Mind the Gap: Developing the roles, expectations and boundaries in the doctoral supervisor-supervisee relationship

Abstract
Do we really need boundaries between doctoral supervisor and supervisee when we are talking about mature learners? Drawing on reflection from my extensive experience, I believe it is critical to maintain this divide. There is an increase in doctoral students, proliferation of doctoral programmes globally and practices which vary from context to context. A shared concern, however, is the engagement between the supervisor and the supervisee which can be mutually unsatisfactory. Why is this relationship often so problematic for both parties? What kind of relationship is most appropriate and beneficial? To what extent does this academic engagement need rethinking? These questions are explored with reference to roles, expectations and boundaries and the underlying principles of good practice.

Introduction
Institutions globally have been expected to increase their intake of postgraduate students, and within a European context, the Bologna (European Commission 1999) and Lisbon Treaties (Gov.UK 2008, European Parliament 2007) have helped inform higher education standards and the lifelong learning agenda. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2015) along with other European national bodies aims to create a ‘first-class’ system of higher education. Similarly in North America, the upskilling of the workforce to doctoral status has resulted in a proliferation of doctoral level courses and pathways. Statistically, there is a worldwide increase in research doctorates each year. For example in 2011, just under 49,000 were awarded in the US and 6,780 in Australia, while India aims to graduate 20,000 by 2020 (Group of Eight 2013, p.5).

Compared to other courses, the ‘student’ in this case is often a mature learner holding professional responsibility with personal commitments. A ‘mature learner’ is defined by the UK Higher Education Statistics Authority as ‘those who are aged 21 or over, at 30 September of the academic year in which they are recorded as entering the institution’ (HESA 2008). From her synthesis of the literature, Smith (2009) adds that the term is also used to describe someone who has not had full-time education for at least three years and has usually had experience in the labour market.
Doctoral programmes need to have structures in place which reflect this type of learner and the diversity of overlapping personal, academic and professional identities (Smith 2008). Further, the long-term one-to-one engagement between doctoral supervisor and supervisee is unparalleled within other university courses placing on-going demands on both parties. Yet in doctoral programmes there may not be a clear or shared understanding of what constitutes a satisfactory or appropriate academic relationship. Practice varies according to the institution and academic discipline; opportunity for in-service training is variable and indeed may only be initiated as a result of difficulties at submission stage, a lack of completions or student appeals.

Reflecting on my experience from doctoral level teaching at seven universities in three countries (Canada, UK & Eire), the supervision of over 20 doctorates to completion and extensive examining experience, this paper explores the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Why is this relationship often so problematic for both parties? What kind of relationship is most appropriate and beneficial? To what extent does this relationship need rethinking? In exploring these questions, I frame the text around the issues of roles, expectations and boundaries and the way this particular educational relationship needs to be placed and maintained on a professional basis which recognises both parties in the enterprise. The article is a discussion piece and aims to contribute to the debate about good practice for supporting completion of doctoral studies and avoiding the situation of ‘when things go wrong’.

The term "doctorate" derives from the Latin docere meaning "to teach" and was used in medieval Europe as a license to instruct in Latin - ‘licentia docendi’ at a university (Verger 1999). In Classical times, the pathway to success was by oral presentation and this practice of incorporating a viva voce as part of the assessment process continues today for many doctoral programmes. Practice globally has involved changes in programme design (Group of Eight 2013), and in the UK, as elsewhere, there has been a trend away from the traditional model of doctoral work in favour of more structured programmes. In Education and the Social Sciences, the traditional route normally involved student guidance from one or two supervisors to produce a thesis of around 80,000 words (see for example Trinity College Dublin). Today there are a plethora of doctorates with a structure which includes ‘cohort’ or ‘professional’ PhDs. These programmes normally contain an element of taught modules, workshops and/or seminars, sometimes with a professional practice component and all normally conclude with a shorter thesis or equivalence in research projects. The timing of the
taught element frequently reflects the needs of mature students and is often scheduled for the weekends, vacation time and also online as part of ‘blended learning’ (see for example University College Cork ‘cohort PhD’, University of Sheffield ‘Ed.D’ degrees).

