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**Supervisor wellbeing and identity: Challenges and strategies**

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## **Supervisor wellbeing and identity: Challenges and strategies**

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### **Structured abstract**

#### **Purpose**

The research aims to explore the professional identity of supervisors and their perceptions of stress in doctoral learning supervision. The research determines ways of developing strategies of resilience and wellbeing to overcome stress, leading to positive outcomes for supervisors and students.

#### **Design/methodology**

Research is in two parts: first, rescrutinising previous work and second, new interviews with international and UK supervisors gathering evidence of doctoral supervisor stress, in relation to professional identity, and discovering resilience and wellbeing strategies.

#### **Findings**

Supervisor professional identity and wellbeing are aligned with research progress, and effective supervision. Stress and wellbeing/resilience strategies emerged across three dimensions: personal, learning and institutional, related to emotional, professional and intellectual issues, affecting identity and wellbeing. Problematic relationships, change in supervision arrangements, loss of students and lack of student progress cause stress. Balances between responsibility and autonomy; uncomfortable conflicts arising from personality clashes; and the nature of the research work, burnout and lack of time for their own work, all cause supervisor stress. Developing community support, handling guilt and a sense of underachievement, and self-management practices help maintain wellbeing.

**Research limitations** Only experienced supervisors (each with four doctoral students completed) were interviewed. The research relies upon interview responses.

**Social and practical implications** Sharing information can lead to informed, positive action minimising stress and isolation; development of personal coping strategies and institutional support enhance the supervisory experience for supervisors and students.

**Originality/value** The research contributes new knowledge concerning doctoral supervisor experience, identity and wellbeing, offering research-based information and ideas on a hitherto under-researched focus: supervisor stress, wellbeing and resilience impacting upon supervisors' professional identity.

## Keywords

Doctoral supervision, wellbeing, resilience, doctoral student learning, stress in research learning.

Article classification: Research Paper

## Aim and introduction

Considerable research exists on supervision practices and interactions. More recently researchers have turned to concerns about doctoral student wellbeing, but to date the other half of that equation, supervisor wellbeing, seems to have largely been overlooked. Supervisors also experience stress in their academic roles. This stress may be in response to student lack of progress, or poor communication, or perhaps to work overload in the current context of increased demands in higher education, or any combination of these. This article concentrates on the broad areas of the personal (experiences, identities, interactions), learning (student progress, achievement impacting on supervisors) and institution (pressures on completion). It contributes new knowledge about doctoral supervisor experience, identity and wellbeing. It does so by exploring supervisor perceptions of concerns, conflicts and stress in the supervision experience, in terms of relationships with students and student knowledge construction and expression, in the changing context of Higher Education. In the former, concerns emerge regarding interactions and student progress, which impact on supervisor identity. In the latter, supervisors are faced with expectations more familiar from the business world, such as increased productivity, faster throughput of doctoral completions, and enhanced scrutiny of process and practices. These expectations can lead to a rather mechanical compliance, to students producing a 'good enough' PhD just in time, which can limit the contribution to knowledge. Such compliance to time and productivity can affect the quality of the research and publications and potentially impact supervisors' own work and reputation. The research reported here first identifies supervisors' perceptions of stress. It then elicits from supervisors the strategies which help them manage the supervision experience effectively in terms of their own identity, stress, wellbeing, interactions and student progress. The research study takes place in a framework foregrounding supervisor experience and identity. It focuses, in particular, on concerns experienced by supervisors, and wellbeing and resilience strategies which have been or could be developed.

## Literature review

Supervision-challenges,changes.

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3 Previous research into supervision considers supervisory approaches for the  
4 development of a project, and personal and research skills applicable beyond that  
5 project (Lee, 2008). It also looks at power-related interactions (Grant, 2008), and  
6 emotional dimensions of supervisors' support for students' wellbeing in interactions  
7 in formalised institutional processes (Strandler *et al.*, 2014; Johanssen *et al.*, 2014;  
8 Vekkaila *et al.*, 2013) on the research journey (Wisker and Robinson, 2011). Much of  
9 this work focuses on doctoral candidates, such as challenges related to cognitive  
10 demands, personal wellbeing issues, and the sheer hard grind of doing a doctorate,  
11 over time, sometimes in another culture, whether that be one of discipline, learning  
12 or context. While there is much work on the experience of being supervised and  
13 supervising, and some on the accompanying intellectual development and the  
14 construction and production of knowledge (Stevens-Long and Barner, 2006; Wisker,  
15 2008), there is, more generally, still a lack of research on the personal, emotional  
16 and affective elements of supervision, and particularly on issues concerning  
17 wellbeing and resilience. Little has been written which explores doctoral  
18 journeys from the point of view of the supervisor. Questions remain about 1) the  
19 relationships between affective experiences and the learning, personal and  
20 professional relations between doctoral candidates and the supervisor, and 2)  
21 supervisors' sense of identity, professional learning and experience, stress, wellbeing  
22 and resilience.

