

# Supervision and supervisor 'training' for new contexts

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# What has changed?

Doctorates are now characterized by:

- diversity not uniformity ( an increased number and range of students with a range of ages, attendance patterns, background, 'class', location and origins; plus a range of models and versions of the doctorate and modes of study)
- globalization ( influences and competition from Europe, USA, South East Asia, Australia and so on)
- regulation: quality control, auditing and accountability ( at national and institutional level)
- growing utilitarianism i.e. increased concerns about utility and purpose for the 'knowledge economy', with a demand for the PhD to inculcate 'generic skills' which may increase 'employability'
- An increasingly different view of what learning, teaching and supervision are.

{for more, see, for example, Taylor and Beasley, 2005)

# Supervisors and their context

From ( take your pick):

trust, professional pride, integrity, responsibility,  
laissez-faire, closed doors/ secret garden, oral  
agreements...

To :

Accountability, auditing, open-ness, guidelines,  
pressure, written recording and reporting,  
'standards', quality assurance.....

{ see O'Neill, 2002 }

# Have students' 'wants' and expectations changed?

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- Consistency
- Signposting
- Guidance
- A critical friend
- a source of experience
- openness and honesty ( from both sides); respect
- Directive ( from some) ..... Yet Non-judgemental
- Helps to set deadlines ( not just my responsibility)
- Open to my perspective..... yet Agenda setting
- Leaves space for my initiative
- Instills confidence;., is confident him or her self
- A motivator
- I don't want any surprises at the end!

# 'New times' ....but recurring debates about the doctorate

- Is it primarily to make a contribution to knowledge (students as producers of knowledge) .... Or a personal journey, a personal project, personal development... or a 'licence to teach'?
- Is it an individual venture.... Or a collaborative effort?
- Are students part of a peer group (a community of practice), a cohort... or is it an isolated journey?
- Are students (or should they be) autonomous .... Or directed (by a supervisor, a sponsor or an employer)? *Is this a false dichotomy?*
- What is supervision? Is it a form of teaching.... or guidance .... Or just 'letting them get on with it'?
- Is the purpose of a doctorate to develop the professional researcher ...? Or the researching professional?
- Who and what is the doctorate for? The individual, the 'body of knowledge' ....or industry, employers, the public good..?
- Should the doctorate be purely 'the pursuit of knowledge' .... Or should it involve imparting generic skills for all students e.g. communication, 'employability'?

# What has really changed? Plus ca change and all that...

- the traditional academic virtues required of doctoral study, and in the written and oral examination of them, have remained unchanged ( I think)
- Students are still required to make a ‘contribution’, to have a thesis in its most literal sense, and to complete a substantial body of writing, which is clear and coherent.
- Have the demands of ‘doctorateness’ perhaps evolved less than the context surrounding them?
- On a more tangible level, if you walked into a supervision session in 2008 would you observe a huge difference between the kinds of activities and interactions going on then as compared with 1988?

# The big issues ( still)

What is 'doctorateness'?

- Is it different in the PhD as compared with the professional doctorate?
- What is meant by 'originality' and a 'contribution to knowledge'?
- What is **theory** in the PhD and the professional doctorate?
- What is 'professional knowledge'? Should professional doctorates always be practice/ profession related?

# So, what to do about supervisor 'development'?

{Is training a dirty word where you work?}

- Knowledge? Understanding? Experience?  
Mentoring? Emotional aspects ( the affective domain?)
- Our approach { see next slide}
- On-line materials ( Virtual Graduate School at Sheffield)

# Supervisor development sessions: examples

- Which 'phase' of supervision is most crucial? ( if any) What should happen in the first 3 meetings? How can we best achieve 'focus'?
- Supervision at a distance: approaches, technologies, tactics
- What is the literature review? what is it for? What is 'criticality'?
- What do we mean by 'theory' and where does it come in to the doctorate: professional and PhD?
- To what extent should we help students with their written ( and spoken) English?
- How should we prepare students for the viva?
- What do supervisors 'get' from supervising?
- Is supervision a form of teaching?

*see next 4 slides*

# **e.g. The supervisor: Why do it? What do they get from it?**

Enjoyment, to learn, satisfaction, pick up some new references, new ideas, new methodologies...

‘I see it as important for me, in keeping my currency in the field; and I think it’s important for the University, especially the one I am at here, where the research culture has not traditionally been strong.’

**e.g. Supervising as teaching?**

Brown and Atkins (1988, p.115):

‘research supervision is probably the most *complex and subtle* form of teaching in which we engage’.

# Is supervision a form of teaching?

‘I see it as a developmental role with the individual, not a transactional role....it’s more intimate, and it’s a more direct communication with the individual learner. It’s much more a developmental relationship with a peer, or a near peer, rather than with a student in a more subordinated role.’

# How do supervisors see themselves in 2008 ?

'I see myself as a companion, with them on their doctoral journey. So my job is to be supportive, to be open, to be there, to be present. I've never set out to be a 'friend' but I do try to be someone they can rely on and trust – and equally to be honest, as you would expect a friend to be.'

*What is your favoured metaphor?*

*Has it changed?*

# References and some ( I hope) useful reading

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