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Trust Me! Building and breaking professional trust in doctoral student-supervisor relationships

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The University Of Sheffield.

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Ethical approval

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a research study looking at perceptions of trust in doctoral supervision relationships. It views academic supervisors in the context of their role as leaders and enablers of trust within their research environments and higher education institutions. It aims to take a broad exploratory view of the specific behaviours that are important in trust building in supervisory relationships. Institutional and sector pressures on the doctoral degree, on doctoral supervision and on academic practice have increased in recent years, and supervision is just one element of an increasingly demanding 'all-rounder' academic role. Supervision is a complex leadership practice, and yet is a key influencer of doctoral success. Any difficulties that arise in transitioning to a doctorate, can be resolved through a good supervision relationship. A poor relationship means that such difficulties are sustained throughout the course of the doctorate. Emotionally competent academic leadership, as well as technical and intellectual mentorship, is required of supervisors, who must be supported in this by their department cultures and university structures.

Trust is a complex requirement of effective workplace learning, especially when learning from a supervisor, and is an essential component of what it means to be a 'professional' – a person trusted to be an expert in a particular area. Using a definition of trust as "willingness to accept uncertainly and make oneself vulnerable in the face of insecurity" (Hope-Hailey et al, 2012) this study poses that the quality of the supervision relationship is influenced by the presence or absence of trust. Trust may be a particularly important factor for leadership within the doctoral degree context, which is characterised by acutely felt uncertainty, the processes of original discovery, and the shifting role and power balances of building a new researcher identity.

To investigate trust in supervision we developed an approach that could facilitate discussion, reflection and understanding of trust and supervision and imagined 'better ways' for relationship building. Interview questions were developed inductively through five initial, minimally structured interviews with staff in administrative roles related to doctoral affairs and supervisory support – postgraduate research tutors. From these interviews came a preliminary framework for discussing and contextualising vulnerability and trust in research supervision. This was used to structure student and supervisor discussion groups. Structured group discussions were facilitated with 26 doctoral students across four research-intensive universities. Supervisor groups engaged 17 experienced academic supervisors. A study blog was used to collect further data anonymously from across the UK. The reach of data collection was broadened, and the number of contributing individuals increased by 69 doctoral students and 21 supervisors. Thematic analyses were used to interpret and compare the data across groups and institutions.

The findings characterise and illustrate the vulnerabilities and tensions students and supervisors spoke about, positioning these 'issues' as 'opportunities' for trust to develop. Without such challenging experiences, there is no need for trust to be tested and no chance for it to grow. Both supervisors and students described a range of experienced vulnerabilities. For students, vulnerabilities were related to the intense learning (both explicit and tacit) involved in the doctorate, and academic environment, and the challenges of shifting prior learning strategies to doctoral study. For supervisors, issues were related to structural issues in how supervision is viewed, valued, supported and constrained by departmental and institutional policies and cultures. The impact of a low trust relationship on doctoral students and on supervisors is sustained insecurity, leading students to experience stress and reduced feelings of confidence and independence.

Both supervisors and students entered into new supervision partnerships with an implicit or assumed trust in each other based on prior educational attainment or institutional affiliation. Trust on both sides was built over time, both in response to each encounter and to observations of behaviour or attitudes towards others. Trust erosion also occurred gradually over time and was linked to unfulfilled expectations for the supervision relationship, or mismatched ideas about the purpose and process of a doctorate. Acute incidents relating to deception, bullying or personal integrity caused trust to be broken in a way that forcefully damaged the relationship.

Supervisory leadership is characterised by tensions and balances. To build trust a supervisor must respond to the student's individual needs and circumstances and develop a discipline-appropriate professional practice in supervision. This study contributes insight into the nature of supervisory trust. It deepens our understanding of what constitutes a 'good quality' studentsupervisor relationship, and signals the presence or absence of trust as a component of quality.

Recommendations are offered that draw on the presented evidence and make suggestions for how supervisors could be supported to establish and sustain trusting supervision relationships. The practical recommendations avoid the language of supervision 'skills', preferring instead to describe contextual and demonstrable trust-building behaviours within the social worlds of research environments and relationships. The primary aim is to assist higher education institutions to enhance supervisory practice, specifically through focusing on relationship tensions.

Information related to this study, an open access online supervisor development resource and links to the project blog and Twitter are available at www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ecr/mentoring/trustmeworkshop [accessed 1 November 2017]. ■

01 What is this about?

Doctoral supervision: academic leadership in pressured times

Institutional and sector pressures on the doctorate, on doctoral supervision, and on academic practice have increased in recent years, and supervision is just one element of academic practice in an increasingly demanding 'allrounder' academic role. Supervision is a complex leadership practice and yet is a key influencer of doctoral success (Styles and Radloff, 2001; Grant, 2003; Gatfield, 2005; Anderson et al, 2006; Emilsson and Johnsson, 2007; Murphy et al, 2007; Lee, 2008; Amundsen and McAlpine, 2009; McAlpine et al, 2012; Zeegers and Barron, 2012; Halbert, 2015) that can 'make or break' a student (Lee, 2008). Doctoral development involves continual identity reappraisal in response to new learning, changing priorities, and working relationships (Gardner, 2008). Rapid identity shifts at the point of transition create feelings of confusion and conflict, which in turn evokes an emotional response to new challenges (Eraut, 2004). Any difficulties that arise in transitioning to a doctorate, can be resolved through a good supervision relationship. A poor relationship means that such difficulties are sustained throughout the course of the doctorate (McAlpine et al, 2012) whereas making sense of developmental experiences can be supported by good professional relationships (Clegg, 2008). It is no surprise, then, that emotionally competent academic leadership, as well as technical and intellectual mentorship, is required of supervisors, and the need to establish good rapport and 'high quality' student-supervisor relationships has been emphasised (Ward and Gardner, 2008; Kiley, 2011; Jairam and Kahl, 2012).

It should be noted that students who face delay in the doctorate also face stigma and shame in doing so, as well as a potential for reduced employability and financial disadvantage. In cases where doctoral students suspend loan repayments for the duration of their doctoral candidacy they accrue greater interest than their counterparts in employment, which is not reflected in their increased post-doctorate earnings (Casey, 2009).