The origin of these new forms of doctorates originated in 19th Century Germany (Group of Eight 2013), and Maxwell (2003) refers to them as a ‘PhD with coursework’ (p.289). Further, the ‘taught’ element of doctoral programmes tends to incorporate input on the philosophy of the social sciences (Silverman 2007), key research concepts (Hammond and Wellington 2013) and practical outcomes from the research project (McDonagh, C et al 2012). Reflecting the Bologna Agreement on lifelong learning, noted earlier, there are also courses on transferable skills for those contemplating a research-based career (Eley et al 2012, European Union 2013, Irish Research Council 2012 a & b).

Doctoral pathways which are flexible and can be linked to professional practice have been offered in the UK for around two decades (Bourne et al (2001). Usher (2002) has noted the diversity of these doctorates and Wellington and Sikes (2006) suggest that they form ‘a spectrum or continuum’ characterised more by ‘diversity than dichotomy’ (p.725). Importantly, recognition of this difference needs to be reflected in the provision for postgraduate students (Humphrey and McCarthy 1999).

This expanded market beyond the traditional doctorate aims to provide a wider choice of doctoral opportunities (Group of Eight 2013). Apart from the research doctorate, i.e. one based on original inquiry, there are also PhDs by publication or a publication portfolio. The latter is described by one university as offering an award that ‘allows for people who have not followed the traditional academic route towards a PhD to obtain academic recognition for produced research… and subject knowledge to doctoral level.’ (Kingston University)

This type of doctorate includes work in the form of previous published articles, monographs or book(s), or those pieces accepted for publication. Again a viva may or may not be part of the assessment process but an appraisal of the overall work is usually required providing critique of the research publications. These programmes contrast with an honorary doctorate
(Brandeis University), bestowed on an individual due to contribution to a field but with a waiving of course work or research thesis as required above.

Whichever pathway is chosen, doctoral students or candidates are normally appointed a main supervisor or director of study with accompanying second supervisor (Gunnarsson et al (2013). An ideal supervisory model which I observed in Canadian institutions includes a subject specialist, a methodologist relevant to the chosen topic and a ‘trouble-shooter’ to help problematize the research. The limitation of resources elsewhere, however, may limit this practice.

Both younger and older doctoral students have educational needs and a range of publications are available to help prepare or augment doctoral level work (Hayton 2015, Williams 2010, Bolker 2010, Boulton 2010, Pietra and Rugg 2004, Dunleavy 2003, Kamler and Thomson 2006). While a variety of programme structures have thus been in place, the nature of the learner in this specific enterprise and particularly the development of the supervisor-supervisee relationship have often received rather less attention. Once registered, students may receive readings and taught elements on conducting a literature review (Byrne et al 2012), reflective and academic writing (Moon 2009, Murray 2011), and the philosophy of social science research (Silverman 2007, Opie et al 2004). As part of the programme, a ‘learning community’ (Giddens 1987) may also be nurtured with research seminars, workshops, Summer/Winter Schools/Master Classes. There may, however, be less input on what to expect in this long-term programme in terms of the supervisor-supervisee relationship and the nature of the roles, expectations and boundaries.

Roles

According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, the word ‘role’ is defined as

‘the position or purpose that someone or something has in a situation, organization, society, or relationship’.

Theorists such as Merton (1957), Smith (2007) and Stark (2007) write about the concept as involving behaviours and obligations in social settings. These can be connected to a social position with appropriate and permitted forms of behaviour, guided by social norms, which
are commonly known and hence determine the expectations. Denicolo and Pope (1994) talk about an interplay of roles with the potential for a dissonance in the normal set of behaviour that may lead to role conflict, for example between a supervisor and student. Further, ‘the duality in the supervising situation, to support and demand at the same time may generate tensions and strains within the tutoring relationship (Gunnarsson et al 2013, p.6). For the purpose of this discussion, the word ‘role’ is defined as a set of behaviours, obligations and norms as conceptualised by people in a social context.

*Why is this relationship often so problematic for both parties?*

There are a number of reasons why this relationship may be challenging for both supervisor and supervisee. Doctoral supervisors are appointed to students, normally at the outset of the programme or once the thesis topic is confirmed according to institutional regulations. In my experience, students rarely have an involvement in this decision-making. Supervisors talk about ‘sharing’ the doctoral student in this enterprise but there may be less clarity about who is assuming the role of main supervisor or the tutor who will have an overview of and responsibility for, monitoring the student progress to help facilitate the completion of various milestones associated with the programme. It is not always clear who assumes this role if the student engages more with a second or third supervisor than the first. Also, during the process of student appeals I have witnessed it emerge that there has been confusion between supervisors as to who was taking responsibility for the overall supervisory role or acting as the Director of Study.

