

**Quality Matters in Doctoral Supervision – a critique of current issues in the UK  
within a worldwide context**

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**Abstract**

This paper takes as its basis information gathered by the authors as part of their survey of a sample of countries from across the globe with regard to national approaches to the purposes of the doctorate award and to the principles and practices of doctoral education. From this information, that pertaining to research degree supervision is extracted and used to discuss a range of issues within this topic of supervision such as: supervision by teams, qualifications to supervise, appointing supervisors, training supervisors and evaluating their performance. These topics are set in the context of the 'Report on the review of research degree programmes' (QAA, 2007).

The authors pose a series of challenges for those involved in the organisation of doctoral supervision and make some position statements of their own based on the information from the seventeen countries sampled.

## **Author Biographies**

**Stuart Powell** (First Author) is Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire and was until recently Honorary Secretary of the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE). He and Howard Green have co-authored a book on Doctoral Study in Contemporary Higher Education and co-edited a book on the Doctorate Worldwide in (both published by Open University Press/SRHE).

**Professor Howard Green** (Second Author) has held the positions of PVC at Staffordshire University, Dean of the Staffordshire Graduate School and Head of Research Development at Leeds Metropolitan University. In addition, he set up and chaired until 2003 the Modern Universities Research Group and between 2000 and 2006 was Chair of the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE). He is currently a Senior Partner of 'Postgraduate Directions' ([www.postgraduatedirections.org.uk](http://www.postgraduatedirections.org.uk))

# **Quality Matters in Doctoral Supervision – a critique of current issues in the UK within a worldwide context**

## **1. Introduction**

This paper examines some issues regarding supervision that arose as we worked on a project with colleagues from seventeen countries from across the world (Powell and Green, 2007) and which we have considered here in the context of the ‘Report on the review of research degree programmes’ (QAA, 2007). For convenience the countries are listed in Appendix 1. Each country had been asked to describe, and comment critically upon, the situation with regard to various aspects of doctoral study, supervision being one of these. It should be noted that they were not asked any specific questions relating to supervision though they were given examples of the kinds of issues they might wish to address.

As might be imagined there were differences in national approach to doctoral study in all its manifestations; however, there was also some common ground. One thing all countries shared was the notion that certain academic staff members were designated to be ‘in charge of’ doctoral candidates though it is important to note here that supervision is not always the word used and the understanding of what it means to guide/supervise/oversee/sponsor may vary. However, whatever the terms used there is commonality in the way in which those terms serve to separate out doctoral students and how they are treated from all other university learners who are invariably described as

students and who are then 'taught' by university tutors/lecturers/teachers. In short, it is commonly the case that research students and the staff allocated to them are demarcated as distinctive within the processes and procedures of university life; however, it is also the case that the way in which that distinctiveness is made manifest is open to variation.

Countries around the world invariably, therefore, interpreted the pedagogy as applied to doctoral study as being distinctive within university learning and teaching generally. This is understandable in as much as the common aspect of such study is that, if it is to be judged as successful, it has to lead to contribution(s) to knowledge rather than merely to an accumulation of existing knowledge by the student. And a presumption follows that supervision requires something different from the person in the role of teacher – in short, he or she has to engage with a student who will necessarily challenge his/her existing understandings and add to, or change, those understandings of the particular aspect of the world that is under study. So, 'supervision' (or some variation on that theme) rather than 'teaching' is commonly accepted as an appropriate way of engaging with postgraduate research work. Yet beneath this common ground there is variation in understandings of the qualifications needed to be able to supervise as well as the roles of the supervisor in the learning and the on-going evaluation and final examination of the candidate. It was also noticeable from a parochial perspective that here in the UK the kinds of parameters regarding for example, the qualification of supervisors and their training and their subsequent roles are, in comparison to many other countries, relatively ill-defined and much less centrally regulated. We do not assert that this is in any way wrong but it

prompts us to examine some of the variations we mention above and thereby question some of the custom and practice followed in the UK and elsewhere.

This paper then draws on the evidence of seventeen authors who contributed chapters to our survey as reported in Powell and Green, 2007. Our purpose here is to examine current debates and challenges in doctoral supervision. In so doing we are aware of the risks that accompany any comparative analysis. Adopting Wolman's taxonomy of the elements of comparative study, (Wolman, 1993) we do not argue that the evidence will lead to the adoption by any one country of the approaches of others (policy transfer). Rather, we argue that a clearer understanding of our own parochial approaches may be gained and possibilities increased that we may develop new strategies through a better appreciation of how others operate, (systems understanding), and reflecting on these approaches (policy learning).

We have focused the UK context for our critique on the recently published Quality Assurance Agency report into its review of postgraduate provision across the sector (QAA, 2007). We have done this because this report acts as both a representation of the current situation and a signposting for what are considered to be the key issues moving forward. In short, we argue that the report sets an agenda for the development of all aspects of doctoral study – though in this paper we focus specifically upon doctoral supervision.

## **2. Issues**

In each of the sub-sections that follow we: (i) set out an issue and its context, (ii) give examples that relate to relevant practices in other countries and then (iii) add comments of our own.

