

Chapter 5

Quality of Doctoral Research Supervision: Contributions of an Integrative and Fluid Framework to Evaluate and Monitor the Process

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ABSTRACT

With this chapter, the authors describe (1) the international, Portuguese, and institutional challenges relating to the quality of doctoral research supervision and (2) systematize the research-based frameworks that exist in the international literature worldwide in what concerns this topic. This is followed by a brief presentation of the research methodology adopted to shed light on the process taken to design an integrative and fluid framework that the authors propose on the quality of doctoral research supervision. Additionally, links are established regarding the international literature and tendencies approached on the theoretical section of this chapter. Finally, the authors reflect on the concerns surrounding the pertinence of the framework that arose from the research to evaluate and monitor the doctoral supervisory process.

INTRODUCTION

Much research has explored the characteristics of ‘effective’ supervision, and much has focused on collecting information about postgraduate research students’ positive and negative experiences that can inform guidelines about supervision, and improve supervisory arrangements and practices. (Petersen, 2007, p.476)

The agenda that may be found within international Higher Education (HE) institutions and other organizations reveals a growing concern about the impact of research at postgraduate level, where doctoral studies are gathering a greater significance and value. The international and European context demonstrates the existence of an increasing number and a greater diversity of research students enrolling in postgraduate studies, particularly in Doctoral Programmes,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7244-4.ch005

where previous doctoral training was not sufficiently considered before the ‘massification’ phase, namely in the case of Portugal. In fact, in Portugal, the question of massification regarding doctoral degree was not considered so pertinent until a few years ago due to several factors: (1) the growing rate of unemployment among young graduates led them to pursue the 2nd and the 3rd cycles of Bologna consecutively, even if they were not intrinsically motivated to pursue postgraduate degrees; (2) as a consequence, the ratio of postgraduate students *per* supervisors increased immensely, with the latter not being sufficiently prepared for this situation and the institution not providing alternative solutions; and (3) the Bologna Process in Portugal, because it added compulsory disciplines to the research-based PhD and led to a growing discussion regarding training issues at PhD level, something that was not previously discussed.

Consequently, the enhancement of quality at doctoral level is considered to be a pertinent subject to most countries and HE institutions around the world. As such, it is urgent to engage in further public reflection and discussions, as well as to carry out more research on the conceptions that doctoral students and supervisors have on what constitutes the quality of the supervisory process, particularly considering their own responsibilities and roles (Connel, 1985; Cullen et al., 1994; Grant & Graham, 1999; Grant, 1999, 2001, 2005; Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2006; Manathunga & Goozée, 2007; Park, 2005, 2007, 2008; Pearson & Brew, 2002). This is a topic that deserves a close attention from academia in general, and from researchers concerned with this subject in particular.

But, before approaching the quality of doctoral supervision, it seems essential to contextualize this phenomenon within a broader setting. There are many challenges with which HE institutions are struggling. We may systematize the following factors that, at a greater or a lesser extent, are influencing doctoral supervision and research.

From our perspective, each of the following elements may not be considered isolated; they are inter-related and constitute challenges through which the quality of doctoral supervision ought to be reflected on. These include:

- Pressures from external stakeholders over the HE sector (Hodson & Thomas, 2003; UK Council for Graduate Education, 1996);
- Massification at doctoral level, and simultaneously doctoral students with more diverse experiences and characteristics (Harman, 2003; Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008; Taylor, 2009);
- Changes in the research environment at HE institutions, as well as in the conception of research and academic work, namely due to: evaluation, financing, time to complete and completion rates of research projects, the existence of a higher number of inter and trans-disciplinary research, and cross-fertilization between disciplines (Bissett, 2009; Brew, 2001, 2007; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Enders, 2005);
- The emergence of different kinds of doctorates (Park, 2005, 2007), although these may be legally systematized or not;
- Focus on the evaluation of experiences of doctoral students (both training undertaken and research) (Bennet & Turner, 2012; Hodsdon & Buckley, 2011; Park, 2008);
- Rising in the development of training programmes directed to doctoral supervisors (Brew & Peseta, 2004; Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004; Reid & Marshall, 2009);
- Intensification of worldwide discussions and reflections on supervisory experiences and problems, and on the identification of doctoral students and supervisors’ competences (Bills, 2004; Cullen et al., 1994; Felton, 2008; Petersen, 2007; Soothill, 2006).

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