The increase in mature students in doctoral programmes has led to an acknowledgement of learners who have extensive professional experience, with expertise obtained from different ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998) who can contribute to the learning process. However, the reality for both supervisor and supervisee may not be so ‘rosy’. The supervisory role can be perceived as wide and all-encompassing as a student may become overly dependent on a supervisor in what is an intensive teaching experience. Likewise, the student may struggle to get access to the supervisor for doctoral discussion.

In terms of difficulties within the supervisor-supervisee relationship, Iphofen (2001) argues that doctoral students need to have a realistic view of the role of the supervisor and in his 12 point charter to cover the doctoral relationship he states clearly
‘I cannot be all things to all students…I cannot be your counsellor, mentor, therapist, friend and boss - my primary responsibility is to supervise’ (p.15).

Yet these roles get confused and it is not always the student who allows it to happen. Further, in blurring the lines between academic supervisor and personal counsellor or therapist, the student risks being without the necessary professional support which stands outside of the academic relationship. Institutions normally have counselling services in-house or access to services which separates the academic and personal counselling responsibilities.

Brabazon (2010) has written from the student’s perspective stating that while she understands the angst, worry and stress of supervisors, she has experienced the other side of the doctoral divide. In terms of adequate supervision, she states with regard to supervisors:

‘they must not be jet-setting professors, frequently leaving the campus and missing supervisory meetings to advance their own career. They must be…available to supervise you rather than continually declining your requests for meetings because they are travelling to Oslo, Luanda or Hong Kong (Brabazon 2013).

According to Wellington and Sikes (2006) ‘problems in the one-to-one relationship with a supervisor’ has led to students abandoning the traditional PhD pathway (p.729).

The blurring of the division between supervisor and supervisee is particularly problematic when a relationship becomes personal as well as academic. Phillips and Pugh (2010) caution about the relationship ‘becoming too personal’ and jeopardising what should be a professional engagement. One of the most difficult problems I have had to advise on is when the sole supervisor and supervisee begin the relationship on an academic basis, develop a personal liaison, become a couple and co-habit, later to separate. Both parties are vulnerable in this instance and the respective positions can be untenable. Further, in my experience it can signal the end of doctoral studies for the student, particularly if a new supervisor cannot easily be found.

Expectations
The reason for problems in the supervisor-supervisee relationship can also be due to differences in ‘expectations’. The term is defined as

‘a strong belief that something will happen or be the case’ (The Oxford English Dictionary).

This includes a ‘confidence of fulfilment’ (Lazarus 1991) and the feeling that something is going to happen. However, the opposite can also occur because the expectations may be unrealistic, and this leads to disappointment. Setting high expectations is part of the ethos of academic contexts and encouraging students to have a work ethic that will lead to success (Ozturk and Debelak 2005).

**What kind of relationship is most appropriate and beneficial to both parties?**

In the teaching of adult learners (Knowles 1984) there is a general expectation by academic institutions that they will be capable of self-directed, autonomous learning (Sinclair 2000, Wellington et al 2005), and that they will augment any learning they receive through the taught element or supervisory instruction through personal engagement with the literature and research process. In a manual aimed at all academic disciplines, Phillips and Pugh (2010) suggest one reason for possible problems is this mismatch between what the institution thinks doctoral students will undertake and the reality for the student. Iphofen suggests,

‘before you begin your PhD, examine your motives for doing it. It is not enough merely to ‘want the badge’. You must have a sustained interest in the subject and the methods you adopt for doing it’ (p.15).

