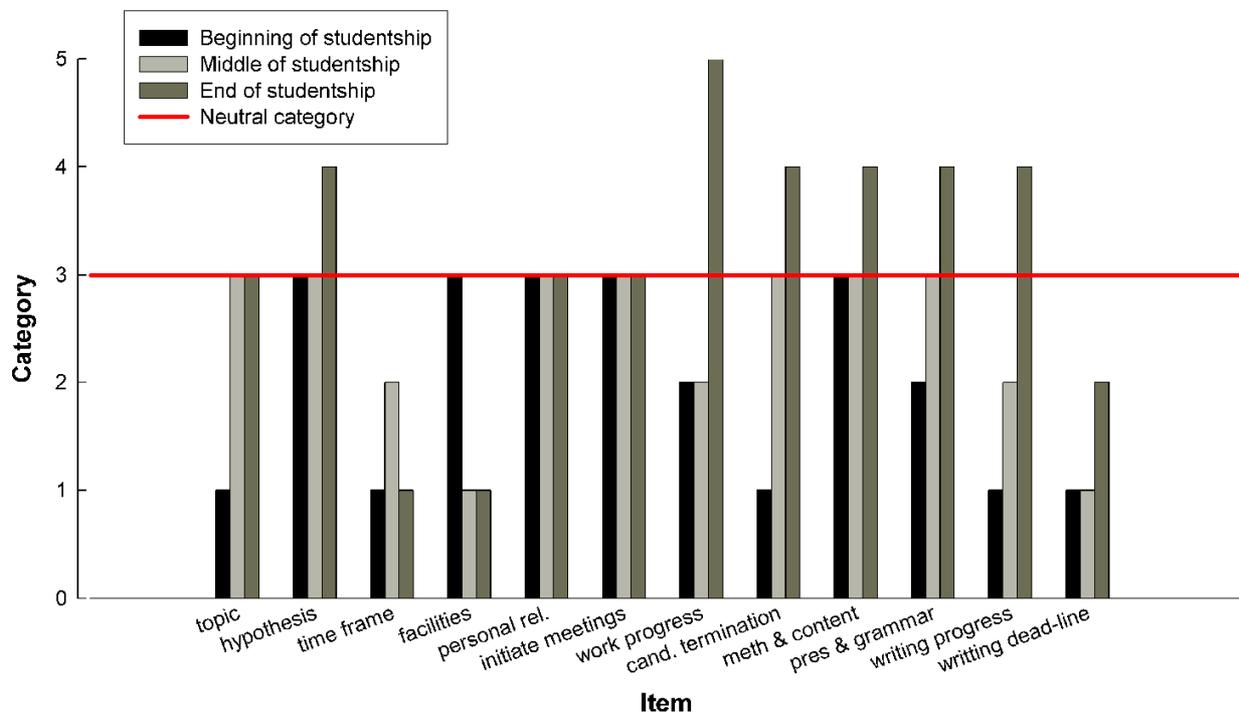


***Fig. 4 Comparison between students' expectations from their supervisors at different studentship periods on a scale from 1 to 5, where category 1 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.***

### ***Supervisors' expectations at different periods of the studentship of their students***

The supervisors perceived also, as expected, that their students should become more responsible and independent with progression in time of the studentship (Fig. 5). This trend is constantly observed for the items in the thesis subclass. The most dramatic change is seen for the responsibility of tracking and checking the work progress: if at the beginning and middle of scholarship the supervisors think of it as more of their responsibility (category 2), when their students reach the end of the studentship they expect their students to take full responsibility for their work progress (category 5).

However, most of the supervisors consider that initiation of research meetings should be a shared responsibility between them and students, irrespective of the period of studentship their students are in (category 3 for both the beginning, middle and end of the scholarship).



