

Blending online and offline in a Community of Practice model for research degree supervisor development

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ABSTRACT

Research degree supervision is a specialist academic practice, and as such there is a growing discourse around what the practice is and how it can be supported. Alongside the increasing body of journal articles and books, the discourse also inhabits the online spaces of blogs and social media hashtags. The growth in online activity means that the potential communities and support available to current doctoral researchers is arguably very different to the experiences of most research degree supervisors when doing their own doctoral study. The challenge for many supervisors is in identifying, understanding and navigating these online resources to support their own supervisory practice and their doctoral researchers.

This chapter reflects on our experiences in developing a model of supervisor development based on a Community of Practice ethos and how in doing so we increasingly blended the online and offline. We outline the model of a Community of Practice around Research Supervision and how the structure of conversations catalysed by both questions and resources enabled awareness of the discourse on supervision. In discussing resources offline, we were able to raise awareness as supervisors shared their knowledge of online resources during conversations. This revealed familiarity and the enthusiasts, as well as creating space for concerns to be raised and reluctance to engage to be explored. Through a scaffolded practice-led inquiry approach to investigating research supervision, supervisors could then choose to personalise further investigation of online PhD resources and spaces, sharing their findings back within the community of practice group conversation. We discuss examples whereby supervisors explored social media hashtags, the use of apps, and virtual research communities to draw out lessons and plans for developing their own supervisory practice. Somewhat unexpectedly, some supervisors also choose to speak back to the discourse and its online communities through then publishing their practitioner inquiries in blog form. We could conclude with some comments on the potential and the importance of linking online and offline in enabling research degree supervisors to recognise supervision as an academic practice and the support available to them through communities of practice both local and global.

Context and Introduction

Research degree supervision is a specialist academic practice, and as such has generated a practice specific discourse aimed at deconstructing the practice as well as supporting it. Conversations about research supervision emerged in Australia and the United Kingdom (U.K.) in the late eighties and early nineties as research supervisors began to make their own research supervision practices transparent by publishing their research supervision experiences as guides and illuminators of the practice (for example Phillips & Pugh, 1987; Salmon, 1992). These studies were the first in a series of practice-led inquiries contributing to an emergent discourse. The growth in doctoral candidature in the 1980s shone a light on the previously hidden or unpublished role of the research supervisor (Manatunga, 2005). Other forms of practice-led inquiry relating to research supervision were individual doctoral degrees that focussed on research supervision as part of explorations into higher education practices (for example Lovas, 1980; Francis, 1996; Hill, 2002) and practice investigation projects undertaken by university research centres such as *Journeying Post Graduate Supervision* (Aspland et al, 2002) and *The Supervisory Dialogues* (Wisker et al, 2003). These projects, as well as contributing to the discourse, encouraged the growing research focus on teaching and learning in higher education research to encompass research degree supervision as an academic practice.

The discourse was enlarged with introduction of several international conferences dedicated to research supervision. A revival of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE)¹ following a decline from its early instigation in the 60s, coincided with emergence of practice-led inquiries into research supervision and growing awareness of the connections between doctoral completions and effective research supervision. The events in U.K. coincided with the initiative of the Quality Post graduate Research (QPR)² conference in Australia in 1994 and the International Doctoral Education Research Network (IDERN)³ in 2007, which expanded the discourse with conference proceedings. Each of the networks represented by these conferences aligned with a range of journals, for example, *Studies in Higher Education*, *Higher Education Quarterly*, (previously Universities Quarterly which it had taken over from Blackwells), *Higher Education Research and Development* and the *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* that reinforced the idea of peer-reviewed research into all higher education practices and thus contributed to building the discourse surrounding research degree supervision (Bastalich, 2017).

