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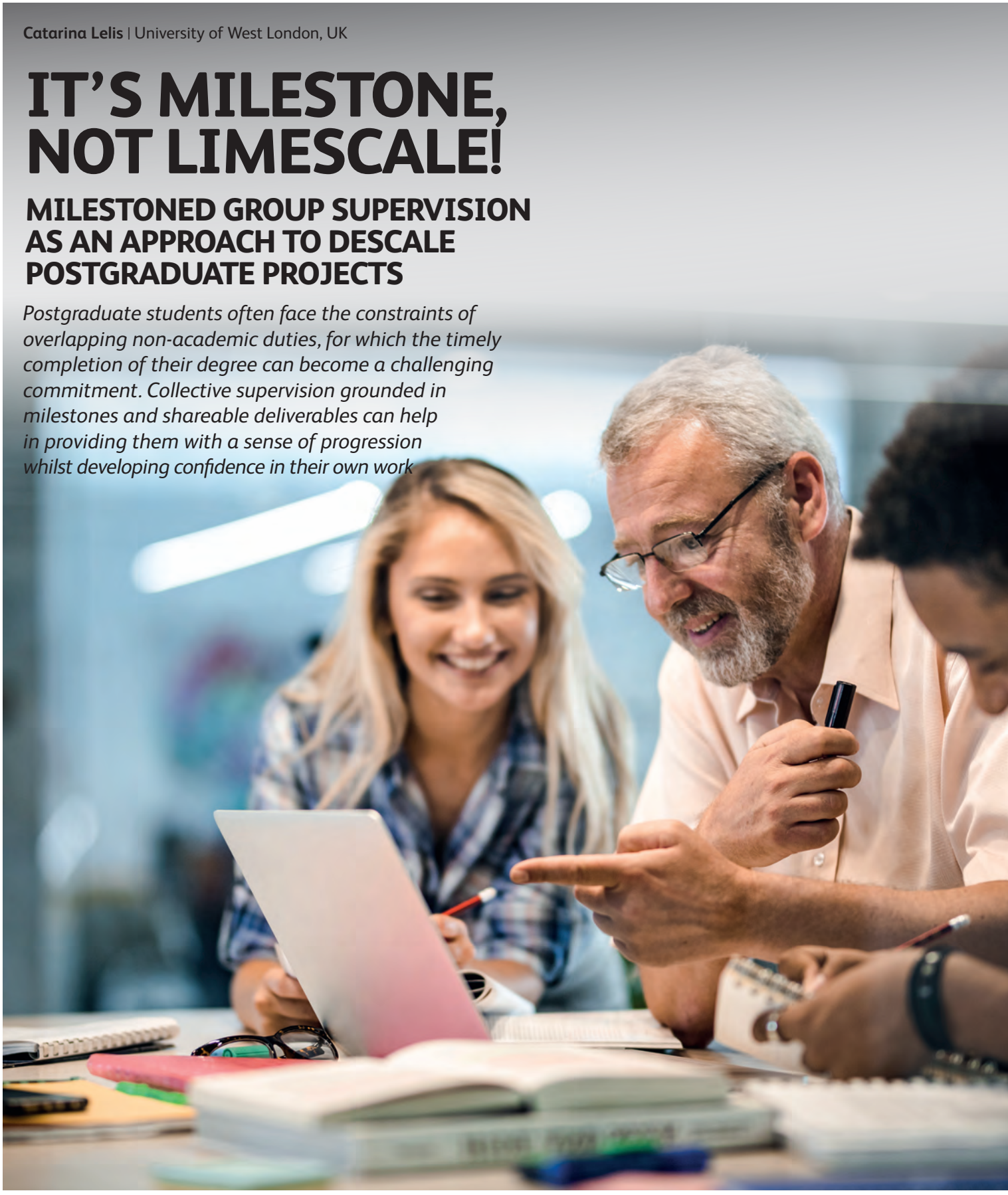
IT'S MILESTONE, NOT LIMESCALE!

MILESTONED GROUP SUPERVISION AS AN APPROACH TO DESCALE POSTGRADUATE PROJECTS

Postgraduate students often face the constraints of overlapping non-academic duties, for which the timely completion of their degree can become a challenging commitment. Collective supervision grounded in milestones and shareable deliverables can help in providing them with a sense of progression whilst developing confidence in their own work



Alternative models of postgraduate supervision

In the context of Higher Education the process of supervising academic work is often associated with the classic one-to-one approach (Pearson & Brew, 2002), in which a student is allocated to a supervisor and meetings between the two are scheduled according to various factors, such as the stage of the project, the specific needs of the student, and the availability of the supervisor. Authors such as Malfroy (2005) have defended alternative models of supervision that move away from the dyadic tradition and that, mostly, provide an efficient answer to the increasingly diverse and rising demand for supervision given the growing cohorts of students in postgraduate courses (Massyn, 2018). This becomes particularly preoccupying when, according to McCallin and Nayar (2012), the relationship between students and supervisors is acknowledged as one of the most important aspects of postgraduate course completion, but also when, according to Massyn (2018, p.115) 'students expect supervisors to be advisers, coaches, mentors, guides and quality controllers'. Massyn (2018) highlights these expectations as the ingredients for additional pressure on supervisors, both in terms of workload, and in terms of the competencies they need in order to properly supervise their students – suggesting that the new collective approaches to supervision tend to accentuate peer interaction as a support component.

Wichmann-Hansen, Thomsen and Nordentoft (2015) present group supervision as contributing to increased student participation in academic activities and to boosting learning – suggesting that it is more impactful than one-to-one supervision. In such groups, the authors mention that the supervisor can be co-present (but is not considered an essential element) and students engage in several activities such as discussing topics of common interest, presenting their research progress, and commenting on each other's materials. This would fall under what Boud (2001, p.3) describes as peer learning: 'a two-way reciprocal learning activity', or the 'networks of learning relationships, among students and significant others' (Boud & Lee, 2005, p.503), where the significant 'other' can be the supervisor. In fact, Stracke (2010) underlines that when peer group activities are conceived as a tactic of supervision, a more balanced relationship (in regard to power) between postgraduate supervisees and their supervisors is developed, which in its turn facilitates collegial exchange, feedback and moral support, in what students consider a friendly environment. Similarly, Samara (2007) offers *insight*, *reflection* and *self-confidence* as the main benefits of group supervision: the student gets a better understanding of the context of research by being exposed to similar topics facing similar or dissimilar problems, which then encourages reflection on ways to proceed and to find solutions, reinforcing the students' determination toward their own research decisions and projects.

Systems of monitoring the unconventional

Universities face a growing and rich diversity of students, if not for other reasons, because of the increased mobility provided by a globalised world. Hence, student diversity is defined not just by factors such as culture, country of origin, age range, but also, as Parker-Jenkins (2018) mentions, by academic background and personal and professional identities. In effect, many (if not most) postgraduate students are working adults, which means they accumulate their studies with other – very often, conflicting – responsibilities. These multiple roles put students, to some extent, at risk and can, undoubtedly, contribute to the discontinuation of their demanding studies, or to the choice of studying part-time, which constrains their academic interaction opportunities. Girves and Wemmerus (1988) stress that the more a student is committed to the university and to earning a degree, the higher their willingness to interact with faculty members and fellow students which then impacts favourably upon completion rates. Girves and Wemmerus add that, at postgraduate level, there is a direct relationship between students' perceived adviser quality/support and their academic performance.

Such support is usually associated with formal processes (e.g. monitoring and milestoning) and can also emerge from informal and multi-disciplinary meetings, where diverse students gather in a shared context to discuss their research projects. However, the latter can prove difficult, namely if completely detached from the former: firstly, if students cannot anticipate the added value of such informal meetings, the fact that their peers may be working on what they may see as tangent topics, may detract them from *wasting* their time in engaging with what, *a priori*, has no direct contribution to their very specific project; secondly, due to the little exposure to research during their undergraduate studies, students often underestimate the time and effort necessary at postgraduate level (Massyn, 2018). For these reasons, Lambert (2012) suggests that students should be given explicit deadlines for the various milestones of their postgraduate journeys.

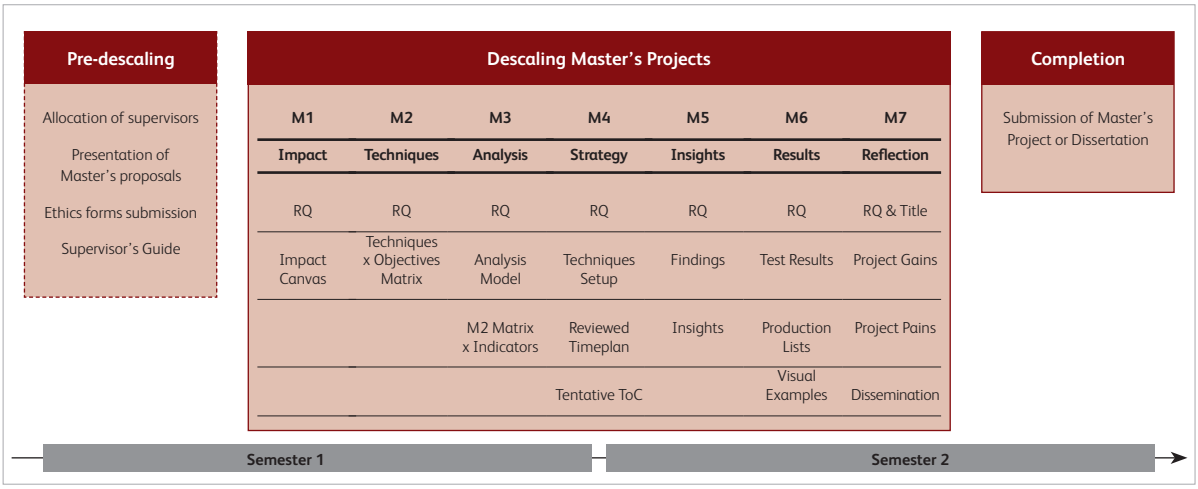


FIGURE 1 The framework for descaling master's projects

Descaling master's projects

In the context of the course I lead, a combination of formal and informal learning environments seems to be the most reliable approach in contributing to a timely delivery. Setting clear expectations and boundaries is expected to support the transition period of becoming a postgraduate student and, to some extent, an independent researcher for the first time. Toward the end of the course, students have two modules that run roughly at the same time: Master's Project/ Dissertation and Professional Creative Contexts, where students are expected to engage either with an internship opportunity or an industry mentorship. Such a context permits that, in regard to master's project or dissertation supervision, students can build both on situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and also on the idea of peer learning through collective supervision – where the supervisor is responsible for managing and structuring the activities for every meeting. The latter is informed by the fact that, this very same context, added to all the other conflicting responsibilities our students have to face, was contributing to the continuous appearance of what I call *research limescale* (queries perceived by students as basic doubts they should not have at that stage, fear of progressing or anxiety provoked by having to move to another stage of the project or, in some cases, simple procrastination). Such sediments were often preventing (or blocking) projects/dissertations (usually based on a mix of documentary review and empirical research) to be delivered within the expected time. Therefore, still within the realm of metaphors, a *descaling* process was deemed necessary.

Hence, after the selection and allocation of supervisors, after the presentation of students' proposals, and after the submission of students' ethics forms, our group supervision sessions are organised on the grounds of functioning as monitoring meetings, mostly to see that work is proceeding according to the cohort's timeline and that queries that can lead to potential delays are clarified in a timely manner. For that, it is suggested that supervisors and supervisees follow specific *pre-descaling* and *descaling* steps (Figure 1):

Master's Project / Dissertation

Milestone 3 – Completing your Analysis Model

Please prepare a PPT presentation with **3 slides only** containing:

1. Your RQ
2. Your completed analysis model
3. Your M2 matrix/table with your evaluation metrics/indicators

To be shared on the 13th April

FIGURE 2 The brief for Milestone 3

Setting clear expectations and boundaries is expected to support the transition period of becoming a postgraduate student and, to some extent, an independent researcher for the first time

1. At a pre-descaling stage, every supervisor receives a Supervisor's Guide, where the supervision formal and mandatory standards are defined (module's learning outcomes, marking criteria, etc.) and both meetings' timings and approaches are proposed (e.g., group sessions should be triggered and arranged by the supervisor, one-to-one supervision meetings should be requested by the students according to their needs and always in between group sessions). In the case of the latter, supervisors are free to adapt the approach according to their own supervisory style and other commitments.

2. Until the end of this two semester module there are seven group sessions, each one up to three hours long and corresponding to a specific milestone. These meetings occur roughly every three weeks. Therefore, the students have, at least, seven different milestones which they are expected to meet:

- Milestone 1 – Identifying the impact of the project
- Milestone 2 – Aligning objectives with techniques
- Milestone 3 – Completing the analysis model
- Milestone 4 – Reviewing the strategy
- Milestone 5 – Sharing findings and insights
- Milestone 6 – Testing results, preparing outputs
- Milestone 7 – Reflection and dissemination

3. Each milestone is accompanied by a very detailed brief on what exactly students are expected to deliver (Figure 2). Milestone 1 is published by supervisors immediately after the master's projects or dissertations proposals' presentations. The briefs of subsequent milestones are published on the day in which the previous milestone and corresponding group supervision meeting takes place.

4. The day before each meeting, students send their milestones presentations in either PPT or PDF format. They are expected to prepare highly diagrammatic contents.

5. In order to optimise feedback, interaction and allow time for discussion, each meeting can accommodate a maximum of six students presenting their achievements. However:

- Those presenting are only announced at the beginning of each group supervision session; hence, every student will still need to prepare the contents and accompany the milestones' schedule. After presenting, students receive immediate feedback from the supervisor and then from their peers, following Samara's (2006) insight that receiving feedback from a peer who is focused on a different topic can be highly positive as it allows for different views to emerge.
- Those not presenting are encouraged to stay for the whole session, as the feedback given to their colleagues will most likely be useful for them as well; moreover, their own perspectives are considered equally valuable during the expected discussion that is open to the group, as the pivotal idea is that exposure to the approaches of their peers helps students in refining the rationale supporting their own choices and research designs.
- Throughout the module all students are given the guarantee that they will present a minimum of two milestones.

In order to counteract all these rather structured guidelines, informality is encouraged throughout the sessions. The purpose of building this friendly environment mentioned by both Samara (2007) and Stracke (2010) is to reduce the fear of saying/asking 'something stupid', which is, in many cases, and in my domain of expertise, what actually allows students (or humans, for that matter), to develop their thoughts into really original or innovative work.

Keep removing the limescale

This framework has been allowing students to more easily keep track of their research and project's process/progress. Besides establishing the grounds for a social network and considering the fact that each communication is so personal and individual (because master's projects and dissertations are individual endeavours by nature), this framework also enhances the involvement of those taking part in these milestone sessions, whilst facilitating the sharing of knowledge and developing students' communication and interaction skills – highly pertinent for employability or career development and when, increasingly, professionals are expected to be members of teams. And, although most supervisees commit to these milestones, each project has its particular time constraints, most of which imposed by the empirical stage in which students are expected to interact with external parties. This means that, despite a structured and milestoned programme, some students are

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unable to fully deliver at the timetabled deadlines. Nevertheless, attending these sessions and realising that some of their peers are further ahead leads to a deeper understanding of the need to either re-nudge the other parties or implement the anticipated contingency plan (which is part of their proposal).

As for those complying with time and benefiting from both the supervisor's feedback and their peers' thoughts and suggestions – in this case, dealing with an extended level of significant 'others', as suggested by Boud and Lee (2005) – I believe this process has contributed to the emotional empowerment defended by Samara (2007), as the students' self-image as researchers is strengthened: after their presentation and discussion, the group always erupts in a loud round of applause, notoriously celebrating small victories; thus, the students see themselves as being on the right track and closer to the moment in which they will be able to claim a small contribution to the discipline.

In addition to the above, I strongly agree with Malfroy's views in that group supervision is an excellent supplement to individual supervision, given the time and resource constraints supervisors increasingly experience (2005). I was recently invited to mentor a fellow colleague in supervision practice by allowing him to shadow one of my supervisory meetings. Unlike what he might expect, I did not invite him to attend an individual supervision session but one of our milestones' presentations. He kindly shared his thoughts:

> *"In the meeting, I have watched the efforts you make to ensure that the project of your supervisees is met, and, at the same time, you made your supervisees independent. I would like to use the format of 7 milestones to guide my supervisees in future. However, I am planning to redesign these milestones on my own and apply them with the next batch. You have extended your guidance and assistance to me, for my role as a supervisor."*

Besides the confirmation of a colleague from a different school and discipline, I have been gathering evidence that this framework is effective in our context, from a student point of view:

- Students manifested their wish to continue meeting as a group; in his final document, one of our recent graduates wrote: *"The milestones in our group of supervisees have taught me that even the largest task can be accomplished, if it will be done one step at a time. I am indeed enriched through the Milestones Series!!! This project alone is definitely a 'Milestone' in my life!"*
- Individual sessions (usually 60 minutes long) decreased substantially, as most of the queries were common and shared during the milestones meetings; also, experienced supervisors could anticipate some of the doubts and concerns, and these were clarified to the group at once instead of repeatedly in every one-to-one interaction. This was seen as very positive by the students because most of them would have to make arrangements with their employers in order to either come in person to campus for a 1-hour meeting, or manage conditions for a video-conference call while at work, which in either case was frequently seen as a burden, often resulting in individual supervision meetings being cancelled last minute.
- Timely completion rates increased; where before this framework had been implemented the majority of students would request the one month final project/dissertation extension, currently, less than half of our students submits an extension request and a great deal of those soliciting it find themselves able to complete their projects within the expected deadline – hence not making use of any extension at all.

Even students who had been allocated to other supervisors (who eventually decided to implement different supervisory practices) would occasionally attend our group sessions to take part in the discussion moments. Of course, as much as not all students are equally prepared to actively participate in a group of such dynamics, not all supervisors would see this approach as their preferred one. Nevertheless, I see this framework as very easily transferable and adaptable to other contexts beyond supervision, both in academia and in industry, especially regarding the regulation of team-based projects of any nature. When the length of such projects differs significantly from the one I present, the intervals between milestones can be flexed, stretched or squeezed according to the specificities of the project's timeframe. This could work for much more longitudinal cases (where sub-milestones would possibly have to be implemented) to one-day bootcamps (where, maybe, a couple of milestones would have to be discarded). When group size varies, considerations would have to be made in regard to who presents: in much larger groups, individuals may have to be gathered, for example, by topics under development or a spokesperson could be selected. Whereas, in smaller groups, every participating member could have their voice heard. As in most human relationship situations, immediate, uninformed and carbon-copy transfers are not recommended, for adjustments would have to be made in order to guarantee that limescale does not build-up to the point of causing irreversible damage.

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