As stated at the outset there is now a wide range of doctoral students with diverse needs. The attrition rate in PhDs is high and it is calculated that around a third to half will fail with a completion range in the UK of 15.2 - 68.9 % according to the individual institution (Times Higher 2013). From my experience, some of the problems lie in the fact that students are registering for doctoral programmes who may not have the motivational or intellectual capacity to complete without substantial support from the supervisor(s). This can derive from the pressure on institutions to recruit from the international market but without necessarily ensuring adequate support structures. For overseas students, acceptance onto doctoral programmes normally follows guidance from the International English Language Testing
System (IELTS) which suggests a combined minimum score of 7 in English reading, writing, speaking and listening. Institutional practice varies and some may request a higher score (see for example University of Nottingham). However, on-going help with writing for academic purposes may also be needed for students once enrolled. Importantly, this support is not required for overseas students alone: home students may also require assistance in writing for academic purposes. A third category of doctoral student consists of members of the academic institution who may be wary of asserting their academic needs in case it reflects badly on their professional standing. There is a pressure on Faculty members to enrol onto doctoral programmes who may be outstanding in terms of pedagogy and leadership but for whom doctoral level work is not readily or easily undertaken. Wellington and Sikes (2005) also found from their research sample doctoral students who ‘believed that they needed a doctorate to keep their job as secure as is ever possible’ (p.727) and to serve ‘as a catalyst for career development and accelerated promotion (p.724). Likewise, Scott et al (2004) suggest that what a doctorate means is varied but is dependent on where the student is positioned on their own career path. I have found myself acting as informal supervisor to a number of colleagues who were being given poor supervision in the Faculty but who hesitated to challenge this adequacy.

Another general expectation is that the students’ work will be assessment and progress documented. A transfer event to the thesis stage is normally part of doctoral structures today. Brabazon (2010) maintains

‘postgraduates are monitored, measured and ridiculed for their lack of readiness or their slow progress towards completion. But inconsistencies and problems with supervisors and supervision are marginalised’.

There is nothing more salutary than being part of an appeal system when things go wrong and there is an absence of good reporting, documentation and monitoring mechanisms demonstrating a lack of awareness about the student’s progress and what might be a ‘fragile’ working relationship with the supervisor(s). Indeed, I have worked in institutions where at the appeals stage after a student failed a viva without recommendation of a doctoral award, there were scant records kept by either of the supervisors other than an informal acceptance that the working relationship between all parties was poor. Nor was there an agreement as to who was the main supervisor or Director Study in this instance. Interestingly, when a student is found
to be experiencing major problems of underachievement and a new supervisor(s) is required, an institutional decision to delegate to a junior member of staff rather than an experienced senior staff may also add to the failure to respond adequately to the needs of the student. Phillips and Pugh (2010) encourage the use of a self-evaluation questionnaire on doctoral supervisory practice to help complement the understanding of student progress.

However, ‘inconsistencies and problems’ between supervisors and supervisees as noted by Brabazon (2013) should be dealt with by a mechanism involving a director of the programme or course leader in the first instance to try and reconcile differences. Involving a student representative may also be appropriate. It is noteworthy that the student normally has rather less ‘cultural capital’ (Foucault 1980) in these matters and a robust avenue of redress is particularly important. The appointment of a new supervisor (s) can help provide a ‘fresh start’ and maximise the potential for successful completion. Further, despite Brabazon’s reservations about monitoring highlighted above, the importance of having adequate written reports of progress should help provide clarity for the student as to success to date and advice for further direction of the work. It also provides the opportunity for the student, the supervisor and the institution to be aware of concerns about completion. Iphofen argues strongly,

‘the PhD is yours. It is not mine. I can advise, guide, suggest and warn. I will not write it…You own it. Not me, so if you choose not to take my advice, that is your prerogative. My responsibility is to record the fact that the advice has been given’ (ibid).

I have noted cases where doctoral students have failed to take instruction, and proceeded to submit their thesis against the advice of their supervisor. Unfortunately, this has invariably led to negative consequences for the student but conversely, good record-keeping has limited reputational damage for the institution.

There is also the occasion when students may be ill-advised by their supervisors. In a study conducted with UK and Swedish doctoral students about the ‘experience of disagreement’ between the two parties, Gunnarsson et al (2013) highlighted ‘dubious advice’ and ‘inadequate knowledge and skills of the supervisor’ (p.5). As the research develops, student knowledge and methodological expertise may surpass that of the supervisor and
‘sometimes supervisors found themselves being ‘outmanoeuvred and outthought by the students’ (p.3). Further,

‘although the student is ultimately responsible for his or her own work, and may feel the supervisor should have all the right answers, a more nuanced picture of dubious advice is realizing that there is in fact no manual and both the supervisor and supervisee learn during the process’ (ibid, p.5).