With a rise in technology, at the beginning of the millennium, many of the already available resources became available electronically. As discussed elsewhere in this volume, several notable on-line resources emerged to support doctoral education, notably the blogs *The Thesis Whisperer* (Mewburn, 2010+) and *Patter* (Thomson, 2011+) which explicitly aim to support doctoral researchers with advice and guidance. Blogsites have also been established that directly aim to support research degree supervisors through sharing practices, challenges and research such as *The Research Supervisor's friend* (Hill, 2011+), *The Supervision Whisperers* (Mewburn & Miller, 2017+) and *Supervising PhDs* (Guccione, 2017+). Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook have facilitated the initiation of multiple online communities for academics and doctoral researchers for example with the popularisation of hashtag such as #PhDChat #PhDlife and #AcWri. Universities have also developed an array of support services and online resources which contributed to understandings of the nature of research supervision (for

example University of Sydney, 2020) and later networks such as the *Research Supervisor's Network* established by the UK Council for Graduate Education and its launch in 2019 of the *Good Supervisory Practice Framework* as an online toolkit for reflection and professional development by supervisors (UKCGE, 2019). The popularity of on-line discussions around a range of higher education topics also coincided with the broader business agenda of creating professional networks online. In many of these networks (for example *Academia* and *Linked In*) academics uploaded copies of research papers related to supervision for universal access. Thus, the online resources for supporting doctoral education are numerous and growing.

This increasingly accessible array of online resources in the discourse was beneficial for supervisors. It also presented a challenge for supervisors as readers and resource users in identifying, understanding and navigating these online resources to support their own supervisory practice and their doctoral researchers. Therefore, alongside instruction in particular institutional procedures, the professional development agenda for research degree supervisors has shifted to embrace alerting supervisors to the vast array of resources online and in the literature, and facilitating individual reflection on supervision as an academic practice which needs developing and refreshing, practising the practice.

A Community of Practice around Research Supervision model

As one university endeavouring to advance an agenda of research supervision professional development, Birmingham City University initiated a face-to-face community of practice around research supervision as an accredited supervisor development programme in 2015. Originating from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on a more social theory of learning, a community of practice can be understood as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Traynor 2015). Whilst acknowledging criticism of commercialised and superficial uses of community of practice (Hughes, 2007; Tight, 2015), we were purposeful in explicitly adopting a community of practice ethos which recognises doctoral study as a domain in which supervisors are members of a professional community with a common academic practice that can be learnt and enhanced through sharing within the community. In this chapter we reflect on the experience and impact of the programme, and on how the focus on face-to-face conversations and dialogues between supervisors has enabled space for engaging with online communities around research degree supervision. As such, the data on which we draw includes: our own lived experience as supervisors and as the designers and facilitators of a supervisor development programme; and the anonymised notes of each group, audio recordings generated for moderation and the programme evaluation forms.

The Community of Practice around Research Supervision supervisor development programme was initiated at Birmingham City University (BCU) in the midlands of the UK in response to a university-wide agenda to improve research supervision. As a post-1992 university with strong traditions of professional and practitioner education, BCU recognised that a quickly growing population of doctoral researchers across both PhD and Professional Doctorate programmes entailed a growing number of academics undertaking research degree supervision. Members of the university's Research Committee were keen to reflect the practitioner focus of much of BCU's research, and so instead of a didactic training model, they commissioned a dialogic approach to

recognise and support supervision as an academic practice. Gaining SEDA (Staff and Educational Development Association) accreditation ensured benchmarking with sector-wide standards and provided national recognition.

The community of practice model designed involves six 90-minute discussion sessions occurring one per month, with then a two-month lead into the final session. These sessions enable discussion and sharing of experiences that scaffold the identification of individual practitioner inquiries which are then reported on in the final session. In line with the community of practice ethos, the assessment is participatory and draws on a professional dialogue models (Pilkington, 2013). Eligibility for accreditation is based on active participation in the discussions, evidence of engagement with the literature of supervision, and an action plan for ongoing development and reflection informed by the practitioner inquiry. Each of the first five sessions are initiated with catalyst questions and resources shared in advance.

