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

Changes in supervisor relationships and arrangements are perhaps surprisingly
common, and much of this has positive outcomes for students (Wisker and
Robinson, 2012, 2013). However, some change produces challenge and stress. For
supervisors, this stress can lead to a sense of inadequacy or loss, leading to an
undermining of professional identity and security. Our earlier work which focused on
doctoral student experiences revealed various stresses, including the perception by
supervisors that they had invested a great deal of emotional and intellectual work in
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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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.
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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).
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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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11 The data from both 1 and 2 were collated, coded, thematically analysed, interpreted
12 and reported here, from 1 to form general comments and underpinning arguments,
13 and from 2 using direct quotations to illustrate and take the arguments forward.
14 Certain themes emerged, broadly collected into the predetermined personal,
15 learning and institutional dimensions.
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18 The themes indicate challenging experiences and concerns; the development of
19 quality of student research learning; supervisors' own professional practice, status
20 and time; and how they link emotional responses with gatekeeping roles and
21 supervisor identity. Some supervisors note stresses and complications arising from
22 institutional time demands, such as achievement at certain stages, writing quality
23 breakthroughs in the research itself, and successful on-time student completion.
24 Other findings emerged when supervisors were asked about their strategies for
25 resilience and wellbeing. These findings indicated issues with managing stresses, and
26 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)
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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 *Institutional*

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32 Institutional expectations, formal milestones and 'training' could cause stress but
33 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*

12
13 A few supervisors commented on stress arising from the nature of the research
14 work, an issue which merits further attention. A supervisor with extensive
15 experience talked about distressing incidents related to veterinary research work,
16 something identified as 'compassion fatigue' (2, H), most commonly seen in health,
17 nursing, ageing, abuse or trauma-related research.
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20 Some responses related to nudging students to cross conceptual thresholds (Wisker
21 *et al.*, 2010), such as working at an appropriate conceptual, critical and creative level
22 for a PhD rather than, for example, merely being busy. Supervisors admitted conflict
23 in their own sense of self-worth when they could neither engage students as
24 learners on their journey, nor fully understand how they conceptualised.
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26
27 I'm not always sure if I'm doing the right thing with them. I would offer them
28 certain theory responses ... I think that a doctoral student should really be
29 doing their own research. (2, B)
30

31
32 Another supervisor commented on the difficulties of working with students who
33 cannot be persuaded to think critically or engage with research, writing and a viva
34 examination in such a way that recognises that research is a dialogue, rather arguing
35 that they alone are right. This supervisor felt that their own relative newness in the
36 role meant they did not have the range of strategies to manage this intransigence.
37 When this limited thinking and arguing led to the student being given major
38 modifications on their thesis, the supervisor felt immense guilt at letting the student
39 down. With hindsight the supervisor could see how the support of others with more
40 experience could help to work out a response to the issues., and to this end many
41 supervisor development programmes include case studies of such situations for
42 groups to consider so that joint wisdom is shared and developed . The supervisor
43 commented:
44

45
46 I think the impact of something that goes wrong is probably stronger because
47 you haven't had experience so much of the fact that it can happen so you
48 think it's all your fault. (2, G)
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51 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**

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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.
5

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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16

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
28

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:
38
39

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.
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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)
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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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54 I can now counsel supervisors who are stuck in the same positions because
55 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**

49
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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