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Academics engaging in formative peer assessment of reflective scholarly accounts of doctoral supervision

Jennie Golding[1*],

[1] UCL Institute of Education

Correspondence email: j.golding@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract. I focus on the formative peer assessment of reflective scholarly accounts of doctoral supervision, undertaken as part of three iterations of an online supervisor collaboration developed using design research. Participants were academics in the United Kingdom and in southern Africa. Common opportunities and challenges were identified, but also some differential responses that underline the deeply contextualised and culturally-infused nature of academics' skill and knowledge sets and their peer interactions. Such processes therefore require context-responsive and culturally sensitive facilitation. The paper contributes to the literatures around comparative academic development, as well as of distance formative assessment.

Keywords: formative peer assessment, supervision, critical reflection, comparative study, southern Africa

Introduction

Postgraduate research supervision is under-valued, under-provisioned and under-developed in many HEIs globally (Taylor et al., 2021). Timely doctoral completion rates are, widely, low. Further, recent years have seen multiple changes in the nature of doctorates and expectations of doctoral supervisors, including massification, and proliferation of format and purposes. The United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKGCE) has recently introduced accreditation of experienced doctoral supervisors in an effort to support deliberate systematic and scholarly reflection on, and valuing of, such supervision. Such recognition is based on a reflective account of supervision in ten key areas, required to be 'personal, recent, analytical, example-based, scholarly and systematic', and supplemented by two references, one each from a former doctoral student and a colleague.

The focus initiative of a series of six collaborative online workshops for experienced supervisors was developed using design research and introduced in the author's home, research-intensive, institution in 2021. The initiative is analysed in Golding (2024), and aims to support development in preparation for UKCGE recognition, predicated on the value of professional reflection on/in/for practice (Huet & Casanova, 2022; Schön, 1987).

Following initial participation by a South African 'critical friend', annual workshop series participants have alternated between UK and sub-Saharan African academics. Formative peer assessment of post-workshop draft reflective accounts of doctoral supervision was introduced for iteration 2, as analysed below. Currently, iteration 4, across ten countries in sub-Saharan Africa, is in train but has not yet reached the peer assessment phase. Under the design research paradigm, practice for the formative peer review stage for iteration 4 will be informed by the analysis presented here, and consequent design developments. Data are therefore drawn from iterations 1-3, of which the first provided the rationale for introduction, but only the second and third featured formative peer assessment.

Such peer assessment is reasonably well represented in the literature, at both school and university levels (e.g. Topping, 1998, 2009), and including, recently, online approaches (Alemdag & Yildirim, 2022; Gao et al., 2023). However, the focus here, on peer assessment with experienced academics, is new. For other groups, key benefits are known to include student motivation (Planas Lladó et al., 2014), with motivation known also to be important for academics; autonomous critical thinking (Carnell, 2016), a better understanding of the subject matter, assessment criteria and their own values and judgements (Wanner & Palmer, 2018). Peer assessment can lead to the identification of knowledge gaps and engineering their closure, as well as increasing reflection and generalization to new situations, promoting self-assessment and greater metacognitive self-awareness. Cognitive and metacognitive benefits can accrue for both assessor and assessee before, during, or after the peer assessment (Topping, 2009). Wanner and Palmer (2018) identify a need for deliberate development of students' capacities for giving feedback, and the continuous and timely involvement of the teacher, for successful peer-assessment; Topping (2009) recommends overt training, with exemplification, checklists and monitoring. However, for peer assessment in universities, Adachi et al. (2018) also identify challenges of perceived expertise, power relations, time and resource/motivation, and superficial engagement with feedback.

In sub-Saharan Africa, entitlement to universal basic education is relatively recent, and demand for university education has exploded in recent years, leading to pressure on resources and rapidly-increasing expectations of academics, accompanied by under-availability of experienced doctoral supervisors (Goujon et al., 2017). We might therefore expect exacerbated challenges in developing appropriately equipped doctoral supervision. It is not clear that the pedagogical approaches, including for peer review, constructive in an English university context will transfer unproblematically to a different cultural context. Across academic research, African ways of knowing, and knowledge in an African context, are less valued in the academy, and much less is known about African academics' ways of developing professionally. The underlying comparative research question addressed in this paper is therefore, ***'What is the same, and what is different, in participant group response to the formative peer review process?'***

Methodology

As outlined in Golding (2024), research tools were developed around Halse & Malfroy's (2010) dimensions of supervision and Bruce & Stoodley's (2013) categories of supervision-as-teaching. Ethical consent was secured from the author's institution (REC 1590), and for research related to iteration 2, from the University of Johannesburg also. After the first three iterations data comprised workshop recordings (22), participant post-submission survey (37), interviews with key personnel probing workshop experiences and learning (7), draft reflective accounts (23), feedback given (23), and submitted reflective accounts (35).

