

Doctoral supervision across worlds: comparative supervisor lenses exposed through collaborative workshops

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

We present early analysis of comparative affordances and constraints of online workshops designed to support systematic and academically-informed doctoral supervision. The original English enactment was transferred to a southern African context involving universities in Namibia, South Africa and Zambia as well as the initiating institution. We report on how contextual affordances and constraints impacted supervisor reflection on supervisory issues and their learning-for-practice from workshops.

We use an institutional ethnographic approach to show that many supervisory issues and challenges are common across contexts, although practice still varies considerably even across colleagues working in cognate fields in the same university. However, local and national cultures and contexts also serve to constrain and impact the approaches to which supervisors feel they have access.

The study is significant for evidencing a novel, transferable approach to affordable and sustainable supervisory development, while also informing more inclusive approaches to both doctoral education and transnational academic appreciation.

Full paper

Background

Postgraduate research supervision is under-valued, under-provisioned and under-developed in many HEIs globally (Fulgence, 2019; Taylor et al., 2021), with tensions between traditional nurture of embryonic researchers fit to curate and develop an academic field (Golde & Walker, 2006) and managerial imperatives towards a scientific-technical postgraduate education that serves wider purposes of market economies (Halse & Mowbray, 2011). Additionally, doctoral supervision takes place against a background of contextual and cultural affordances and constraints but in a global, and mobile, higher education system. Recent years have also seen widespread diversification of the student body and of doctorates, massification, and formalisation of doctoral study (Hasgall et al., 2019). The result is multiple and significant tensions for supervisors, and often, low rates of doctoral progression and completion, especially in non-laboratory settings (e.g. Churchill et al., 2022).

Despite a clear need for cross-national mutual understanding and respect in a mobile, inter-connected and fundamentally competitive academic world, there is very little comparative work in the field of doctoral education. A notable exception is Taylor et al. (2021), focusing on education and structures for doctoral supervision. Further, systematic preparation for, or development of, doctoral supervision in universities globally remains unusual and/or prohibitively expensive at scale (Manderson et al., 2017).

The workshops

From Autumn 2021 we are adopting design research (Bakker, 2019) to develop an annual series of six online collaborative workshops that support 'reflective, personal, scholarly and systematic reflection' (UKGCE, 2019) of experienced supervisors in a major English university, laying foundations for UKGCE supervisor recognition. Involvement of two external 'critical friends' from Egypt and South Africa HEIs shadowing, contributing to, but importantly, also critiquing workshops for further development, has catalysed a similar locally-informed approach 'SAUSC' in southern Africa from Spring 2022. That is led by the authors, involves five experienced academics from each of South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, and supports an additional, comparative, element to the research.

Workshop aims are to support sustainable and affordable deliberate and academically-informed reflection on related issues, via the establishment of a genuine 'professional learning community' (Vescio et al., 2008). Transference to practice is supported by approaches adapted from Timor-Schlevin et al. (2022). SAUSC workshops also support understanding of locally unique contributions to the field of doctoral supervision. This paper focuses on early comparative work; workshop design and early impact are reported elsewhere.

We asked, 'How do contextual affordances and constraints across the four universities involved, impact supervision practices, and inform academics' reflections on, and learning about, doctoral supervision in and through such workshops?'

Methodology

Our approach is institutional ethnographic (Smith, 2006). Data are drawn from workshop recordings, and participant survey and

unsolicited feedback; also from in-depth interviews with the 'critical friends' for English workshops and each of the (four-strong) leadership group for SAUSC workshops. Interviews and surveys probe participant workshop experiences and learning initially around structure, people organisation, reported practices and content, to discern potential improvement for those purposes, but also the associated cultural and contextual affordances and constraints, to inform comparative analysis. Data are analysed thematically, with further comparative analysis informed by Halse & Malfroy's (2010) five dimensions of supervision, as well as Bruce & Stoodley's (2013) categories of supervision-as-teaching. Cross-researcher and participant validation of data interpretation enhances trustworthiness.

Initial findings

suggest participating supervisors show considerable variation in approaches to supervision and supervisory roles adopted, even within one university and research field. However, within each area of supervision considered, there is also much that is in common across contexts, including major challenges associated with doctoral student induction, progression and support. The quality of student preparation, availability of high quality (co)supervisors, doctoral assessment structures, financial and career doctoral completion (dis)incentives, all serve to shape the choices perceived to be available, and point to particular issues sometimes specific to context. For example, under-prepared students working in an alien language, and generous central funding that is dependent on timely completion, can lead to supervisors feeling pressured into over-intervening in thesis writing; existing southern African academics' challenges in accessing publication in high quality international journals, or participating in high status international conferences, are commonly replicated for their students.

Implications

This work evidences a novel, transferable approach to affordable and

sustainable supervision development that also enhances mutual collaboration and learning across the contexts involved. Early comparative findings suggest some local adaptations can enhance impact on supervisor learning and practice. They underline the importance of doctoral support and systems that accommodate and build on the particular capacities doctoral students bring; they also inform more inclusive approaches to both doctoral education and transnational academic appreciation.

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