A number of previous works position the relationship aspect of supervisory leadership as pivotal to the development and success of the doctoral candidate (Emilsson and Johnson, 2007; Gill and Bernard, 2008; Green, 2005; Haksever and Manisali, 2000; Lee, 2008; McCallin and Nayar, 2012; Unsworth et al, 2010; de Valero, 2001). Yet, much of the research education discourse has not translated into defined pedagogical concepts in practice (Zeegers and Barron, 2012).

It is important, given rising pressures and expectations on supervisors, that this study and its set of recommendations should be sensitive in its approach to articulating the complex relational and emotional tensions in supervision. This work explicitly does not seek to assign blame to any party. Neither does this report seek to position doctoral supervision as a means to a performative end ie focusing only on timely doctoral completion or how to recruit and allocate time to greater numbers of supervisees.

Trust as a determinant of doctoral progression: clues from a thesis mentoring programme

In 2013 a thesis mentoring programme (University of Sheffield, 2017) was developed in response to an identified need for conversations around doctoral writing. The thesis mentoring programme matches writers who self-identify as 'stump-ed' (**st**ressfully **u**nable to **m**ake **p**rogress) with a post-doctoral researcher. Over a 16-week period the pairs meet to discuss the barriers to progress and to create bespoke solutions. The mentoring programme offers a space for open dialogue and problem solving with the support of an independent staff member.

Potential participants in thesis mentoring complete an expression of interest form detailing their current writing challenges. Through such requests for support a tendency towards 'concealment' behaviours in struggling doctoral students was detected.

This may manifest as concealment of self ie hiding behaviours, not replying to emails, not attending meetings; or delay or concealment of writing progress ie 'over-claiming' or 'over-promising'.

"I just run the other way when I see her coming, I can't be near her. I'm really angry that I was allowed to get into this mess, when it could have been avoided."

"I don't even know what my data shows. I daren't open my files. I can't talk to him about this, I've been saying it's all going fine."

"In my head my thesis is perfect. If I start writing it, we'll all find out that it isn't, and I can't stand that – I'm embarrassed."

It is not accurate to generalise that every participant in the thesis mentoring programme was unable to communicate openly with their supervisor(s), many reported good and supportive supervision relationship(s). However, data observation from the mentoring programme, made over several hundred programme participants, was that delay in making progress with doctoral thesis writing could occur via concealment behaviours, brought about by a 'low-quality' relationship with the doctoral supervisor.

Trust as a workplace phenomenon has been defined as "*willingness to accept uncertainly and make oneself vulnerable in the face of insecurity"* (Hope-Hailey et al, 2012). This study poses that the quality of the supervision relationship is influenced by the presence or absence of trust, and that concealment of self, or of the products of research, may be a way of coping with feelings of insecurity or vulnerability in a low-trust relationship. Trust may be an important factor in the doctoral degree context, which is characterised by acutely felt uncertainty, the processes of doing original research and discovery, and the shifting role and power balances of identity development. This work reports experiences of trust in supervision relationships, and the specific behaviours involved in building and breaking trust in this context.

Conceptualisations of trust

There are several conceptualisations of trust, trust building, and decisionmaking processes that could provide appropriate frameworks for examining trust in the doctoral student-supervisor context. Two frameworks are summarised below:

Trust and workplace supervision **(Hughes, 2004).** Trust is a complex requirement of effective workplace learning, especially when learning from a line manager or supervisor. Although learners are responsible for making the first gestures of trust building for learning purposes (ie revealing a learning need), they are also under pressure to prove themselves to be trustworthy (ie to show they are working at the doctoral level, and are becoming independent). A tension exists then between demonstrating lack of knowledge or understanding to a supervisor, which creates an opportunity to build 'learning trust', and appearing competent in their sight, which helps students gain the managerial trust of their supervisor.

Professional trust **(Frowe, 2005).** Trust is an essential component of what it means to be a 'professional' - a person trusted to be an expert in a particular area, one who is trusted to understand the rules and make sound judgements that uphold the standards and codes of conduct of the profession. In working relationships of 'expert' and 'learner', this bestows on the expert professionals (the supervisor) a privilege and power advantage over those outside the profession, and perhaps also as novices seeking entry into the profession. ■

02 Aims and objectives

Viewing academic supervisors in the context of their role as leaders – and as enablers of trust within higher education institutions who create an enabling research environment – this study aims to take a broad exploratory view of the specific behaviours that are important in trust-building in supervisory relationships. This report talks not about supervision 'skills', but about contextual and demonstrable trust-building behaviours within the social world of research environments and relationships. The primary aim is to assist higher education institutions to enhance supervisory practice, specifically through focusing on relationship tensions.

Research question 1:

What are the vulnerabilities (ie the opportunities to trust) that exist within in the doctoral experience?

Research question 2:

How is trust in doctoral supervision relationships built or broken?

Research methods

Methodology: to identify examples of specific behaviours that built or broke professional trust, a critical appreciative inquiry approach (Cockell and McArthur-Blair, 2012) was developed to facilitate discussion of common experiences of doctoral supervision, and imagined 'better ways' for relationship building though a social/systems lens.

Data: data collection began with five in-depth minimally structured interviews at one institution. These were with doctoral supervisors who also had an administrative role related to doctoral affairs and supervisory support (postgraduate research tutors). These individuals were able to discuss and reflect on their experiences of the common challenges for supervisory relationships. Additionally, they were able to offer comment on trust-breaking behaviours and their impact. From these interviews, a preliminary framework for discussing and contextualising vulnerability and trust in research supervision was created that drew on aspects of prior work on the behaviours involved in workplace trust (Hughes, 2004) and professional trust (Frowe, 2005). The framework was used to structure student and supervisor discussion groups.