***Fig. 5 Comparison between supervisors' expectations from their students at different studentship periods on a scale from 1 to 5, where category 1 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.***

## ***Comparison between students' and supervisors expectations at different periods of studentship***

Although the picture of comparison of expectations between students and supervisors seem very complex, the general trend is that supervisors expect their students to be more responsible than the students are thinking is expected from them, at all stages of studentship (Table III and Fig. 6).

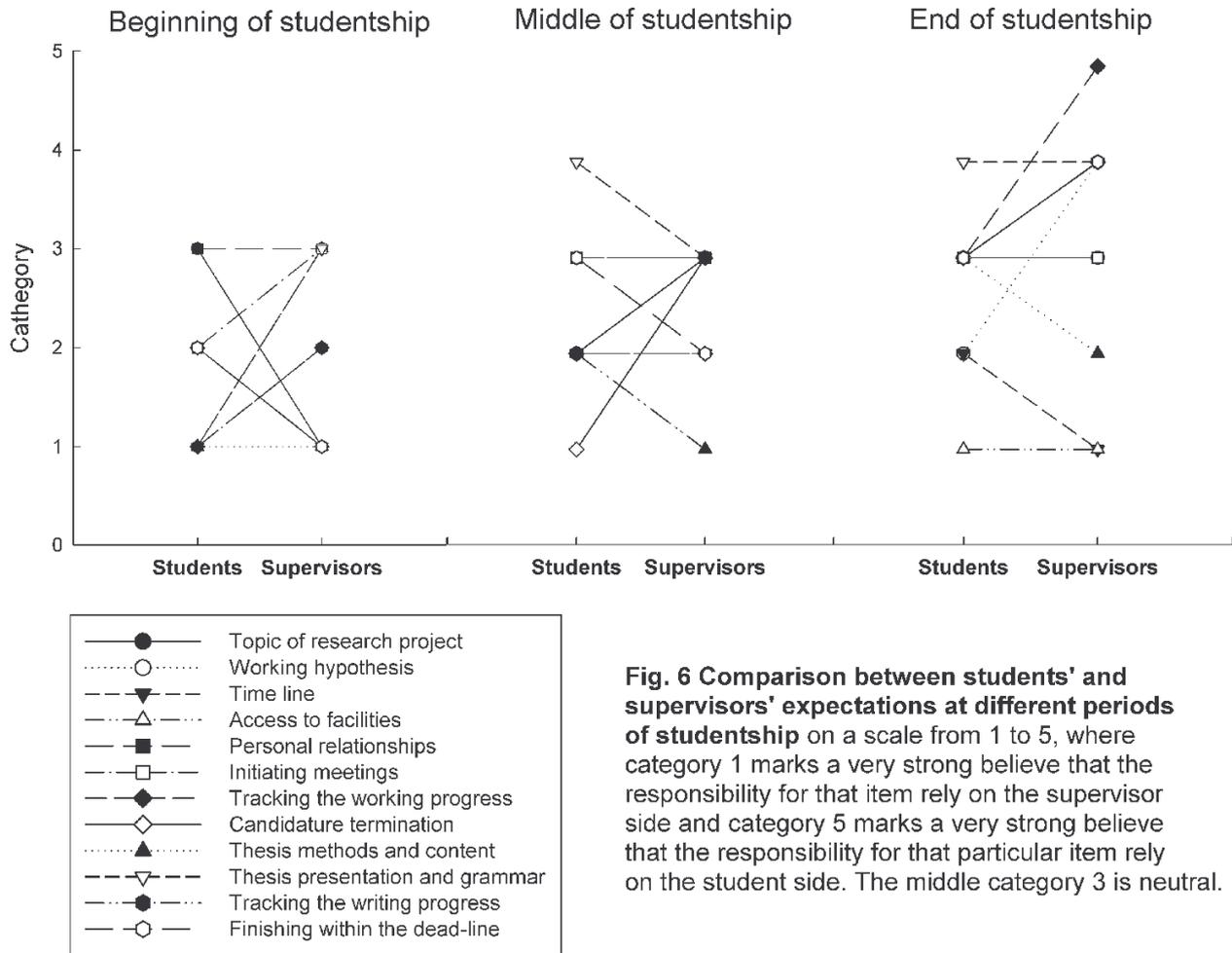
Item / Student period	Topic / course of study				Contact / Involvement				The Thesis			
	Topic	Working hypot.	Time frame	Facilities	Personal rel.	Initiating meetings	Work progress	Cand. termination	Methods & content	Present & grammar	Writing progress	Writing dead-line
Stud. at beginning (n=3)	3	2	2	1	3	2	1	2	1	1	1	2
Superv. a stud. at beginning (n=6)	1	3	1	3	3	3	2	1	3	2	1	1
Stud. at middle (n=8)	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	1	2	4	3	3
Superv. a stud. at middle (n=5)	3	3	2	1	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	1
Stud. at end (n=8)	3	2	2	1	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	3
Superv. a stud. at end (n=6)	3	4	1	1	3	3	5	4	4	4	4	2