1. Who am I as a participant of this community of practice?
2. What prior knowledge do I bring to the practice of research supervision?
3. What is good research supervision?
4. What resources can I use to support my aim of improving my research supervision?
5. How will I know when I have achieved my aim of improving my research supervision?

(Hill & Vaughan, 2018)

These catalysts follow a five-step process to initiate reflection and scaffold engagement with resources: firstly acknowledging what ‘troubled’ (Schön, 1983:50) the practitioner about their research supervision practice; secondly exploring the provenance (Hill & Lloyd, 2018) of participants as research supervisor; thirdly exposure to the discourse and literature surrounding ‘good’ research supervision, as well as reflecting on experiences; fourthly identifying and sharing of relevant resources for advancing supervision practice; and finally planning how to undertake a practitioner inquiry (Stenhouse, 1981; Andersen & Herr, 1999) relevant to the individual’s context, proposing the rationale, sources and anticipated outcomes.

The final, sixth session is structured around participating supervisors feeding back on their individual practitioner inquiries and how they envisage their findings will inform their practice going forward. The learning in each session is reinforced through the distribution of anonymised notes afterwards for review and as a prompt for individual reflection. The notes provide a summary of the discussion as well as further details of literature and resources identified during the conversation. Each of these five scaffolding steps invites different ways drawing on and talking back to the educational discourse.

The programme is based exclusively on community of practice principles. As a group of academic professionals we can come together to talk about a common practice and through this dialogue each advance our own understanding and practice. Dialogue is facilitated as open and honest, with respect for differing experiences and positions. Thus, groups are kept purposively small and each has two facilitators, experienced supervisors who have themselves been through the programme. That supervisor-participants then go on to volunteer to facilitate other groups suggests that they see

the benefits in continuing to participate in the conversations and to actively be part of a supervisor community. Indeed, feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive and it is clear that supervisors perceived benefits in having the space for peer dialogue and of feeling part of a broader community of practice of research degree supervisors:

“The opportunity to talk to others and discuss concepts as well as being grounded in theory was fantastic.” (participant evaluation 2018)

“The space for reflection and sharing of ideas was both welcome and extremely valuable. The experience of others was excellent in terms of contextualising my own approaches, and the discussions aided me in thinking through next steps - some reinforcement, some positive renewal and re-thinking.”
(participant evaluation 2017)

The sense of a supportive community of peers in which honest dialogue was possible seems to have been particularly valuable to research degree supervisors:

“You need to feel safe in an environment, so you can show your weaknesses, your vulnerabilities and understand that they are not going to be used against you in the future.”

(participant comment in session 2017)

“It did all this in a friendly and not judgmental atmosphere that allowed the participants to reflect on their work and explore the potentials they have.”

(participant evaluation 2017)

The benefits in creating space and time for busy academics to reflect communally on research degree supervision and the changing landscape of doctoral education have been clear. Whilst this small group, participatory and dialogic development programme has emphasized face-to-face local community connections, it has also had unanticipated benefits in increasing awareness and reflection on larger global online communities for doctoral researchers and research degree supervisors.

Discussing the online offline to raise awareness

As with any community of practice, we look at the array of sources which informed people’s practice in our conversations. Perhaps expectedly, discussion on online communities and resources occurs most frequently during the fourth session which is focussed on resources to support supervision as a practice. However, reflections on the online have also entered conversations in the other sessions. As we discussed ‘troubling’ we introduced aspects of the discourse that referred to the same issues of troubling. In conversations about prior experience when we discuss ‘provenance’, often supervisor participants would reflect on their knowledge and use of online resources including social media hashtags and blogs. Interesting, in the communities of practice, supervisors tend to bring into the conversation online communities for doctoral researchers rather

than explicitly focussing on online communities of research degree supervisors. This suggests that they are primarily considering how the online can support their supervisees, and only indirectly how this can benefit themselves as supervisors.