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31 There is work on the affective elements of doctoral students' learning journeys  
32 including that of Holbrook, Bourke, Cantwell, Scevak and Budd from the SORTI group  
33 at University of Newcastle, New South Wales (Budd *et al.*, 2010) while at the  
34 University of Gothenburg (Johanssen *et al.*, 2014a; Strandler *et al.*, 2014b) research  
35 has looked at the emotional work of supervision, considering the practical and  
36 emotional issues of students who 'leave'. Our own work (Wisker and Robinson 2013)  
37 concerns the perceptions of supervisors who variously retired, left the university,  
38 experienced breakdowns in relationships with students, or acquired students  
39 midway in the research process. The latter resulted in supervisors 'adopting' what  
40 one of our participants termed 'doctoral orphans'. Our research, and that of others  
41 to date, indicates that far from being a systematic supervision relationship and  
42 intellectual developmental process from start to finish, supervisory arrangements  
43 are, quite frequently, subject to changes for many reasons.

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49 Changes in supervisor relationships and arrangements are perhaps surprisingly  
50 common, and much of this has positive outcomes for students (Wisker and  
51 Robinson, 2012, 2013). However, some change produces challenge and stress. For  
52 supervisors, this stress can lead to a sense of inadequacy or loss, leading to an  
53 undermining of professional identity and security. Our earlier work which focused on  
54 doctoral student experiences revealed various stresses, including the perception by  
55 supervisors that they had invested a great deal of emotional and intellectual work in  
56 students, only to find students moved to other supervisory relationships. Such  
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3 moves were often for the best of reasons, but nevertheless in some instances left a  
4 sense of loss, and frustration. Other supervisors reported ongoing questioning of  
5 their own capabilities to supervise through to completion when faced with lack of  
6 intellectual movement and transformation in students who were often needy, made  
7 little progress, or in some extreme cases, began grievance procedures which felt  
8 unfounded.. Issues of supervisor stress and concern are evident between the lines in  
9 research focusing on student experiences of student/supervisor interactions in  
10 relation to problems, challenges, wellbeing and resilience.

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13  
14 Barbara Grant defines supervision as ‘such a challenging and “chaotic” pedagogy’  
15 (Grant, 2003, p. 189). Intellectual, personal, and professional relationships are at the  
16 core of this pedagogy. Supervisory relationships are opportunities to engage with  
17 fruitful learning dialogues and to support and empower doctoral students through  
18 their research learning journey, to completion. However, while supervisors might  
19 well benefit from interactions with doctoral students, they can also experience stress  
20 when little progress is made, personal professional relations break down,  
21 communication is lost, and when students move on or leave. Idealised notions of a  
22 supportive supervisor and student ‘dyad’ (Lee, 2008; Wisker, 2012; Delamont,  
23 Atkinson and Parry, 1997) are questioned in the work of Grant and Manathunga  
24 who identify the potential ‘master-slave’ relationships of power (Manathunga, 2007;  
25 Grant, 2008), and in our own work on doctoral orphans and ways of trying to  
26 reconstruct and deal effectively with problematic relationships between supervisors  
27 and students (Wisker and Robinson, 2012, 2013). While one might question the  
28 hierarchies of power inherent in the supervisor-student interaction, it is still palpable  
29 and enshrined in institutional hierarchies. The literature shows that the supervisor-  
30 student relationship can isolate and disempower students. Yet, when relationships  
31 or projects show problems, experienced supervisors can be left questioning their  
32 own professional abilities and identities, and worrying about where to turn for  
33 clarification and support. Supervisors skilled at research processes do not always  
34 know what to do next when faced with issues of student non-progress or students’  
35 personal problems. Given their professional standing, they often feel they should  
36 have this knowledge and ability and as a result could feel stressed because their  
37 professional skills are challenged.

### 47 Identity

48  
49 Professional identity lies at the heart of some of these issues. However  
50 most literature on academic identity focuses on student identity development  
51 related to their disciplines (Golde, 1998), and on challenges to academic identities in  
52 the current contexts of high expectations and changes in academics’ circumstances  
53 and university structures (Archer, 2008a; Clegg, 2008). These issues also impact on  
54 supervisors. As Halse has pointed out, current expectations that supervisors ‘learn  
55 the new “rules of the game”’ and ‘comply with a raft of policies, practices and  
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3 procedures that the university decreed essential for good supervision' (Halse, 2011,  
4 p. 56), accompanied by new forms of accountability and high productivity, could  
5 increase workload. This could also shift what historically can be a personal  
6 partnership model of a learning journey over time (often a very long time), into one  
7 that is more managed by the demands for systematic processes and productivity and  
8 the new doctoral experience of funding tied to completion.  
9

10  
11 Far from being fixed, identity (in this case academic and specifically supervisor  
12 identity) can be seen as changing in relation to external change (Ivanic, 1998), and  
13 development (Baker and Lattuca, 2010). The notion of an 'identity-trajectory' leads  
14 to the sense of both a core of self, and change over time (McAlpine, Amundsen and  
15 Turner, 2013). In this regard, notions of 'becoming' and 'unbecoming', offer insight  
16 into the changing identities of academics as supervisors over time and place. Some  
17 of these changes can be enforced and some are the result of personal choice  
18 (Archer, 2008; Pyhältö *et al.*, 2012a).  
19

