

# Doctoral supervisory quality from the perspective of senior academic managers

**Margaret Kiley**

**Australian National University**

It has been suggested in the literature that the relationship with a doctoral supervisor is the predominant factor in student decisions to continue or withdraw from their candidatures. However, anecdotally it is not uncommon to hear heads of department, faculty deans and those in similar positions say that they know who the poorly-performing doctoral supervisors are, but often they are not sure what they, or others can do to remedy the situation. This study is based on interviews with 34 senior staff in order to understand how they identified supervisors who they generally considered less than ideal in the way they supervised doctoral candidates. This was followed by how they addressed, often, the multiple issues involved. The results provide helpful insights for staff in leadership positions as well as those whose role it is to support doctoral education, and particularly candidates and supervisors.

*Keywords: doctoral education, PhD supervision*

## **Aim**

The aim of this study was to identify the barriers and supports for heads of department or similar when they are working with doctoral supervisors who might be deemed less than ideal, for example: unskilled or neglectful. The research questions addressed were: Within an Australian context how do Heads of Department define troublesome, unprofessional or poorly performing research supervisors and what, if anything they do about them? In the Australian situation the role of the head of department is critical given that generally the dean of graduate research has little or no authority over staff in departments. Note, this study was particularly from the perspective of senior academic managers. While there is no doubt that a broader study involving candidates and

supervisors would have revealed a more comprehensive picture, this modest beginning presents one aspect of this complex picture.

## **Context**

There is substantial research to indicate that poor research supervision is associated with doctoral delays and non-completions (see for example Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Gardner, 2009; Platow, 2011). Therefore, identifying ways in which senior staff can identify and then respond to issues of poor performance in supervisors was deemed to be one way of addressing the issue of unprofessional supervision. Of note, performance here was not referring to numbers of publications and grants, but rather the way staff performed their supervisory work with candidates and colleagues. At

the coursework teaching level (bachelor's and master's) it is often possible to identify poorly-performing lecturers through course and teaching evaluations. However, it is generally recognised that it is much more difficult to identify and quantify supervisory performance.

Despite the difficulty in identifying supervisors of concern there are reports such as the article by Grove (2016) who writes about the 'toxic' supervisor and 'students from hell' and Grant (2004) the master/slave relationship. Specifically related to supervisors, Chamberlain (2016 pp. 1-3) proposes a number of different types of unprofessional behaviour such as: cheap labour; the 'ghost supervisor'; collateral damage; the combatant; creepy crawlers; and the captivate and con supervisor.

In their study of supervisory quality Lofstrom and Pyhalto (2017) used a model of ethical principles based on Kitchener (1985, 2000) with the qualities: '1. *respect for autonomy*; 2. *avoiding harm* (non-maleficence), 3. *benefiting others* (beneficence), 4. *being just* (justice) and 5. *being faithful* (fidelity)' (Italics in the original p. 233). The framework was applied to data they collected from Finnish supervisors and candidates in the natural and behavioural science. They found that: 'A substantial portion of the ethical dilemmas in the data pertained to non-maleficence, typically exploitation' (p. 242).

On the other hand, research by Golde (2000) and others suggests that a supportive advising [supervising] relationship is central to successful and timely completion and particularly as an agent for socialisation into the discipline, the institution, and a scholarly approach to research. There are a number of books written for academic staff who are setting out on the course of becoming an effective supervisor (for example Denholm & Evans, 2007; Anne Lee, 2012; Taylor, Kiley, & Humphrey, 2018; Walker & Thomsom, 2010; Wisker, 2012). Unsurprisingly they have a common thread related to discussing and managing expectations, recognising individual differences, creating a positive relationship, and managing the research process.

In addition to books, there are numerous publications related to being a 'good' supervisor with most research findings recognising the important aspects of the affective rather than simply the cognitive qualities of the supervisor. For example, from student interviews Janssen (2005) reports qualities such as: availability; interest and enthusiasm; good communication; approachability and rapport. Adrian Lee, Dennis, and Campbell (2007) undertook analysis of applications to the journal Nature for their Mentor of the Year award and the results indicate again, a strong focus on the affective aspects

of supervision such as: unselfishness and respect. In a more recent study Davis and Kiley (2018) found that the affective dimensions of supervisors were by far the most common with regard to candidates' comments on the ideal supervisor. However, one of the difficulties with such findings is the idea that sometimes 'tough love' is much appreciated after submission of the thesis but not necessarily during the process.