The anonymised notes from the conversations demonstrate that as well as raising awareness as supervisors shared their knowledge of online resources, these conversations revealed familiarity and the enthusiasts for virtual communities:

I have used some of the blogs myself and also shared them with students. I find them to offer useful advice, information and tips for various aspects of research. But the main reason why I use them is for reflecting and reassurance – for me and for students. For me, reading a blog post on an issue I am currently grappling with, enables me to see the issue from different perspectives and it usually leaves me feeling more confident about my approach or finding a solution.

(group notes, 2017)

This supervisor neatly sums up the benefits from accessing online communities around doctoral education and these benefits are the same ones that participants identified in being part of our face-face Communities of Practice around Research Supervision – encouraging reflection, sharing approaches and gaining confidence. In particular supervisors identified how the different registers of discourse online could benefit themselves and their students, particular through the use of satire and humour:

“podcast on how to fail a PhD – humorous but useful”

(group notes 2018)

“Two participants suggested that when a student they had used the PhD comic (web and paper publications). Fun and very true”

(group notes 2018)

“PhD comics is good for explaining institutional politics”

(group notes 2019)

These comments also reflect the variety of online spaces and media that supervisors were aware of, encompassing audio, visual and text media online. Treating real life issues such as institutional politics and enculturation into academic life through humour was seen as beneficial in normalising experiences, and acknowledging the emotional labour of undertaking doctoral research:

“Social media can be beneficial for sharing experiences, ‘normalising’ to an extent the problems that pgrs can face”

(group notes 2019)

“All felt that blogs give the "real experience" more immediately, even perhaps more useful than books”

(group notes 2018)

As well as normalising to an extent some anxieties around the lived experience of doctoral studies, supervisors have drawn attention in the conversation to how communities online can help address issues of diversity and inclusion. As well as recognising online as an increasingly important mode of professional networking for academics, it has been noted that:

“Social media can be a powerful tool for young researchers as it is egalitarian and can be beneficial for those with social anxiety around face-to-face networking”

(group notes 2019)

“This supervisor (& team) has a WhatsApp group for students & supervisors which mitigates potential issues about physical distance from the university

(group notes 2018)

“We also discussed how online there are supportive communities for older students, students who are parents, students with disabilities, students with mental health problems.”

(group notes 2018)

From such anecdotal evidence, it is clear that some supervisors do perceive online communities generated through hashtags, Facebook groups and apps as providing useful additional support to doctoral researchers.

As the designers of the programme, it is interesting for us as authors to reflect on how supervisors have revealed they are deploying such online resources in their supervisory practice. Signposting seems to be the main mode in which these online communities and resources are utilised, and their do appear to be particular academic issues and stages in which the online is being drawn upon. Issues around supporting academic writing has emerged as the most common arena in which online resources are called upon:

[Pat Thomson’s] “posts about grappling with theory (‘theory fright’) useful.”

(group notes 2018)

“Another useful resource was *Explorations of Style* [website] ... in providing this reference she also recommended Patrick Dunleavy’s Write for Research twitter feed as useful”

(group notes 2017)

“Writing advice via social media/blogs is sometimes received better by pgrs who won’t turn to text books”

(group notes 2019)

‘Useful’ tends to be the most common phrase used to describe the various online discussions of academic writing, with supervisors commenting on how they have seen benefits from signposting to particular techniques and strategies in contextualising their feedback to supervisees. The perception is that the online resources provide tools that enable them to act on feedback in constructive ways. It is also notable that supervisors identified a reluctance amongst some doctoral researchers to engage with the books on academic writing, with more than one supervisor reflecting that their supervisee seemed reluctant to admit to struggling to the extent of borrowing a text book from the library but were more likely to engage with blog posts online on the same issues. Whether this is because of the relative invisibility of engaging online compared to being seen with a book can only be speculated. Supervisors have also commented on how these discussions have drawn their attention to techniques that they were not personally aware of and have used in their own academic writing practices, such as pomodoros, reverse-outlining and topic sentences. The other common stage of the doctoral journey at which supervisors noted signposting to online resources was around the viva voce, a frequent cause of anxiety in doctoral researchers in the UK:

“Viva Survivors – particularly useful if you have doctoral researchers approaching the examination stage. There is a whole/ archive of podcasts –interviews with people about their doctoral viva (they are not primarily horror stories!); range of blog posts and other resources focusing on examination issues and preparation.”