20  
21 Other work considers the response to ideas, tensions and demands of what it means  
22 to be a researcher in terms of identity, stress and resilience. Davies and Danaher  
23 (2014) focused on early career researchers in relation to efforts aimed at  
24 empowerment in the context of prioritisation of certain research activities over  
25 others in the higher education context. The work of one of the authors (Castillo *et al.*,  
26 2015) looks at developing professional identities of early career researchers in  
27 response to changing 'signals' in a research career. However, there is to date little  
28 work on supervisors' sense of stress, risk, or management regarding their own  
29 research when supervising that of others. For supervisors, some of their positive and  
30 negative experiences could be related to conducting research and being a supervisor  
31 of others' research, whether it contributes to their own work or is free standing.  
32 Supervisors might start out hesitant or confident in their roles, and have these  
33 affected by interactions with students including breakdowns, losses or successes,  
34 and by the development of the project.  
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### 37 **Stress, wellbeing and resilience**

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39 In studies such as that of Halse and our own, the tensions that supervisors report  
40 lead to stress and challenges to academic identity. Not all changes are bad, and not  
41 all challenges to academic identity are damaging. Some supervisors in Halse's study  
42 react badly to the insistence on training for the role, while others in her study as well  
43 as in that of Spiller and colleagues (Spiller *et al.*, 2013) and our own, find forms of  
44 ongoing development supportive, an opportunity to share complex issues, enable  
45 community and reduce stress. Work on stress, wellbeing and resilience often tends  
46 to be in the (often unresearched) 'top tips' training model so for example training for  
47 senior managers, 'the hub' runs events on resilient leadership and thriving under  
48 pressure. However the report 'Five ways to wellbeing' (online) offers an evidence  
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3 base for improving wellbeing particularly at work, focusing on a range of proven  
4 behaviour strategies: connect; be active; take notice; keep learning; give. It is argued  
5 that these enable wellbeing, resilience and reduce stress, proffering a positive  
6 forward-looking attitude. It also suggests that older people can be lifted from  
7 depression through work, and that sharing, giving, participation in social and  
8 community life are associated with a sense of wellbeing, positive feelings and  
9 happiness.  
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13 This advice resembles that suggested by supervisors, in the data (below). While  
14 working and community contexts might be useful for the positive mindsets and  
15 resilience for 'older people', we argue that this could be translated into considering  
16 the academic workplace as a community, where academic participation and the  
17 supervision support to others could also produce a form of happiness. So too  
18 could involvement in supervisor support and development systems, and team  
19 supervision, since it is otherwise quite an isolating role. Work on future  
20 consciousness also aligns with that on stress, emotional resilience and wellbeing in  
21 the workplace. This advises predicting, then variously avoiding, planning and coping  
22 with stressful situations. Lombardo notes that research 'in positive psychology also  
23 shows that our emotional states strongly affect our thinking capacities; we do not  
24 think as creatively and intelligently about the future when we are emotionally  
25 miserable as we do when we are hopeful and happy (Fredrickson, 2005).'

26 Intellectually complex futurist visions express hope and fear and while fear and  
27 negative emotions including 'anxiety, stress, despair, and depression, have been  
28 extensively studied within psychology (Reading, 2004)', The issue we are mainly  
29 concerned with is one of resilience and in this respect Lombardo argues that positive  
30 mindsets and behaviours that are hopeful and proactive can be learned through  
31 anticipating a positive future and working towards it rather than a negative one over  
32 which one has no control (Seligman, 1998; Lombardo, 2006a, pp. 48-49; Lombardo,  
33 2007c). Optimism is more realistic than pessimism, he suggests, since pessimists  
34 avoid problems and run or hide from reality, while optimists seek solutions (Carver  
35 and Scheier, 2005). These theorists and practitioners suggest that thinking, planning,  
36 problem solving and decision making are all positive behaviours building wellbeing  
37 and resilience. In times of such rapid technological change and, we would argue,  
38 change in the demands on university staff including supervisors, planning ahead is  
39 advised (Lombardo and Richter, 2004; Lombardo, 2006a, pp. 61-6) as is the  
40 construction of positive narratives about success. In the case of supervisors this  
41 could for example be success of the students being supervised, of joint research, of  
42 publication), towards which you can plan, rather than negative ones, advice which is  
43 also given to postgraduate students (Morris and Wisker, 2011). Wilkinson's 'fear  
44 course' (online) helps develop similar forward-looking mindsets. This work is related  
45 to Positive psychology which is also useful in considering psychological health,  
46 strength, and wellbeing. Built both on evidence and value judgments regarding  
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3 what is “good” versus ‘not good’ in humans, positive psychology focuses on hope,  
4 wisdom, optimism, happiness, self-efficacy, flow, and love (Keyes and Lopez, 2005).  
5 This sounds a little abstract perhaps, but in some universities (including Brighton,  
6 where one of the authors works) there are communities focusing on wellbeing and  
7 happiness which is evidence of a research-based and practical strategic connection  
8 with wellbeing and resilience. Such institutional support systems and culture could  
9 be further activated to support supervisors.  
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### 12 13 **Supervisor stress, resilience and wellbeing**