### **2.1 Supervision by Team or by Individual Supervisor**

#### **Context and issues arising**

In the UK the revised QAA Code of Practice regarding Postgraduate Research (QAA, 2004) suggests that ‘.....*each research student will have a minimum of one main supervisor. He or she will normally be part of a supervisory team*’ (Precept 12). This ‘normally’ is fast becoming a universal with, for example, the Report on the review of research degree programmes (QAA 2007) stating that “*most institutions now have supervisory teams, generally comprising two or three people including a designated principal supervisor*” (paragraph 37, p. 8). Indeed, later in the Report it is noted that some review teams commented on the “*need to introduce supervisory teams*” (paragraph 45, p. 10) and also a need for “*clearer definition of roles and responsibilities*”. To our knowledge there is no evidence, beyond the colloquial, to suggest that teams are a more effective model for supervision than single academics. Similarly, there is no mention in

any either of the QAA documents mentioned here of what might be appropriate in terms of roles and responsibilities.

There is in the Code, therefore, no rationale for this recommendation, nor any indication of how a team might operate to create the most effective learning environment for the student. There are perhaps ideas about students needing more than one avenue of support and of the dangers of insularity in one-to-one relationships between academic and student that underpin the recommendation, yet these ideas are not referred to directly. This is not to suggest that such a recommendation is flawed but rather that, as far as we can tell, it is not based on evidence and therefore does not come with a complete rationale that might guide practitioners. Indeed, in our own experience and according to our own perceptions, working in teams *has* brought some benefits for us as supervisors, particularly in terms of broadening one's view of the topic and the possible ways of exploring it more effectively. Clearly, we do not present evidence in this paper as to the benefits for students themselves but we can presume that students may be able, for example, to make use of the various kinds of methodological expertise that different supervisors bring to the situation.

Our anxiety then is not so much with the recommendation itself but with the knock-on effects of its implementation on academic staff who do not wish to engage with the possible benefits that we ourselves have experienced and who therefore expend energy in finding ways of meeting the recommendation without necessarily changing existing patterns of behaviour. In short, we see a danger in academic staff who are used to

supervising alone, continuing in this vein despite a paper exercise in which they become part of a team. In short, the lack of evidence leads to the lack of explicit rationale which in turn leads to lack of clarity about where the gains lie for supervisors and students in the notion of team supervision. We suggest that there is lack of clarity about how different roles may be developed within a team context and about the balance of responsibilities and that without such clarity the reality of team work in this context may become much less than the expectation.

The danger we refer to above comes when clarity of role is actually obfuscated by the imposition of teams, where academics may become more engaged with wrestling with the unfamiliar and ill-defined social structures than supervising the student and where students may find themselves in academic relationships with individuals who offer potentially conflicting views of their roles and more importantly conflicting views on the project in hand that remain unresolved (conflicting views may be productive but only when handled positively). Form may become more important than substance as all concerned strive to find a purpose for themselves where no guidance exists.

### **Examples from Countries Worldwide**

Use of supervisory teams at doctoral level is not a constant across the seventeen countries we sampled, though many do make use of more than one supervisor in one way or another. The one thing that does seem constant is that there is one supervisor who holds

the main responsibility for the progress of the student on the programme of study. He or she may go under different names but without exception there exists a notion that one supervisor is ‘principal’; in some countries the role of this individual is more clearly defined than in others. One aspect that readers may wish to note is the variation in flexibility in respect to this issue that exists, from the firm, unbending rules on the one hand to the flexible interpretation of a principle on the other (see the examples cited in Box 1). Another aspect is the indication of role that may be surmised from titles given to individuals within team contexts; for example, the use of ‘promoter’ and ‘co-promoter’ on the one hand and main supervisor working to ‘dissertation committee’ on the other.

We list some of the practices, taken from our sample, in relation to team supervision (Box 1) and then single supervisory arrangements (Box 2) and then in our conclusions we draw together these examples and make some recommendations of our own.

#### **Box 1 –Examples of Team Supervision**

- In the **Netherlands** each PhD candidate has a thesis supervisor (*promoter*) and, in many cases, a *co-promoter*. The co-promoter works under the responsibility of the *promoter* and (s)he must have a PhD degree. Depending on the situation, this involvement may lead to a formal second supervisor ship. In the final stages of the candidate’s programme, a Doctoral Committee comprising between six and ten members, is put together and this Committee evaluates the candidate’s dissertation.

- In **Poland** there is always one official so-called ‘scientific supervisor’ for each doctoral candidate; and this supervisor is proposed and elected during the opening of the doctorate procedure. Under Polish law, part of the duty of a professor is to be involved in the conferring of doctoral degrees, as well as that of reviewing doctoral theses thesis, this is part of the duty of an academic teacher. The supervisor is fully responsible for the academic development and progress of a doctorate candidate; however, students with scholarships which involve some teaching commitment are also supervised by the deputy director for teaching in the department.
- In **Australia** there is mention in nationally agreed guidelines of a principal supervisor being appointed, ‘...to coordinate the research of each candidate. This person should be assisted by a colleague (such as an associate supervisor) or colleagues (such as an advisory team, supervisory panel) who may have different roles in the supervision process.’ Recent custom and practice has seen an increase in and encouragement of the use of panels for supervision.
- The dominant model for supervising doctoral studies in **Canada** is by a committee, which includes the supervisor. In institutions where the norm is different, committee supervision still exists for a certain number of programmes.
- In the **USA** each doctoral student has one named ‘main advisor’ as well as a dissertation committee of five professors. It is a requirement that at least two of these committee professors should come from outside the candidate’s doctoral programme and thus can be deemed independent of it. While for many, doctoral students in the USA continue to have a close relationship with their main

dissertation advisor, in recent years an emphasis has been placed upon the faculty/student relationship and 'mentoring' has become the preferred model for some. A mentor, in contrast to an advisor, is supposed to nurture, protect, guide and socialise the student into becoming an effective professional in his or her field. For example, a faculty mentor plays an active role in helping the student search for and find a job after degree completion. In short, faculty often takes on a more general and all-embracing role that goes beyond the confines of the specific research programme that the student undertakes.

