

“I didn’t really appreciate how hard work it would be!” – New supervisors’ experiences of doctoral supervision (0104)

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Outline

Literature

There is a growing literature on the supervisory role in doctoral education, focused mainly on experienced supervisors. These studies evidence such themes as supervisory models, orientations and styles (Acker, 1994; Murphy et al, 2007; Lee 2008), supervisory dilemmas (Delamont et al, 1998; Cryer, 1998), the supervisor-student relationship (Ives and Rowley, 2005; Manathunga, 2007b), supervision pedagogy (Manathunga, 2007a) and doctoral supervision as professional work (Halse and Malfroy, 2010). Only recently have some studies focused specifically on the experiences of early career academics as new supervisors (Sambrook et al, 2008; Amundsen and McAlpine, 2009; Amundsen and McAlpine, in press).

Context and Purpose

This study is part of a broader research project which aimed to better understand how early career academics (ECAs, i.e. doctoral students, research staff and newly appointed academics) experience their academic environments and how they are prepared for careers in academia. In this paper we report on ECAs, from different disciplinary backgrounds, who are new to doctoral supervision and capture some of the issues involved as they undertake this new role. We wanted to see what concerns surfaced and to explore how knowledge of these experiences might advance supervisory support and practice within the university.

Participants, data collection and analysis

ECAs with no more than six years research supervision experience and currently supervising at least one doctoral student were recruited from one UK research-intensive university, either from lists of individuals who had attended introductory supervision seminars or via academics who had graduate training responsibilities. Eleven new supervisors volunteered representing four disciplines – social sciences, humanities, medical sciences and physical sciences. Each participant was sent a pre-interview questionnaire to provide background information on their experience as research supervisors before being interviewed at a time and location convenient to them. The interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis was carried out.

Emerging themes

Supervision as hard work: Although participants expressed enthusiasm and pleasure about being a supervisor, probably the overarching theme conveyed by most was one of finding the supervisory experience as hard or difficult work. This seemed to surprise many, perhaps because their own experience of being supervised as a doctoral student was that it was a relatively straightforward process “I was certainly less hard work than some of my students are...” Seen from the other side of the relationship, it became apparent that things were not always plain sailing, that what

had worked for them as doctoral students was not necessarily appropriate for their supervisees, and that a degree of flexibility was required.

Inexperience: A range of inexperience contributed to making supervision hard work and gave rise to feelings of anxiety and insecurity e.g. what balance to strike between directing the student and encouraging independence, what style of supervision to develop, how to respond to different student needs, what was doctoral standard work, how to manage students' expectations. They reported formal training for doctoral supervision was insufficient to address these issues, written guidance was sparse and, although support networks existed or could be developed (e.g. co-supervision), these were rarely drawn upon to assist their developmental process. The impression was that participants considered they should be self-sufficient even though this approach was clearly not helping them.

Being Responsible: Participants saw supervision as part of being an academic and displayed a strong sense of responsibility towards their students in respect of getting them through their doctorate, giving them a rounded doctoral experience and assisting with their career trajectories. This "duty of care" sat uneasily with their concerns about the adequacy of their supervisory skills, their general inexperience and the absence of sufficient measures of how well they were doing. Many participants gave the impression that they felt solely responsible for their students (even in co-supervisory relationships) and the notion that they are only one resource which students can, and do, draw upon was not well-developed.

Accommodating reality: Whilst successful completion was seen as the only way to substantiate their supervisory abilities there was a dawning realisation that their abilities were only one of many things to impact successful completion. Participants found themselves considering whether, and how, they could influence or contain aspects such as completion times, admissions policies and practices, students' lives beyond the doctorate, and their own commitments and views in order to give their students a better chance. It appeared that ongoing supervisory experience was exposing an initial lack of awareness of how the wider context would impact their role and the breadth of issues they would need to engage with.

Implications

The themes noted here, for the first time from a UK perspective, mirror a number emerging from recent literature on new supervisors in North America: that they rely heavily on their own time as a doctoral student, they practice supervision as a solitary pursuit, and their development is mostly through on the job experience (Amundsen & McAlpine, in press). These themes suggest that ECAs new to doctoral supervision in the UK may be poorly equipped for the role, reluctant to seek help or unaware of where to turn for guidance, support and resources, and uninformed about the implications of the wider context. Given that our data imply that existing training and support structures appear inadequate this raises a number of questions about how to better equip and support new doctoral supervisors: what do new supervisors need to know and how; how are new supervisors best supported; what could new supervisors do to help themselves; what can the university and departments do by way of preparation for the job ahead?

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