It is important here to gain some insight into how heads of department know who are the poorly performing, unprofessional supervisors for whom they are responsible. Many universities, particularly in Australia, require candidates and supervisors to complete an annual report, with some even requiring six-monthly reports. However, Mewburn, Cuthbert, and Tokareva (2014) undertook interviews with 20 candidates and 15 supervisors to find out the efficacy and value of such annual reports. They found that there was a diversity of views about the purpose and audience with most assuming 'effectively no audience' (p. 8). Furthermore, 'no candidate expressed the desire or willingness to comment on supervisor performance in writing' (p. 5).

In light of the above, the New South Wales (Australia) Ombudsman, in a recent report, asked the question: why do universities find complaints regarding supervisors to be problematic? The report argues that the relationship between supervisor and candidate is a complex one and:

If a dispute arises it almost always centres on events that occurred when two individuals were alone in a room having a conversation that does not exist outside their respective memories, which rarely align. A third party, investigating a complaint, has nothing they can definitively rely on to determine where the truth lies. (Ombudsman, 2016 p. 3)

In light of the importance of good supervision, and the difficulty in evaluating supervision in ways that universities might evaluate undergraduate teaching this small-scale study set out to ask Heads of Department or equivalent:

- What they thought made a 'good/poor'; 'professional/unprofessional'; or 'well performing/ poorly performing' supervisor;
- How they knew about these supervisors, especially the negative ones; and
- What they did about them.

However, it is worth noting that one of the first challenges associated with the study was deciding on the term to use to describe supervisors who generally were not very good! Poorly performing? Unprofessional? Staff of concern? Difficult? Various terms are used here to give a sense of the language used by interviewees.

## Methodology

Following ethics approval, deans of graduate research in each of the seven universities involved in the study were approached and asked to introduce the researcher and her project to relevant staff in their institution. These were staff that the dean thought might be prepared to participate in the study. Once the message was sent out by email, potential interviewees were asked to contact the researcher directly in order to ensure that the institution's dean of graduate research would not know who had been involved.

In most cases, the interviews were held individually, although, at one university there were six staff who opted for a group discussion. Each individual participant was interviewed for approximately 30 minutes with the interview recorded and then noted whereas the group discussion went closer to an hour. The 34 interviewees came from seven different universities across three states of Australia as detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Interviewees by type of University**

Type of University	N=
Australian Technology Network	9
Innovative Research University	6
Group of Eight	4
Regional	1
Non-aligned	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>

As Table 2 outlines, of the 34 interviewees 13 were heads of department, seven held the role of associate dean higher degree by research (HDR), six were deans of faculty, four were graduate convenors, two were deans of graduate research, and one a pro-vice-chancellor. Most of those in more senior positions had held the role of head of department or equivalent in previous years.

**Table 2: Roles of interviewees**

Role	N=
Head of Department	13
Associate Dean HDR	7
Faculty Dean	6
HDR Convenor	4
Dean of Graduate Studies	2
Director	1
Pro-Vice-Chancellor	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>

Twenty-two of the 34 interviewees were from humanities and social sciences (HASS) disciplines and 12 from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) areas. Twenty were female and 14 were male (See Table 3).

**Table 3: Number of interviewees by discipline and gender**

	Female	Male	Total
HASS	14	8	22
STEM	6	6	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>34</b>

In order to analyse the data, each interview record was read a number of times with major issues coded against the following four key questions. The codes were then categorised into the major themes outlined in Tables, 4, 5 and 6. Questions asked were:

- What defined a 'professional' doctoral supervisor?
- What constituted a 'difficult or unprofessional' doctoral supervisor?
- How did interviewees know who were the unprofessional staff?
- How were the issues addressed? What worked and what did not?

