

Navigating the Role of Replacement Lead Supervisor: An Autoethnographic perspective

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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 that 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).

(150/150 words)

Full Paper

Doctoral supervision is, by nature, a long-term relationship that contrasts 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 the loss of individual supervisors. However, it is rare that doctoral supervision will (officially) continue with one supervisor or advisor. If a supervisor leaves an institution mid-way through a candidate's registration, conversations have traditionally focused on the best interests of the student; when an option, some may have chosen to leave and 'follow the supervisor' others may have opted to stay alongside other candidates and be given a new supervisor. It is important to acknowledge at this point however that supervisors do not always leave an institution but may leave a team when relationships are deemed irretrievable or even when the supervisor decides they no longer wish to be a doctoral supervisor (*"I don't get enough hours"*, *"I'm not enjoying doctoral supervision"*, *"I don't want to do it any more"*). And, for us, therein lies the rub. Can or should a research supervisor be stopped or prevented from walking away from supervision? Who picks up the pieces? These important questions are not however the focus of our paper! They would take us into the realm of institutional politics, organisational structures, line management, and performance management. We are more interested in the implications of picking up, inheriting or adopting candidates who have lost a supervisor.

Although we actively engage with literature on doctoral supervision, take an institutional lead in delivering supervisor training, and are involved in inter-institutional doctoral education communities, we observe that there is an absence of space to share reflections on practices of 'taking on' additional supervisees mid-registration or 'stepping in' to ameliorate risks of non-completion that threaten doctoral candidate success. We have both enjoyed doctoral programmes leadership roles between 2009 and 2022 in a business school context where PGR numbers have represented over a fifth of the institutional PGR population due to a growth in DBA programmes and the enrolment of staff on doctorates alongside traditional

PhD recruitment. Between us, we have stepped in to supervise a dozen doctoral candidates who had lost supervisors and have supported each of these candidates to completion.

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 in supporting the candidates who have previously been supported by other supervisors.

However, most pertinent to our lived experiences of supervising doctoral candidates who have previously been supervised by other supervisors are what we might term 'getting onboard', 'riding the waves', and 'sailing into the sunset'.

'Getting onboard' encompasses the decision-making that occurs prior to agreeing to be a replacement supervisor. Here, we acknowledge agency and coercion at play.

'Riding the waves' refers to the implicit and explicit levels of commitment that ensue from the decision to 'get onboard', particularly in relation to this type of candidate who has already suffered what Wisker and Robinson (2012) acknowledge as 'loss'. The 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 teaching, research, administrative, leadership and management roles. We play multiple concurrent academic roles. This situation means that our identities and relationships as research supervisors risk collision with others, including, in some situations, the supervisors/colleagues who's supervision roles we may have stepped into. Readings from others may sometimes include misguided interpretations that by taking on additional supervisees we are seeking 'quick wins' to increase our doctoral completions records. This is despite numbers of doctoral completions not being a determinant of academic promotion in our institution.

'Sailing into the sunset' extends beyond the sense of achievement that accompanies supporting any doctoral candidate to successful completion. There may be seemingly little formal recognition of the non-completion risks avoided (despite institutional metrics and reputation) but there is a huge sense of pride in seeing a candidate achieve success. This links to success in the face of adversity.

(726/750 words)

References

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