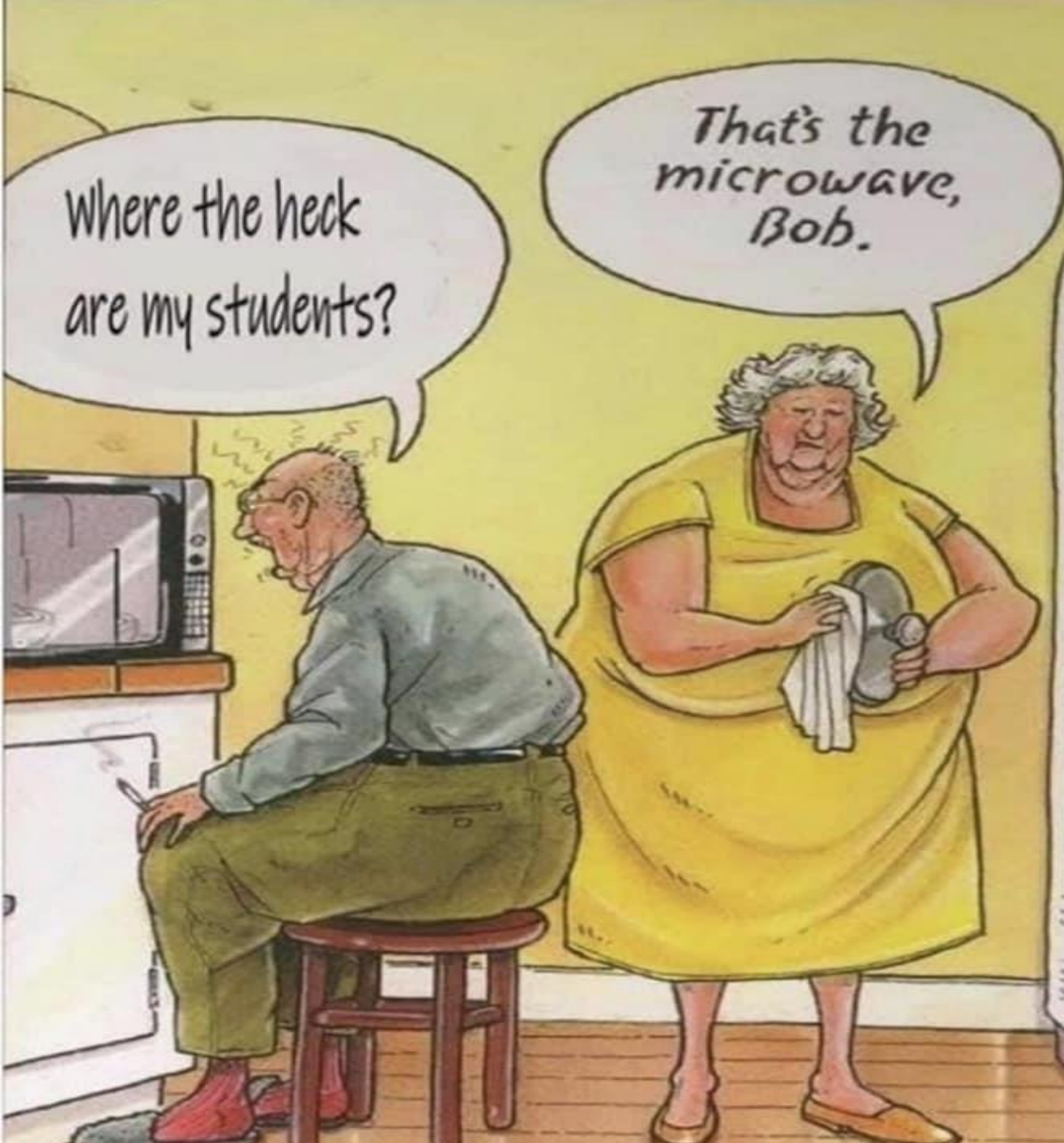


# Are we all still here?

## Remote supervision of doctoral students

Gina Wisker  
University of Bath UK  
2020



Sent by Alan Tait PVC Open University rtd  
(origin unknown)

**Calypso - my research assistant in my  
supervisory workspace**



# Way through

- Some personal background history - current students and issues
- Some research background and resources
- What issues do your doctoral candidates face?
- Remote supervision more generally
- Remote supervision in the Coronavirus era
- Emergency Response adds new complexity
- Why is it happening? and is it new? how does it differ from face to face supervision? and any supervising at a distance
- What have we done before with working with students face to face and at a distance which will work well in online supervision?
- What do we need to consider which is utterly different or maybe more noticeable?
- What are the challenges and issues?
- How is this sustainable and successful?
- More references

