

164 Navigating the Role of Replacement Lead Supervisor: An Autoethnographic perspective

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

In this paper we build on Wisker and Robinson's (2012) work on supervisors and doctoral 'orphans' to reflect on our autoethnographic experiences of what has been referred to as 'picking up the pieces'. We believe it is especially timely to re-explore losses and gains involved in changes in supervisory arrangements against a backdrop of reports of academics leaving the profession (voluntarily or through compulsory redundancy schemes), associated supervisory capacity challenges, and disputes over academic pay, work-loading and the significance of particular academic activities. By adopting an autoethnographic approach, we acknowledge and value the relationships that research supervisors have with others and look beyond discourses that underplay our positionality as academics, administrators, leaders and managers, and colleagues. A reflexive approach enables us to explicate the practice of 'taking on' additional supervisees mid-registration or 'stepping in' to ameliorate risks of non-completion that threaten doctoral candidate success (and institutional metrics and reputation).

Full paper

Doctoral supervision involves long-term relationships that contrast with many other academic roles that often start and finish within an academic year. It is not difficult therefore to imagine potential complexities in ensuring or guaranteeing sustainable supervision arrangements. Team-based supervision approaches are often intended to mitigate against loss of individual supervisors. However, it is rare that doctoral supervision will (officially) continue with one supervisor or advisor even if team-based supervision ideals do not mitigate against lesser interested or engaged colleagues in the team. Supervisors do not always leave an institution but may leave a team when relationships are deemed irretrievable or the leaving may be more akin to 'checking out' when a supervisor decides they no longer wish to be involved ("I don't get enough hours", "I'm not enjoying doctoral supervision", "I don't want to do it any more"). There is often a particular sense of urgency to fill a void when a principal advisor or lead supervisor leaves the team and where that supervisor has carried the weight of supervision. The latter context forms the backdrop to our reflections.

The breakdown of a supervisory package can be traumatic for a candidate, leading to feelings of abandonment, a loss of trust in the institution, questioning the worth of their research, and a fissure in the continuity of the research, their belief in their methodology and philosophical foundations adopted which have often been built in partnership with the machinations of their ex-supervisor. Replacement supervisors often come with a different epistemological, axiological and methodological view of the research or, in many cases, come from an opposite intellectual tradition. Wisker and Robinson's (2012) work on supervisors and doctoral 'orphans' identified three broad dimensions of problems and ways forward based on empirical research with 20 international supervisors. Two of their categorised issues – learning (relating to the doctoral project, research approach, and patterns of learning) and personal/professional (relating to interactions, relationships, mindsets and wellbeing) – hold relevance to the framing of our experiences of becoming and being replacement lead supervisors.

Quite often, the qualification for a replacement supervisor is their experience rather than subject specialism. Thus, 'getting on board' is more than signing a form. It involves negotiation, understanding, flexibility, creativity, and diplomacy. For the new supervisor, the first time they meet the candidate is often when they have been assigned to them by a desparate manager. They have not been involved in either the recruitment process or the formulation of project aims and objectives or research questions and 'getting on board' is often the end process of discussions such as "there is no one else I can ask", "as a senior member of staff you should" or "if you don't X will fail or formally complain". As academics involved in doctoral programme leadership we also may be confronted directly with

emotionally charged candidates begging for us to step in as lead supervisors due to perceptions that there is “no-one else to help”.

‘Getting onboard’ encompasses the decision-making that occurs prior to agreeing to be a replacement supervisor and, here, we acknowledge coercion to be at play as much as agency; becoming a replacement supervisor can be emotionally loaded, exhausting and stressful.

Implicit and explicit levels of commitment ensue from getting onboard, particularly in relation to candidates who, by the time they receive a replacement lead supervisor, have already suffered what Wisker and Robinson (2012) acknowledge as ‘loss’. For us, navigation of challenges and ways forward extend beyond Wisker and Robinson’s (2012) learning and personal/professional dimensions. Being a supervisor is only one (small) academic role we perform alongside concurrent teaching, research, administrative, leadership and management roles. This means that our identities and relationships as research supervisors collide with others whose readings may include misguided interpretations that by taking on additional supervisees we are seeking or will gain ‘quick wins’ to increase our doctoral completions records^[i]. There may be little empathy for our positions. Becoming a replacement lead supervisor is fraught for both the student and the supervisor, yet this actuality is often not supported in terms of training or additional resources if picked up mid-academic year.

Expectations associated with being a replacement supervisor are often overlooked in terms of pressures to rescue at-risk candidates. Highlighting particular challenges experienced through this aspect of academic practice, we call for wider appreciation of the nuances associated with doctoral supervision in different contexts.

[i] Despite numbers of doctoral completions not being a determinant of academic promotion or reward systems in our institution.

References

Wisker, G., & Robinson, G. (2012). Picking up the pieces: Supervisors and doctoral “orphans”. *International Journal for Researcher Development*.