

The Challenge Of 'Supervising' Students Who Are Doing A Phd By Published Work

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<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/full-guide/enhancing-the-digital-student-experience>

This is a guest post by Professor Susan Smith, Associate Director of the Centre for Learning and Teaching, Leeds Beckett University. It is a call for more academic staff training and development for colleagues supervising students doing the PhD by Published Work route.

The growing diversity of doctoral programmes in Higher Education contributes to knowledge and enhances innovation (Halse & Malfoy, 2010; Lee, 2010 & 2011; Blessinger & Stockley, 2016). Indeed, one of these routes - the PhD by Published Work (PhD by PW) - is becoming more popular and, as a result, more supervisors are needed for new students. But these supervisors of PhD by PW routes should not be 'any old supervisor'. The art of supervising students doing this PW route is different from supervising students doing the more traditional PhD awards.

Students of the PW route are almost always longstanding, accomplished researchers with a coherent body of peer reviewed scholarly work (be they papers, monographs or artefacts) rubber-stamped and accessible in the public domain for all to read.

I have observed that while many colleagues who are supervisors are clear about the requirements and the role for supervising a student via a traditional PhD route, they admit they are working in the dark with their students on the PW route and have a poor understanding of the process and the different supervisory skills required. Contributing to this confusion is the lack of consistent training available in universities to support building the skills and knowledge for the supervisors of this PW route. As a result, potential candidates are put off, existing candidates are confused and procedural muddle occurs.

In fact, I argue that 'supervising' is the wrong word (maybe 'facilitator' or 'mentor' or even 'PhD life/research coach' would work better!). After all, unlike the traditional, typical PhD supervisor the PW supervisor is not 'keeping an eye on' their students to check they are safe and competent researchers before they are let loose on the wider community – many PW students are already established, well published researchers in their own right and have all been safely 'on the loose' for years. PhD by PW supervisors *do not*, unlike the traditional PhD route supervisor, need to ensure their students are producing quality research or ensure their methodology is sound – this has already been done and dusted by the peer reviewers for the journals where the work is submitted. It should also be ironed out early at the Confirmation of Registration stage (and very often this is not the case).

From my experience, the supervisory skills required by someone who has a PW candidate should focus on something slightly different:

- Making sure that the students have a body of work focused on what Professor Sally Brown would call the 'golden thread' (Brown, 2018) – a clear subject or theme which has been explored at a deep and critical level.
- Making sure that student removes outputs which don't fit their submission. It is so tempting to include lots of peer reviewed work they are rightly proud of, but if it doesn't align with the golden thread the submission strength is much diluted.
- Making sure that the candidate is prepared to discuss work with the examiners at the viva voce and making sure other examiners are fully equipped and experienced in making sure they are *not* marking the papers and exploring basic methodology but exploring instead ideas relating to

the works' originality, coherence and contribution to the body of knowledge. I call these three key areas 'the triple whammy' in my book (Smith, 2015).

- Making sure that the student can write the synthesis in the time available (usually a year) and the structure and content of that synthesis is robust, thematic and clear. I would say of all the skills this is the only one shared with traditional PhD route supervisors.
- Using supervisory meetings at the pre-synthesis writing stage to explore the submitted work with a deep critical approach can be very useful indeed. Encouraging the student to discuss their works' impact, reach, context, meaning, journey and future are not always the trains of thought that traditional route PhD supervisors think of.

I'd argue the sector really needs much better guidance for our colleagues supervising students doing PhD by PW routes. This guidance should focus specifically on clarifying the suitability, number and range of outputs (these are currently inconsistent in different universities). We also need much better institution-specific staff development and training to clarify practice, process and regulations for new supervisors of PhD by PW routes. Perhaps with more role clarity colleagues would actually be keener to sign up as PhD by PW supervisors?

A PhD by PW is a route worth encouraging – it is inclusive, great for atypical candidates, fabulous for encouraging joined-up thinking and a sense of connection and longevity in research practice. It is worth supporting with well informed 'supervision'.

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