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**The importance of students' motivation and  
identity when supervising professional  
doctorate students; a reflection on  
traditional and professional routes**

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**Abstract**

The literature on doctoral supervision frequently identifies the importance of aligning supervisory style to the particular needs of students. Much of this literature is based on research carried out with students on traditional PhD routes. The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which the needs of students on professional doctorates differ from those on traditional PhD routes. Exploring this topic is of particular importance if we accept that supervisors' own experiences of supervision as research students are likely to affect their approach to supervising. The paper concludes that it is not helpful to regard the needs of professional doctoral students and more traditional PhD students as falling into two separate groups. The diverse and evolving nature of all doctoral provision means that these needs are shifting and likely to be converging over time. However, it is helpful for a supervisor to develop sensitivity to issues that are likely to be more common among professional doctorate students. The important differences are most likely to be found in the motivation, identity and identity formation of students and it is these that we need to be sensitive to so that we can adjust our supervisory approach accordingly.

**Keywords**

Professional doctorate; supervision; identity; motivation.

**Introduction**

The literature on research supervision frequently identifies the importance of aligning supervisory style to the particular needs of students (e.g. Lee 2008, Deuchar 2008, Gurr 2001). The nature of student needs can be conceptualised differently. For example Gurr (2001) focuses on striking the right balance between support and independence at different stages during the student's research journey. Lee (2008), Arvidsson and Franke (2013) and McCormack (2004) focus on differing conceptualisations of research and Ahern and Manathunga (2004) and Green and Bowden (2012) focus on developing and supporting the necessary mindset to ensure timely completion. Much of this literature is based on research carried out with students on traditional PhD routes. The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which the needs of students on professional doctorates might differ from those on traditional PhD routes. Exploring this topic is of particular importance if we accept Lee's (2008) argument that supervisors' own experiences of supervision as research students are likely to affect their approach to supervising. As Carr, Lhussier and Chandler (2010) point out, the majority of professional doctorate supervisors will probably have completed a traditional route PhD themselves and are, therefore, likely to draw on this experience as supervisors in ways that might not be appropriate.

**Citation**

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**Do the supervision needs of professional doctorate students differ from those of traditional PhD students?**

Some of the literature on supervising professional doctorates does claim that the supervisory needs of professional doctoral students differ from those of traditional route PhD students (Carr, Lhussier and Chandler, 2010; Lee 2009). However, before examining the details of these differences it is worth noting that Wellington and Sikes (2006; Wellington, 2012) identify that there is in fact a diversity of doctoral provision and that the experiences of students cannot be simplistically divided into traditional PhD routes and professional doctorate routes. Neumann (2005) also identifies that the supposed differences between professional doctorates and more traditional PhD routes are often not as great in practice as might be supposed. In addition, pressures on completion, sometimes driven by funding, mean that many 'traditional' doctoral routes have developed practices and structures that might, historically, have been more typical of professional doctoral programmes (Servage, 2009). These changes include formalising and assessing research training and building in clearer links with employers and employability. It is also worth noting that despite perceptions among students that the professional doctorate is a more suitable vehicle for applied and professionally focused research (Wellington and Sikes, 2006; Neumann, 2005) and a similar perception in some of the academic literature (e.g. Johnson, 2005; Carr, Lhussier and Chandler, 2010), in practice the traditional route PhD is just as suitable a route for applied research in professional contexts (Neumann, 2005). Conversely, many professional doctorate students end up completing theses that are less closely connected to developing applied professional practice than might be thought to be the case (Neumann, 2005; Wellington and Sikes, 2006). In addition, it also needs to be acknowledged that some of the factors that might result in professional doctorate students having different support needs, such as the higher number of these students who are part time and who need to manage multiple demands on their time and attention such as work and family, can also apply to part time students on traditional routes. Taken together, these considerations mean that it would be a mistake to take a nomothetic approach to considering the differing needs of professional doctoral students and traditional route PhD students and to assume that these are two clearly distinguishable groups with clearly distinguishable needs. In practice it makes more sense to take an ideographic approach and to recognise the particular constellation of needs that individual students have irrespective of route (Wellington and Sikes, 2006), while having a particular sensitivity to those that may be more commonly occurring for students on professional doctoral programmes when supervising these students.

So issues such as being part time, the need to complete formalised and assessed research skills training and the demands of researching applied professional practice may relate to either professional doctorate or traditional PhD routes. This means that different supervisory support needs between professional doctorate and traditional PhD routes are less likely to be found in practical issues such as the amount of support in research methods needed, the different demands of researching applied practice or the need to understand the challenges of juggling different commitments. If the different supervision needs of professional doctorate students are not to be found in these areas, where are they to be found?