Structured discussions were facilitated with groups of second and third year (or part time equivalent) students (n=26: four non-STEM / 22 STEM, 12 female / 14 male, all doctorate types) across four research-intensive universities. Supervisor groups engaged experienced academic supervisors (n=17: three non-STEM / 14 STEM, 10 female / seven male). A study blog was used to collect further data anonymously from across the UK. This broadened the reach of data collection and increased the number of contributing individuals by 69 doctoral students and 21 supervisors from unknown institutions and disciplines. Thematic analyses were used to interpret and compare the data across groups and institutions. No gender, discipline or institution data was captured from blog comments and, as such, these findings are not intended to imply generalisations related to those demographics. Due to the number of anonymous contributors, no claims are made that the sample is representative or that the findings apply more broadly. ■

03 Key findings

The following section reports the major findings from the discussion groups and blog data in relation to both student and supervisor comments on the supervisory relationship: vulnerabilities, tensions and trust. These findings demonstrate and illustrate the vulnerabilities and tensions students and supervisors spoke about, positioning them as 'opportunities' for trust to develop. Without these challenging experiences there is no need for trust to be tested, and no chance for it to grow. In the second part of this section, the behaviours cited as important to trust building and breaking are reported.

What follows is intended to demonstrate the dynamics and tensions of supervision, to allow better understanding of a complicated relationship. It is very important to note at this point that the data presented has been purposefully selected to highlight the nature of the vulnerabilities and illustrate the tensions. It is not true that all participants in the study identified as having overall negative experiences of supervision.

Research question 1: What are the vulnerabilities (ie the opportunities to trust) that exist within in the doctoral experience?

Student vulnerabilities

(a) Higher learning, and research, involves 'not knowing'. Doctoral study is a learning experience and learning involves a process of 'not knowing' and of feeling insecure. Participants reported that, as individuals new to research and new to academia, the learning curve had been steep. Research work is inherently risky and students felt also that the processes of becoming 'doctoral' was uncertain and ill-defined.

"Even in Masters we had handbooks saying what standards we should be expected to achieve. What are the learning objectives for this? In my PhD now, where is the guidance? Where is it written what PhD-worthy looks like?" **Anonymous**

It was easy to 'become lost', or get 'off track', and there was an expectation that supervisors should allow flexibility and independence, but within an overall framework in which trial and error is to be expected. If this expectation is not explicit, doctoral students can come to believe that difficulties and failures are their fault, rather than being a natural part of the research process, evoking an emotional response.

"I'm angry because I don't know how this works and that to me is scary. I mean, I don't know the rules I'm playing by, and when I feel out of control it's unbearable. This is a hard time in my life, nothing is constant, and I feel like I just want one fact I can pin down, one solid anchor." **Male, STEM**

Students missed the familiar numerical feedback they had become used to using to monitor their own performance. Instead, students reported that subjective judgements were made and feedback could vary greatly depending on individual and with supervisor mood. Participants expressed a desire for numerical marks or indicative language to be used in the PhD as formal opportunities to understand if they were 'working at the right level'. Not understanding if your work was 'good enough' was cited as a key destroyer of confidence and trust.

"I just get 'fine, it's fine, fine fine, move on'. I've never had a 'very good' and I have put in so much effort to try to get one." **Female, social sciences**

(b) Unmet expectations for the doctorate, and for the supervisor relationship. Most participants reported that the doctorate was not what they had expected it to be at the beginning. Students found that the study strategies they employed in their previous experiences of work or study did not work well for the PhD project and process of making new discoveries. They expressed a desire for clearer steer.

"I spent ages not really sure what was meant to be happening, not sure what 'be more independent' meant and I should have said something sooner but I was too embarrassed, too ashamed." **Female, STEM**

"I think there's a style of 'non-teaching' that I've experienced in the sciences, where they pretend it's a supervision strategy – that there's some merit attached to leaving people to struggle their way through things as if it's going to make them better at the thing they can do in the end than if someone told them quite quickly and easily what the thing was. Some supervisors are hands off not because it's the right supervision strategy but because they'd rather have their time to themselves." **Anonymous, STEM**

Unresolved uncertainty created feelings of blame. Either students blamed themselves for being 'sub-standard' and lost confidence, or they blamed their supervisor for not helping them enough, or not giving them fair warning of what was to come. Unclear and unspoken expectations, roles and boundaries caused further feelings of insecurity.

"I do not know where I stand with him. I am baffled on a daily basis by this relationship. I mean, is he my dad? Is he my prosecutor? Why does he want to criticise me, and then invite me out for drinks with the group? I don't need a friend, I need to know what I'm doing." **Male, STEM**

(c) Students have the most to lose. A view that the doctorate was 'all or nothing' was commonly expressed and students worried about failing to be awarded the doctorate. They felt that fear of failure made them easily manipulated by supervisors and that they had to do 'whatever it took' to complete the doctorate.

"My career is at stake because if I don't get it, it's hard to write off that I did years of study that ends in nothing. This could potentially all end in humiliation for me, having to explain to everyone that I won't be Dr [surname] after all… soul destroying… it looks bad, like you failed because you didn't put the work in or something, but there's so much more to it, who supervised it and what they had you doing."
Male, arts and humanities

Students felt also that post-PhD career paths offered a level of financial reward that did not compensate for the losses incurred, and the chances of remaining in research or academia permanently was very low. For some, poor academic career prospects demotivated students and made them question why they were persevering.

"When it comes to it, why take the pain of going through all this fear and stress when there probably won't even be a job for me at the end of it." **Anonymous**

Other participants suspected that supervisors may be using 'false hope' of a post-doctorate job to keep them motivated.

"…he has implied about a job after this. But, I, well, I hope it comes to that. I think though that by implying this, it's all to get me to work more, get more data that he can publish, and after he can always say the grant didn't come in."
Female, STEM

Delayed employment, paying doctoral graduates the same as Masters graduates, not yet 'being on the earnings ladder', delayed pension contributions, refused mortgages, taking a pay cut, having to give up part-time work, delayed repayments on student loans, and funding the final stages of study on credit cards were all mentioned as financial losses that had negatively influenced motivation for completing of the PhD, and reduced perceptions of the value of engaging with doctoral study.

(d) Supervision advice, direction and feedback.
A commonly expressed frustration was non-responsive supervisors who were too busy with their own work, or with other, more favoured, students to meet, read work or offer feedback.