## **Box 2 – Examples of Single Supervision**

- The practice of 'team supervision' is not widely prevalent in **Indian** universities though there are possibilities for external supervisors in addition to the local main supervisor (see later section).
- The predominant mode of supervision in **South Africa** continues to be a traditional apprenticeship model that connects students to single supervisors in relationships that continue throughout the programme of study and which are often close. Many in South African universities would argue that this traditional model has worked well although, from time-to-time, there are tensions and challenges that have recently surfaced and which are now being increasingly recognised. There are currently experiments going on in terms of the creation of groups of students who are team-supervised, though the usual requirements of having clearly defined supervisors tends to persist. These approaches are mainly a result of situations where there is a substantial increase in the number of students but is also a recognition that in areas in which there are substantial interdisciplinary overlays, that the traditional model may not work that well. Team supervision then is in its infancy and treated as 'experimental'.
- In **Denmark** each doctoral student has a main supervisor. It is possible to have more than one, but there is always one named academic who is responsible for the

progress of the student.

### **Comment**

We suggest that what is required is not a proclamation that there must be supervisory teams but rather a notion that a student must be supported in specific ways and that supervisory arrangements must address those ways. It is not teams *per se* that are required but rather it is what teams can do (for students) that may be desirable. We need to focus therefore on the functions that arrangements perform rather than the form that they take. If we need to require anything of universities it should be that they support their doctoral students in specific dimensions. For example, if we take the notion that a student should have access to someone who can 'take over' if his/her main supervisor is absent for some time then that kind of access can be arranged via various devices that do not necessarily involve teams. Indeed, having a team does not mean that such support will be forthcoming if that team was not set up with this function specifically in mind. We suggest therefore that what is required is first a clearer definition of what the functions are that make up 'adequate supervision' and second organisational flexibility in the way in which those functions are met. A team is nothing unless its internal structures and its functions are defined.

There are perhaps two issues within the examples given in Box 1 that are worth considering briefly. In one sense they may seem matters merely of semantics yet the

words seem to us to underpin some important concepts. First, the idea of a candidate having a 'promoter' does clarify the role somewhat in that it is clear that a person fulfilling this role is necessarily on the side of the student and is actively promoting his/her candidature for a doctorate. This kind of relationship may seem on the surface to be consistent with the UK notion of what a supervisor does, yet this is not quite the case. To supervise implies the right and obligation to oversee work and to condemn when necessary as well as to praise when appropriate, whereas to promote seems to us to be a notion that is less equivocal, it involves direct action to put forward the candidate to others for judgment making. Second, and similarly, the idea of a doctoral committee offers a different perspective on role of the 'supervisor' in managing the student's progress. PhD by committee may strike fear into the heart of many an academic – particularly those who spend a considerable amount of their time attending committees - yet we suggest that having a supervisor who reports to a specially set up doctoral committee offers a relationship in which the supervisor becomes a more integral part of the way in which the student operates. The supervisor *and* the student relate to the committee, which then takes away from the supervisor some of the roles of furthering the administrative progress of the project and more importantly of distancing the supervisor from the assessment of the progress of 'their student'. There is a sense of course in which sponsors and supervisors necessarily evaluate progress – this is a natural part of pedagogy – but the formality of progress assessments become less straightforward when a supervisor is part of an assessment process that passes judgment on work that he/she has, in part at least, 'sanctioned' or even initiated.

In the UK system where a supervisor is in a position of possibly being both supporter and judge then roles may become confused. Of course, teachers assess their pupils and there is not necessarily any conflict in this but the relationship between a research student and his/her supervisor involves them both in going beyond learning material and being tested upon that learning. As we have already noted, research degree study is unique [in higher education] in being devoid of predetermined curricula (upon which candidates might be assessed) therefore devoid of predetermined assessment points. In the context of research degree study there is a sense in which both teacher and pupil are engaged together in creating the curriculum and assessing their own progress in meeting their research intentions. Having a committee that is outside of the pedagogical relationship seems to us appropriate. And here we need to draw a distinction between the kinds of committee noted in Box 1 and the kinds of research degree committees prevalent in UK universities. In the former the committee is concerned directly with the academic progress being made, whereas in a typical UK university the research degree committee will refer (and essentially, defer) to academic judgments made by others – admittedly those that the committee may have appointed but who nevertheless those who are distinct from it. The notion of a doctoral committee set up for an individual candidate to which both candidate and supervisor may relate, and which deals with the administration and the academic judgment making, is a different notion from that which is prevalent in the UK and may suggest a further consideration of our current, UK practice.

## 2.2 Being Qualified to Supervise Research Students

### Context and issues arising

The issue that we need to focus upon in this section is just what it is that is being required of someone in order that they may be deemed suitable to supervise doctoral students. The QAA Code of Practice (2004) refers to the need for those who are to supervise to have the *‘appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support, encourage and monitor research students effectively’* (QAA, 2004, precept 11). Because of the emphasis on teams as described earlier in this paper, it is common though not universal that it is the experience and expertise of the team collectively that is accorded scrutiny and again our concern here is that, while this may be wholly appropriate where what individual team members do is clearly defined and understood by all concerned parties, it may be rendered meaningless where such clarity is not present. What the team offers collectively, by way of experience and expertise, matters little if in reality one member acts in isolation of the others.

