

# Managing Expectations in the Transition to Postgraduate Research

Setting up Successful Supervisory Relationships

Online Discussion

Research Supervision

🕒 30 Jan 2024

📍 Online

💷 £0-135 Free for members

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This online discussion, led by colleagues from the University of Central Lancashire and Edge Hill University, will examine the importance of establishing a good supervisory relationship in the early stages of the transition from taught to research led education.



UK Council for  
**Graduate Education**

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**Edge Hill  
University**

Graduate School

***Investigating the expectations of students and research supervisors  
concerning their roles and duties in the learning process.  
May 2023 – May 2024***

- This presentation stems from our current, ongoing research into student-supervisor expectations.
- Our aim is to share some initial data findings, to PROMPT DISCUSSION (as well as invite you to contribute to the research).
- The questionnaire at the QR code and link, is a redeployment of the classic: Brown/Atkins Role Perception Scale (1988) in a MSForms format. There are 12 questions, plus space to provide more explanatory detail in response to each question.
- We asked UGs and PGt as well as PGR candidates and supervisors to respond, revealing beliefs about transitions ‘into research’, ‘becoming’ a researcher, and about relationships for ‘learning through research’ (we have mainly doctoral level responses).
- We have an excellent response rate (100+ and growing) with a 50/50 split between students and supervisors responding.

<https://forms.office.com/e/Rt9trvHyDU>



**Breakout Room:**

To get things started, please introduce yourselves in the breakout rooms and have a think about this question:

**1. Padlet Question. What kind of impact might managing expectations have on the learning experience for the student researcher and the supervisor?**

**Please use the Padlet to jot your thoughts**

## For convenience and overview, our data is grouped/presented into 3 areas -

1. Research project design and initial stages of a doctoral programme.
2. Research in progress / contact and involvement.
3. Examination phase

## Surprise finding to date -

When our data is grouped (students and supervisor responses together), colleagues predicted the results from our research would graduate to the mean, **but they did not...**

## The picture emerging is that -

Our data reveals, in the main, that supervisors believe that students should take sole, or the **majority share of responsibility for managing their doctoral research project (and the learning relationship).**

*However,*

Our data also reveals that, in the main, students agree with the supervisors, that managing their doctoral project (and the learning relationship) is also **their sole/main responsibility.**

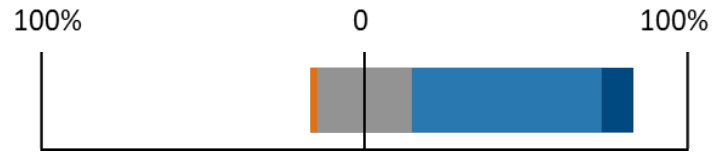
= our data suggests a more proactive stance to managing learning relationships, earlier in registrations/candidacies would be a good tactic in supervision towards positive outcomes.



## 1. Research project design and initial stages of a doctoral programme

**Q:** In the end, is it up to the supervisor to decide which theories / theoretical frameworks are most appropriate for the study, OR, does the student have a right to choose their own theories / theoretical frameworks, even if it conflicts with the supervisor's?

- It is entirely for the supervisor to decide
- It is mostly for the supervisor to decide
- It is a shared responsibility
- It is mostly for the student to decide
- It is entirely for the student to decide

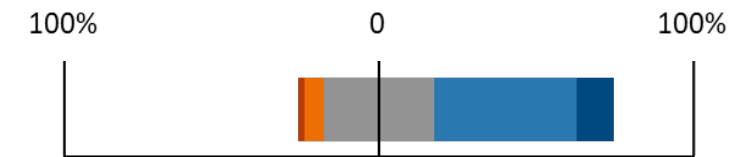


- **Responses:** "The student should choose the framework methodology appropriate for their study. The supervisor should advise. Ultimately, it's the student's choice."
- "It depends on whether the student is self-funded or is part of a research team. Supervisor for funded, more student for unfunded".

## 2. Research in progress / contact and involvement

**Q:** Should the supervisor initiate frequent meetings with the student, OR, it is up to the student to decide when they want meetings with the supervisor?

- It is entirely the supervisor's responsibility to initiate meetings
- It is mostly the supervisor's responsibility to initiate meetings
- It is a shared responsibility to initiate meetings
- It is mostly the student's responsibility to initiate meetings
- It is entirely the student's responsibility to initiate meetings

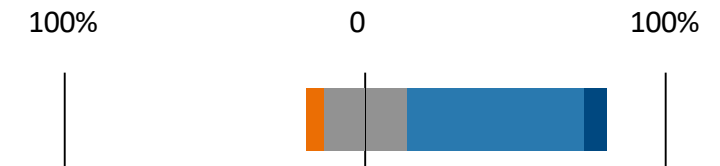


- **Responses:** "If the doctoral candidate knows the milestones and timing of meeting them, then it is their responsibility to meet them."
- "Arranging tutorial meetings should be entirely the student's responsibility. It is not for the supervisor to chase students about their work as doing so breeds a culture of dependency."
- "Sometimes it's necessary for the supervisor to reach out to the student - to make sure they are OK".

## 3. Examination Phase

**Q:** Does the supervisor have direct responsibility for the standard of the dissertation / thesis, OR, does the supervisor offer advice only and leaves all decisions concerning content, format and standards to the student?

- It is entirely the supervisor's responsibility
- It is mostly the supervisor's responsibility
- It is a shared responsibility
- It is mostly the student's responsibility
- It is entirely the student's responsibility



- **Responses:** "Thesis is an end component of the doctoral research experience. It is the student's responsibility... it's the student's thesis after all."
- "As a supervisor I just want to know that writing practice or final/polished drafts are in production. I wouldn't want a student to submit work without my approval."
- "It is the student that achieves the degree or has their thesis (with their name on the front of the thesis) that is stored on a repository. To supervise is to overlook, assist, enthuse and encourage; they are not a co-author."