"I waited over four months, and I did ask for it, but after asking, and asking again, don't you feel stupid though. Well I could ask again but come on! What's taking the time here, no idea, she's in the office, what's she even doing? In the end I got a postdoc to read it and just submitted it. Postdocs are helpful but they leave and you feel bad asking them for help once they've sort of, moved on to new jobs." **Female, STEM**

Feedback at the postgraduate level is a complex process and confusion and conflicting guidance and agendas from multiple supervisors was the most reported supervision difficulty. The data collected on this issue was extensive and covered issues of difficult project meetings, confusion about project direction and focus, difficulty integrating literatures, getting contradictory feedback, in-fighting, intimidation of co-supervisors, 'playing politics', and using the student as a 'bargaining chip'.

"I attended a workshop called, I think, 'managing your supervisors' or something like that and, well, I was furious, I was going redder and redder in the face… I felt, just, like, like what?! Why are you telling us this, why not them? It's easy to pick us off and say hey it's all your fault, but I felt it, it blamed the victims of this, the simply…bad management. Why is it my job to manage them?! I came for a degree." **Female, social sciences**

Further conflicting guidance and advice included pressure from doctoral development professionals to attend wider development activity while, on the other hand, supervisors insisted that the only thing that mattered was getting data and publishing papers.

Some students were working within cultural norms of harsh feedback and critique, ad hominem criticism, academic rudeness, and bullying and these instances were experienced as prolonged shame and humiliation.

"I spent seven hours slaving on something he asked me to do in prep for a supervision session… I emailed it to him just before, go there, and he deleted it all in front of me!! I have to start again and send first thing on Monday… he has little communication skills to articulate what he means, won't allow asking questions from me to help me understand, he says there's no such thing as feedback, it's called criticism…he also says I must be more academic and work until 2am and up again at 5am like good academics do." **Female, social sciences**

Audience reactions to student-delivered presentations, a core and often compulsory academic activity, were dreaded and sometimes avoided.

"…and we all saw what happened to [another student] when she gave her talk! They were laughing the profs, and like, really sniggering about it, and then the questions were intended to… well certainly not to give her confidence to present again. We dreaded our time up there, we knew it was coming, and my friend [student] just didn't come in, she phoned in sick, it didn't help her, but it's no win is it?" **Anonymous**

(e) Processes for seeking help or escalating complaints. A key vulnerability for students was lacking awareness of who to contact to resolve supervision tensions, or not knowing the appropriate processes for escalating a complaint about supervision. Additionally, negative experiences with raising a concern had been experienced. This had taken various forms: broken confidences, 'fobbing off', or 'blaming the student' and performance managing them.

Students reported feeling that it was a waste of time to raise an issue with a head of department or another representative (eg postgraduate research tutor) as that person would 'always protect the supervisor'.

"I went…and told her about it, and it was all very dismissive. She just said, 'oh, well I'm surprised as he's not like that with me'… I thought well good for you. Well I was gutted, I finally reached out and admitted I couldn't handle it, and it was just ignored. I felt well stupid." **Female, STEM**

"Head of school said that he would look in to the [supervision] issue and get back to me which he did after a couple of days only to say that all of my claims were wrong as my supervisors do not have any obligations to meet me in person, emails also count as supervision, and they don't really have to email me more than once in a month. He also added that I had no right to complain as I haven't done any substantial work in the last year. His final words were 'this is how we work, either take it or leave it'. And I decided to leave." **Anonymous**

It was expressed that changing supervisors was so difficult that it was often better to cope with bad supervision. Participants, more so in STEM disciplines, felt that a seeking help would cause further deterioration of the relationship, which was undesirable as they were 'tied to' a supervisor due the way their funding was structured.

Supervisor vulnerabilities

(a) Recruitment practices. Supervisors complained frequently of restrictive practices related to the recruitment of doctoral students. Specifically, they reported that being expected to take on students who they had not themselves recruited was a major cause of tension and conflict in the supervisory relationship. Especially if this was being done 'just to increase numbers and make money'.

"Well, it's simply impossible to know when some students start their PhD what they are going to be like, their capabilities, experience, aptitude, work ethic, even personality. All you have is a CV if you're lucky… saying their degree grades and what lab project they did. It's a gamble. You can end up dragging them through and you've got no choice." **Female, STEM**

Not all supervisors interviewed (or other discipline-appropriate practice) doctoral candidates, and not all interviews were treated as formal opportunities to learn about the candidates' experience (outside their prior educational achievements), attitudes and motivations for study.

"It often happens that time pressures get the better of you and a student is accepted on to a programme based on how they come across on paper, and so if you get a 'good' student then great, if you get a less able one you can really suffer." **Male, STEM**

In STEM subjects, it was not usual to require examples of written work, or of intellectual orientation to the research project eg as a 'PhD proposal' – as is common for social sciences and arts and humanities.

"Applicants writing their own proposal, a few pages on the research they want to do, why it's needed and how they're gonna approach it. That's better than a cover letter to me, because it's real example of the kind of work they'll have to do, and be judged on." **Male, social sciences**

(b) Supervisory leadership is difficult. Supervisors reported feeling pressure to be a good supervisor and to 'get it right' for the student. Most spoke of the need to be flexible and try different approaches with different students while maintaining equity and not 'showing favouritism'.

"Managing people is just an intrinsically difficult thing to do. It can be scary when a student is depending on you to know the right thing to do, and you have to hope that what you have toboffer works for them, but you're going on gut feel." **Male, arts and humanities**

"You can end up being labelled as a good or bad supervisor based on your early students when you're still finding out how to do the job and what to do with this person you're responsible for." **Anonymous**

Supervisors who had received formal, institutionally sponsored 'training' were in the minority and there were varying opinions about the value of development activities. Most who had received no formal development support felt that it would have been of value. Some felt that a 'management training' label wasn't for them and that academia was characterised by 'unique, non-management' relationships.

"What you need more than an hour of being told off by a smug consultant, is a person to phone up and go, 'oh, help please, this has happened, what's the best thing to do'?" **Male, STEM**

Those with prior experience in industry, or a prior professional practice, were more open-minded to expectations of engaging with development activities.