Of note, several interviewees found it easier to describe the staff who they considered to be professional or 'good' supervisors before they began describing the difficult ones. As a result, the findings below begin on a positive note and then move onto the more negative aspects. As commented earlier, this modest study sought the views of academic managers rather than supervisors and candidates. This is not to suggest that the perspectives of candidates and supervisors are not highly valuable but given there is very little research from the managers' perspective this study is seen as a start.

## Findings

From the analysis, as Table 4 outlines, there were four main categories of 'professional' supervisor qualities: affective qualities; communication skills; assistance with writing and publication; and the management of candidature.

As with many studies (see for example Connell & Manathunga, 2012; Halbert, 2015; Janssen, 2005; Adrian Lee *et al.*, 2007) the affective aspects of supervision are frequently at the top of any list, and certainly they were reported in this study. For example, the 'Supervisor has to care about the student as a person' (HASS3). And, a

**Table 4: Main categories and characteristics of professional supervisors**

1.	Affective	Caring
		Interested in the candidate
2.	Communication	With the candidate
		With other supervisors
3.	Writing and publication	Support with scholarly writing
		Publications
4.	Management	Agreements
		Meetings
		Knowledge of policies and procedures

professional supervisor is: 'someone who is genuinely interested in the student' (HASS15).

Linked with the affective aspects of supervision is communication: 'And then I want the primary supervisor to be someone who really knows how to communicate' (STEM2). Communication was described in several ways, including communicating with other members of the supervisory team as well as with the candidate.

Assisting with writing and publishing was another quality that was reported in relation to the professional supervisor. For example, the good supervisor: 'does know how to support students with all the problems they face with writing' (STEM2). And 'I also think that the professional supervisor encourages students to publish along the way' (HASS2).

Finally, interviewees talked about the management qualities of supervision such as: setting up agreements; meetings; and knowledge of policies and procedures. A member of the discussion group (DG) reported that: 'I guess the professional supervisor handles 'hygiene' [organisational] aspects [however] they are necessary although not sufficient [to be a good supervisor]' (DG).

A second aspect related to meetings, and something that came up frequently was: 'basic things like being able to schedule regular meetings and attend these meetings' (DG). And, as HASS2 reported:

I define professional as a system where the supervisor sets up a formal agreement and schedules of meetings and those meetings are adhered to and there is some input from the student on what form those meetings might take but at each meeting there should be a report made by the student on what progress has been made and what they want to discuss and that should be presented to the supervisor.

The third characteristic under management of candidature related to being: 'very aware of the policies, procedures etc' (STEM2).

I now move on to report from the analysis how interviewees described unprofessional supervisors or those who were difficult to 'manage'.

### The unprofessional/difficult supervisor

The following categories of unprofessional as outlined in Table 5 were evident in the interview data from academic managers: organisational; personal; skills; and research related.

**Table 5: Main categories and characteristics of unprofessional supervisors**

	Category	Characteristics/qualities
1.	Organisational	Unavailability
		Unresponsiveness
		Lack of timely feedback
		Withdrawal
		Changing ideas
2.	Personal	Inappropriate relationships
		Too nice
		Disrespectful
3.	Skills	Lacking supervisory skills
4.	Research related	Manipulation
		Inappropriate authorship on publications
		Unethical behaviour

### Organisational

In the category of organisational there were five main characteristics or qualities noted when describing difficult supervisors (Table 4). The first, and most common, was unavailability: 'Things like students coming in and saying that my supervisor only meets with me for three minutes a week. I am scheduled from 11.27-11.30' (STEM8). Linked with unavailability was the second characteristic of unresponsiveness to candidate needs and required administrative tasks, for example: 'Supervisors are just not responsive enough and they don't respond quickly enough to student enquiries and don't communicate and meet often enough with the student' (HASS8). And: 'My own supervisor was a dud in the sense that he was a benign dud as he was absent' (STEM4). Such supervisors could be described as negligent. The third characteristic was lack of timely feedback. As HASS3 commented: 'The other thing that I guess is very unprofessional and which I think is a major issue...is people who don't read students' work.' Or, even when they eventually read the work: 'a

long turn-around time, or no turn around with feedback on written material' is a real problem (STEM5). There could be several reasons for this, including institutional pressure to take on excessive supervisory, administrative and teaching workloads.