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15 Our new work reported here is influenced by and builds on earlier work on  
16 education doctoral students’ wellbeing and emotional resilience (Morris, 2010;  
17 Author). Most research into stress, wellbeing and resilience amongst students  
18 focuses on undergraduates. Ryff and Keyes (1995) and Howard and Johnson (2004),  
19 for example, identify illnesses developing from poor study experiences. Taking that  
20 work further into postgraduate study, Poyatos Matas (2008, 2009) builds on the  
21 work of Haksever and Manisali (2000) and Nightingale (2005) to show that lack of  
22 clearly defined goals and milestones can cause anxiety during research and writing a  
23 thesis. Muurlink and Poyatos Matas (2010) and Poyatos Matas and Tannoch-Bland  
24 (2011) explored ways to alleviate stress and enable wellbeing and emotional  
25 resilience, and earlier work of one of the authors helped develop a toolkit (Morris  
26 and Wisker, 2011) to identify difficulties and support postgraduate students’  
27 wellbeing and resilience. These efforts underpinned our interpretation of successful  
28 strategies for doctoral orphans and informed our work on the supervisors who have  
29 lost or gained the doctoral orphans.  
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36 This article focuses on the supervisor point of view, opening up a broader and  
37 deeper range of problematic moments, particularly in the supervisory relationship  
38 and supervision journey. These moments lead to concerns, stress, challenges to  
39 professional identity, and in several instances to the development of strategies for  
40 wellbeing and resilience. While much of the earlier work focuses on doctoral  
41 students (Author), and work is being carried out by Van den Berg (2015) on early  
42 career supervisors, we consider how experienced supervisors (who have supervised  
43 four or more PhD students through to completion) recognise concerns and variously  
44 cope (or not) in a number of potentially stressful situations. We consider this both in  
45 terms of response to enhanced and changed expectations in the more managerial,  
46 productivity-oriented university, and more particularly in relation to working with  
47 students on their research.  
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53 Situations related to working with students include change in supervisory  
54 relationships, where supervisors take on a student previously supervised by another  
55 during the research project, or have to ‘hand over’ a student to another supervisor’s  
56 care, and when there are conflicts and stalled projects. We found supervisors  
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3 acknowledging concerns about challenges to their sense of professional identity  
4 combined with these situations. Other issues and complications regarding the  
5 students' work, which impact supervisor stress, arise from institutional time  
6 demands on the project, such as achievement at certain stages, writing quality,  
7 breakthroughs in the research, and successful on-time PhD completion. Interesting  
8 information began to emerge during the course of our earlier explorations of  
9 doctoral candidate and supervisor experiences; however, we only now turn to  
10 considering experienced supervisors in particular.

### 14 **Methodology and methods**

16 The research is in two parts. While working with earlier projects we became aware  
17 of supervisor stress and resilience, but lacked space to focus on this. We felt it useful  
18 to rescrutinise that earlier work to discover any explicit comments on these topics.  
19 Having identified issues regarding changing context and expectations; student  
20 interactions and challenges; and stress and professional identity arising from the  
21 rescrutinised material, we built new questions which specifically focused on those  
22 areas. Qualitative methodology enables us to explore the perspectives of the  
23 supervisors through asking them to tell their own stories since it is their perceptions  
24 and experiences which are of interest here. We conducted semi-structured open-  
25 ended interviews with experienced supervisors (who had supervised four or more  
26 students to completion), and who indicated their willingness to take part in the  
27 interviews. We met these supervisors while running internationally based  
28 supervision workshops, and at conferences focused on postgraduate supervision  
29 that deliberately built on established trust. The research is in two linked parts:

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36 1) The 'troublesome encounters' project on postgraduate students' wellbeing and  
37 stress in education (Author) and work which led to the publications 'Doctoral  
38 Orphans' (Author) and 'Picking up the Pieces' (Author). These were re-scrutinised for  
39 evidence of supervisor stress, wellbeing, resilience strategies and effects on identity.  
40 This earlier work is used to inform thinking and questioning which led to the  
41 interview data in this article (this part is referred to throughout as 1, with no  
42 quotations from participants).