"I'm a psychologist, do you know how many hours training I had to do before I could use the label supervisor and be responsible for others. A lot." **Female, STEM**

(c) Complicated processes and checkpoints on the doctorate. A key vulnerability was the complex administration and regulation of doctoral programmes (eg statements of expectations, codes of practice, handbooks, supervision policies, progression criteria). Supervisors felt that there were issues with trying to get the 'whole picture' and expressed a frustration with data and recording systems that didn't 'talk to each other'.

"I feel like each and every person is sitting in their office trying to individually find…having to navigate their way through what does or doesn't apply to them. It's like, oh you happen to come across something you need to know, so glad I found that… It's not easy to find out what you have to do for the student and it takes time away from other things." **Male, STEM**

There was a strong feeling of resentment towards 'university management' or 'the centre' for putting pressures on supervisors and students through allowing unclear processes and incomplete information to persist.

(d) Accountability. The pressure of being accountable for delivering outputs from doctorates that have received funding could be acutely felt, and the tension between 'rushing them through in three years' and 'making the research actually worth funding' was agreed across all supervisors. This tension was greater for internationally funded doctorates where 'we have the visa issue making the problem worse'.

"Councils are tougher now, expect you to get your students to deliver and you are vulnerable if you can't because it might mean that you don't get funding from them again. That could have serious impact on my reputation and in these times, it's cut throat, not getting funded is risking your job." **Male, STEM**

Supervisors also felt that ensuring the quality and integrity of the work was a risk to their own reputation and spoke of the need to 'have faith' that the student was following good research practices of data integrity. Several participants spoke of seeing data that was 'too perfect' and having to check its credibility.

"There is no time to micromanage every little thing your students do, and error check every part of their work. I get to know them personally so I can trust that their data is good, and they have followed the right ethics… and really done what they claim to have. You could fall foul later if a student needs a quick way out, and then it hits the fan…that would be a giant black mark against me if a student's data was not what it appeared to be, and had already been put out there." **Female, STEM**

(e) Value of supervision. Participants said that it was not common to spend time talking about the more 'tricky' (relational) aspects of supervision with others. Beyond commiserating with colleagues over the complicated processes and reporting mechanisms, many supervisors reported that there were no formal spaces for talking about supervisory practice.

"We all just do what we think is best and hope for the best. So it's hard, especially for new supervisors, to know that others struggle, or how to approach problems with students…some can be quite tricky…pregnancies, mental health, should I have my door closed if meeting a student alone. You find out if you've done it wrong from your school head but that's not what I mean." **Male, STEM**

"New staff who are trying to hold it all together and prove their worth often reach out for help way too late because there's a very individualistic mentality and no one wants to admit that they are struggling." **Female, social sciences**

Supervision was not reported to be a common feature of institutional promotion or other reward and recognition processes. It was discussed that people who weren't intrinsically motivated to supervise well might be incentivised to do so if the practice of supervision was 'taken seriously'.

"If you're doing it well it's because you are the one who cares. People don't often go the extra mile all the time, because an academic's time is more valued on our other activities, getting funding and getting papers is what you need to demonstrate for promotion. All I was asked is numbers current, numbers completed. Not how I did it, or the impact on the students' welfare." **Male, social sciences**

(f) Supervisory teams, and supervisory 'mentoring'. New challenges had been faced in working as supervisory teams. Participants described being paired with a more experienced colleague as a 'mentor' as basic provision, but felt it was done so 'the dept could cover their backs' rather than as a genuine mentoring opportunity. Tensions in the appropriateness of this mentoring role, and of the potential for making supervision more complicated were discussed.

"… though this isn't always a good thing. If you are paired with a colleague you can learn from it works well, but if they are a difficult person to work with, the new supervisor, is there like, ok what can I learn, but really bears the burden as well as the student. You can end up protecting the student from the other supervisor if they're a bit sharp in their ways… some senior colleagues can end up using you to do all the proper supervision work while they claim to be doing the 'strategic stuff'. I couldn't say I learned from my mentor, I had to manage them." **Female, social sciences**

Research question 1 examined the opportunities for trust to form within in the doctoral experience. Both supervisors and students described a range of experienced vulnerabilities. For students, vulnerabilities were related to the intense learning (both explicit and tacit) involved in the doctorate and academic environment, and the challenges of shifting prior learning strategies to doctoral study. For supervisors, issues were related to structural issues in how supervision is viewed, valued, supported and constrained by departmental and institutional policies and cultures.

Research question 2: How is trust in doctoral supervision

Implicit trust. Students all indicated that they had entered into the doctorate with a willingness to place their trust in the supervisor, due to an assumed 'trustworthiness' derived from the supervisor's institutional affiliation, status as a researcher, or prior experience (eg as Masters degree supervisor, or colleague). This could be mirrored for supervisors who had a prior working relationship with a student, or felt secure that the student's prior educational credentials (eg degree-awarding institution, prior supervisor) were of a high enough calibre. This concept has been previously described as secondary or implicit trust (Frowe, 2005) and described as a basis for the formation of a more direct professional trust.

"When I was first told about my project I trusted wholeheartedly in my supervisor and the preliminary data. … By the end of my PhD my trust had eroded, not just in my supervisor but the entire academic process." **Male, STEM**

Students and supervisors also drew in opinions from others around them in the early phases of the relationship, and formed opinions about trustworthiness of each other from observation of behaviour towards, and in the presence or absence of, other parties.

"My second supervisor was quite mixed. She was clearly very hard working and ambitious yet she was overly critical of other people behind their backs; very unprofessional." **Anonymous**

Sites for developing professional trust. Trust building was described by all participants as an 'ongoing process over time' and a process that is 'slow to build and quick to destroy'. For trust to develop between students and supervisors, 'trust behaviours' must be demonstrated and observed by both parties (as discussed in Hope-Hailey et al, 2012). Trust could be built or broken within formal supervision meetings (eg in the giving and receiving of feedback, being included in or excluded from a conversation or decisionmaking process) and between formal supervision meetings (eg following through on actions, following up on conversations, keeping appointments, keeping confidences).