Somewhat different from the first three characteristics is the fourth, withdrawal, which involved supervisors choosing not to continue with candidates who are having difficulties:

The other thing I find extremely unprofessional is when perhaps the supervision is not going the way it maybe should have, some supervisors have got the gall to suddenly say that is not in my area and want to withdraw from the supervision process...it's very difficult to discipline the academic in that situation, there's a whole lot of academic reasons why. (HASS2)

The fifth organisational characteristic was described by HASS16 as changing ideas. 'He would give advice...the student would go away and work on it and then when he went back to the supervisor, he had other ideas...this happened with three students.'

In summary, many of the interviewees reported a number of organisational issues related to the supervisors they described as unprofessional including: not being available; lack of helpful and timely feedback and commentary; and lacking commitment to the candidate when 'the going got tough'.

### **Personal**

Under the category of personal, interviewees reported: personal relationships; being malicious; and being 'too nice'. Comments regarding personal relationships related to both co-supervisors and candidates. For example, because the supervisors were not communicating before meetings: '[the candidate] gets opposing views about something and is torn as to who they upset and who they please' (HASS9). More personal relationships were described as: 'Does not respect the 'at arms-length' supervisor/student divide' (STEM3).

The second quality under personal was the disrespectful. 'There are the malicious ones, not a huge number of them, but they do exist' (STEM4). Trying to explain this STEM3 suggests that:

Sometimes these supervisors are very bright but have psychological problems ... Dealing with that situation is not straightforward...I don't think they realise that the student is the one they are meant to be working with and it is not all about their own research.

Another way of describing such supervisors is 'toxic' (Grove, 2016; Kearns, 2018) and it was not uncommon

for these supervisors to be quite senior, who brought in substantial research funding, and were good researchers in their own discipline with the term 'arrogant' being used to describe some of them. As will be discussed later in this paper, it was often this group of supervisors which was the most difficult for senior staff to manage.

Perhaps the personal characteristic or quality of a difficult supervisor that was most unexpected is what was described as the too nice supervisor and for some senior managers they posed considerable difficulty. Basically, these were the supervisors who found it almost impossible to, 'call it' as some managers described, perhaps being considered weak or lacking in academic courage. In other words, even though the candidate might be struggling to grasp essential concepts, and be behind on most milestones, the 'too nice' supervisor kept supporting and encouraging rather than, as senior managers suggest, recommend that the candidate withdraw or change their program.

For example: '[I] have a swag of committed supervisors and the problem with the ones who are problematic is that they are too over-indulgent to the detriment of the student' (HASS1). Or: 'I think that is one issue where the student doesn't realise there is a major issue and the supervisor has been too positive' (HASS6). With a third describing:

At annual review, the supervisor says yes everything is going ok and the panel reiterating that, while the student is clearly struggling [these supervisors seem to think] 'I can't tick unsatisfactory as the student will be upset so I will tick satisfactory.' (STEM8)

### **Skills**

The poorly skilled supervisor was not considered disrespectful or arrogant, but just someone who was not good at supervising, or, who could be described as 'unskilled'. For example, STEM1 suggests: 'they are clueless through no fault of their own, often because they had poor supervision themselves and/or little or no support regarding supervision from their institution.' Or, as STEM4 commented: 'then there is a person who doesn't even know, [about supervision] and doesn't take the developmental responsibility seriously at all'. Many, but not all, Australian universities provide supervisor development programs.

We have a supervisor register and there are rules about that...you have to be research active and have published in the last few years and we have to attend an update every couple of years, otherwise you won't get your registration approved. (HASS8)

However, with some development programs the focus is substantially on policy and compliance rather than supervisory skills and knowledge which might explain the lack of skills for some supervisors. While it is important to know the rules and procedures, the development of skills and strategies for supervisors is critical, particularly for those who did not themselves have quality supervision on which they can base their practice.

### **Research related**

The fourth category arising from the data was research related and included: manipulating studies and students; inappropriate authorship on publications; and unethical behaviour.