# Emerging typologies: inferences from the data from students and supervisors -

*Indicative voices of learners and supervisors – utterances and inferences from the data*

## Candidates/students -

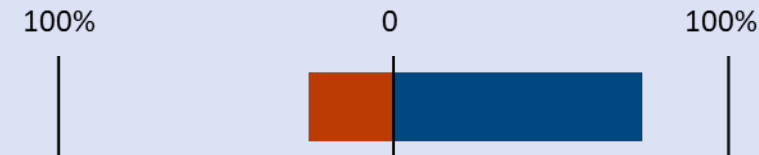
1. **Expectant voice** – “Tell me what to write and I’ll write it” – ‘sparrow mouth’, spoon-fed – “tell me what to think”.
2. **Passive voice** – “Ok, if you think that’s best for me” - lacking confidence, naive, accepting – “whatever’s best”?
3. **Imagination voice** – “I Didn’t know what to expect, so I made it up” – worriers, disappointed, and panders to calamity-car-crash stories – “No-one told me I had to write a thesis and have a viva!”

## Supervisors/Lecturers -

1. **Worthiness voice** – “Give me something worth looking at” (and then we’ll meet)
2. **Eager-to-impress voice** – “I’ll read anything, anytime, give you loads of feedback”.
3. **Safe pair of hands voice** – “Don’t worry, I’ll sort it” - Gets a project ‘over the line’, experienced, long view.
4. **Contractual voice** – “If you do your bit (first) I’ll do mine” – A gamble of who’ll make the effort first.

**Q:** Do you agree that staff-student relationships are purely professional and personal matters should not intrude, OR, are close personal relationships essential for successful supervision?

- Purely professional (personal matters should not be discussed)
- Personal relationships are important for successful supervision



### Contrasting Responses:

- “After 20+ years....I’m not actually interested in personal matters of my students. I used to try to be “everyone’s friend” - but it is tiring and is not advantageous to anyone”.
- “Empathising with a students needs, motivations and behaviours is critical especially if you’re working alongside for 3 years +”

# Emerging typologies: inferences from the data from students and supervisors -

Indicative voices of learners and supervisors – utterances and inferences from the data

## Candidates/students -

1. **Expectant voice** – “Tell me what to do and what to think”.
2. **Passive voice** – “Ok, if you think that’s the supervisor’s best”?
3. **Imagination voice** – “I Didn’t know what to do”  
calamity-car-crash stories – “No-one told me”

## Supervisors/Lecturers -

1. **Worthiness voice** – “Give me something worth supervising”
2. **Eager-to-impress voice** – “I’ll read anything you give me”
3. **Safe pair of hands voice** – “Don’t worry, I’ll be there”
4. **Contractual voice** – “If you do your bit (first), I’ll do mine”

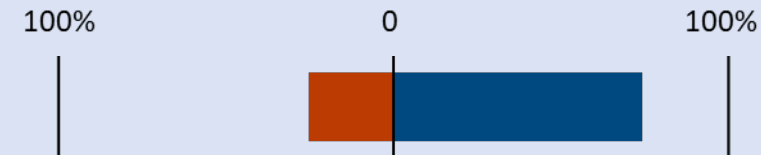
## Padlet Question 2. What other kinds of narrative types have you encountered from student researchers and supervisors?

Please outline your thoughts again on Padlet.  
You might see such narratives around-

1. *Project design and initial stages of a doctoral programme*
2. *Progress / ongoing development of research*
3. *Examination phase – who’s judging who?*

**Q:** Do you agree that staff-student relationships are purely professional and personal matters should not intrude, OR, are close personal relationships essential for successful supervision?

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### Contrasting Responses:

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# Data reveals a disconnect – has supervision in research lost sight of the person?

## 1. The 'P' in a PhD = Person + Project -

Q: Has the person (and to some degree their learning needs) slipped into the shadow of the 'Research Problem' ... the person becoming invisible ... and/or is research supervision itself becoming invisible?

## 2. Appreciating the Power Imbalance -

- The Learner thinks it's (i.e. all aspects of project development) their responsibility
- The Supervisors think it's (i.e. all aspects of project development) the students' responsibility

## 3. Consistency versus Standardisation -

*Consistent* good supervision does not necessarily mean *Standardised* supervision  
e.g. the standard edict to meet every 6 weeks, may not be an indicator, or lead to consistently 'good supervision'.

**3. Padlet Question.**  
What issues might arise by confusing consistency and standardisation in supervisory practice?

## Our current thinking is that:

- Candidates come to us (for our doctoral 'powers') to learn through research.
- Recognise when a learning relationship is working, and when it's not.
- The power imbalance between 'learner and teacher' means the onus is upon the supervisor to act 'proactively' to set up positive learning relationships e.g. anticipating key milestones, for learning through research.

- Thank you for listening and contributing to this UKCGE workshop -

## **Bibliography of our recent Doctoral Education initiatives**

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[https://www.academia.edu/95679312/Clive\\_Palmer\\_and\\_Chris\\_Hughes\\_2023\\_UKCGE\\_Postgraduate\\_Research\\_Supervision\\_An\\_Inter\\_Collaborative\\_Workshop\\_Graduate\\_Research\\_School\\_Edge\\_Hill\\_University\\_Ormskirk\\_UK\\_1st\\_February](https://www.academia.edu/95679312/Clive_Palmer_and_Chris_Hughes_2023_UKCGE_Postgraduate_Research_Supervision_An_Inter_Collaborative_Workshop_Graduate_Research_School_Edge_Hill_University_Ormskirk_UK_1st_February)