Analysis was reflexive thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2022), starting from the above themes. Here, I draw largely on the last three sources, together with recordings of peer review preparation and feedback workshops. A range of findings around the workshops is available in Golding (2024); here I focus on those specifically related to the peer review process.

Genesis of formative peer assessment phase

Despite the experience and collaboratively-evidenced supervisory expertise of participants, not all initial applications for recognition were successful, and that was a real, sometimes traumatic, challenge to the senior academics concerned. Analysis of their submissions usually showed this was the result of a limited, or uneven, application of the given assessment criteria in their reflective

accounts, and with peer support, all were successful on resubmission, though some still struggled to evidence the required depth of reflectivity.

For the second iteration in southern Africa, therefore, facilitators gave a stronger steer on making notes of reflections and experiences during and after sessions; they also introduced a structured optional formative peer assessment phase. Design of peer assessment responded to considerations identified from the literature, adapted for the target participants. In particular, formative peer review of draft reflective accounts of doctoral supervision was asynchronous and anonymous. It was preceded by an assessment workshop focused on collaborative analysis of a sample reflective account using UKCGE assessment criteria, leading to discussion of content and framing of feedback, structured in terms of UKCGE requirements of 'personal, recent, analytical, example-based, scholarly and systematic' reflection. All drafts received assessment from one peer and one UKCGE-accredited assessor, and those were compared, discussed and edited at a post-assessment workshop before anonymised assessments were returned to their authors.
Even so, with most of the available supervision literature emanating from the global north, and despite leadership active listening to, and probing for, contextual or cultural affordances and constraints on supervision practice throughout the workshops, some southern African colleagues found it difficult to translate the given criteria into practice, underlining the importance of the research question upon which this paper focuses.

Findings and discussion around the formative peer assessment phase

Interviews broadly suggested that benefits of the whole process accrued in two (interdependent) phases – first, from participation in workshops, supported both by the commitment and engagement needed to research and lead a session, and the active approaches adopted. Second, benefits were reported accrued from the reflective, analytical and scholarly writing needed for construction of the reflective account of supervision submitted. From the second and third iterations, the formative peer assessment phase was widely reported to be instrumental in linking those two phases, as well as deepening and broadening the knowledge acquired, including of assessment criteria.

In both workshops and peer assessment, the cross-disciplinary nature of the participant group was felt to support development of new perspectives, in line with Guerin (2015). Surveys and interviews reported the experience of engaging in peer assessment demanding and time-consuming, but very fruitful. Participants reported gaining knowledge of the supervision literature, and of possible approaches to (especially problematic) supervisory scenarios; refined critical thinking around their own supervision experiences, practices and values; enhanced grasp of the assessment criteria; and renewed confidence and expertise to improve their own account. All these benefits were reported in similar terms across participant groups.

However, a number of challenges were also exposed, sometimes differentially across groups, as summarised in Table 1 below. A representation as for example '(3)' indicates there was some such challenge reported in iteration 3, but not to a significant extent; '3' indicates a more serious challenge. As a reminder, iteration 2 involved colleagues from South Africa, Namibia and Zambia, and iteration 3, colleagues from the author's home institution in England.

Table 1: Summary of challenges experienced in formative peer review process

Iteration	Identified challenge

1,2,3	Participant academic colleagues had previously engaged very little with the supervision literature: *'The literature is really very thought-provoking, and I had almost no knowledge of it. Applying it to my own practice is hard, though' (Iteration 1 survey).*
2, 3	Descriptive rather than analytic writing.
2(3)	Feedback to academic peers is different from feedback to students, and more difficult in this context, but there was also supervision-related learning from that: *'I found I had to be much more careful about how I gave feedback to colleagues, with respect and being very careful not to offend. But I think that's important learning for working with students also' (Iteration 2 interview).*
2(3)	Systematic reflective supervision practice was unfamiliar to most participants. While valued for these workshops, it was reported hard to achieve on an ongoing basis, as suggested by UKCGE, given current pressures on academics' time, and the wider under-valuing of supervision within that: *'I have to admit to not stopping to analyse my supervision, very often. I can see that my first attempt was fairly superficial, even though colleagues said it needed to be deeper. I definitely learnt a lot by resubmitting, though maintaining that depth is really hard given everyday pressures. I am, though, now better sensitised to a lot of the issues' (Iteration 3 interview).*
2(3)	Cultural constraints of seniority and, sometimes, gender, in both assessment and feedback: *'It is challenging to give critical feedback to experienced and senior colleagues, but it has been instructive to learn to do that in respectful and constructive ways' (Iteration 2 survey)*
2(3)	Challenges of separating the personal contribution from the institutional, particularly in contexts where conformity and managerialism are valued: *'We have to do what the university says, and that governs most of our thinking. We do not think about whether or how we might choose to do things differently as individual supervisors, but these workshops, and writing the reflective account, have given me confidence that how I supervise can make a difference' (Iteration 2 interview).*
2	Some inter-cultural issues in global discourses surrounding doctoral supervision evident in structures, bibliography and feedback from UKCGE: imbalances of power between the global north and south, post-colonialism, tensions of multiple identities, little external valuing of African-sourced supervision research and of African ways of knowing: *'In the workshops, there was respect for how different universities work, and that some of the global north literature doesn't just transfer to our context. But some of the feedback assumed ways of supervision which are not possible for us' (Iteration 2 interview).*