As HASS9 suggested an unprofessional supervisor is one who: 'manipulates the study into something they want rather than allowing the student to take the lead'. Furthermore, order of authorship on publications was seen by some as unprofessional: 'I find it very unprofessional when students' work is presented with the supervisor's name as the first author. I find that extremely unprofessional...' (HASS2). However, as many would argue, there are different protocols regarding author order for different disciplines although STEM3 comments that one of the things he does is observe: 'how the supervisor lists the authors in publications and in seminars' as a way of knowing who the unprofessional supervisors are in the School.

Unethical behaviour was not only related to unethical research but: 'a recent problem has been the ethics of completion where a supervisor moves to another university and wants to take his students who are quite close to completing' (HASS16). There are a number of issues involved in this practice including the completion funding from the Government which is likely to go to the completing university, not necessarily the one where much of the early work was undertaken. Furthermore, particularly in some disciplines, there are likely to be serious ramifications related to the transfer and ownership of Intellectual Property.

### **Why might supervisors be like this?**

While asking the question: Why might supervisors be like this? was not part of the formal protocol, many interviewees spontaneously provided several reasons for

why they thought that some supervisors performed their role so poorly. The most common response from the data was related to the system. For example:

There would be a number of people I could name without the slightest difficulty who basically put their name down to do supervision as it counts for workload and it gets them out of what I would call 'normal' teaching. So that's a big problem. (HASS3)

This practice is likely to be prevalent in universities where workload policies enable staff to 'buy themselves out' of lecturing by taking on additional research candidates. And in a similar vein where the academics' research role is privileged over their teaching and service

roles.

In the worst case you will have someone with a stellar research career and one of the reasons they are stellar is that they have managed to do nothing else and they want to keep doing that and they resent that they have to teach and they resent that they have to exhibit leader-

ship outside their own lab, they resent the fact that they have to go to Open Days, they resent the fact that they have to deal with student enrolments because that is not what they want to do, they want to be a researcher. (STEM1)

The same interviewee suggested that part of the explanation for this behaviour is that: 'I think academics typically come into a university doing one thing [research following their PhD] but they are employed to do something else and this transition is not clearly explained to them' (STEM1). And as HASS10 says:

The transition from someone whose whole life is devoted to research which is very luxurious and self-ish and then all of a sudden, they have commitments outside their research and so the research contribution is less than 50% of what they do. I don't think we do a good job of explaining this. The good ones get it but others don't.

The second reason for unprofessional behaviour that was evident in the data related to the lack of action and taking 'the tough decision' on poor performance by senior staff.

If we were really serious about it and the university were prepared to wear the flak, very senior people like a dean could actually put his or her foot down and say something like 'we get too many bad reports of your supervision and so you are not getting any more students'. (HASS3)

When suggesting above that the dean should 'put his or her foot down' within the Australian system this would have to be a dean of a faculty or college, given that generally deans of graduate research have no authority over staff in departments. Issues of lack of action, and some solutions from the study, are reported below. However, to summarise there were generally four types of supervisors who caused concern for heads of department and those in similar positions. They were those who can be described as:

- *Toxic* i.e. disrespectful, unpleasant
- *Unskilled* i.e. poorly skilled in supervision
- *Neglectful* i.e. negligent and uncaring, and
- *Too nice* i.e. unable to address key issues of performance during candidature.

However, these comments do not take into account the fact that it might well be that the Head of Department is one of those described above. This adds extra complexity to an already complex situation.

### How did senior staff know who were the underperforming/unprofessional supervisors?

Given the generally reported private nature of the research supervisor relationship (see for example Park, 2008) it would not be surprising if senior managers generally reported that they were unaware of who were the underperforming and perhaps even the highly performing supervisors in their department or faculty. However, many of those interviewed reported that they were made aware of poorly performing staff through a number of channels.

Heads of department reported that they generally knew of such staff by reports coming from associate deans, convenors and administrators. Another source of information was milestone and progress reports particularly where there was an associate dean or administrator who worked carefully through the reports and passed on comments: 'We now have a research administrator and they are running regular reports for me so I can see what's happening with progress' (HASS16). A third source of information was from candidates: 'coming by and talking with me about issues' (STEM11).

