

Supervising Doctoral Researchers: Personal Reflections

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Philosophy and working practice

Supervising doctoral candidates is an important part of my professional activities. It is one of the most rewarding aspects of my work, both intellectually and in terms of forming relationships with researchers who become friends and colleagues in the broader research communities of which I am part. Supervising doctoral students has, at times, been both inspirational and generative of my own research ideas and projects. My approach to supervising doctoral students can be summarised thus:

- The research experience should be challenging, but enjoyable;
- The relationship between all involved in the doctoral process (between supervisors of whatever level of seniority and between supervisors and doctoral student) is non-hierarchical, mutually supportive, and based on trust and honesty;
- Supervisory meetings, both formal and informal, provide an open and honest forum for the free exchange of ideas where knowledge and expertise is shared;
- Doctoral research provides a platform for professional development;
- The supervisory process in the course of a PhD should provide a basis for nurturing a researcher towards becoming a colleague;
- The supervisory relationship is a means through which to develop friendships and broader intellectual perspectives.

In terms of the process of supervision, there can be no single model since all doctoral researchers are different and respond in different ways to the demands of research and the intellectual environment they inhabit. I tend to adapt my style to suit the needs of each individual. Thus, some students require regular face to face meetings throughout their three years, often for reassurance and confidence as they progress towards becoming independent researchers, or as a form of disciplining in helping them set and attain targets. Others are more confident and/or self-directed and prefer less frequent, but perhaps more intensive meetings. Different kinds of research project also place different demands on researchers at different times and it is important that supervisors recognise this. Part of the skill of a supervisor is in recognising early on what the requirements are for each researcher and how they respond best to supervision. Whatever the personalities and needs of my students, I encourage them to contact me informally whenever they need my advice or encouragement, or simply to run ideas by me. This includes those who work effectively on their own, since researchers can still improve ideas by sharing them on a regular basis and regular contact is an essential part of monitoring progress. I am also happy to meet with students outside of formal university spaces, since this often helps in fostering a collegial working relationship. Some students respond better in less formal spaces: on one occasion I agreed to a student's request that I, in my role as Internal Examiner, arrange for the viva voce to be held in a community hall. This was the first time that both examiners had conducted an oral examination off-site and accompanied by the sound of whale song, and the experience was thoroughly productive for all.

While I tend to be adaptable and responsive in my style of supervision, a number of concerns are central to my working practice:

- That the expectations of doctoral research are explained at the outset to help the researcher understand what is feasible in the time available. This should never diminish enthusiasm and, in my experience, demystifying the process helps even less confident students realise that they are fully capable of completing what can seem like a daunting task at the outset.
- To explain the role of the supervisors, the ethos of the supervisory relationship and the kinds of support that can be expected and called upon. To explain that the supervisor is accessible and should be the first port of call and source of support to address difficulties faced by researchers.

- To explain the responsibility of the supervisors for monitoring progress, quality control and ensuring timely completion. To explain the processes by which the Department and University monitors progress (including maintaining a written record of supervision) and decides on progression at the end of Year 1.
- To explain that, despite the collaborative element in the supervisory relationship, the researcher has ownership of the project. While the supervisors offer guidance and make suggestions, the responsibility for defining the project and for making theoretical and methodological choices lies with the doctoral researcher.
- That momentum and planning is crucial at the early stage of research, as is the process of developing the supervisory relationship. I encourage regular meetings in the first year (often weekly and at least fortnightly) and regular contact throughout the three years. While the timetable for formal meetings and actions is negotiable, researchers are encouraged to attend more than the minimum number of formal meetings (usually 10-12 per annum) required for Departmental monitoring purposes.
- Timely return of work should be contractual. I encourage students to understand the demands on supervisors' time by asking them to allow at least a week for me to read draft chapters and other papers; in return I guarantee that detailed written and oral feedback on their work will be provided within two weeks of submission. I commit to reading draft theses within four weeks of receipt and, if necessary, I schedule time over a weekend to do this without distraction. I also advise on examiners' reports after the viva voce and read any minor amendments prior to final submission. Regular feedback is an important means of assuring researchers that their work is valued.
- To persuade researchers of the value of a healthy work-life balance – and not only those who have families. I try to encourage my students to see the importance of working smart, that long hours are often not the most productive, and the value in seizing opportunities to be involved in the broader life of the University and beyond.
- To encourage researchers to develop their own networks. I was in a cohort of three as a doctoral researcher, but benefited enormously by being part of a regional network of postgraduates and academics that met regularly. I encourage researchers to take every advantage of departmental and university postgraduate communities. Postgraduates are members of a research community and their participation in seminars and workshops is actively encouraged. I also encourage them to speak regularly to other colleagues to develop wider professional networks through conference and workshop attendance.
- To encourage researchers to develop their skills by involving them in: i) university and department postgraduate training programmes. All students complete a Training Needs Analysis, which helps them identify their current skills and areas in which they might need further training in completing their research and in career development; ii) in learning and teaching support, specifically in demonstrating and tutoring of undergraduates. This helps develop communications skills, self-confidence and an understanding of the knowledge-transfer process.
- To allow researchers to develop their own agendas and to understand that it is healthy and often productive to disagree with their supervisors, who are not always right.
- To reassure researchers at moments of toil or difficulty that even the most brilliant scholars struggle at times (quoting Marx on not dreading the 'fatiguing climb' of the 'steep paths' to knowledge usually works).
- To treat all researchers equally and to never ration time when it is needed irrespective of workload models and workload pressures.