# Remote supervision: helpful recent online activities

UKCGE 'Effective Practices in Doctoral Supervision at a Distance'

1st May 2020 <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/supporting-members-during-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-454.aspx>

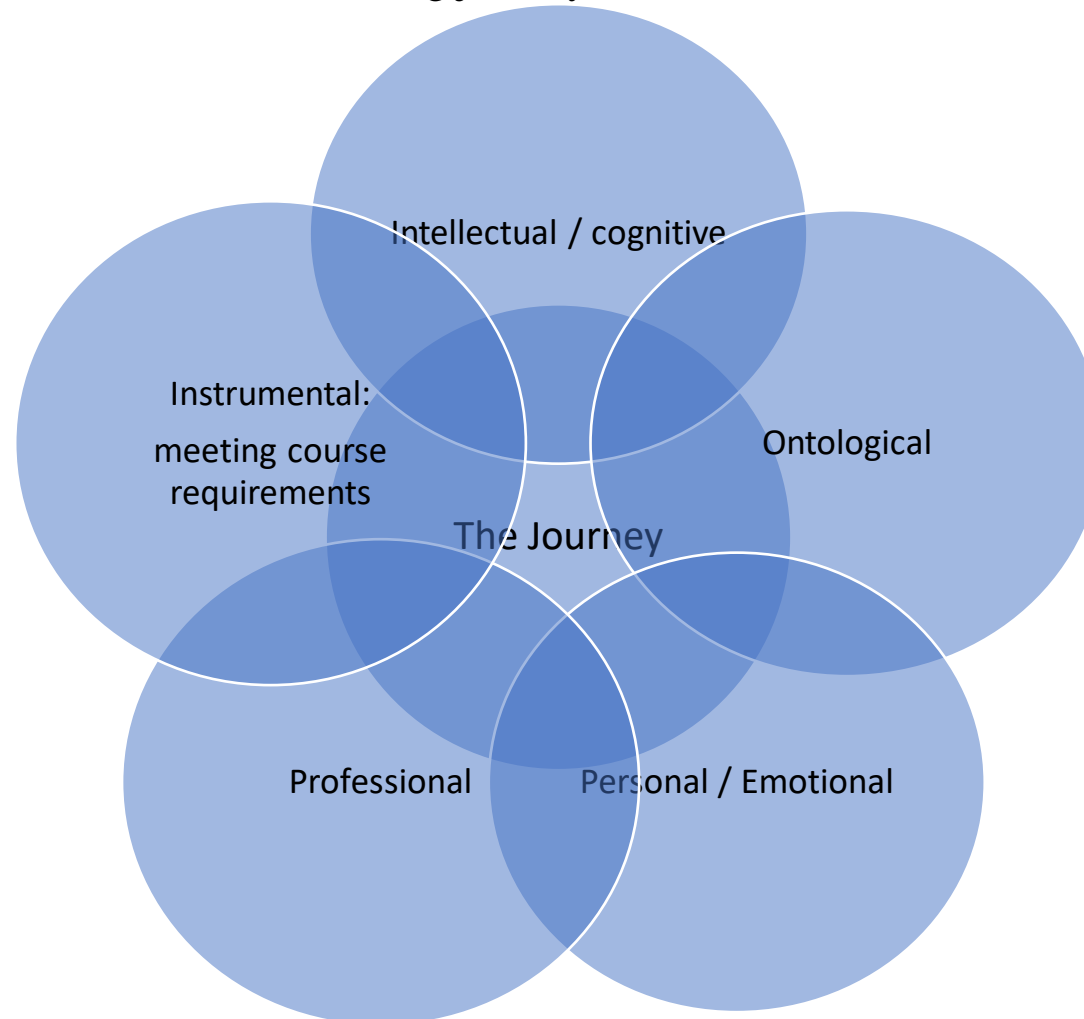
SRHE 'Doctoral Supervising and Examining Remotely – meeting the challenges of working under Covid19'

<https://www.srhe.ac.uk/events/pastevents/details/?eid=479>

(further references at the end)

# Research learning journeys: multi-dimensional

Doctoral learning journeys Wisker et al HEA, 2011



# 3 dimensions -and how they are affected by remote supervision generally and in the current pandemic

- Personal – wellbeing, disruptions, context, communications, collegiality
- Learning – workflow, learning dialogues supervisor/candidate and community of peers
- Institutional – structures timings technology and accessibility bandwidth

# Distance candidates and remote supervision - then and now

- Perhaps we have always worked with distance candidates
- Perhaps you were a distance /and or part-time candidate
- What issues have presented eg isolation, life pressures, momentum, motivation, lack of contact with others to develop dialogues and great ideas, share work -
- For the candidates? for you as a supervisor?
- What has worked well?
  