When considering why some students opt for professional doctorates rather than more traditional PhD routes, Neumann (2005) identifies that students often opt for professional doctorate routes because they don't believe they are capable of taking a more traditional PhD route. She also reports, as do Wellington and Sikes (2006), that the perception of a tighter structure is appealing. Given the varied and evolving nature of current doctoral provision, it isn't necessarily the case that PhD routes are more demanding or have less support than professional doctorates, so the important factor here is the self image of many professional doctorate students rather than different demands

between the two routes. It seems, from what Neumann (2005) and Wellington and Sykes (2006) report, that professional doctorate students might not view themselves as 'the kind of people' who do PhDs. Linked to this self image is the higher proportion of these students who might have spent some years out of higher education rather and whose higher education achievements might have been less impressive than many students who become full time PhD students as a continuation of their initial time at university. Neumann (2005) reports that she found no differences in the actual quality of PhD and professional doctoral students, so this is an issue of self confidence and self image rather than a real need for greater support. Or, put another way, this is a need for support with the affective demands of completing a PhD rather than the narrowly conceived academic demands. As well as considering the motivation for opting for a professional doctorate rather than a traditional PhD route, it is worth considering why these students opt to return to higher education at all. Despite the claimed focus of professional doctorates on specific professional contexts, for many professional doctorate students there is no clear link between gaining a doctorate and professional advancement (Neumann, 2005) and there is not always a clear link between completion of the doctorate and alterations in professional practice (Wellington and Sikes, 2006; Burgess and Wellington, 2012; Arvidsson and Franke, 2013). Drawing on a sample of Ed D students (the group most relevant to me) Wellington and Sikes report the motivations for undertaking doctoral study as professional renewal, personal satisfaction, the quest for knowledge and intellectual challenge (Wellington and Sikes, 2006:727). Wellington and Sikes claim that 'professional renewal' refers to a vitalising effect rather than a specific career development. Researching nurses undertaking doctorates, Arvidsson and Franke (2013) reported finding three different views of the purpose of learning: to use researching to improve action in the nursing context; to gain a different perspective on the practice of nursing; to transform identity from nurse to researcher.

Taken together, this self image and the motivations for study of many professional doctorate students distinguish them from many, although not all, traditional route PhD students. Many traditional route PhD students will regard their PhD as a (perhaps mandatory) route into their chosen profession of working in Higher Education. Some professional doctorate students may see the professional doctorate as a route into a change of profession (e.g. Arvidsson and Franke's (2013) transformed identity) and some others will be people who have already moved from professions to working in higher education and who are using the doctorate as a way to enhance their position. However, many professional doctorate students will not see a close link between their doctorate and their career path, or status (Neumann, 2005). This difference raises considerations about the relationship between the doctorate, supervision and identity.

A number of researchers in this area comment on the importance of identity development for all doctoral students and for the process of supporting doctoral students (Wellington and Sikes, 2006; Crossouard and Pryor, 2009; Petersen, 2007; Klenowski et al., 2011). Identity development issues may be relevant to many professional doctorate students.

I want to explore this point in relation to Lee's (2008) conceptualisation of doctoral supervision and Franke and Arvidsson's (2011) findings on how research supervisors experience supervision of doctoral students.

### **Concepts of doctoral supervision**

Lee offers five 'discipline-neutral' (2008:268) concepts of research supervision, based on a review of literature and interviews with a purposive sample of twelve supervisors from a range of disciplines at a research intensive UK university. Supervisor experience ranged from twenty years to those who

were supervising their first doctoral student. The concepts arrived at from this approach were also discussed with a small number PhD students to ascertain their face validity. Lee's five concepts are:

1. Functional: where the issue is one of project management
2. Enculturation: where the student is encouraged to become a member of a disciplinary community
3. Critical thinking: where the student is encouraged to question and analyse their work
4. Emancipation: where the student is encouraged to question and develop themselves
5. Relationship development: where the student is enthused, inspired and cared for

Elaborating on these concepts Lee also sets out the role of each participant and the supervisor knowledge and skills that are used in relation to each of these concepts (Table 1.).

**Table 1. A framework for concepts of research supervision (Lee, 2008).**

	<b>Functional</b>	<b>Enculturation</b>	<b>Critical thinking</b>	<b>Emancipation</b>	<b>Relationship development</b>
<b>Supervisor's activity</b>	Rational progression through tasks	Gatekeeping	Evaluation, challenge	Mentoring, supporting constructivism	Supervising by experience, developing a relationship
<b>Supervisor's knowledge and skills</b>	Directing, project management	Diagnosis of deficiencies, coaching	Argument, analysis	Facilitation, reflection	Emotional intelligence
<b>Possible student reaction</b>	Obedience organised	Role modelling	Constant inquiry, fight or flight	Personal growth, reframing	Emotional intelligence

I would argue that the functional concept is pragmatically necessary to all supervisory relationships, although it obviously shouldn't be the only concept that is in operation in good supervision. Similarly, I would argue that relationship development is necessary in all supervisory relationships if they are to be managed and adjusted appropriately in response to developing needs. However, I think the middle three concepts of the list above (enculturation, critical thinking and emancipation) have different relevance to professional doctorate students and to more traditional route PhD students, in cases where the latter see the PhD as the necessary entry qualification for a career in higher education. For these traditional route PhD students, enculturation is an important part of increasingly participating in the professional community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to which they are apprenticed. For these students it is appropriate that the supervisor should support opportunities to progressively form the identity of an academic in higher education, and to foster enculturation within the culture and practices of higher education. It is important to note here that the practices and professional identity of the supervisor are likely to provide at least an approximate model for the students.

