

**THE SUPERVISION PROCESS AS EXPERIENCED BY DOCTORAL STUDENTS AND SUPERVISORS IN A PORTUGUESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION: A CASE FOR SUPERVISOR DEVELOPMENT?<sup>1</sup>**

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Long regarded as a 'private space' (Manathunga, 2005) somewhat removed from the academic arena, supervision has recently become a central issue in doctoral research education (Bastalich, 2015). One of the reasons for this attention lies in the fact that the success of the PhD heavily depends on the supervisors, who should provide the time, expertise and support to foster the candidate's competences and ensure the production of a high-quality thesis (Mainhard et al., 2009).

Studies on doctoral supervision have been developed on a range of topics, namely supervisory tasks and roles (Lee, 2008; Tahir et al., 2012; Woolderink et al., 2015), supervisory relationships (Delamont, Parry, & Atkinson, 1998; Hemer, 2012) and expectations towards the supervision process (Ali, Watson, & Dhingra, 2016). Most work is based on case studies informed by in-depth interviews, where the topic is operationalized in terms of reported understandings of the participants in doctoral supervision.

Our study is in line with these, extending existing research to provide a fuller picture of how doctoral students' and supervisors' experience the supervision process. In particular, it focuses on students' and supervisors' perceptions of the competences and roles of supervisors, on students' expectations towards the supervision process, and on supervisory relationships and their challenges, highlighting suggestions for supervisor development. The study was conducted at a Higher Education Institution in Northern Portugal, as part of a international research project EUROMEC<sup>2</sup> that explored the experience of doing a doctorate in five European universities and one Chinese university, through the analytical lenses of 'supervision', 'language' and 'identity'.

Methodologically, we used a case study approach informed by document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 4 doctoral supervisors and 12 'home' and 'international' students from the arts and humanities (Education, Gerontology and Geriatrics, Multimedia in Education, and Psychology). Document analysis focused on legislation and rules from the University concerning the supervision process. Interviews were individually conducted, after obtaining consent from each participant, to access their representations. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and submitted to content analysis, following a constructivist approach of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Concerning supervisors' competences and roles, students mainly highlighted the supervisors' scientific expertise and their ability to simultaneously challenge and offer support as valuable assets. International students, in particular, regarded highly their supervisors' knowledge of their countries and cultures. Both students and supervisors agreed on the fact that supervisors should support students in acquiring transversal competences, help them to identify their learning needs, set deadlines for the submission of reports and parts of the thesis, and, most importantly, provide critical feedback on their written work in good time.

With respect to supervisory relationships, students said they had very close relationships with their supervisors, regarding them as guides who helped them throughout their doctoral studies, and, in some cases, their friends. This was in tune with their previous expectations. Supervisors, on the other hand, had a twofold opinion. While female supervisors mentioned that they were close to their supervisees, acting as mentors and sharing students' personal problems; male supervisors viewed this relationship as strictly professional and formative. Main challenges identified in the supervisory relationship were students' personal problems; the supervision of international students, many of whom complete their degrees via distance delivery; and the workload of supervisors.

Considering these results, the practices of joint supervision and supervisor development were mentioned by both students and supervisors as increasingly important in providing more individualized and student-centered support. In this presentation and considering the themes and sub-themes of the conference, we look more deeply at students' and supervisors' suggestions on how supervisor development can take place and contribute to the success and quality of doctoral education.

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