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46 2) Ten new semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted face-to-face  
47 and by email with supervisors across a range of discipline areas – business, computer  
48 science, medicine, health, education, and the humanities, in the UK, Canada, Sweden  
49 and South Africa. The sample was opportunistic. Supervisors were invited to  
50 participate. We knew some of these supervisors professionally, having met them at  
51 conferences. We knew others because of their interest in the work voiced during  
52 internationally based supervision workshops (this part is referred to throughout as 2,  
53 with participants labelled A, B, etc.). Supervisors operate in different international,  
54 institutional and disciplinary contexts, but each had at least four student  
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3 'completions'. We do not focus on these contextual differences, since our approach  
4 was not a quantitative one with fine tuning on different cultural differences, but  
5 rather an exploration of common issues regarding stress and wellbeing in  
6 supervision. Questions focused on supervisor stress, wellbeing, strategies and  
7 effects on identity.  
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10 The data from both 1 and 2 were collated, coded, thematically analysed, interpreted  
11 and reported here, from 1 to form general comments and underpinning arguments,  
12 and from 2 using direct quotations to illustrate and take the arguments forward.  
13 Certain themes emerged, broadly collected into the predetermined personal,  
14 learning and institutional dimensions.  
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17 The themes indicate challenging experiences and concerns; the development of  
18 quality of student research learning; supervisors' own professional practice, status  
19 and time; and how they link emotional responses with gatekeeping roles and  
20 supervisor identity. Some supervisors note stresses and complications arising from  
21 institutional time demands, such as achievement at certain stages, writing quality  
22 breakthroughs in the research itself, and successful on-time student completion.  
23 Other findings emerged when supervisors were asked about their strategies for  
24 resilience and wellbeing. These findings indicated issues with managing stresses, and  
25 developing strategies for resilience.  
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### 31 **Findings: difficulties, issues faced, and responses.**

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33 **Personal:** Difficulties met included problematic relationships and supervisors coping  
34 with change in supervisory relationships.  
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36 Supervisors identified stress and concerns of wellbeing deriving from interactions  
37 with students, related to emotional, professional and intellectual issues, which  
38 affected their own sense of identity and wellbeing in emotional, professional, and  
39 intellectual terms. These issues included responses to individuals' needs and  
40 demands; balances between responsibility and autonomy; and some uncomfortable  
41 conflicts arising from clashes in personality and/or clashes related to authority and  
42 ownership. Supervisor stress could also be caused by experience of changes in the  
43 student/supervisor relationship, particularly concerning students who do not get on  
44 with their supervisor or who leave (Wisker and Robinson, 2012; Johanssen, Wisker,  
45 Claesson, Strandler and Saalman, 2014; Vekkailla, Pyhältö and Lonka, 2013).  
46 Supervisors' personal feelings are tied in with loyalty to students, so that they often  
47 felt a challenge to their own professional ability if students made little progress, and  
48 a personal sense of loss if the students chose to end the supervisory relationship and  
49 seek another supervisor. Some also reported stress related to learning and research  
50 when students exhibited confusions in understanding which the supervisor could not  
51 help clarify or overcome.  
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3 They managed this sense of loss and difficulties of being in a new supervisory  
4 relationship:  
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6 I don't recommend getting more involved in interpersonal or political issues  
7 than you have to ... you can't be of use to the student unless there's mutual  
8 respect. (2, D)  
9

10  
11 Tensions existed between professional, intellectual and personal issues. There were  
12 also concerns exhibited by supervisors over their contribution to student learning  
13 development, and the continuity and eventual completion of a sufficiently successful  
14 project which makes a quality contribution to knowledge. In this respect, supervisors  
15 were aware of the value of and challenges to their contribution to the student's  
16 research development and the development and completion of the project. This  
17 response occurred in the context of institutional expectations and expected quality  
18 in the disciplines, where supervisors often saw themselves as the first gatekeepers of  
19 quality. Some supervisors noted tensions and issues around completion and success,  
20 with the pace and development of the student's work, and with the institutional  
21 expectations and professional pressures. In terms of the quality of the work,  
22 supervisors specifically commented on issues concerning the demands of theory.  
23 More generally, some were concerned with lack of time and opportunity to enable  
24 their own research and development.  
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### 30 31 *Institutional*