Beyond our anxieties about the effect of focusing on teams at the expense of roles, the upshot of the QAA code more generally is that it is left to institutions that have research degree awarding powers to decide which of their staff may supervise and which may not in terms of how *‘appropriate knowledge and skills’* is interpreted. In the UK it is possible that in an institution with research degree awarding powers any member of staff may supervise in a principal role – regardless of their status in terms of experience of research

or of supervising and regardless of their subject expertise (be that judged by academic awards gained or publications etc). Of course, UK institutions may require that a principal supervisor has a doctorate him/herself and/or that he/she has a certain number of years of successful research experience evidenced by publication of grants awarded or indeed that he/she has supervised as a member of a team successfully, but an institution does not have to operate these kinds of conditions. This is in marked contrast to many other countries. Again, we are not suggesting that this UK situation is necessarily wrong – indeed what is done in the UK may be indicative of a mature, effective, self-controlling system but it does perhaps lead us to examine the contrast with most, if not all, of the countries sampled.

### **Examples from Countries Worldwide**

The quality of research degree supervisors is noted as a concern in several of the countries in our sample although there appears to be little direct evidence of poor quality supervision being a significant factor in the success rates of students. Both France and Japan have developed approaches which are worthy of comment. In France (and similarly in Poland) supervisors must gain the ‘habilitation’ in order to supervise, a diploma awarded after approximately five years of research work following the award of doctorate. Interestingly from our perspective in this paper, the habilitation, which in France at least involves presentations to a panel of three peers and a board, is concerned more with the research projects than with any pedagogic issues of supervision.

Clearly, in some countries the ability to offer research degree programmes is restricted to certain, selected universities only. This effectively means that some university teachers are 'not qualified' as an outcome of where they work rather than because of any inabilities they may have at an individual level. The examples cited below refer therefore to those university teachers who are in a position to become qualified (i.e. not necessarily to all academics within a country).

### **Box 3**

## Qualifications to supervise

### Examples

- In **Denmark** only associate and full professors can be supervisors. This is a not uncommon state of affairs across countries sampled. It is also the case in Denmark that the student may be enrolled at a university but be working at another location, such as a government research institution. If that is the case the student can have a principal supervisor who is a professor at the university and a project supervisor at the place of work. The university-based supervisor is responsible for documenting that the student has done what was planned and has fulfilled the requirements in the Programme.
- Before 1984, two doctoral qualifications co-existed in **France**: a 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle thesis, prepared in 2 years, and the Doctorate of State, which was thought of as a sum total of research work, the establishment of the scientific career, and the gateway to professorship. In place of this Doctorate of State, a '*Habilitation to supervise research*' was established in 1984 as a prerequisite for professorship and for autonomous supervision of doctoral candidates. This "Habilitation" is defended, on average, after about 5 years of post-doctoral research work. As noted above, a '*Habilitation to supervise research*' is required to be awarded to a supervisor. Researchers apply for this diploma after approximately 5 years of research following their own doctoral defence. The applicant has to write down a presentation of his/her research results and an indicative research project, which is then reviewed by three experts and defended before a board. So-called 'junior'

researchers may start to supervise doctorates in collaboration (and under the control) of the properly designated supervisor (i.e. one who has the 'Habilitation' diploma).

- In **Australia** the principal supervisor should have: expertise in the field of study, hold a doctoral qualification or equivalent, be 'research active' in a relevant discipline or disciplines, have sufficient time and resources to provide a quality learning experience for the candidate, and have training and/or experience in the supervisory process.
- In **China** there is a lot of social kudos associated with being a PhD supervisor because it is seen as the highest form of recognition of academic capabilities. Senior academics in universities which are approved by the Ministry of Education to host PhD programmes are keen to become PhD supervisors at the earliest opportunity. Applications are submitted to the Research Degrees Committee within the relevant HEIs and approval of new PhD supervisors is granted on an annual basis. For those who have become approved PhD supervisors, they will display it on their business cards with pride, using the Chinese expression, 'bodao'. In China, to qualify as a PhD supervisor, one is normally expected to: be a full professor for at least five years, be a leading researcher in the relevant field, have supervised at least one cohort of masters' dissertations to completion (note that it takes two to three years to complete a masters degree in China), be in possession of a PhD qualification if one was born after the founding of the People's Republic of China.
- In **India** there are no specified qualifications laid down for the Supervisor beyond

those required for a teacher.

### **Comment**

We suggest that the position of the UK with regard to qualifications to supervise doctoral candidates is one where custom and practice is largely defined at the level of the individual institution and thus one where there is variation across the piece. This may be the sign of a mature academia that trusts its own universities to act in the best interests of the student and which has an experienced and extensive research community that is capable of responsible self-regulation. On the other hand it may be, again, that the role of the supervisor remains opaque in the UK and therefore what is required of them is left imprecise. In short, one cannot know what knowledge and skills someone needs to possess to undertake supervision if one does not know what supervising entails.