Another problem area between doctoral supervisor and supervisee concerns publication from the research process which often receives little advance discussion. Instead there is often an expectation that this process will develop organically with an assumed understanding between student and supervisor. In the case of doctoral students, they often lack knowledge of this expectation and again there is a power dimension which usually resides with the supervisor(s). Iphofen suggests the following advice to the student:

‘articles and seminar papers written solely by you need have only your name on them. If I make a contribution I expect my name to be included as a ‘co-author’ (ibid).

He also advises some degree of acknowledgement, ‘do not forget the subtle ways in which I may have influenced your work, your progress and your ideas’ (ibid).

Joint publications are a contested area. In my role of course leader in UK institutions, I have been approached by students aggrieved that their supervisors expect their name to be added to publications as the work progresses and who are wary of challenging this action before successful completion of the doctorate. Without clear explanation at the outset about the expectations concerning joint publication, the student may feel exploited and/or the supervisor(s) may feel unfairly judged.

From their research on doctoral level work, Phillips and Pugh (2010) provide a practical list of expectations to safe guard the interest of both parties in this academic arrangement. For example, they advise the student to

- be honest when reporting on progress and
follow the advice that they give, especially when it has been given at the request of the student (pp.95-100).

Failure to take instruction can severely prejudice successful completion as signalled earlier and I have been surprised by the challenge from students to the academic judgement of doctoral supervisors without a sound alternative. Conversely according to Phillips and Pugh, students should expect their supervisors to

- be constructively critical
- be available when needed
- have sufficient interest in their research to put more information in the students’ path (pp.145-154).

Clearly, these expectations of both supervisor and supervisee may not converge. Supervisors assume a variety of roles often with a large workload, as reflected in the profile of mature students, and it is unrealistic to set an expectation of ‘available when needed’. However, students need access to their supervisor and there should be agreed times which are honoured, subject to unforeseen circumstances. Again, it is important in managing expectations that the student has an understanding of what can be expected from the supervisor(s), and who to approach when things go wrong and there is a breakdown in the relationship. This should be part of the establishment of boundaries between both parties.

**Boundaries**

Who sets and maintains the boundaries between doctoral student and supervisor? Looking back I recall that my master’s supervisor in Canada said at the end of one tutorial, ‘hurry up and finish this thesis and I can invite you home for dinner’; and that my doctoral supervisor in the UK invited me only once for a social drink and then accompanied by other students. I did not resent this and instead welcomed the focus on the academic role of my supervisor. However, arrangements between supervisor and supervisee can be informal, elastic and varied.
The word boundary means ‘a line which marks the limits of an area or a dividing line’ (Oxford English Dictionary), something that indicates the farthest limit. The term is also used as a metaphor to explain social distancing and suggests what are *in-bounds* or acceptable and *out-of-bounds* meaning unacceptable (Evans 2002). Without boundaries, social relationships can become confused and the concept of boundaries has useful application in social, professional and academic contexts.

*Developing an appropriate and beneficial academic relationship*

There are implicit power relationships (Foucault 1980) in the student-teacher relationship as noted above but working with mature learners can create a more complex situation, and one in which boundaries are blurred, confused or non-existent. Phillips and Pugh (2010) suggest that supervisors be friendly and personal without being intimate. Certainly if the relationship becomes one of close friends rather than supervisor-supervisee it can be difficult to provide critical review, particularly if the work is not progressing or failing to reach doctoral standard. Iphofen (2001) states that whilst recognising how hard it is to undertake a doctorate, it is important to consider that the student is not the only one who ‘needs protection’ (p.15). Acknowledging the supervisor’s needs in this instance is important in order to develop a relationship which is appropriate and beneficial for both parties. Maintaining ‘a friendly and potentially long-lasting relationship has been signalled in some studies (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBBSEy-EMuQ).

From my observation, the boundaries can become blurred on a number of occasions, for example when there is also a professional working relationship between the two parties in the same department. Another problem area is when the supervisor feels compelled to get involved in the writing process to ensure completion, creating extensive tracking on draft chapters of the thesis. This level of input is sometimes in response to the institution’s as well as the student’s pressure to complete. The urgency to secure a doctoral completion can be particularly challenging for both parties and there may be an unrealistic expectation of the supervisor to help provide this support. Just as the doctoral student may have many roles and identities so too do supervisors: as Iphofen states, ‘supervising your PhD is not the only thing I have to do’ (p.15). However, in the final writing up stages of a doctorate, the supervisor may well undertake a considerable amount of time to support student completion.
Pressure to complete on-time or within a reasonable time structure is now more pressing and the days of the decade-long thesis in the UK is less common. This is culturally-specific and elsewhere it is not unusual for around a decade to pass between registration and completion of doctoral work: for example in Canada the average is 55-78% of completions within a 9 year period (University Affairs 2013); and in New Zealand, 8 years completion time (Education Counts 2013). Speaking from the student’s perspective, Brabazon (2010) argues ‘As a prospective PhD student, you are precious. Institutions want you – they gain funding, credibility and profile through your presence’.