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33 Institutional expectations, formal milestones and 'training' could cause stress but  
34 were also seen to offer structured strategies for moving forward.  
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36 Some issues related to time allocated and balancing other demands on supervisor  
37 time.  
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39 The diversity together with the overload has to do with it, it takes more  
40 energy from a person to actually be dealing with many diverse tasks and  
41 having to juggle ...it's all their teaching work, undergrad post grad, many  
42 administrative activities. (2, H)  
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46 Another issue arose from the supervisor's allocation of projects, since some  
47 supervised in their specialist area and others in much broader areas. This allocation  
48 was probably due to understaffing, the status of the university in terms of focus on  
49 specialisms, and the supervisor's willingness to help support projects with no local  
50 specialist. The scope of the research and variety of students could be an issue,  
51 spreading the supervisor's focus too broadly and thinly so their work ranged  
52 between different research projects, those of students and their own:  
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3 It could be research that is quite different from the research that the student  
4 is doing because we often find that you constantly move between these  
5 different projects. (2, H)  
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8 Another issue causing extra work and stress was language differences. If students  
9 were from a different language and culturally inflected background to the  
10 supervisor, reading, suggestions for work, critical thinking and the fine elements of  
11 the nuances of language and research behaviours communicated through language  
12 might be confused. Another language issue occurred in dual language institutions  
13 where translation, level of interpretation and writing quality in the second (or third,  
14 or fourth) language was often of concern, a block, and an extra time constraint for  
15 both student and supervisor:  
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19 Remember they teach in two languages, everything has to be translated,  
20 something that significantly adds to the workload of our staff members. (2, S)  
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23 From participant responses and our own experiences, it becomes clear that  
24 institutions need to take these practical issues into account when allocating time,  
25 resources and support.  
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28 In their interactions with university committee and management structures, and  
29 with the scaffolded moments of student work development, such as proposal  
30 approval, transition/transfer to full PhD study, progress reporting and acceptance for  
31 examination, supervisors were aware of acting both as advocates, and gatekeepers  
32 of quality. Their advocacy extended to ensuring students have adequate facilities  
33 and sometimes to working for funding.  
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36 One supervisor noted the consistent political work conducted on the student's  
37 behalf, an experience which was stressful for the supervisor as well as the student.  
38 Their concerns with interactions with university structures and representatives were  
39 mixed with an awareness that student difficulties or success impacted supervisor  
40 reputation. Researcher identity, status and personal sense of success are bound up  
41 with institutional expectations and practices for both student and supervisor. For  
42 some supervisors, the moments of approval of the project proposals,  
43 transfer/confirmation of candidature and progress reports were also stressful, since  
44 they often felt their *own* work was being put under scrutiny. Alternately, the  
45 involvement of others in working with student progress and a form of peer review of  
46 that work offered supportive confirmation and direction for future work with the  
47 student.  
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53 However, systems and structures could also be seen as useful and supportive.  
54 Supervisors used structures and institutional processes to manage issues of lack of  
55 student response or progress, plagiarism, lack of internal justice, non-completion  
56 and transfer.  
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3 When relationships broke down irrevocably or students were not making progress  
4 sufficient to be able to move on with their PhD, institutional structures were often  
5 perceived as taking the weight of some of the most complex decisions. This  
6 perception confirmed the supervisors' own professional sense that it was better to  
7 halt the supervision progress and the student research at that time, or for the  
8 student to change supervisor or topic, methodology, etc. The institutional processes  
9 offered confirmation and support, which prevented confusion and a sense of guilt.  
10

### 11 *Learning*

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14 A few supervisors commented on stress arising from the nature of the research  
15 work, an issue which merits further attention. A supervisor with extensive  
16 experience talked about distressing incidents related to veterinary research work,  
17 something identified as 'compassion fatigue' (2, H), most commonly seen in health,  
18 nursing, ageing, abuse or trauma-related research.  
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22  
23 Some responses related to nudging students to cross conceptual thresholds (Wisker  
24 *et al.*, 2010), such as working at an appropriate conceptual, critical and creative level  
25 for a PhD rather than, for example, merely being busy. Supervisors admitted conflict  
26 in their own sense of self-worth when they could neither engage students as  
27 learners on their journey, nor fully understand how they conceptualised.  
28  
29

30 I'm not always sure if I'm doing the right thing with them. I would offer them  
31 certain theory responses ... I think that a doctoral student should really be  
32 doing their own research. (2, B)  
33  
34

35 Another supervisor commented on the difficulties of working with students who  
36 cannot be persuaded to think critically or engage with research, writing and a viva  
37 examination in such a way that recognises that research is a dialogue, rather arguing  
38 that they alone are right. This supervisor felt that their own relative newness in the  
39 role meant they did not have the range of strategies to manage this intransigence.  
40 When this limited thinking and arguing led to the student being given major  
41 modifications on their thesis, the supervisor felt immense guilt at letting the student  
42 down. With hindsight the supervisor could see how the support of others with more  
43 experience could help to work out a response to the issues., and to this end many  
44 supervisor development programmes include case studies of such situations for  
45 groups to consider so that joint wisdom is shared and developed . The supervisor  
46 commented:  
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51 I think the impact of something that goes wrong is probably stronger because  
52 you haven't had experience so much of the fact that it can happen so you  
53 think it's all your fault. (2, G)  
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57 And of one inexperienced student:  
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3 Where he didn't listen to any advice, and virtually went head on into his viva  
4 convinced that he could talk the examiners into thinking the same things that  
5 he wanted to think, when that didn't happen and he had major corrections to  
6 do, he was very distraught and therefore I felt that I had failed him. (2, G)  
7  
8

9 For some supervisors, such blockages and problems directly impacted their sense of  
10 self-worth, professional effectiveness and identity. Some individuals responded  
11 functionally using university systems to structure research learning or 'letting go' of  
12 non-developing students. Other individuals used nudging and support, intellectual  
13 challenge, and incremental work leading to student 'learning leaps', noting  
14 satisfaction, happiness and achievement with student learning success.  
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17  
18 Supervisors acknowledged challenges, issues related to identity, concerns about  
19 their professional practice and about the lack of progress made by some students,  
20 when their own sense of professional practice and success was tied up with such  
21 cognitive intellectual development and achievement. This conflict emerged as a main  
22 contributor to supervisor stress and insecurity about professional identity. Other  
23 contributors were lack of information, lack of support and over-work as well as  
24 university expectations of productivity in terms of throughput of successful students  
25 within the allotted time.  
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### 29 **Strategies for wellbeing and resilience suggested by supervisors**