For our part we suggest that to qualify to supervise (and indeed to be trained to supervise, which we consider later in this paper) requires a consideration of the pedagogy involved as well as knowledge and expertise of research matter. It is not enough to have experience of researching to be seen as qualified because the task of supervising involves more than doing research – it requires that the supervisor engages with the student in learning about aspects of investigating that will necessarily, if successful, change the nature of what is being learnt. That engagement, then, involves teaching and learning as well as researching - it may well be distinctive as an educative process in that it is likely

to include challenge to the way in which an individual academic has previously understood relationships between acts of learning, things that are to be learnt and acts of teaching someone to understand something that they did not understand before.

We suggest, in light of the above and in the context of a reading of QAA (2007), that for many institutions it may be worth separating out more clearly than is presently the case, the qualifications required to supervise on the one hand and to supervise autonomously on the other. Again, to focus in regulatory terms on the combined experience and expertise of the supervisory team (as would seem to be the case in many institutions, see QAA, 2007) at the expense of considering the issue of autonomous supervision versus [non-autonomous] supervisory involvement may result in an obfuscation of the real needs of the student. Utilising the notion of a 'principal' supervisor as a response to this issue is likely to be effective only where the distinction between principal and other is defined more fully than simply in administrative terms.

### **2.3 Appointing Supervisors: formal or informal / institution or student led?**

#### **Context and issues arising**

The QAA Code of Practice (2004) and the report of the review (QAA, 2007) as noted above, comment fairly fully on the appointment of supervisors (e.g. in terms of qualifications and training) but they say little about the process of appointing supervisors. There is an assumption (see Precept 11) that institutions will appoint supervisors to

students (or to their teams). Yet we know (e.g. Phillips and Pugh, 2000; Wisker, 2005) that in reality the coming together of prospective student and putative supervisor is not always so straightforward. In one sense this may not seem significant, yet in the authors' own experience of managing research degree programmes at institutional level it is clear that a significant number of problems that occur within postgraduate research programmes have their roots in that initial coming together of student and of intellectual ideas and of supervisor(s).

### **Examples from Countries around the World**

In Japan the appointment of supervisors appears to be far more regulated than in the other countries in our sample (with the possible exception of China). Academics wishing to supervise research students must be formally approved by MEMEX (see Yamamoto, 2007 for a fuller explanation) and receive the title of Maru-Go Professors. The process, which takes around one year to complete, gives the academic a special stamp of approval by the Ministry to supervise doctoral candidates. At the other end of the spectrum from this highly regulated structure, the case in Germany appears to be far more relaxed with academic staff not only free to supervise but apparently to manage the entire process single handed. The UK and the majority of the remaining countries occupy a middle ground in which competence in the area of research and previous experience are the key criteria in the appointment of supervisors.

<b>Examples</b>
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- A student who enrolls in a doctoral programme in **Japan** has a supervisor(s) who will supervise him/her from the beginning of study to the awarding of the degree. It is often the case that students request who will supervise them at the entry stage.
- The postgraduate scene in **China** is underpinned by recognition of, and response to, reputation. Prospective candidates are expected to know a particular academic personally or by reputation and they then tailor their application accordingly, i.e. to match up with the research interests of that supervisor. Quite often, famous PhD supervisors become over subscribed with doctoral students and then they simply turn away new applicants.
- In **Mexico** students select professors, by reputation or personal knowledge, as a potential mentor. In some institutions, students are required to take brief summer admission courses and tests before they are interviewed by the department faculty that in turn assigns a particular mentor.
- In **India**, it is usual for the candidate to propose a research programme and once that is approved, then the candidate will be allocated a supervisor from among the teachers of the department, depending upon the specialisation required; effectively students are matched up with supervisors. However, students may sometime have the option to choose a supervisor depending upon research interest and that supervisor's willingness to guide the student. There is also some flexibility for a research student to choose an external supervisor with the consent and approval of the departmental research committee.

- In **Denmark** it is typically the case that doctoral students cluster around certain supervisors. These are typically highly research active professors, who also have a good status as teachers and thus are able to get in touch with the best and brightest students when they are in their masters years. Most doctoral students get their fellowships through application based on open calls. This is a condition for all fellowships financed through the government grant to universities and through research councils. For industrial doctoral students in Denmark the company applies for a fellowship based on recommendations of a specific candidate for the position. The call is typically based on research projects being done in research groups, and the call will mention the professors involved in the group, and they then become the supervisors later on.

### **Comment**

It is clear from the examples above that it is fairly universal that there is a need for aspiring students to know of their prospective main supervisor and that this is of paramount importance to those wishing to undertake a research degree. While this is understandable at some levels it is also indicative of a culture in which 'who you know' begins to take on an importance that may go beyond its real value. Of course students should frequent themselves with the research of the prospective supervisor, as indeed they should with the field more broadly, but when being known by the supervisor (e.g. as a Masters student) becomes more important than what the student knows and the evidence

he/she can put forward to show how readily he/she can learn at an advanced level (and, in turn, begin to advance knowledge themselves), then this may seem a recipe for a kind of insularity that is likely to be counter productive in the long term. Academia in many of our examples can be seen to be permeated by a culture where reputation and status become imbued with indications of worthiness which may, or may not, have substance. Observers may also feel that this applies equally in the UK.

## **2.4 Training of Supervisors**

### **Context and issues arising**

In the UK, it is advocated that supervisors should receive training in addition to meeting the criteria for appointment as a supervisor and there is a general emphasis placed on increasing the quality of supervision even though there is, again, little direct evidence of poor supervision (it should be noted however that such evidence does exist in Finland and in Germany).