This diminishes if completion is long: directives have added to the impetus to register but also to complete. Failure to complete within the institutional regulations now carries a financial penalty for the institution in some countries, for example in the UK and Eire. The fee structure is spread over a 4/5 year period and on-going doctoral support beyond that time may normally take the form of a relatively small continuation fee. The movement to completion of the doctorate can be particularly testing of boundaries and the maintenance of an appropriate gap between both parties. There is the danger that one may feel disappointed or over-used and that boundaries have been breached. These kinds of problem can in some cases lead to a strain if not breakdown in the relationship. In the Gunnarsson et al (2013) study one supervisor noted:

‘the student thinks about nothing else, and you [the supervisor] think about it sometimes for one hour every three or four weeks. So it is difficult in a PhD supervision session to get up to speed as quickly as you need’ (p.3).

Similarly, Iphofen states

‘There is no such thing as an emergency …lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on mine…Contact me by email, post or through the secretary. You do not need my home telephone or mobile number’ (ibid).

One of my doctoral students used to phone me during a Friday or Saturday evening as she rushed to write up her thesis in preparation for a new phase of her life. From that point I no longer provided a personal number for my doctoral students and moved from an implicit
assumption of boundaries to explicitly establishing them: not to serve as a brick wall between both parties but as a divide which recognises accountability on both sides and respect for each other’s space.

Rethinking the Doctoral Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship

There is potential for the relationship between doctoral supervisor and supervisee to be problematic as signalled above and it is timely to rethink and reconceptualise this arrangement in a manner appropriate for both parties, particularly with concern over completion rates in some institutions (Times Higher 2013). Personal reflections on the doctoral relationship do not lead to generalisations but from my experience a number of key messages have emerged.

Doctoral level work is context-specific in terms of institutional regulations but there are shared elements in the relationship of supervisor and supervisee. Roles, expectations and boundaries between the two parties can vary from being formal and distant, to informal and collegiate with academic and social interaction. I have found, for example, situations of *quid pro quo* whereby the supervisor easily blurs the boundaries and the student is perceived as a friend, colleague and/or unpaid research assistant. At the same time, the student may look to the supervisor not only to provide support as an academic advisor but also to act as an advocate and actively seek to secure an academic position for the student upon completion. This practice was also noted by Phillips and Pugh (2010), and the relationship may operate well until or unless either party feels they are being exploited. It can also signal a lack of equity for other doctoral students. There is a place for mentoring (Moonie-Simmie et al 2012) whereby students are nurtured into the workings of higher education but expecting the supervisor-supervisee relationship to result in a job acquisition by the end of the programme can be particularly unfair and unrealistic.

Moving towards greater clarity about this educational relationship may also help to avoid a breakdown in relationships or students withdrawing from the programme. Iphofen states it may seem unsympathetic to establish a ‘personal contract’ with postgraduate students but a lack of clear specification is both confusing and misleading for the student. You cannot legislate for how mature adults will conduct themselves in professional contexts but it is beholden of the institution and the supervisor to give some thought to appropriate ground
rules. How often do we meet with students for the first time and initiate discussion about the research topic, skipping over the nature of the supervisor-supervisee relationship and the attendant roles, expectations and boundaries or such things as intellectual ownership and joint publications? Working with mature learners there is often an assumption of implicit understanding and a failure to make the supervisor-supervisee relation explicit can lead to potential problems. Further, mature doctoral students have often contributed a substantial sum of their own money to fund their doctorate and therefore have significant financial as well as personal investment in the programme. Making more explicit the supervisor-supervisee arrangements is part of the acknowledgement of this investment.