Most challenges identified were specific to the focus learning, rather than attributable to the formative peer assessment process. The exception was an impact from perceived power relations. Substantive assessment of draft reflective accounts was double-blind, and supervisory biographical details were removed. However, some details within the account gave an indication of the seniority of the writer, and sometimes, their gender. Several southern African colleagues reported feeling uncomfortable about assessing the draft account of a senior, or male, academic, although such issues had not been obvious during workshop sessions. Where it was possible to probe, such sentiments appeared to result from perceptions of status, rather than of expertise. Even in an English university, occasional comments were occasionally made about assumed seniority. Otherwise, none of Adachi's (2018) identified challenges of perceived expertise, time and resource/motivation, and superficial engagement with feedback was evident – perhaps a reflection of mature learners who had opted into the process.

No participants to date have claimed significant familiarity with the supervision literature. While that might appear odd in academics, Taylor et al. (2020) show that is common, globally. Rather more surprising in academics experienced in supervising academic writing, at least half produced draft or submitted reflective accounts that were judged by their peers to be largely descriptive, rather than analytic, in nature – despite one given assessment criterion being 'analytic'. It appears some academics in both contexts are rather better at recognizing descriptive writing, than avoiding it themselves! Again across cohorts, though more marked in iteration 2 'in' southern Africa, there was widespread report that feeding back to peers in this context, and with this focus, was considerably more difficult than feeding back to students – in relation to both content and framing – although leading to cognitive as well as metacognitive gains, as in Topping (2009). The specific content, while focused on a familiar set of activities, is required to be accounted in particular, unfamiliar, ways. The framing of feedback, for peers, is of course also largely unfamiliar: many academics have experience of feeding back to those they line manage, but that is seldom a true peer relationship. However, several participants commented that the focused analysis and discussion of feedback had made them more aware of feedback impact on the recipient, and also of the need for constructive specificity, including of positives, consistent with Wanner and Palmer (2018); some also said they were confident that learning would transfer unproblematically to their supervision – and indeed, reported in their final submissions that was already happening.

Other challenges were more prevalent in southern African (iteration 2) reports than in those from English academics (iteration 3) – though it is important to remember these are only quite small, unrepresentative samples. The UKCGE framework promotes an ongoing and systematic reflective approach to supervision. Such discourses are widespread in education in England, though achieving them another matter, certainly in doctoral supervision (Huet & Casanova, 2022). They are less familiar in sub-Saharan Africa, where rapid expansion of education, together with the recent focus on competency curricula, has catalysed a focus on 'basic' teaching and learning at all levels (Goujon et al., 2017). Southern African colleagues were therefore much less familiar than their English counterparts with the underlying approaches. Both cohorts, though, identified the focus workshop/formative assessment/accreditation process as supportive of 'systematic reflection on practice' that resulted in enhancement to their supervision – but expressed reservations about whether the approach was sustainable, as analysed in Kenny (2018). Relatedly, some colleagues in both iterations found it difficult to separate their own supervision practice, and impact, from that of university-imposed systems and frameworks. Arguably, as Kenny (2018) evidences, that is harder to achieve where universities place high value on conformity and managerialism, as is common in sub-Saharan Africa (Goujon et al., 2017).

Finally, southern Africa academics, reflecting post-accreditation, identified inter-cultural tensions in global discourses surrounding doctoral supervision that they felt were somewhat evident in UKCGE materials and feedback: academic imbalances of power between the global north and south, post-colonialism, tensions of multiple identities, limited external valuing of African-sourced supervision research and of African ways of knowing as evidenced in e.g. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Schöpf (2020). Addressing such issues is not easy, but for the focus initiative, the emergent annotated bibliography of sub-Saharan sourced supervision literature, expansion of the pool of global south UKCGE assessors, and eventually, the establishment of an African accreditation scheme that fully recognises African epistemology, are useful steps forward.

Conclusion

Common opportunities and challenges were identified, but also some differential responses that underline the deeply contextualised and culturally-infused nature of academics' skill and knowledge

sets and their peer interactions. Such processes therefore require context-responsive and culturally sensitive facilitation. For the focus academic development, that is likely to be a particular issue for iteration 4, where participants work in twelve different universities across ten sub-Saharan African countries, each with their own context and both academic and wider social culture. Data from that iteration will further enhance our knowledge of comparative academic development, as well as of distance formative assessment.

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