

Time to move on: doctoral student and supervisor experiences of changing relationships in institutional contexts. (0123)

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## **Abstract**

Breakdowns and changes in relationships between supervisors and doctoral students are remarkably common although rarely mentioned in the literature and still under-researched. Previous work has explored the experience of doctoral 'orphans' and supervisors and students picking up the pieces and continuing with or moving on from breakdowns or changes in the working relationship: some students changing supervisors, some supervisors losing or acquiring and beginning to work anew with doctoral students. Building on a re-scrutiny of recent projects, this new work considers issues of experiences and responses to such changes. It explores perceived effects on learning, a cognitive dimension, and on wellbeing and resilience, a more personal dimension, situating the work in the institutional dimension, context and regulations.

## **Introduction and literature review**

Much guidance literature on supervisor student relations focusses on the early days of establishing sound relations, the range of supervisor behaviours and responses from the functional, enculturation and other aims of supervision (Lee, 2008, 2011), research work on the power relationships between student and supervisors (Manathunga, 2007; Grant 2008 ) considers the darker side of power imbalances, and work on intercultural difference also indicates some potential for difficulties or richness. Earlier work in which this project is grounded, considers the experiences of doctoral orphans (Wisker and Robinson, 2013 ) how they respond to breakdowns in supervision or losing their supervisors (Budd, J., Scevak, J. and Cantwell, R.,2010 )and are seen to develop empowerment and resilience, and /or work in new supervisory relationships. Other work considers supervisors' responses to breakdowns in the supervisory relationship or student's progress, the loss of students and challenges of taking on new students (Wisker and Robinson, 2012; Lovitts, 2001 ) as well as a range of work on emotional dimensions to supervisor from student and supervisor viewpoints (Morris and

Wisker, 2011; Vekkaila et al 2013) and a closer focus on the emotional dimension and resilience (Strandler et al, 2014).

### **Methodology and methods**

This work is in two parts, the first part re-scrutinises two earlier projects i) doctoral 'orphans' and supervisors, a project with participants from the UK, Canada and Australasia and ii) a Swedish project which looked at relationships, emotional issues and wellbeing.

2) New research conducted in the UK and South Africa which focuses on student and supervisor experiences of relationship breakdowns, wellbeing, resilience and practical institutionally based strategies to manage the learning and students' success.

The three projects each employed qualitative interviewing.

### **Data and discussion**

Re-reading the previous projects and re-scrutinising data offered some new insights in three dimensions previously not considered: institutional, personal and learning. In the new project, data from interviews focussing on changing relationships, breakdowns and moving on also revealed issues, interactions and interesting ideas concerning the experience for supervisors and students, understood across these three dimensions. Re-scrutiny of the data from the two previous projects has been re-analysed, coded thematically and joined with that of the new project, similarly analysed, and the combined findings are now discussed across the three dimensions of institutional, personal and learning. This reveals some interesting results regarding emotional, personal and learning effects of the breakdowns or changes in relationships between students and supervisors. Personality and project issues interact to produce experiences which can hamper or enable conceptual, creative and critical work, the learning development aims of the doctorate. Issues of breakdown, resilience and wellbeing emerge for both students and supervisors, and the structural roles played by institutional practices, some negative, but many positive are seen as offering a scaffold for recognition of difficulties, support mechanisms, and ways forward for supporting change. Considering findings across the dimensions reveals:

**Personal dimension** - distress is shown at student supervisor breakdown in relationships, and in the challenges of taking on a new relationship; emotional resilience emerges as a positive response.

**Learning dimension** - relationships breakdown might be caused by and can affect learning behaviours and development at doctoral level, students not making enough progress – at conceptual, critical and creative levels might be experiencing poor supervision, or overwhelming challenges (some culturally inflected) in the complexity and intellectual levels of the work expected of them. Transferring to new supervisor relationships offers both new opportunities for development, and new intellectual challenges.

**Institutional dimension** -several respondents indicated the problems of institutional issues such as changing jobs and retirement forcing an untimely conclusion to the doctoral student/supervisors' relations, while others offer examples of constructive use of institutional mechanisms for supportive programmes, central processes, staged rites of passage and the support of their community in decision making .

## **Conclusions**

Doctoral supervision and doctoral study aim to enable the construction of contributions to knowledge both factual and conceptual and the building of researcher identities alongside research. This is far from straightforward and discourse of breakdowns in relationships, stalled projects, research work not achieving its potential, can lead to supervisor/student relationship breakdowns which can be perceived as emotionally taxing, undermining, challenging. Changes in the student/supervisor relationship can lead to further problematic issues or to resilience and success.

Sometimes levels of learning, conceptual creative and critical work which make a contribution to knowledge, are affected by personal and institutional dimensions, which supervisors and students report as concerns, and seek to deal with in institutional frameworks, and with new behaviours and relationships built on resilience and perseverance as well as developmental interactions new ways of working reported as leading to resilience, empowerment and ownership. The findings of the research discussed here could usefully inform both supervisor and student relationships, and institutional frameworks to support these.

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