(group notes 2018)

Again, it appears that the online communities are valued by supervisors for providing emotional reassurance, not ‘horror stories’, and an implicit recognition that such reassurance may be better received from peers than by the supervisors themselves.

Not all supervisors express positive thoughts about online communities and resources. It is key to our community of practice ethos that we enable safe spaces for concerns to be raised and reluctance to engage to be explored in a non-judgement environment. Several strands of more negative concerns around online doctoral education have emerged across differing groups. There are concerns that social media becomes another expectation of and pressure on doctoral researchers, adding to the competitiveness of the current doctoral landscape:

“Danger that too much emphasis is put on the construction of a profile on media, where is the substance?”

(group notes 2019)

There has been detailed discussion in some groups of concerns around the substance and depth of self-declared online expertise, particularly around issues of peer-review or lack thereof for blogs.

“I find the opinionated nature of blogs very difficult ... Social media can tend too much to just bragging and/or moaning!”

(group notes 2016)

Some supervisors are cautious of trusting the online environment. This mistrusting response has also appeared in relation to the potential negative consequences of the sharing of emotional lived doctoral experience online:

“Another said that blogs, and other students, tend to relate their own positive or negative experiences, and reading the latter may throw you off balance; e.g. "my supervisor is a devil" ... and this may be misleading or even hurtful if the relationship with students is all one way. So perhaps seminars and books may give a more balanced view.”

(group notes 2018)

Here a supervisor was expressing concern that blog posts might influence doctoral researchers to interpret or reinterpret supervisory relationships negatively. The concern appears to be that trauma and negative experiences would be read into situations and anxieties could be magnified rather than resolved through reading about others’ experiences. There has also been open discussion that the active use and promotion of online community platforms by supervisors might lead to inflating the expectations of supervisors. For example, when a supervisor reflected on how they use WhatsApp to enable a sense of cohort amongst their supervisees, the group then:

“discussed how this makes the supervisor(s) potentially available to handle queries 24/7 and not all supervisors would be comfortable with that arrangement.”

(group notes 2018)

This issue of comfort appears to be of key importance to how supervisors engage with online communities and resources. Whilst potential benefits are shared, there are undercurrents of mistrust. In our view as authors it is important that our community of practice programme enables space for supervisors to honestly share reservations as well as developing understanding through shared examples of the online doctoral landscape which in the majority of cases is very different to that of their own doctoral study.

Personalising the investigation of online PhD resources and spaces

The dialogues within the community of practice sessions scaffold the selection of individual practitioner enquiries. Through these enquiries, supervisors are able to further investigate and reflect on an area of research degree supervision that has personal resonance and relevance for them. Thus, there is the opportunity for supervisors to choose to explore online resources and communities in more depth. Our experience however, is that a minority of supervisors choose to do so.

Our experience has been that where supervisors have chosen to investigate online support for doctoral researchers, their interest has been on the socio-emotional support available amongst peers for their supervisees rather than particular supervisory tools that they might personally engage with in their academic practice. For example, a supervisor participant in 2017, had initially proposed a practitioner inquiry into how social media enabled support mechanisms for students, prompted by how in the conversations

“We also discussed how social media facilitates connections between PhD students and can act as a support network for candidates across different disciplines, as a form of *Networked Participatory Scholarships* (Veletsianos & Kimmons 2012; Cooper 2016).”
(Participant presentation slides, December 2017)