"If I attend for an appointment (which is rare) you can bet your bottom dollar the conversation will revert to how busy they are, what they are up to professionally and what's on the horizon eg with REF. It seems the relationship is focused on them and how they can build their kudos" **Female, social sciences**

While on the whole she gave me good advice, it was often the case of 'this is my advice, now take it'. Any time I queried the advice, or was critical of it in any way I just got the same response 'I've been published doing this, so you do it' despite the fact that there were clear flaws which I tried to explain on several occasions. I was hoping for an academic discussion yet what I got was orders." **Anonymous**

Both students and supervisors valued disclosure, openness, and finding common ground and shared interests (whether through personal socialising together, or from a professional relationship). Trust in the supervision relationship was reported to be built when knowledge was freely shared together, and supportive guidance offered. Where a student felt that the supervisor had their best interests at heart and where a supervisor perceived that the student valued their input, a more trusting relationship was developed. The use of gratitude practices (explicitly feeding back the aspects of the relationship one in grateful for) has recently been reported to enhance the supervisory relationship (Howells et al, 2017). Inclusive practices, collegiality, valuing individual contributions and giving credit where due also increased trust. It was also predominantly reported that trust in the supervisor was more likely to build if the doctoral student themselves had been entrusted with important pieces of work. Being trusted raises self-esteem, personal worthiness and job satisfaction (Van Maele and Van Houtte, 2012).

"What I value most is the fact that I feel it really is work in partnership, with [me] providing critical comments on aspects of my supervisor's work…I don't even like talking about supervision meetings, because it is more about research meetings. On a couple of occasions, I have been able just to knock on my supervisor's door for a quick chat and it's very comforting knowing that it's something that I can do if needed…I simply feel that my supervisor gets me." **Anonymous**

Erosion of trust also happened over time and trust-eroding behaviours were most rooted in circumstances where expectations for the doctorate or for the supervisory relationship did not become a reality (eg unavailability of either party, unpredictable reactions or failure to follow through on agreements, lack of specialist expertise or ability) and insecurity about how to work together, progress, standards and achievements.

"My primary supervisor … wants me to do research without paying for it, nothing is ever good or fast enough and I have lost basically all motivation after working for him in only about six months. At that point he gives all of his students 'the talk' – pointing out that the project isn't going anywhere and there's no chance you'll finish in time. Additionally he is very removed from actual research and demands impossible things." **Anonymous**

"I had done lots of … outreach. And I said is there room on the REF for this? ... I gave them like a huge long list of everything I've done; I said can you find a small corner for some of this work. And the supervisor emailed back saying yes the naughty corner, and that was it. That's the only thing in the email and so that is how you destroy trust. Is by making your supervised person … feel like shit actually. It's toxic." **Female, arts and humanities**

Trust was also eroded where students felt blamed (eg for failed experiments or processes); experienced unfairness compared to peers (favouring students on 'productive' projects); or endured 'checking/snooping' activities. Calculative methods of accountability employed with a possibility of sanctions or penalties increases mistrust (Groundwater-Smith and Sachs, 2002). Trust breaking was likely to be a result of either party breaking confidences, lying, or hiding important information. Commonly students lost trust in supervisors as a result of acute incidents that were often related to the 'competitive' nature of research or the 'high expectations' on research careers. Examples were centred on research integrity issues and often related to data ownership, publication, public criticism, or sharing appropriate credit for intellectual contribution to funding applications.

"…over the years I found out that she had been telling her, you know senior colleagues… things about my disabilities… so now because [of that] I definitely don't trust her and I feel powerless to complain because I wouldn't want to sour the relationship within a particularly small department" **Male, STEM**

"[They take] some of the work that you have done and hand it over to someone else because he or she … needs to pass her PhD and doesn't have enough. And without asking you, without checking that you are okay [with] that. And then you know to guard yourself and you don't trust them with your stuff." **Female, STEM**

Previous work has demonstrated ethical tensions in supervision relationships (Goodyear et al, 1992; Löfström and Pyhältö, 2014, 2015; Mahmud and Bretag, 2013). Feelings of hurt, betrayal or embarrassment can arise for both parties where trust is broken or withdrawn (Walker, Kutsyuruba and Noonan, 2011). Emotional responses to the building, erosion and breaking of trust was apparent throughout this study for both students and for supervisors and can be detected in the language of the data reported through this report.

Research question 2 asked how trust in doctoral supervision relationships is built or broken. Both supervisors and students entered into new partnerships with an implicit or assumed trust in each other based on prior educational attainment or institutional affiliation. Trust on both sides was built over time, both in response to each prior encounter and to observations of behaviour or attitudes towards others. Trust erosion also occurred gradually over time and was linked to unfulfilled expectations for the supervision relationship, or mismatched ideas about the purpose and process of a doctorate. Acute incidents related to deception, bullying or personal integrity issues caused trust to be broken in a way that forcefully damaged the relationship. ■

04 Conclusions

The student is the biggest stakeholder in their doctorate. Their doctoral experience will impact on their future career, financial situation, health and on other areas of their life. Vulnerability exists for doctoral students and supervisors and is inherent in the processes of research, supervision, academic leadership and collegiality. The doctorate is characterised by subjective tensions and challenges from the outset that must be negotiated. The student may come in to a doctorate for many reasons but in doing so they have often chosen to invest in their intellectual development, potentially at the expense of their financial security. A doctorate places the student in control of their own learning, but the boundary between feeling in control and feeling the pressure of responsibility will differ for each individual. The tension between proving oneself as an independent researcher and admitting to having knowledge or understanding gaps, and asking for help, is also a trade-off. Although learners are responsible for making the first gestures of trust building for learning purposes (ie revealing a learning need), they are also under pressure to prove themselves to be trustworthy (ie to show they are working at the doctoral level) (Hughes, 2004). The benefits of having multiple supervisors can become outweighed by the need to constantly synthesise information where a student encounters conflicting guidance and difficult group dynamics.