30  
31 In data from both research parts, supervisors offered fewer strategies for wellbeing  
32 and resilience than expected. These strategies were rarely related to the specific role  
33 of supervision or the higher education context. They are gathered here as general  
34 strategies and strategies which were more specific to the context and role.  
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37  
38 General strategies included personal coping strategies; time management;  
39 work/study/life balance; and motional and practical support from family/friends;  
40 peers; supervisors and varied support services.  
41

42  
43 Everyday practical strategies included recognising the importance of taking breaks  
44 from the work of supervision and research, and doing almost anything else other  
45 than research and focusing on the research and student; regular physical exercise of  
46 a variety of sorts, from sports, to walks in the country; artistic and aesthetic  
47 activities, including listening to music and plays on the radio, watching drama on the  
48 TV, going to the theatre or concerts; and gardening. Supervisor stress management  
49 in this series of responses resembled stress management and wellbeing in a number  
50 of other contexts. These strategies resonate with those offered in the world of  
51 psychology and business, for example the five ways of behaving which enable  
52 wellbeing, resilience, reduce stress and offer a positive forward looking attitude:  
53 'connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, give'(5 ways). Some  
54 mentioned problem-solving behaviours in relation to dealing with institutional  
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3 blockages, or alternatively using institutional processes to support them in their  
4 work with students who were making little progress or wanted to leave.  
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6  
7 Other authors identify similar or further, generic resilience and wellbeing  
8 characteristics for coping (Dewe, P, 2008 p. 12), such as active participation in sport,  
9 walking, running and also reading, socialising. Specifically, and in relation to the  
10 literature, community and learning, all of these begin to appear in supervisors'  
11 responses, although the practice of 'giving' is absent. However some supervisors did  
12 talk about the positive aspects of a form of giving, of their time , their advice,  
13 considered as 'leaning' on them, so that in times of mutual difficulty over the  
14 project:  
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17  
18 ...you might say I was kind of more of a maternal type of supervisor, holding  
19 onto them to make sure they get there. (2, K )  
20

21  
22 Many supervisors are working long hours, although they derive pleasure from  
23 the learning development of engaging with students' intellectual journeys,  
24 investment in working alongside and helping students develop, being part of an  
25 intellectual community sharing the issues around supervisory practice (for instance  
26 in development sessions).  
27  
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29  
30 Those strategies specifically related to wellbeing in the research development and  
31 student engagement areas engaged issues to do with the community, professional  
32 identity, role, and the institution. They included developing a supportive community  
33 of peers; management of the supervisor role; attending relevant training; self-  
34 awareness; perseverance; open mindedness, being prepared to listen to criticism;  
35 intercultural awareness; and encouraging students to manage expectations. One  
36 supervisor focused on managing the role, managing expectations and developing  
37 independence which will reduce supervisor as well as student stress:  
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40  
41 In terms of positive wellbeing you want a level of clarity and I like the  
42 students to have a level of clarity of exactly what they're supposed to be  
43 doing so, you know, there will, you know, in my case there will be negotiation  
44 of exactly what we're going to do over the coming year, there will be  
45 deadlines, and that might be the first step. You obviously want them to get a  
46 sense of, you know, become more independent so you may relax that over  
47 time.(2, J)  
48  
49

50  
51 Supervisors said that in times of conflict and difficulty that it was important to  
52 develop the skills of positive thinking; an ability to keep perspective; and to be  
53 compassionate with yourself.  
54

55  
56 Some specific supervisor wellbeing enhancement strategies aimed to support the  
57 student. However, by managing the role and student experience, supervisors felt  
58 that they can develop a more rounded sense of wellbeing. These strategies include:  
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3 holistic view of student; supervision tailored to needs and learning styles; encourage  
4 questioning; sharing experiences; signposting (colleagues, peers, networks) so  
5 student also relies on others and develops networks; encouraging participation in  
6 conferences; listening skills, empathy; regular contact (e.g. email); constructive  
7 feedback; and pastoral care. Taking care of the student, being aware of their  
8 differences and different needs, joining them into communities and groups and  
9 discussing learning expectations all seemed to help manage the relationships and  
10 the students' own progress, and so lessen supervisor stress and enhance resilience  
11 and wellbeing. Their learning from reflection and experience seems to show  
12 evidence of taking control, optimism, strategies supported by the work from positive  
13 psychology and future consciousness (Lombardo 2006a, 2007c). They often  
14 transferred their own learning to support for students, as one commented:

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20 'As a PhD is intrinsically an individualistic enterprise, it is important to nurture  
21 student resilience through creating a sense of belonging and developing  
22 relationships.' (2, B)  
23