Ethos of supervision

My commitment to supervising is a product of what I understand to be four different levels of responsibility. First, is a responsibility to the individual student and my approach here emerges from my own experience of being inspired and encouraged by one of my PhD supervisors at a critical time during my studies. As first generation to attend university from what would now be described as a 'low participation' area, my understanding of my own abilities and of what might be possible through higher education were limited, even while I was a high-achieving undergraduate. One my supervisors introduced me to the idea of doctoral research, encouraged me to attain as highly as possible in my first degree to ensure access to funding, and worked with me closely on developing a research proposal that won a British Academy Scholarship. Without this encouragement and generosity, and without funding, I would undoubtedly have left university after my first degree. I have supervised students from a range of different backgrounds and my own experience has taught me that encouragement, appropriate support, and building confidence and independence are essential to their success. I encourage all my doctoral students to attain to the best of their abilities, which also means that I set high standards that are reinforced through oral and written feedback on their ideas and writing. I also encourage my students to talk to and help each other, especially where their research interests are similar. This has enormous benefits in exchange of ideas, developing confidence, sharing resources and experiences, and developing camaraderie. In my experience, researchers respond well to an environment that is both intellectually rigorous and supportive.

The second level of responsibility is to the discipline. As an academic geographer, I share some responsibility for ensure the future survival of the discipline by helping to nurture the next generation of inspirational teachers and researchers. Part of this responsibility to the discipline is also interwoven with responsibility to the individual. My intellectual and professional relationship with my doctoral students does not end with submission of the thesis. I have spent many hours reading through curricula vitae and job applications, draft papers for publication and draft grant applications, and listening to 'dry-runs' of presentations for interviews. Excellent supervision to the award of a PhD does not necessarily equip students with the skills to publish, or to apply and succeed in applying for grants and jobs. The market for academic posts is already ferocious and is likely to worsen in the coming years. I thus consider it my responsibility not only to recruit and supervise doctoral candidates, but to offer guidance in their professional development until they are in post and embedded in a new support network. Furthermore, academic disciplines survive on the goodwill of academics themselves – assuming positions of responsibility in the disciplinary community, peer-reviewing, participating in conferences and workshops – as well as working collaboratively, sometimes across intellectual differences, at the forefront of ideas. Supervisors provide a model and set the standard for the next generation: being a well behaved supervisor hopefully inspires good citizenship in our successors.

The third level of responsibility is to the departments and institutions in which I work. The financial and strategic reasons for recruiting postgraduates are self-evident, but equally important is recruiting outstanding doctoral candidates as part of the maintenance of a vibrant intellectual environment. For this reason, I have been willing to supervise researchers who are at the margins of my own specialisms. I have supervised students who I knew would require more of my time to enable them to develop as doctoral researchers (for example, those from 'non-traditional' routes into higher education or whose first language is not English). Recruitment often requires time and effort, but in my experience the profit in terms of the intellectual relationships that can result is worth the investment.