Negotiation of supervisory leadership is equally characterised by tensions and balances. Supervisors balance ensuring timely completion by guiding towards an achievable project, with ensuring the research is novel enough that publications can be forthcoming and the impact agenda served. Students must be given enough freedom that they develop independence, but without becoming overwhelmed, and the supervisor is accountable for each successful completion. Though good supervision brings its own satisfaction and the intrinsic rewards of a job well done, cultures of good supervision, time allocation models and formal career progression rewards for good supervision are lacking.

To build trust a supervisor must respond to the student's individual needs and circumstances and develop a discipline-appropriate professional practice in supervision (Torka, 2016). The above accounts of trust building and breaking indicate three areas of professional practice that supervisory development initiatives could usefully focus on:

- Rapport building that creates learning alliances ie communicating expectations, demonstrating empathy, defining boundaries. A supervisor is responsible for nurturing the learning alliance by cultivating respect, flexibility, clear communication, shared engagement in scholarship, clear roles and responsibilities (Halse and Malfroy, 2010).
- Feedback practices centred on building multiple opinions into a source of developmental evaluation and critique (as discussed in Guerin and Green, 2013).
- Research integrity practices related to authorship, recognition and ownership. A variety of ethical problems are embedded in supervision and include incompetent or inadequate supervision, abandonment, overruling, exploitative supervision, encouragement to commit fraud and authorship issues (Goodyear et al, 1992; Löfström and Pyhältö 2012, 2014, 2015; Mahmud and Bretag, 2013) and should be considered in developing ethical approaches to supervisory leadership.

A key relationship tension was observed throughout. Where trust in a student is low, a supervisor is more likely to seek to meet more frequently, to monitor their performance and to otherwise control their work more tightly. This further decreases the students' perceptions of trust in them and overall trust is lowered (Groundwater-Smith and Sachs, 2002). In contrast, students experiencing broken trust isolated themselves, avoiding the people and activities that increased their feelings of vulnerability. Hiding behaviours lead to delay in doctoral progression as students then struggle to make sense of their experiences, evaluate their progress and feel securely 'on track'.

The impact of a low trust relationship on doctoral students and on supervisors is sustained insecurity, leading to stress and reduced feelings of confidence and independence. Avoiding being seen to be vulnerable frequently leads to delay in the doctorate and associated anxiety, financial and social penalty.

This study contributes insight into the nature of supervisory trust. It deepens our understanding of what constitutes a 'good quality' student-supervisor relationship, and signals the presence or absence of trust as a component of quality. It illuminates the behaviours that erode or break trust in supervision, highlighting critical relational aspects of doctoral development that it is hoped further researchers will pick up for deeper investigation. Specifically, this work demonstrates that building trust is done through action and is a fluid process of continuous reappraisal and negotiation. Clear recommendations for developing supervisory leadership practices follow. ■

05 Resources and tools

An online learning resource for supervisors and aspiring supervisors has been developed from this investigation. It used study data, case studies and advice from administrative leads for postgraduate study (postgraduate tutors) and offers tools for relationship building that help to create certainty, predictability and trust.

http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/ecr/mentoring/trustmeworkshop ■

06 Recommendations

Recognising the constraints of UK and international funding models, recruitment targets, the terms of the Tier 4 (general) student visa system and the future uncertainty for research funding strategies in the UK, recommendations are offered concerning supervisory leadership practices and structural or policy developments pertaining to the supervision of doctoral degrees. In examining support and development for supervision practices and relationship building, we can also contribute to the wellbeing agendas universities have recently developed in response to reports of high instances of mental health issues – context and environment is a predictor of doctoral student mental health (Levecque et al, 2017). To achieve this, institutions must also develop mechanisms that strive towards cultures of academic practice that usefully and developmentally support their academic leaders.

The prevailing theme for supervisory development is a professional leadership practice that serves to make the doctorate more predictable and navigable by promoting clarity and empowerment. Recommendations for supervisors are offered below that serve to build trust through the setting of expectations, offering of clarity, and through proactive conversations.

Trust-building recommendations for supervisors

(a) Recruitment practices that build trust. Expectation setting for the doctorate, and the trust building process, begins before the official degree start date. Student participants indicated that they had entered into the doctorate with a willingness to place their trust in the supervisor, due to an assumed 'trustworthiness' which derived from the supervisor's institutional affiliation and academic record. Information to support this decision-making was gathered from online sources (eg staff web pages) and through the interview processes. Supervisors should be aware then that these first encounters can act as an informal contract and influence new students' ideas of the requirements of the doctorate and of the supervision relationship. Web materials, application processes, interview processes, offer letters and welcome packs should reflect the real requirements of the doctoral role, supervisory practices and institutional requirements within a disciplinary context.

(b) Making supervision predictable. Supervisors should make time for dialogue on how to work together, and for understanding and setting expectations for the supervision relationship itself. A flexible understanding of the best way to proceed can help frame the induction process and annual progress reporting, and can be usefully reviewed and refined at intervals along the course of the doctorate as the student's supervision needs change. Students and supervisors talk frequently about supervision but they do so to others rather than each other (Torka, 2016). Open communication and feedback to each other, rather than harbouring negative feelings, can improve supervision relationships (Howells et al, 2017). The relational aspects of supervision are felt to be more important to students than the task-focused process aspects (Collins, 2015).

(c) Crafting supervisory teams with clear roles and purpose. More thoughtful selection and formation of supervision teams is required in order to clarify each partner's contribution and role. Supervisory teams would benefit from taking time to agree their individual inputs, and how those roles will combine to support the student to achieve. What is lacking in such confusing experiences is communication that goes beyond protocols and routines and into an understanding of different ideologies and beliefs about the research (Halbert, 2015). As Guerin and Green (2013) have articulated, supervisory teams could usefully make time to develop procedures for dealing with diversity in their individual feedback; ensure students are included in all discussions about their project and their development; and recognise that their combined power over the student is intimidating and can be experienced as threatening.

Often, a supervisory pairing is intended as a development or mentoring opportunity for a new supervisor – being paired with a more experienced colleague. Care should be taken in these cases to prepare the mentor for their role, and to articulate some expectations for the new supervisor's development.