At his presentation he reported that using the twitter hashtags #PhDlife and #PhDsupervisor he looked at what doctoral researchers were tweeting about and noticed that most were about stress, not the research itself. Whilst he did share examples of the tweets he had found; his practitioner inquiry had evolved into a focus on supporting doctoral researcher wellbeing. Whilst there was implicit recognition of the support role played by online doctoral communities in the initial proposition, the supervisor’s individual reflection and action planning to enhance their own practice was focused very much on face-to-face interactions, and a supervisor’s role in recognising the need for, and signposting other support services. Whilst the group then shared knowledge and experience of local resources, the initial focus on online communities was not returned to in the discussion.

In 2018, another supervisor chose to undertake a practitioner inquiry to enable them to think about the pastoral role of a supervisor by investigating how doctoral researchers experience the PhD. They did this via an interrogation of twitter posts using the hashtag #PhDlife, scraping seven days of tweets to explore the topics and tone of tweets in conjunction with looking at literature on social media in doctoral education and academia. The tweets revealed the hashtag provided a space for playfulness, the exploration of precarity and the realities of doctoral study. Interestingly, the supervisor concluded that, in the sample, this was not a space where expertise was played out; instead it was a space where anxiety and humour were enacted in comments on the emotional labour of performing the particular identity of doctoral researcher. One supervisor wondered if in doing so, the tweeters were:

“playing out online the expectations of the supervisor: you aren’t quite there yet, I told you it would be hard”

(participant, audio recording 2019)

Mirroring the discussions in other groups, discussion of this practitioner inquiry focused on the potential of online communities to combat loneliness and offer support for the emotional lived experience of doctoral study. The group also discussed the supervisor’s role in reproducing tropes of isolation and procrastination and the potential for consciously countering this by signposting and helping their supervisees find their own online communities.

To date, out of nearly 150 practitioner inquiries, very few supervisors have chosen to explicitly focus on investigating online tools that they could use for supervision meetings, rather than as signposting to support beyond supervision. In 2019, this supervisor investigated which online tools might enable an enhanced the sense of community amongst distance-learning doctoral researchers and in doing so support them in a group supervision approach. The supervisor discussed a number of potential platforms with their three current supervisees and discovered that the doctoral researchers had already created and/or found their own online communities. In response to the

presentation, supervisors discussed how different platforms might encourage different behaviours and relationships:

“There is a need for boundaries and to balance the personal with moments of authority, if too personal then the PGR can perceive /misuse relationships to avoid conflict and deadlines.”

(group notes 2019)

The group acknowledged that some platforms seem to encourage a more informal, personal mode of communication - the chats and gifs - and that this could challenge establishing a more professional supervisory relationship. The group agreed on the need to use appropriate technology with a degree of critical awareness of the types of relationship and interaction that a supervisor wishes to foster. As with any supervisory practice, the group concluded that flexibility and reflection would be required of a supervisor trying to create and foster cohorts online.

Feeding back into online communities

Whilst relatively few supervisors chose to investigate online support for doctoral researchers in their individual practitioner enquiries, several have chosen to contribute to online resources for research degree supervisors. This suggests both a community-minded approach that values their experiences in the development programme, and a presumption that supervisors do use such tools and resources.

For example, a supervisor in the Law School used a strengths-based inquiry approach to reflect on her first year of being a research supervisor. The outcome of her inquiry was a model of supervision that she shared with other first-time research degree supervisors in our university, and that she contributed to *The (Research) Supervisors Friend* blogsite: “to offer guidance to new research supervisors” (Cooper 2016). Her explicit intention to offer a supportive touchstone for other new supervisors can be seen as characteristic of the “gift economy” of academic blogging (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013). In the same year another supervisor’s practitioner inquiry took the form of a reflection on their supervision practice analysed through a framework that they devised from the supervisory literature (Bøgelund 2015), again sharing both their approach and findings on *The (Research) Supervisors Friend* blogsite (Feldman 2016).