Most interviewees went to some length to explain that they followed up in some detail with the individuals (candidates and supervisors) when a complaint was made as things were not always as they seemed. This was particularly important in light of the comment by STEM5:

On reflection, there is one issue I would still struggle with – there is one senior supervisor that I would say is the person I used to get the most consistent complaints about – never formal I hasten to add – year in year out. However, if you go back and ask the successful graduates, they speak very highly of this person and say he was critical to their success.

The sources of information link well with the following possible strategies.

### Strategies for improvement

Keeping in mind that this study was from the perspective of academic managers, several interviewees reported that there were some staff, generally very few, who they felt there was little or nothing they could do to change or even stop supervising given they were bringing in large amounts of research funding to the Department. On the other hand, there were several positive strategies reported that relate to other poorly performing supervisors and which are noted below (See Table 6).

*Table 6: Effective strategies for addressing issues*

1.	Transparency	Boards of Examiners and formal reviews
		Committee Chairs
		Administrative processes
2.	Positive culture	Through transparency
		Administrative structures
3.	Support	For Heads of Department
		For Convenors/Associate Deans
		For Supervisors

From the data key findings relate to: making the supervisory relationship or supervisory practices more transparent; development of a positive culture; and provision of support structures.

### 'Opening up' the supervisory relationship

The supervisory relationship has been described as the 'Secret garden' of supervision (Park, 2008) where: '... student and supervisor engaged together as consenting adults, behind closed doors, away from the public gaze, and with little accountability to others' (p. 2). However, most senior managers reported that where processes were in place to open up the relationship or make it 'less private' there were fewer reported incidents of underperforming or unprofessional supervisors. They suggested that one of the key reasons for this was the peer pressure exerted through a culture of supervisory

performance. One of the 'opening up' processes reported related to Annual Reports:

The [progress] reports, other than confidential ones which go to the Head of School, go to a Board in the School and we sit down and read them one by one... and there is a subtle peer pressure. (HASS11)

Another example of this process reported:

That a [special] meeting is more like a board of examiners for the HDR students and so we go through each report on how they are progressing, and we review each student just to make sure they are all on track... all the supervisors in the enrolling area attend that meeting. (HASS8)

One associate dean reported that following such a meeting a staff member came up to her and commented: "Oh no, you actually read everything" – so he knew there was going to be a change' (STEM8). Another system that was reported by a few institutions as working well was having a chair person, independent of the supervisory team, who meets with the candidate: 'we do have the chairperson approach, chair of the committee who is not a supervisor. This is a third person who nominates to your committee and then the student can go to them separate from the supervisors' (HASS10).

The idea of supervision being 'private' had a slightly different connotation for STEM6. 'I don't think it should be private. Some researchers in universities act as if they are consultants and doing the university a bit of a favour... and so there is a tendency that research governance is something they actively resist'. Several interviewees stated that making the process of supervision more transparent should be accompanied by senior staff being more prepared to take action with poorly performing supervisors. 'You have to be in an environment where people are prepared to make the hard decisions when the crunch comes' (STEM1).

Another strategy related to structure allows a Convenor or Associate Dean to ensure that poorly performing supervisors no longer received any new candidates. For example, STEM3 reported that they are able to: 'restrict [supervisor] access to students and scholarships' by managing the application process very strongly. However, in some cases this is not as easy as it sounds.

One thing that is really difficult is to stop them from taking on students, it seems to happen completely independently of the Head of School, so someone should not be able to take particular students, but the students just turn up. (STEM1)

Additionally, as HASS3 commented: 'if you have someone who is a very senior professor and brings in all these

awards and grants it is very difficult to say to them, we are not giving you any more students'. Furthermore, there is the requirement that heads of school/line managers have a responsibility to discuss issues of performance with staff and offer support/development prior to such action being taken.

In a different way a strategy that was reported as being helpful was the increase in candidates presenting their work in public activities. For example:

Recently a student was presenting and they weren't going well, and they couldn't answer a simple question and the supervisor didn't say anything so it [the issue] was taken to the Head of School [me] and we decided that the person [the supervisor] had to go off the Register... there had been previous problems but this was a public way of addressing the issue and so I could do something about it. (DG)

Having one or two senior staff in the department annually reviewing each supervisory panel (supervisors and candidates) was another reported strategy. On the whole, when a department had put into place strategies to make the supervisory relationship and practices more transparent the head/dean reported positive outcomes.