The fourth level of responsibility is to co-supervisors. I was fortunate to co-supervise with experienced colleagues in the early stages of my career and learned a great deal about the art of supervision from these colleagues. As Principal Supervisor on a number of funded projects, I have sought to involve less experienced colleagues as co-supervisors. The advantage in doing so is

mutual – I am able to impart some of my experience of best practice in supervising to early career researchers, while they bring new ideas often acquired through their formal training and their own experiences of being recently supervised. However, I also enjoy supervising with senior colleagues and with colleagues in different areas of my discipline or across disciplines. I have enjoyed uniformly excellent relationships with all of my co-supervisors, who share my belief that supervision is a shared responsibility and commitment. In my experience, researchers respond well if they feel they are part of a functioning team and good working relationships between supervisors are essential in this dynamic. A collegial relationship between co-supervisors is essential both in managing the research process and in creating a supportive, but intellectually challenging environment in which doctoral students thrive.

Nurturing and being a critical friend

The diversity of the students I have supervised, the intellectual learning I have acquired through working with them on a range of different topics, and the different demands they have placed on me have all made me a better supervisor. I have supervised part-time students, mature students, students with disabilities, overseas students and students who have become parents in the course of their research, and all have challenged and inspired me in different ways. The highs are undoubtedly the inspiration that comes with working with dynamic and sometimes brilliant individuals who go on to produce truly outstanding work, or those individuals who have fought to overcome all manner of difficulties or balance different responsibilities to complete high quality theses. Doctoral students generate an intellectual energy that keeps mid-career academics like myself feeling refreshed and excited about our own research. The lows are few, but this does not mean that supervision is always plain sailing.

Many of my doctoral students conduct research overseas in quite challenging environments, some of them living for extended periods in impoverished countries for the first time. Technology, such as Skype and email, now makes maintaining a supervisory relationship across distance much easier. This includes being able to provide advice through conversation and timely written feedback through the use of track changes and other editing functions on electronic attachments. However, it cannot always substitute for a twenty-minute informal chat over coffee. I try to prepare my students for the demands of fieldwork, which I understand well from my own experiences. Where possible, I try to coincide my own field visits with those of my students so that we can meet and share experiences, but very little can actually prepare them for experiencing, for example, abject poverty for the first time. Being at the end of a telephone or in receipt of an email to deal with the extreme emotions that can arise during the loneliness of research is often an important and invaluable source of support.

I see my role as a critical friend to researchers I supervise. I do not seek a pastoral role unless this is required of me since students have private lives that should be independent of their doctoral studies. However, I am always on hand to offer support, advice and friendship should this be required. I also treat my students as valued colleagues. Where I think their confidence will be enhanced, I give them my own draft papers to read and comment on and encourage them to become involved in the peer-review process if they are approached, as several of them have been. I also encourage them to become members of learned societies, present their work at regional workshops and international conferences, and to begin writing for publication during their research. Some researchers are capable of doing this at any point in the doctoral research, since they often have publishable material from Masters theses or are keen to write short articles and book reviews. Others take time to develop higher level writing skills, but for the sake of career progression, where a researcher is making good progress in completing draft chapters, I encourage them to write at least one journal article during Year 3. I also guide them through the entire process (from identifying appropriate journals to responding to referees' comments). In my field, co-writing papers with doctoral students

from their thesis is potentially damaging to careers. Early-career applicants for human geography posts in the UK would be expected to have single-authored papers from doctoral research. Therefore, I take an ethical stance not to add my name to my students' papers, though as supervisor I help shape the ideas and usually read and comment on drafts. Instead, I have developed productive post-doctoral working relations with a number of my former doctoral students, including employing them as Research Associates or working with them as co-researchers on funded projects.

One highlight of supervising doctoral students often comes years after they have successfully completed their theses. Some of my students realise at an early stage that they are both researchers and colleagues, but very few of them are reflexive enough in the pressurised and myopic environment of postgraduate research to realise that their supervisors experience many of the ups and downs with them. However, when they become supervisors, as many of my former students have, they usually acquire insight into a supervisor's anxieties about a student's progress, their work-life balance, their finances, and their safety while conducting overseas research. They realise that we fidget in our offices chewing our nails while they sit their viva voce examinations, and that we share their sense of achievement and joy when the outcome is successful. The moment they develop this insight and choose to share it with their old supervisor is the moment that I know that my former supervisee has learned some of what is involved in being a dedicated, and hopefully successful, supervisor of doctoral research.