It is interesting to note that later participants in the communities of practice programme went on to reference these contributions to the online discourse – for example the supervisor initially looking at twitter hashtags in 2017 discussed earlier in our chapter themselves referenced Cooper and Feldman’s blog posts in their own practitioner inquiry report. Thus, the blending of offline and online by the communities of practice is brought full circle, as oral reports and conversations within face-to-face sessions are then disseminated online, and the online publications are later discussed within subsequent face-to-face conversations.

Conclusions and a pandemic postscript

Our experience has demonstrated the importance of linking online and offline in enabling research degree supervisors to recognise supervision as an academic practice and the support available through communities of practice both local and global. Research degree supervision is an academic practice with communities plural; it is not just a singular community of practice amongst local colleagues in one institution. Through online supervisory spaces, subject and disciplinary communities both online and in other networks, supervision is an academic practice that this shared and can be reflected upon and continuously learnt through an individual academic's participation in multiple communities. As supervisors we are always in the process of learning and refining, of becoming-supervisor as Grant (2018) puts it. This is why in our view it is also crucial to not just facilitate awareness of such online resources and communities. It is important to provide space for supportive dialogues of open reflection amongst supervisors in which anxieties around online communities for doctoral education can be honestly raised, experiences shared and the potential of such online communities critically evaluated in relation to the particular contexts of individual supervisory practices. Just as online spaces can enable the 'troubles talk' of doctoral researchers (Mewburn 2011) which can be cathartic and supportive for them and their peers, as indeed many of our supervisor participants noted, it is as important for research degree supervisors to also have trusted spaces in which their troubles can be shared and interrogated, including supervisors' concerns around online practices. Whilst there may not be many surprises amongst the views shared by our anonymous supervisor participants, it is important that their voices can be heard and that conversations take place between research degree supervisors about their academic practices of supervision.

At the time of writing, March 2020, higher education is facing unprecedented challenges and the question of online support for doctoral researchers and their supervisors has taken on a new urgency. Whilst for many supervisors, the occasional supervision meeting by telephone, Skype or other online platform has become commonplace over recent years, the current situation requires all supervisory contact to be via remote means. In the UK, as with many countries, universities are physically closed in response to the Covid19 global pandemic and doctoral research and its supervision have to take place online by participants who are socially-distancing and only having face-to-face contact with members of their own household. We have thus moved our Community of Practice around Research Supervision development programme to online delivery, as arguably creating space for supervisors to share experiences, anxieties and ideas about online supervision practices is more relevant and urgent. Whilst it is relatively early in conditions which are currently envisaged to exist for at least the next six months, early indicators are that the use of video-conferencing (in our case Microsoft Teams) whilst a change in platform, does not fundamentally change the nature of the experience and quality of the conversations between supervisors. Meeting virtually, our supervisors are still forming supportive and reflective communities of practice.

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¹ The Society for Research into Higher Education is a UK-based international learned society concerned to advance understanding of higher education, especially through the insights, perspectives and knowledge offered by systematic research and scholarship. The Society aims to be the leading international society in the field, as to both the support and the dissemination of research. Established in 1965, and revitalised in the 1990s, it holds annual conferences see <http://www.srhe.ac.uk/downloads/ShattockSRHEfirst25years.pdf>

² The Quality Post graduate Research (QPR) conference was established in Australia in 1994 as a way of biannually bringing together research degree supervisors, postgraduate students, academic developers, university decision makers and administrators, governmental representatives and those who conduct research in postgraduate education and associated areas to discuss, debate and make sense of the complex and changing area of HDR policy and practice. See <http://www.qpr.edu.au/whatisqpr>

³ The International Doctoral Education Research Network (IDERN) is a network of scholars and practitioners established in 2007 and actively engaged in researching doctoral education and hosting a conference every two years to three years. See <https://www.mun.ca/educ/research/idern.php>.