

Keynote

First impressions: Understanding the beginnings of the supervisor-student relationship in doctoral education

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‘Think Piece’

Doctoral supervision is a relational practice where meaningful connections among supervisors and students are of profound importance. Therefore, anyone wishing to develop an understanding of supervision pedagogies, we must always grapple with the human interactions that underpin doctoral learning. Across the research field of education, scholars have sought to make sense of, and advocate for, the meaningfulness of teacher-learner relationships (e.g. hooks, 1994). Indeed, some have argued that the task of understanding the relational is key to understanding education itself: ‘education is not in the activities of the teacher, nor in the activities of the learner, but in the interaction between the two...A theory of education is, in other words, a theory about the educational relationship’ (Biesta, 2004, p. 12-13). While relationships lie at the heart of learning, the capacity of students and educators to create meaningful connections is under pressure in many corners where impersonal, transactional and customer-oriented relations are increasingly prevalent (Bovill, 2020; Gravett, 2023). In this talk, I address the conference theme of ‘postgraduate supervision as relational’ by considering the beginnings of supervisor-student relationships.

My talk begins with a seemingly simple question: when do supervision relationships begin? Does the supervision relationship begin on day one when the student is formally enrolled, and supervisor(s) are in place to assume responsibility for guiding their development? Does a relationship develop sometime after, once all parties are well acquainted and the project is underway? Or is it possible that, in contexts such as the UK, supervisor-student relationships may begin to form sometime before the formal ‘start date’ of the doctorate itself, emerging in the informal interactions that characterise seeking admission to doctoral study? If the latter is the case, how might these first impressions and informal interactions go on to matter in the process of gaining admission, and in the eventual development of a formal supervisor-student relationship?

In this talk, I draw on insights from two interlinked studies focused on the early stages of the doctoral student-supervisor relationship (Burford et al., 2023). The studies shared a focus on the informal ‘pre-application’ stage of doctoral admissions in the UK, where communication between prospective doctoral applicants and possible doctoral supervisors frequently occurs, particularly in the Arts and Social Sciences. The studies underpinning this talk involved interviews with doctoral students, professional services staff and directors of doctoral programmes, as well as focus group discussions and a diary study with prospective doctoral supervisors to track actions in relation to application enquiries. Often pre-application communication takes place via email, office visits or video calls and includes topics as diverse as eligibility and entry requirements, funding and scholarships, identifying proposed projects and receiving feedback on research proposals and application materials (Burford et al., 2024). Our research team has examined the inequalities that can arise around access to pre-application information (Kier-Byfield, Burford & Henderson, 2023; Dageni, Burford & Kier-Byfield, 2024) and concerns surrounding which prospective applicants may be screened out of applying for doctoral education in the first place (Henderson et al., 2024). In this talk, I take this work

forward by considering how early impressions might matter in various ways for prospective supervisors and students.

In UK doctoral admissions, the early and informal communication shared between prospective applicants who are seeking to form a supervision relationship and the prospective supervisors they contact matters. Given that many supervisors receive considerably more inquiries than they have capacity to supervise, what applicants say or send, and how this communication is presented often become influential in supervisors' evaluative judgments about their pool of potential applicants. Indeed, the quality of the communication between the two parties is often important in decisions supervisors may make about encouraging prospective applicants to submit formal applications to study or seek research funding, or declining support. We found that supervisors focus on the question of *supervisability* as they navigate these interactions, often evaluating pre-application communications for signs of a potential successful working relationship. Equally, prospective applicants use early contact to make decisions about whether or not to make formal applications to work alongside prospective supervisors. Student accounts suggest that pedagogical relationships begin to form at this stage, as prospective supervisors give feedback on materials and applicants gain insights into what it might be like to be *supervised* by the academics they are connecting with.

Ultimately, in this talk I argue that early impressions that occur before formal admissions processes matter greatly in the context of UK doctoral admissions. In foregrounding this issue, I seek to push at the conceptual edges of how we see the supervisor-student relationship itself, arguing that sometimes pedagogical relationships form before achieving official recognition. Pragmatically, my talk calls our attention to the importance of informal communication processes and pre-doctoral relationships. All parties involved describe how meaningful these interactions can be for setting the scene for a formal supervision relationship that may form, or may not. The effects can be consequential, leading to the end of the road for some applicants, or serving as beginning points and testing grounds for others.

References

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