24  
25 Conditions for academic wellbeing for both students and supervisor include: a pro-  
26 research student culture – guidance, mentoring; training opportunities –  
27 personal/professional, technical and academic skills; access to funding; academic  
28 community with formal and informal opportunities to contribute; a pro-wellbeing  
29 culture – proactive, built into academic life; supportive infrastructure – access to  
30 services, facilities, pastoral care, monitoring.  
31  
32

33  
34 One supervisor noted that the infrastructure and involvement of others helped  
35 relieve the sleeplessness and stress of their sense of inability to support and move  
36 a student on, when the student was stuck at a cognitive level which prevented  
37 theorising and critical engagement with the research:  
38

39  
40 I reduced my stress by getting confirmation of the problem but also by  
41 bringing other people in because I thought if other people approach this from  
42 different angles maybe they will make the breakthrough that I can't make. (2,  
43 G)  
44

45  
46 The supervisor noted 'the stress is empathy' (2, G) for the student and their  
47 experience of being stuck. Following a solution to the problem, this supervisor  
48 shared the idea of engaging in developmental dialogue and seeking support when  
49 difficult moments occur, noting that otherwise supervision is a lonely business, and  
50 one tied up with professional identity, which makes it even more problematic for  
51 some individuals:  
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55 I can now counsel supervisors who are stuck in the same positions because  
56 it's happened so I've learnt from it. (2, G)  
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3 For supervisors, resilience, wellbeing needs and strategies are necessary in the  
4 context of high stakes work with complex, intellectually engaged research. These  
5 strategies are also necessary for the personal interactions with the  
6 researchers, which continue over a long time, following the trajectory of discoveries,  
7 theorising blockages, and iterative enhancing of the research project and its written  
8 culmination: the thesis and research publications. Beyond the generic practices of  
9 relaxation, sport, diversion, and self-management, supervisors' resilience and  
10 wellbeing is specifically tied in with learning and community.  
11  
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### 13 **Theoretical and educational significance**

14  
15 Most of the work considering resilience and wellbeing has been carried out on  
16 student-supervisor interactions and latterly there has been work on difficulties in  
17 relationships and on learning progress (Strandler, et al 2014; Wisker and Robinson  
18 2012, 2013). New work focusing on student-supervisor identity, wellbeing and  
19 resilience in the face of such difficulties offered and developed here offers useful  
20 insight into the more stressful areas of supervision and the interactions between  
21 personal, learning and institutional levels of problems and of support. The research  
22 study presented here looks at some of the successful strategies which supervisors  
23 recognise they have used and developed to support the whole process to a positive  
24 result. Many supervisors we consulted acknowledge stressful issues and resilience  
25 strategies centering around managing expectations, developing sound habits which  
26 reduce the stress of research and interactions, sharing good practice with others,  
27 and making good use of the infrastructural support of the university. They  
28 acknowledge that while the supervisor relationships and practices relate centrally to  
29 their own academic and whole identity, they need to step back, put it in perspective,  
30 and find local, personal, learning and institutional ways of managing the role. They  
31 also need to manage the ways in which the problems the role produces offer a  
32 threat to professional identity in terms of competency, and take note of the stress  
33 and ways of managing it in order to function in a successful and healthy manner.  
34 Interestingly, some of the negative responses to 'training' and development which  
35 emerged early in our work were countered by supervisors suggesting that  
36 development opportunities offered support, community and the sense that sharing  
37 issues and successful practices could make them both more effective and  
38 'considerate' of themselves.  
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### 48 **Conclusions**

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50 Little research to date focuses on issues related to PhD supervisor/student learning  
51 interactions and progress, even though these interactions specifically affect  
52 supervisor stress, wellbeing and resilience as well as professional identity among  
53 experienced supervisors. Our previous work and that of others on students and  
54 supervisor breakdowns, losses or terminations focused on emotional, stressful  
55 experiences in doctoral supervision relationships and the learning journey, largely  
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3 from the student perspective. However, supervisors also reported stress which was  
4 largely unexplored and un-researched. This stress included quite fundamental  
5 questioning of their ability to support and enable students to achieve their potential  
6 and a finished doctorate. We determined to look further into supervisor stress,  
7 wellbeing and resilience to bring these issues to the surface.  
8  
9

10 Research reported here suggests there is a range of concerns and issues, including  
11 many impacting upon supervisors' sense of professional identity. These results are  
12 shared here in the expectation that clarification can lead to positive action  
13 minimising stress and isolation, informing development of personal coping  
14 strategies, and enhancing institutional support. These actions will enhance the  
15 supervisory experience for the supervisor, and potentially for the students and their  
16 outcomes (this latter is hoped for but beyond the scope of the current research).  
17 These conclusions contribute new knowledge concerning supervisor experiences of  
18 interactions with students, projects and the institution; their sense of distress,  
19 confusion, blockage, and stress; and their strategies for wellbeing and managing  
20 expectations. The conclusions are understood using theories of academic identity  
21 and wellbeing, resilience considering relationships between supervisor, student,  
22 project and institutional context. Supervisors identify perceptions and practices  
23 enabling them to act professionally and personally for positive outcomes for  
24 wellbeing and identity, and for student research learning and project success.  
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