While these strategies were reported as being very helpful they generally relied on having energetic, creative and well-supported departmental convenors or associate deans which, from the literature (Brew, Boud, & Malfroy, 2017) is not always the case.

### ***Development of a positive culture***

The development of a culture where positive and professional supervision was supported was described by HASS11: 'It's quite collegial here and...so while the annual review meetings are a structure they fit within a culture and a supportive environment'. STEM1 had an interesting way of describing the positive culture: 'It is important that everyone is hunting in a pack, heading in the same direction, "this is acceptable", "this is not acceptable" ... structures and transparency are essential'. Mind you, developing a transparent culture, according to one of the DG participants is difficult to implement: 'It's an interesting one culture, trying to change culture. But I find here [in Australia] that it is quite difficult to be transparent'.

### ***Support structures***

Some interviewees talked about support structures that were available in their institutions for supervisors. However, many of them talked about the problem where those staff considered to be most in need of development were likely to be the ones least likely to be involved. While many universities in Australia have some form of

mandatory development for staff new to supervision certainly not all required experienced supervisors to engage in meaningful development.

Another form of support was for convenors, associate deans and heads of department as many reported there was little in the way of assistance for them in their convening or leadership roles. For example: 'I've never seen anything [regarding training and support] for convenors and how to manage internal processes and people' (HASS11). Another example came from HASS5 (a head of school) who reported:

One of the students came to see me and I said 'go and see the Associate Dean and complain' ...So they went to the Associate Dean, but it was a very tricky situation and they were not equipped to deal with these leadership problems.

Whereas STEM9 reported that: 'I did a workshop on handling difficult situations before I started this position, it was helpful.' Support such as this might have helped HASS13 as a head of department 'Heads are only here for a short period. There is lots [of training] for supervisors, but I think having difficult conversations is something we shy away from.'

However, some interviewees reported helpful support such as: 'I have fantastic support and administration and that really helps' (STEM12). HASS16 [an associate dean] also reported the value of a support system:

We have a graduate research school and they are fantastic, they are knowledgeable and confidential and so I always feel I can ring them up, more on processes rather than what to do. But if I do have tricky questions, I can happily sound out the issues. So that's been really helpful for me.

## Conclusion

This modest study reporting from the perspectives of 34 academic staff working with doctoral supervisors has highlighted a number of issues. The first is the different ways in which a supervisor can be unprofessional, that is, toxic, incompetent, neglectful or too nice. Some of the reasons put forward for this behaviour included:

- Mis-match of expectations of the role of an academic.
- Lack of support and development for supervisors and for senior staff having to work with them.
- Being the sort of person who finds it difficult to 'give bad news'.
- Supervisors with personality disorders, or
- Simply 'a nasty piece of work' as a few interviewees described it.

While there were issues related to handling the individual who was not performing her/his supervisory role in a professional, positive manner, many interviewees mentioned that their role in working with such staff was much easier when transparent processes were in place. These processes centred around three main practices. The first related to making the supervisory process less private with colleagues reading annual progress and similar reports, senior staff meeting regularly with supervisory teams of candidates and supervisors, and the use of committee chairs. The second strategy reported was the involvement of pro-active HDR administrators, convenors and associate deans who establish processes that emphasise a strong positive supervisory culture. The third strategy reported was the active management of student applications to ensure that supervisors who consistently had complaints made about them were not able to take on new candidates without appropriate conditions put in place.

Certainly, this study has a number of limitations, particularly given the relatively small number of participants, coming from one perspective, which has not made it possible to draw conclusions related to issues based on gender, discipline or type of university. A more ambitious study involving candidates and supervisors would certainly broaden our understanding of this very complex issue in doctoral education.

## Acknowledgements

A draft of this paper was sent to all participants in the study and a substantial number responded with insightful and helpful comments for which I would like to thank them most sincerely.