This interpretation finds some support in Franke and Arvidsson's (2011) findings on research supervisors' different ways of experiencing doctoral supervision. Franke and Arvidsson interviewed thirty supervisors, of differing age, seniority and experience, across a range of disciplines from two universities in the same city. In contrast to Lee's claim of discipline neutrality, Franke and Arvidsson identify two broad types of approach to doctoral supervision, which they find correspond to some extent, in terms of prevalence, to different clusters of academic disciplines (although there are examples of both types of approach in all disciplines). The two broad types are research practice-

oriented supervision and research relation-oriented supervision. In research practice-oriented supervision, supervisor and research student work side by side on the same research project. The research student learns how to do research through an apprenticeship model that also contributes to identity formation as part of the same community and the supervisor. As with all forms of apprenticeship learning, some of the teaching will be implicit and some of the learning will be tacit, a fact acknowledged by Franke and Arvidsson's (2011:8) identification an 'indirect object' in research students' learning, which relates to the ways in which they learn as much as the 'direct object' or content of what they learn explicitly. In research relation-oriented supervision, the research student will be working on an independent project that may have no connection to the supervisors own work. In this case learning to do research and identity formation will be mediated by an explicit teaching and learning dialogue between supervisor and student.

In their sample, Franke and Arvidsson found that research practice-oriented supervision is more common in faculties of medicine and technology, whereas research relation-oriented supervision is more common in faculties of social science and education. In line with this, I would contend that professional doctorates are more likely to be supervised by research relation-oriented supervision and that the students are less likely to be apprenticed as new members of a particular research team with common goals and a shared identity.

Many professional doctorate students have no desire to become academics in higher education. As Gregory (1997) expresses it, they want, if anything, to be scholarly professionals not professional scholars (Wellington and Sikes, 2006; Lee, 2009). This notion finds an echo on Arvidsson and Franke's (2013) finding that many nurses undertaking a doctorate saw their learning as resulting in improved professional action. However, the identity of the scholarly professional is not one that can easily be found already in existence. One of the reasons for this is that there will be very few colleagues working in their professional context who have doctorates and who engage in the kinds of practices that lead to doctorates. This gives no existing community of practice to be apprenticed to. In addition, in many professions higher academic study can be seen as at best an irrelevance to and at worst a distraction from skilled professional practice. This means that professional doctorate students are likely to have an uncertain professional identity or two identities, professional and doctoral student, that don't sit comfortably together (Klenowski et al., 2011). Unlike the traditional route PhD students, the supervisor is not able to provide a model for the practices and identity of the scholarly professional as they will already have left behind daily membership of the profession and its practices in order to develop the new professional identity of an academic in higher education. This is an increasingly likely pressure on academics in professional areas as the demands of higher education performativity increase (Deuchar, 2008).

The particular demands of being a scholarly professional and the relationship of these to the supervisory process are recognised by Johnson (2005) and Lee (2009). Johnson suggests that for professional doctorates it would be helpful if the supervisory team included a colleague from the workplace of the students. Lee identifies the value of the cohort (a supposedly more common feature of professional doctorates than more traditional PhDs) as a community of practice for the student. In neither of these cases are these suggestions primarily related to issues of identity. In both cases the suggestions are related to the practical challenges of carrying out research in live and evolving professional contexts outside of the university. However, the two suggestions do also have merit in terms of supporting the identity development of professional doctorate students. If the workplace supervisor is someone who has been through a similar process this can provide support for identity development. Similarly the cohort can provide the developing community of practice that might be absent from the workplace. The general point here is that supervisors of professional

doctorate students need to be sensitive to the uncertain and perhaps uncomfortable (et al., 2002) identity of being a scholarly professional rather than a professional scholar and need to think about how best to support this aspect of a student's development.

If enculturation could be a particularly problematic aspect of the supervisory process for professional doctorate students, critical thinking and emancipation are likely to have a particular resonance for these students. As outlined before, professional doctorate students are less likely to be motivated to undertake doctoral study by career considerations given the ambivalent attitude within many professional workplaces to higher academic study and the lack of any clear link between gaining a doctorate and career advancement. This means that professional doctorate students are more likely to be motivated by self actualisation (Maslow, 1962/1998) rather than any other motivation. This argument is consistent with the motivations for study found by Wellington and Sikes (2006). This means that the emancipation and critical thinking aspects of supervision could take on particular centrality when supervising professional doctorate students.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that it is not helpful to regard the needs of professional doctoral students and more traditional PhD students as falling into two separate groups. The diverse and evolving nature of all doctoral provision means that these needs are shifting and likely to be converging over time. In addition, the differences between PhDs and professional doctorates in terms of structure and focus can be over emphasised. However, it is helpful for a supervisor to develop sensitivity to issues that are likely to be more commonly occurring with professional doctorate students than with more traditional route PhD students. I have argued that these issues are less likely to be differences with the procedural aspects of the doctorate, the focus of the research or the competence of the student. The important differences are most likely to be found in the motivation, identity and identity formation of students and it is these that we need to be sensitive to so that we can adjust our supervisory approach accordingly.

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