- In considering the COVID exacerbated versions of being a doctoral candidate and being a doctoral supervisor –draw on and build beyond these experiences

We are

- a) helping to deal with the issues the candidates face
- b) helping the candidates to deal with the issues
- c) dealing with our own issues

Please keep all of this in mind as we consider issues, challenges and what works/might work now

# What issues do your doctoral candidates face now?

## Personal

- Emotional and Spatial – location
- Separation from families/ family issues
- Home working – domestic demands, family, pets, deliveries
- Health - physical and psychological
- Isolation
- Screen fatigue
- ‘ontological insecurity’ ‘existential terror’ (the threat of the virus, the removal of everyday markers and routines, the uncertain ending of the lockdown)
- lack of energy and drive
- Douglas Halliday found amongst his Durham centre scientists: 48% no regular daily routine; 50% never turn computer off; 75% don't exercise outside;
- Researching remotely and its supervision can be geographically, economically and culturally unequal and perhaps unequal in terms of gender – home schooling, domestic demands

## Institutional

- Access problems - if it's a practical scientific or artistic social project - access to machinery, labs, materials, archives - spaces to carry out the research
- Access problems - Technology: for candidates without high level sustained Internet access there are problems with accessing online journals and any materials, information, data management systems, bandwidth and stability, powercuts, lack of familiarity with new essential tech (eg MS Teams, Zoom, online library)
- Time to completion might change



# Learning

- Challenges to drive, motivation
- Difficulties of developing ideas and practices alone when better suited to working with others
- Lack of developmental dialogues
- Access to participants and materials, labs, libraries, support practices
- Decreased contacts and variety – some collegial and community
- Disciplinary differences
- Opportunities to share ongoing work and overcome stuck places
- Changes to project-time, methodology and methods.



# Candidates I have worked with over the past few weeks (We have met entirely online)

- Uprooting from home, coming to the UK/moving round their home countries from cities to coast/village
- Life changing losses and changes - relatives dying, distance from families, isolation in a UK or other location which is unfamiliar
- Limited access to the Internet and therefore facilities, reading etc
- Extreme psychological upset, emotional, financial, physical upset relocations, loss of income, loss of jobs, loss of friendship and community groups
- 'I am doing much more cooking, more cleaning up, home schooling,'
- Against this background, one of the candidates I have supervised recently echoed several from the past, noting that the only thing which has structure, direction, engages her imaginatively and intellectually and is moving forward, the only thing she can manage is the research project

# Some informal quotes

- 'my working hours went up a lot' 'crazy working hours'
- (In MS teams)
- 'I'm very happy to see all my colleagues ; all the fragile people'.

# Candidates using online community communications

[R]ise in digital communication ...‘communicating with their peers regularly via messaging services such as WhatsApp or by using video calling software such as Skype. These services offer greater opportunities to interact as they do not require a physical meeting. They also allow for group communications whereby a number of students can interact with the community at the same time.

P[p]eer support is not only limited to networks of peers who have physically met each other, increasingly students are turning to *digital first* communities as a form of support... Social Network websites to speak to other students. This can be an effective strategy to overcome a lack of physical research culture. On the social media site Twitter there is a vibrant culture of doctoral students from all disciplines interacting with each other through hashtags such as #phdchat. McPherson *et al* (2015) have found Twitter is beneficial for building networks both locally and globally, enhancing information flows and inspiring thinking (McPherson *et al.*, 2015).

Branching out also allows students to communicate with more experienced researchers within their field.