**Margaret Kiley holds an adjunct position at the Australian National University, Australia.**

**Contact: [Margaret.kiley@anu.edu.au](mailto:Margaret.kiley@anu.edu.au)**

## References

- Amundsen, C., & McAlpine, L. (2009). 'Learning supervision': Trial by fire. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(3), 331-342.
- Brew, A., Boud, D., & Malfroy, J. (2017). The role of research education coordinators in building research cultures in doctoral education. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 36(2), 255-268. doi:10.1080/07294360.2016.1177812
- Chamberlain, S. (2016, 12 January 2016). Ten types of PhD Supervisor relationships: which is yours? *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/ten-types-of-phd-supervisor-relationships-which-is-yours>
- Connell, R., & Manathunga, C. (2012). On doctoral education: How to supervise a PhD, 1985 – 2011. *Australian Universities' Review*, 54(1), 5-9.

- Davis, D., & Kiley, M. (2018). *The Ideal Supervisor: The Candidate's Perspective*. Paper presented at the Quality in Postgraduate Research conference, Adelaide, Australia.
- Denholm, C., & Evans, T. (Eds.). (2007). *Supervising doctorates downunder: Keys to effective supervision in Australia and New Zealand*. Melbourne: ACER.
- Gardner, S. (2009). Student and faculty attributions of attrition in high and low-completing doctoral programs in the United States. *Higher Education*, 58, 97-112. doi:10.1007/s10734-008-9184-7
- Golde, C. (2000). Should I stay or should I go? Student descriptions of the doctoral attrition process. *The Review of Higher Education*, 23(2), 199-227.
- Grant, B. (2004). Symposium Session: Masters and slaves—the twisted dialogues of supervision. In M. Kiley & G. Mullins (Eds.), *Quality in postgraduate research: Re-imagining research education* (pp. 76-89). Canberra: University of Canberra.
- Grove, J. (2016, April 7). PhD: 'toxic' supervisors and 'students from hell': How should universities handle breakdowns in PhD student-supervisor relationships? *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/phds-toxic-supervisors-and-students-from-hell>
- Halbert, K. (2015). Students' perceptions of a 'quality' relationship. *Quality in Higher Education*, 21(1), 26 – 37. doi:10.1080/13538322.2015.1049439
- Janssen, A. (2005). *Postgraduate research supervision: Otago students' perspectives on quality supervision, problems encountered in supervision*. Retrieved from Dunedin: <https://www.otago.ac.nz/graduate-research/study/phddoctoral/programme/otago403801.html>
- Kearns, H. (2018). *Enabling mental health for research degree students*. Paper presented at the Quality in postgraduate research conference, Adelaide.
- Lee, A. (2012). *Successful research supervision: Advising students doing research*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Lee, A., Dennis, C., & Campbell, P. (2007). Nature's guide for mentors. *Nature*, 447, 791-797.
- Lofstrom, E., & Pyhalto, K. (2017). Ethics in the supervisory relationship: supervisors' and doctoral students' dilemmas in the natural and behavioural sciences. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(2), 2731-2747. doi:10.1080/03075079.2015.1045475
- Mewburn, I., Cuthbert, D., & Tokareva, E. (2014). Experiencing the progress report: an analysis of gender and administration in doctoral candidature. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 36(2), 1555-1171. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2013.861054>
- Ombudsman, N. S. W. (2016). *Complaints about the Supervision of Post-Graduate Students: A Discussion Paper*. Sydney.
- Park, C. (2008). *The end of the secret garden: reframing postgraduate supervision*. Retrieved 23rd April 2015 <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/hr/OED/CPD/rsarchive/files/ChrisPark.pdf>.
- Platow, M. (2011). PhD experience and subsequent outcomes: A look at self-perceptions of acquired graduate attributes and supervisor support. *Studies in Higher Education*, iFirst.
- Taylor, S., Kiley, M., & Humphrey, R. (2018). *A handbook for doctoral supervisors* (2nd ed.). Oxon: Routledge.
- Walker, M., & Thomsom, P. (Eds.). (2010). *The Routledge doctoral supervisor's companion: Supporting effective research in Education and the Social Sciences*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wisker, G. (2012). *The good supervisor: Supervising postgraduate and undergraduate research for doctoral theses and dissertations* (2nd ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan.