

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Doctoral Supervision In Changing Times: How Do Supervisors Exercise Agency To Support Doctoral Researchers To Timely Completion?

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Research Domain: Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

Abstract:

Summary

Globally, the doctorate has been subject to numerous policy interventions, which have dislocated it from its purely knowledge-based origins and have broadened its purpose to provide training that creates highly skilled graduates for the knowledge-based economy. In parallel, the timescales for completion of a doctorate have been tightened.

These changes place additional pressure on supervisors who are asked not only to guide fledgling researchers through the knowledge-production process, but to support them in taking advantage of the myriad of opportunities that will leave them well-prepared for a variety of career trajectories; all within a constrained timescale.

This paper asks: How do supervisors exercise their agency to support doctoral researchers to timely completion in times of flux?

Reporting on findings from an institutional case study of a UK Russell Group university, and two data validation events, three modes of agency are identified: epistemic-oriented agency, personal efficacy-oriented agency, and relationally-oriented agency.

Paper:**Title**

Doctoral supervision in changing times: How do supervisors exercise agency to support doctoral researchers to timely completion?

Paper

The doctoral qualification in the United Kingdom, and further afield, has been subject to numerous policy interventions, which have intensified during the last three decades. Such interventions have dislocated the doctorate from its purely knowledge-based origins and have pushed it toward providing a broader training that produces entrepreneurial leaders (Balaban, 2016) capable not only of producing knowledge but being a competent user of knowledge, with the capacity to translate it into a commercially or socially viable enterprise (Hancock & Walsh, 2014). The economic and social benefits that doctoral graduates generate has encouraged policies that restrict the timescales for completion of doctorates, seeking to ensure the efficient supply of highly skilled graduates for the knowledge-based economy.

The broadening of the purpose of doctoral education, alongside a tightening of timescales for completion, is a global phenomenon. For example, the Review of Australia's Research Training System (McGagh et al., 2016) advocated for the addition of broader skills training, closer collaboration between universities and industry at doctoral level, along with opening up placement opportunities to doctoral researchers. In a similar vein, The European Higher Education Area has promoted the triple 'i' agenda to make doctoral education more internationalised (to improve quality), more interdisciplinary (to broaden career prospects and promote knowledge transfer), and more intersectoral (to build-in work ready skills training to doctoral programmes). Consequently, the doctorate is in a state of flux, which is influencing the experience of key actors in doctoral education such as doctoral researchers, supervisors, programme directors, administrators, and researcher developers. This paper focusses on the experiences of supervisors.

The paper is informed by institutional work theory (Lawrence, Subbady & Leca, 2009), which provides a useful theoretical lens for examining the relationship between the changing doctorate and supervisor work. The paper takes the position that the doctorate can be conceptualised as an institution (i.e. an enduring element of social life that affects the behaviour and beliefs of social actors) that is being disrupted. In exploring the relationship between the doctorate and supervisors, institutional work theory invites researchers to focus their efforts on understanding how supervisors exercise their agency from mundane activities that maintain the status quo through to bold acts that open up new possibilities.

This paper acknowledges that the doctorate is being disrupted, and that this disruption is placing additional pressures on the work of supervisors. Supervisors are now not only asked to guide fledgling researchers through the knowledge-production process, but they have the additional responsibility of supporting their doctoral researchers in taking advantage of the myriad of opportunities that will leave them well-prepared for a variety of career trajectories; all within a constrained timescale.

The following research question was posed: How do supervisors exercise their agency to support

doctoral researchers to timely completion in times of flux?

In order to address this question, the paper draws on findings from an institutional case study of a Russell Group university in the United Kingdom. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews (N = 28) facilitated by a creative method called 'rivers of experience' to capture participants' critical experiences. A further 31 individuals participated in the study via two workshops, one held at the UK Council for Graduate Education's International Conference on Development in Doctoral Education and Training (ICDDT) and one all-day workshop at the Society for Research into Higher Education. Participants included key actors in doctoral education, namely, doctoral researchers, supervisors, administrative staff and researcher developers. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and guided by a constructivist philosophy (Denicolo, Long, & Bradley-Cole, 2016).

Through the data analysis, three modes of supervisor agency were identified:

- epistemic-oriented agency: this concerns the tactics and strategies that supervisors employ to develop reflexive and independent researchers.
- personal efficacy-oriented agency: this concerns the tactics and strategies that supervisors employ to help their doctoral researchers prioritise and balance the competing demands on their time
- and relationally-oriented agency: this concerns the tactics and strategies that supervisors employ to foster productive and supportive working relationships with their doctoral researchers.

The research reveals that these agentic modes are impacted by the changing nature of the doctorate, which can create divergent needs between doctoral researchers and their supervisors, inviting a more instrumental approach to supervision or, at worst, questionable supervisory practices.

In summary, the research finds that supervisory practices are changing as the institution of the doctorate becomes disrupted. Supervisors are creating new ways of exercising agency so that they can be responsive to the new demands of the doctorate whilst safeguarding the knowledge creation element. Generally, the data support the view that supervisors are exercising their agency in ways that are helpful and supportive to doctoral researchers, enabling them to make the most of their experience in the time available. There was, however, evidence of recourse to toxic supervisory practices which must not be left unaddressed.

It is hoped that these research findings will be of interest to a broad range of stakeholders including other researchers in the field, practitioners and policy makers. Already, the results have been used to inform a recent workshop for supervisors at Royal Holloway, University of London, which was very well received.

References

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