While I am arguing for keeping clear boundaries in this relationship there are counter arguments for reducing them and having more equal partnerships. This is reflected in the School of Humanistic approaches to learning (Maslow 1943, Rogers 1969, Knowles 1984). Increased collegiality (Cipriano 2013, Curaj et al 2012) can involve co-teaching by supervisor and supervisee with shared use of staff rooms and other department facilities. It is important to recognise and respect the professional knowledge of doctoral students but also not to lose sight of the fact that unlike other members of the staffroom they have entered into an academic programme for which they expect a concrete outcome. There is also ‘the dangerous rise of therapeutic education’ whereby it is claimed we are drifting away from an acknowledgement of human potential and agency to focusing predominantly on student vulnerability in the university (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009).

Drafting a contract of rights and responsibilities may appear too legalistic for some institutions, as if undertaken as a precaution against litigation. But there is space for practice which bridges the gap between student and supervisor to protect both parties, and a number of guiding principles should underpin this practice. Importantly, regular student evaluation at least on an annual basis should contribute to this revision, and not be left to doctoral completion as part of the ‘exit’ process. All doctoral students regardless of age or doctoral pathway need to have on-going support. This pertains to the 21 year old doctoral student, who may be part of a research team, to mature learners who are working on a part-time, structured PhD, and to faculty members. As signalled earlier, the latter group are often the most ill-served by the institution because there is often an assumption that they are familiar with the research process and they in turn may feel vulnerable about exposing any intellectual weaknesses to their peers or managers. To slip into a ‘cosy’ informal relationship from the...
outset with an assumption of no need for clarity, disadvantages students as they proceed through what may appear to be a nebulous programme without direction beyond the research topic. This potentially disadvantages both parties in the endeavour.

There are models of good practice which are useful for guidance, but they are context-specific and not a substitute for institutionally-developed policy. Indeed, the process should go beyond clarification of the elements of the programme to consideration of the nature of the institutional ethos and a willingness to discuss appropriate roles, expectations and boundaries with sufficient opportunity for redress for both parties. In practice, rethinking the supervisor-supervisee relationship will need to be about developing policy which at a minimum is:

- Context specific
- Institutionally developed
- Based on an understanding of mutual responsibilities and accountability
- Within an ethos of respect
- Disseminated verbally and in written form at the beginning of the programme with
- Adequate monitoring and reporting of student progress
- Robust mechanisms for changing supervisor and
- Regular opportunities for student feedback and evaluation by all stakeholders

There is no ‘best practice model’ which can be transposed uncritically or that should be imposed: institutionally-based policy needs to be developed in order that there is ‘ownership’ and ‘buy-in’ from all stakeholders in doctoral programme provision. It is also important to acknowledge that the nature of the supervisor-supervisee relationship changes over time and may require (re)negotiation of the terms of engagement. Institutions should be open to the fact that this should perhaps be the norm and part of regular review of progress (Gunnarsson et al (2013). The nature of the relation is affected by personal chemistry and a supervisor may have different relations and experience with different doctoral students. Finally, the implications are also that as well as guiding principles to support policy and practice, there needs to be the possibility in this academic relationship to ‘divorce’ when ‘things go wrong’ and to be able to do so through a third party, such as a course director/committee and with the least damage to either party.
Conclusion
This discussion aimed to contribute to the debate about the nature of the doctoral supervisor-supervisee relationship, and contained the central argument that there should be a clear and maintained divide between supervisor and supervisee in the interest of both parties. The relationship can often be problematic and we need to rethink this in terms of one which is most appropriate and beneficial to both stakeholders. Expectations, roles and boundaries must be made explicit at the outset of a programme, both verbally and in written form, and re-visited, not in an overly-legal contractual form which weakens or undermines the adult engagement in doctoral research, but to safeguard the interests of all parties and to help facilitate successful completion rates. Although there needs to be institutional policy to help inform practice, we need to avoid the idea of a quick-fix standardised, ‘one size fits all model’. As well as the nature of the relationship changing over time, the type of supervisory relationship initially established may be inappropriate later. Importantly, there is also the important element of ‘chemistry’ that exists between the two parties. When things go wrong and students turn to appeals, claiming for example, inadequate supervision, there is damage to the reputation and credibility of the institution and a loss of personal and financial investment for the student. In the haste to increase postgraduate provision, higher education institutions need to consider and revisit such guiding principles for underpinning a programme which is beneficial and fair to all parties.

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