None of the Precepts in the Code of Practice (QAA 2004) that refer to supervision (Precepts 11, 12, 13 and 14) make specific mention of the need for training of supervisors though one of the explanations that sits below precept 11 does mention that, *‘They [supervisors] will wish, and institutions will require them, to engage in development of various kinds to equip them to supervise students. New supervisors will participate in specified development activities, arranged through their institutions, to assure their competence in the role. Institutions will expect existing supervisors to demonstrate their continuing professional development through participation in a range of activities*

*designed to support their work as supervisors.*' (Explanation under precept 11, QAA, 2004, p. 13)

In the Report on the Review by QAA (QAA, 2007) it becomes clear that the training of 'new' supervisors' has become commonplace in the UK if not universal (paragraph 34, p. 8). However, despite the assertion of an institutional expectation with regard to existing supervisors, the report reveals that the issue that was one of the most commonly commented upon within all the reports on individual institutions was the variability in the 'training and development of established supervisors' (paragraph 35, p.8). The report maintains that 'there is still work to be done' in engaging established supervisors in development programmes. It is stated that such supervisors are 'rarely required' to so engage. The situation on the ground therefore seems to be in contradiction to the assertions of QAA with regard to what should be expected of existing, established supervisors.

Neither of these documents makes any mention of the nature of training and development programmes that are being advocated and indeed expected; nor is there any underpinning rationale as to why research degree study should be separated out for special mention with regard to the development of supervisory and teaching skills. Paragraph 36 of the 2007 Report (QAA, 2007) refers only of ways of 'incentivising' supervisor development. It cites two examples of what are presumably taken to be good practice in this respect: first, an institution that runs an annual competition for the 'best student/supervisor relationship' and another where a 'Vice-Chancellor's award for excellence in doctoral

supervision' has been introduced. We return to these two reward systems in our comments below.

### **Examples from Countries around the World**

#### **Examples**

- In **France** some universities and doctoral schools develop information and seminars for supervisors to make them aware of their responsibilities, not only for the supervision of the research project but also in the choice of complementary courses and the working out of the professional project.
- In **Australia** DDOGS also operates a web-based supervision resource known as first (‘for Improving Research Supervision and Training’) which was created by a consortium of Australian and New Zealand universities.

None of the other country contributors sampled mentioned ‘training’ of supervisors as an issue at all. Follow-up questions asking specifically about any national requirements, or common practices, in this regard indicated that such training is not deemed necessary in part at least because of the rigour of selecting supervisors in the first place (i.e. the somewhat circular argument that their skills must be adequate or they would not have been selected in the first place).

### **Comment**

Within the countries sampled, the training and development of research degree supervisors is not an issue of any significance; however, according to the two QAA documents referred to above it is an issue in the UK. Again, what is not clear from these documents, is what it is about research degree supervision that marks it out for special attention among the range of teaching and learning contexts that any university lecturer is likely to encounter in their professional practice and following from this what kind of development the new, as opposed to the established, supervisor needs?

It is also not clear whether a distinction needs to be drawn within the category of ‘established’. In the 2004 QAA document the term ‘existing supervisors’ is used yet in the later (2007) report the term ‘established supervisors’ is employed. While wishing to avoid accusations of pedantry, there seems to us to be a significant difference between these two terms with the former being a weaker version of the latter (a supervisor might be on an existing team but still be relatively inexperienced in terms of successful

students, while an established supervisor might be interpreted as one who has an established track record of successful supervision). Between the two documents then there develops a more encompassing notion of who needs to be trained. Yet of course ‘trained in what?’ remains unidentified and hence, for us, unresolved. While we subscribe to some of the tenets of life-long learning and the need to be ever improving in professional practice and while we recognise that a supervisor may have supervised twenty students inadequately and still have a reasonable track record on paper (many doctoral students may well be resourceful and resilient and ultimately successful in gaining a doctorate in the face of incompetent supervision), we also suggest that developmental needs will change with increasing experience and competence and that focusing on the giving of prizes (see above reference to some of the ‘good practice’ defined in QAA 2007) for something that should be part and parcel of the professional approach to any teaching in universities is to miss the point entirely. New, existing and established supervisors are all more likely to perceive the usefulness of, and engage in, training/development if the reasons for it can be spelt out, and here what needs attention is the distinctiveness of the relationship between teaching, learning and supervising on the one hand and researching and learning about researching on the other.

By focusing on the universality of supervisor training programmes at the level of availability and treating them with a generality that belies their necessary specificity for different populations of supervisor and by concentrating upon ways of ‘incentivising’ engagement with such programmes, QAA is missing the opportunity to highlight what is

truly important and that is the *raison d'être* for the programmes and their subsequent internal integrity.

We suggest that most other countries in our sample are not engaging with supervisor development because they are seeing the recruitment of only very experienced researchers as the important quality issue and in this it may be that they are accepting experience of researching as the necessary qualification at the expense of an understanding of successful strategies for creating effective teaching and learning situations within the research environment. In our own view such an interpretation is problematic in as much as we would argue that doctoral study should be concerned with learning about researching and learning through researching, it is not about researching alone.