**Table III** Comparison of expectation between students and their supervisors at different studentship periods, on a scale from 1 to 5, where category 1 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.

## **Conclusions**

Although this is a pilot study done on a limited number of subjects and its moderate response rate might expose its results to various biases, its findings bring useful knowledge on students' and supervisors' expectations in research supervision at upper levels in an international setting. The University of Bergen has established standards which both students and supervisors are expected to meet (Bergen, 2003, updated 2006).

This is clearly reflected in the present survey by the observed agreement between students and supervisors on various items such as supervisors' responsibility for ensuring the necessary facilities, or shared responsibility for the methods and content of the thesis.



**Fig. 6 Comparison between students' and supervisors' expectations at different periods of studentship on a scale from 1 to 5, where category 1 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.**

**Fig. 6 Comparison between students' and supervisors' expectations at different periods of studentship on a scale from 1 to 5, where category 1 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that item rely on the supervisor side and category 5 marks a very strong believe that the responsibility for that particular item rely on the student side. The middle category 3 is neutral.**

However, this study has also identified few differences between students' and supervisors' expectations at all levels and periods of studentship. An interesting observation was that overall, the undergraduate students expected less from their supervisors than the supervisors were thinking was their responsibility, while the MPhil and PhD students expected, at least for some specific items, that the responsibility should rely more on the supervisor side than the supervisors themselves perceived. As

expected, the general trend for both students and supervisors was towards shared or shift towards the student side of responsibilities with time during the studentship. However, the present findings showed for some particular items that the supervisors expect their students to be more responsible than the students are thinking is expected from them, at all stages of studentship. This incongruence between students' and supervisors' expectations is not completely unexpected if one has in mind the numerous previous reports on students' dissatisfaction with the type of guidance provided (Aspland et al., 1999; McClure, 2005; Parry & Hayden, 1994; Powles, 1988). As early as two decades ago Moses identified a range of student concerns including the adverse impact of personalities on supervision, professional factors such as supervisors' insufficient knowledge in the area supervised or a lack of interest in students' work, and organizational factors such as too many students, too much administration, poor management of research groups, and failure to provide appropriate student support (Moses, 1984). It is most likely that such factors are not anymore of actuality in the supervision process nowadays or not to the same extent as previously due to an increasing awareness of these problems and measures taken by the universities (Technology, 2007). Although there are studies that suggest that there is no 'right way' to supervise a student (Exley & O'Malley, 1999) and that the research degree supervision is a bi-lateral complex process that has no set prescription (Kam, 1997), this study emphasizes the importance of sustained efforts that should be done continuously to improve the supervision process, as previously suggested by studies at other universities (Woolhouse, 2002). It pinpoints the necessity of continuous negotiation of expectations, both at the beginning of the study according to the level of studentship that it is involved, and during the study period, since the expectations of both students and supervisors might change with time during various periods of a scholarship.

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