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Academic Mentoring Rather Than Supervising – Turning the Doctoral Supervisory Model Upside Down

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Short Discussion

Supervision is the act of 'overseeing, directing, or taking charge of a person' (OED, 2023). The process of doctoral supervision normally assumes that the Director of Studies has expertise in two areas. Firstly, in subject matter expertise and secondly in doctoral-level research methodology. The addition of a second or third supervisor can extend the expertise available to the student but the assumption of a hierarchical relationship between supervisor and supervised exists both in terminology and in practice.

Yet, in so many other industries it has been recognised that professional development is best facilitated through coaching and mentoring processes rather than 'supervisory' relationships. Why does academia assume that professional development in research skills and subject knowledge are optimised through expert supervision?

As qualified coaches and experienced academic supervisors, we are currently working on a professional development programme that develops level 8 research skills in an organisation's staff. Candidate development comes from the delivery of professional doctorate-taught material combined with professional coaching and mentoring. The mentoring focuses on two elements:

- reviewing a learner's skill base in relation to the taught material and compared to a modified Vitae RDF. The mentoring identifies opportunities for learner development.
- challenging a learner's subject-specific thinking and their proposed methods for implementing a practice-based research project. Learners are supported to identify key subject matter experts within, and outside, their organisation who can provide appropriate critique of ideas and thinking.

In the model, the academic mentor is not the repository of expert knowledge, it is the student who is the primary subject matter expert. The mentor facilitates a process that identifies and engages with additional relevant expertise where it can be found. In this sense, the mentor sits underneath the learning process guiding the student to engage with knowledge where it can be found.

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