**Joe Waghorne ‘Postgraduate research in professional practice: processes, challenges, supervision, support, and success’** PhD in progress, University of Brighton

# Encourage and enable

- Teams and online communities to link candidates with you and with each other, reduce isolation, build work links, information sharing, support when stuck, emotional wellbeing
- Mix the personal, institutional and learning sharing in each 'meeting'.
- Considering research and researcher development and issues timelines- spot possible problems in advance and put in support, advice, links
- Offer updates about deadlines, development, resources and successful practices through resource links/locations/sharing (mention when speaking, provide static links)
- Provide information about learning and research development (Coursera etc MOOCs, websites, online videos and resources)
- Engagement with regular teams meetings (led by supervisors) to stay in touch with small groups and whole cohorts
- Development of online communities (which candidates can manage themselves)







# Some issues for supervisors (as well as candidates)

- Intense focused sessions online on the screen are exhausting - Pam Denicolo (SRHE) pointed out your eyes water. I'd like to add your head hurts, your back hurts, your legs fall asleep
- There are major intrusions from the family your pets, delivery man and random flies, bees or birds
- You are fitting this in around a range of other demands and tasks in a location which is not ideal for focused dialogues at a very high intellectual level nuanced for individual learners
- If all supervision is online, picking up non-verbal clues, managing dynamics of the dialogues - not too insistent, not too vague, interestingly affected by 'reading' issues arising from unspoken concerns and cultural differences



# Remote and online supervision: making it work well

- More **personal** and aware of wellbeing of the candidate
- Regular short structured contacts starting with friendly concerns
- Should be accompanied by collegial community interactions eg in teams (facility for micro teams in MS teams etc), writing groups
- Despite or because of the **technology** it genuinely can enable complex interactive supervisory dialogues and **learning**
- More intense, focused and **structured** supervision
- Building on knowledge of **institutional and doctoral** expectations/regulations/
- Demands highly structured, managed, frequent, dependable synchronous(online meetings) and asynchronous (email, sharing materials, links to facilities, reading)
- Pre-planning and focused reading to identify issues to talk about and share
- Structured post supervision activities –notes, plans, updates on timelines

# For supervisors

## Personal

- Find manageable comfortable well ventilated working space
- Manage time - screen time, domestic demands
- Organise, structure
- Take regular breaks,
- Get exercise
- Eat properly
- Sleep properly
- Put time into friends, family, creative activities
- Plan yourself out of stuck places with candidates and their work
- Congratulate yourself when supervisory interactions go well

## Institutional

- Stay in touch with other supervisors to share positive (and negative) experiences, tips, materials, institutional disciplinary and research information, and experience
- Stay informed
- Use the supervisory teams/pairs process to build rapport, plan supervisions and workload division, discuss candidate progress etc.
- Get on with each other despite any differences of hierarchy, age, culture, personality

## Learning

- Keep up with your own research and discipline communities - avoid isolation
- Take part in enough online, work, development and sharing activities/not substituting these for every other work and life demand
- Make and develop new international links
- Keep researching and writing planning and sharing – remotely until it is possible to do it effortlessly
- Build and enjoy the high level intellectual learning dialogues with students and other supervisors

# Support for distance supervisors

- Keep in touch with each other locally and internationally, sharing experiences and positive constructive solutions to problems with candidates' progress, your own communication, isolation etc
- Use eg MS Teams for supervisor communication and exchanges
- Engage with the plethora of really useful webinars, resources

'Increasing numbers of domestic and international postgraduates are studying at a distance or offshore. For their supervisors, this could present particular challenges concerning negotiating issues and practices related to demands of studying and undertaking research at a distance, balancing research, work and domestic responsibilities and, for international students, negotiating cultural difference, differences in preconceptions and expectations of PhD processes and culturally inflected learning styles. Distance supervisors might never actually get to know their students or negotiate face-to-face ways of dealing with issues. At Anglia Polytechnic University (APU), a successful, offshore, international cohort-based PhD programme has run for 5 years involving 180 students, with a high success rate (45 PhDs to date). To address supervisors' needs so they might best support, enable and empower students' research and PhD achievement, we constructed an online development and support programme that was unpatronising in tone, that was a shaped process which marked PhD development stages, and one that involved:

- **Negotiating differing demands of new and well-established supervisors;**
- **Supervisors contributing to development and discussion;**
- **Focusing on issues of cultural difference and distance supervision;**
- **Encouraging supervisors to empower and enable students to take critical approaches in research and maintain momentum through to successful completion.**
- (Temporary usernames for our online supervisors were 'hedgehogs'. The idea of inviting in, nurturing often invisible visitors to a space, hoping that support aids survival, not squashing, was an appealing analogy.) **Key words:** distance supervision; postgraduate supervision; international students

**Wisker *et al* (2003) On nurturing hedgehogs: Developments online for distance and offshore supervision.**







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