(d) Proactively developing early and continuous writing. Doctoral thesis writing, a difficult process which requires specific support, was a heavily reported area of trust breaking in supervision. The pressure of 'writing up' had caused trust in the supervisor's and in the student's competence and integrity to be broken. Passively accepting that a thesis is one of life's great unknowns is not an effective course of action; like any other writing task, it can – and must – be defined (Murray, 2011). Making time for academic writing requires disengagement from other tasks, and (eg supervisory encouragement to write) repositions writing as legitimate academic work (Murray, 2013). Supervisors are in the ideal position to challenge the accepted model of 'writing up' as a final stage of the degree, and instead create pedagogies for developing doctoral writing (see Kamler and Thompson, 2014) throughout the degree.

(e) Supporting stressed students. Stress is rooted in pressure and doctoral students experience pressure in the normal course of their work. It is important for supervisors to be able to recognise the symptoms of stress in those they supervise, and to support students in a way that doesn't exacerbate matters or cause them to lose trust. Helping a student regain a feeling of control over their schedule and workload is an essential part of managing stress. Supervisors can help by making sure that doctoral researchers develop good strategies for coping with pressure including making short-term to do lists rather than long-term ones, focusing on the positives, seeking help to get things done, and taking regular time out to relax or pursue a hobby or interest. Supervisors should recognise that they are a key role model for stress management and healthy working practices, and that their validation of stress management strategies is crucial to their success.

Recommendations to higher education institutions

(e) *Develop meaningful institutional mechanisms for the reward and recognition of good supervision*. Rather than positioning 'good supervision' as the achievement of numerical targets, degree completion times, or as full workload allocation, recognition must be given to supervision that is developmental and creates effective partnerships and alliances for learning and for research. A more expansive appraisal process for academic staff, which takes the voices of doctoral students and co-supervisors into account, and allows for the articulation of supervision as a professional practice, is suggested. Similar processes could also be employed to define promotion criteria that evidence research leadership and development. Staff could be better aided to align their supervision work within a learning and teaching context, for example in making applications to the Higher Education Academy for recognition at senior levels. In tandem, poor or ineffective supervision must be systematically challenged, and supervisor learning needs identified. Institutions should also develop mechanisms to raise their own awareness of patterns of high- and low-quality supervision, recognising discipline or gender biases, and raising their awareness of the role that department and faculty leaders play in creating developmental cultures.

(f) Leadership development for supervisors. Experienced supervisors who participated in this study were reflective about their development and expressed regret that they had not received more support in the earlier stages of supervision. Newer supervisors were more attuned to the 'researcher development agenda' and felt confident to seek out development activities. As with all voluntary development activity, 'finding time' was perceived as the main barrier to engagement, and participants felt that, in hindsight, they would have benefited from supervisor development as a mandatory part of their induction as it would have 'pushed' them to engage. In order to clarify institutional expectations, and give institutional permission, universities could mandate a foundation level of supervisor development that safeguards staff and students, provides up to date policy guidance, and demystifies doctoral processes. Supervisors do benefit from generic workshops with peers despite obvious discipline differences in practice (Carter et al, 2017). Further supervisor community-based sessions, would embed learning, ensure relevance and peer support, and provide opportunities to raise difficult issues. Three areas of professional practice that supervisory development initiatives could usefully focus on are indicated in this study:

- Rapport building that creates learning alliances.
- Feedback practices, particularly team feedback.
- Research integrity practices related to authorship, recognition and ownership of research ideas and research data.

The first two of these three areas align with coaching as a professional practice in creating productive learning spaces. A coaching skill-set includes formal contracting, rapport building and learner-centred relationship building. Issues of research integrity for supervisors will align with wider strategies in this area as outlined in the Concordat for Research Integrity (Universities UK, 2012).

(g) Postgraduate tutor role. A postgraduate tutor is a member of academic staff who fulfils an administrative role related to doctoral student affairs. A key vulnerability for doctoral students was low awareness of the designated staff contacts who could support them to resolve supervision tensions, and the appropriate processes for escalating a complaint about supervision. Additionally, some students reported having negative experiences when they had attempted to raise a concern with a departmental postgraduate tutor. This was, in some cases, attributed to tutor unavailability or disinterest, and in others that the individual tutor was ill-prepared to give guidance or help the student resolve the issue. In some cases, consulting with a tutor had exacerbated a supervisory problem, for example where a breach of confidentiality decreased trust in the supervisory relationship. It is strongly recommended that higher education institutions consult with staff and students to critically evaluate and even redesign the postgraduate tutor role. In particular, consideration of who is recruited to the tutor role is warranted. Factors to consider in the recruitment of appropriate individuals are: experience of supervision and supervisory teams; expertise in the practices of learning support and guidance and leading others to do deliver this (eg senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy); and potential conflicts of interest in tackling supervisory issues ie challenging the supervision practices of a senior colleague in the same department.

Postgraduate tutors should be supported to:

- Champion good practice in supervision.
- Be visible points of contact with transparent processes for resolving supervision issues.
- Use coaching approaches to empower doctoral students, and be able to draw upon the practices of mediation to support supervision relationships where needed.
- Raise concerns about supervision with department colleagues and signpost them to development activities and resources.
- Engage with other postgraduate tutors across the institution as part of a network.

(h) Recognition of the formal and informal mentoring by early career researchers. Post-doctoral early career researchers play a key, if frequently unrecognised, role in the support and development of doctoral students. Institutions should think carefully about the informal supervision work delivered by such early career colleagues, and it is suggested that formal recognition is needed, ie strategic recognition of supervision work by postdoctoral staff eg in learning and teaching strategies, and in the job descriptions for early career colleagues. Mentoring and coaching are increasingly seen as useful approaches for developing attributes related to doctoral independence such as selfawareness, agency, communication, and coaching has been demonstrated to impact upon doctoral progression (eg Godskesen and Kobayashi, 2015; Kearns et al, 2008; Gardiner et al, 2012). Formal coaching or mentoring programmes can be leveraged to provide a way for doctoral candidates to link into independent support for proactive planning and self-management. Additionally, being a mentor will ensure early and appropriate development of practices related to building quality supervision relationships at the early career stage, and before primary supervisor responsibilities are expected. ■

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