## **2.5 The Evaluation and Monitoring of the Performance of Supervisors**

### **Context and issues arising**

There is no mention in Precepts 11-14 of the QAA Code of Practice (QAA, 2004) (i.e. those relating to supervisory practice) of issues of evaluating or monitoring the performance of supervisors, neither is there any such mention in the explanations under the precepts. However, in the report on the review (QAA, 2007) there is reference to 'good practice' in the monitoring and review of supervision (paragraph 43 on page 9). The 2007 QAA report is, then, drawing attention to good practice in areas that it did not

see fit to include in the earlier 2004 Code, and of course the 2007 review was supposed to be a review of how well institutions were addressing the Code (not how well they were addressing things that were not in the Code). More importantly, perhaps, are the examples of good practice that are cited in paragraph 43, the first is *'the annual progress review being carried out by two independent assessors excluding the supervisor'*, the second is *'termly formal reporting on supervision to the institution'* (it is not clear in the report, who does the reporting nor indeed if it is connected to the annual progress review), and third (described as a 'particularly interesting example of good practice') is the *'formal review of supervisory practice and the supervisory team when a thesis is failed or requires major revisions'*. We return to these examples in our discussion below.

### **Examples from Countries around the World**

#### **Examples**

- The Ministry of Education in **Finland** administered a survey for the first graduate school students in 1996 (MoE 2000). At that time, 55 per cent evaluated their overall experience of the new system as good or excellent and 25 per cent as satisfactory. The remaining fifth had unsatisfactory or even bad experiences. As regards the quality of supervision, 25 per cent claimed that their experience was below satisfactory. According to a second survey made in 1999 at the end of the first graduate school period, the majority (67 %) of respondents would have wanted more supervision and support. One out of four thought that the supervision they had received for their dissertation was unsatisfactory or even

poor. At that time 15 per cent had completed their doctoral degree.

- At the time of writing, there is no regular assessment of supervisors in **France**. However, it is assumed by our French respondent that the assessment of supervisors is easy to perform regularly each time a doctorate candidate's training is assessed by the doctoral program, through the regular follow-up of the doctoral project progression, and through indicators on doctorate achievement rate and doctors' employment rate. In other words the supervisor's competence is judged by the success of the candidate on the project. In France there is a focus on the complementary responsibilities of the research team in which the project is developed and that of the doctoral school in continually evaluating the progress of the project. Some doctoral schools ensure that the evaluation of the work – and hence of the supervisor's effectiveness, is undertaken by a senior scientist outside the lab, and/or the appointment of a mid-term thesis committee, which provides scientific advices on the progress of the work. Such evaluation is taken to be very beneficial for all parties.
- The quality of supervision has been of considerable concern in **Germany** in recent times. Anxieties have been expressed about high levels of dependency on supervisors by students. There have been accusations that some supervisors have exploited their doctoral candidates for their own research and, significantly, in terms of their own teaching duties and that such supervisors have not provided sufficient feedback with enough regularity on the research work of their postgraduate students. The establishment of doctoral programmes and Graduiertenkollegs has been intended to address these criticisms.

## **Comment**

There are three main issues for us arising from the two QAA documents in terms of how they relate to evaluating and monitoring supervision and in relation to examples from overseas.

First there is the lack of evidence in the UK regarding the quality, or lack of it, in supervision across the sector. Without the kind of evidence supplied in Finland it is hard to see where the baseline for improving standards is, let alone the specific areas within supervision where concern should be focused.

Second, it is evident from a reading of the two QAA documents that, in respect of evaluating and monitoring supervision at least, aspects of institutional practice that receive no mention in the Code were considered by review teams and, presumably therefore, featured in considerations of the quality of individual institution's processes and procedures. Such considerations highlight some features of the kind of quality process that is developing in the UK. A national Code is agreed and institutions are exhorted to meet the precepts within it. After a suitable period of time in which they can make adjustments to their practices in order meet those precepts, the institutions are then reviewed to ascertain how well they are matching up to what the Code requires of them. Yet that review, according to the subsequent report, included areas of operation that were

not mentioned in the Code and therefore institutions find themselves in danger of being criticised for omitting from what they submit for external review, documents or items that they had not been asked to include in the first place. They also find themselves reading in the final report practices that are identified as 'good' yet which bear no relation to the content of the original Code. In short, goal posts are subtly but significantly moved in the process of reviewing and reporting.

Of course, it may be argued that the Code was never intended to be all-encompassing and that quality should not be refined down to a series of boxes to be ticked. The review teams may have interpreted their task as identifying good practice as they found it, regardless of its relation to the Code itself. But such an argument harbours within it the real difficulties of any Code of this kind – its precepts become reified into things to be done and any published review into how well institutions are matching up to the Code necessarily become an exercise which engages with the question 'have the institutions done the things that are set down in the precepts?'. However, while the process of review we have seen here (QAA, 2007) completes the reification begun by the Code itself, it does not necessarily do so with regard *only* to those aspects of practice that were originally identified as worthy of inclusion. This latter phenomenon means that quality targets for institutions to aim for may be extra to the original Code and have been spontaneously generated by review teams which were not set up for that purpose.

This leads to our third issue - the way in which review teams have identified examples of good practice (as reported in QAA, 2007) and the effects on the general quality of

provision if institutions were to adopt them within their own custom and practice. The three particular examples given in respect of monitoring, and reported above, illustrate the danger. Our main objection is that there is no evidence presented as to why these should be deemed 'good practice' other than that a review team determined them to be so. Indeed, it might well be, presumably, that a single member of the team noted some institutional practice and determined that it is 'good'. So, we have a situation where one person, or at best a small group, identifies, from presentations of current practice on paper what is good, and by implication of omission what is not so good. We do not doubt the good intentions of reviewers acting alone or together, but what is clear is that such identification must remain at the level of unsubstantiated opinion without the necessary evidence to support it.

If we take the specific examples of good practice mentioned in paragraph 43 of the report into the review (QAA, 2007) (and noted earlier in this current paper), we suggest that they are imprecise and therefore unhelpful. For example, it is not clear exactly how the *'the annual progress review [presumably of the student's progress] being conducted by two independent assessors excluding the supervisor'* feeds into any monitoring of the supervision unless (a) that review includes a specific focus on supervision and (b) student progress can be directly related to quality of supervisory input. It is also not clear, that if there is such a specific focus as suggested in (a) above, what form it takes (e.g. input from student/supervisors and/or a paper trail of meeting frequency and content) and what happens to its outcomes (e.g. to whom or to what committee are the outcomes reported?). Similarly, the notion of *'termly reporting on supervision to the institution'* is opaque. It is

not clear if this is related to the annual progress review (it is in the same sentence but seems dislocated) and if it is then it is unclear just how the annual feeds into the termly. Nor is it clear whether the termly reporting is at a collective level of, for example, numbers of supervisors in particular departments, their workloads and their attendance at training workshops or at the individual level of reports on numbers of supervisory meetings of specific teams, feedback on relationships with specific students and so on. In short, the lack of detail renders the 'good practice' nebulous at best and dangerous at worst (that is, dangerous in as much as it leaves open to interpretation just what it is that is being judged as 'good').

The final, and according to QAA, the '*particularly interesting example of good practice*' is '*the formal review of supervisory practice and the supervisory team when a thesis is failed or requires major revision*'. This raises, for us, a series of questions. First, is there an implication here that an institution that operates a doctoral examination process that includes failure and major revision is regarding the use of those assessment categories as indicative of something above and beyond the efforts and abilities of the student? Are examiners aware that if they make use of the 'major revision' category they are triggering a formal review of supervisory practice? Is it possible that, if they are so aware, then their judgement making is automatically at two different levels – first that of assessing the outcomes of the student's programme of study and second that of the supervisor's practice in relation to it? Is it possible then that any such duality may confound the integrity of the assessment process? Will the examiners have input into the formal review, above and beyond the input made evident by their grading and their comments?

Will a formal review take place in an instance where a supervisor has advised the candidate against the submission of the work? In short, we suggest that the apparent simplicity of the example of ‘good practice’ obscures some complex issues of assessment and responsibility, raises some difficult knock-on questions and further that any institution seeking to emulate this ‘good practice’ without a clear understanding of its implications and ramifications is at risk of undermining quality in its very pursuit of it.

### **3. Conclusions**

We have noted above the example of the ‘habilitation’ in France and have suggested that it is concerned more with the research projects than with the pedagogic issues of supervision. We have also noted that the training of supervisors is now a feature of the postgraduate research scene in many countries.

In the light of these two notes, it seems to us important to consider just what it is that supervisors are being trained for, and again, this brings us full-circle to questions about the nature of the doctoral award to which the student aspires. As we have stressed elsewhere (Powell and Green, 2007), our view is that the student is engaged in acts of learning about how to do research, is studying for an academic award that has criteria which the student needs to demonstrate that he/she has met. Supervision is, therefore, primarily an act of pedagogy – not of research. Hence it follows that research degree supervision should be about how the supervisor can most effectively engage with the learner in the latter’s attempts to provide evidence to meet the criteria for the award.

In one sense it might seem that the art and the science of teaching should readily transfer to the research degree context from the other kinds of [university] teaching that the academic member of staff is engaged in. However, what makes research degree supervision different is the expectation that the student will attain a kind of mastery that is on a par with the supervisors' and that in respect of the specifics of knowledge the student will necessarily exceed that supervisor. After all, the student has to contribute to knowledge and this means that supervisors must learn things they did not know before. The 'curriculum' in research degree study is therefore about extending knowledge not merely transferring it. The essentials of the teacher/pupil (or master/novice) relationship are different from that which pertains at all other levels of learning and therefore the pedagogy is new. Supervisors who think they can supervise because they can research are necessarily misguided and it follows that systems which mirror this misguided notion are also necessarily at fault. Prior experiences of researching and/or teaching are necessary but not sufficient for effective research degree supervision.

Supervision is a complex business and to begin to define good practice, for example in monitoring it, without a careful exposition of just what it involves, its constraints and the parameters of its responsibilities is, in our view, unlikely to lead to an enhancement of quality provision. To encourage review teams to identify what, in their collective opinion, are examples of good practice without any reference to any evidence whatsoever other than their own, predetermined, beliefs is to run the risk of the inappropriate adoption of

dubious practices by institutions intent on illustrating their commitment to the newly established, yet ever changing, quality agenda.

Word length: 9,560 (Please note that this word length includes the words within the Tables, without those words the length is 7,503. Further, the authors suggest that if word length is a problem then (i) the Tables might be cut (or put into an Appendix) or indeed (ii) that the paper could be abbreviated by omitting sections 2.4 and 2.5; this would require only some minor amendments to the abstract and conclusions.)

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**Appendix 1 - List of the 17 countries included in the survey**

Australia	Brazil	Canada
China	Denmark	Finland
France	Germany	USA
India	Japan	Mexico
Netherlands	Poland	South Africa
Thailand	UK	