Doctoral Education Beyond the Single Supervisor

Supervision as a Collective Practice and the Problem of Accountability

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The doctoral supervision that European universities describe in their regulations is individual, and the supervision that produces completed doctorates is collective. This article examines the gap: what a supervisory team actually does, why the single-supervisor model persists in law and in culture, and what the collective practice requires if it is to be accountable. It argues that the team is not a dilution of responsibility but a condition of it, and that the instrument which makes the team work is the written record of its meetings.

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1. The Regulation and the Practice

Almost every European university publishes a regulation that names one supervisor as responsible for a doctoral candidate, and almost every completed doctorate has been produced by several people. The gap is not a scandal; it is the ordinary difference between a legal instrument and a working arrangement.

The regulation names one supervisor because accountability requires a person: a committee cannot be dismissed, a person can. The practice involves several because a doctoral project crosses the competences of a single specialist: the person who knows the method may not know the field, and the person who knows the field may not have the time.

Everyone who shaped the thesis is absent from the record of its supervision

The consequence is a set of informal arrangements that carry the work and no legitimacy. A second supervisor who reads every draft and never signs anything, a postdoctoral researcher who teaches the candidate the instrument, a colleague who supplies the data, a librarian who

builds the search strategy: all of them supervise and none of them is visible in the file that the quality assurance office reviews.

2. What the Team Supplies

The evidence on completion and on satisfaction is consistent about the function of the team, and the function is narrower than its advocates claim.

The first thing the team supplies is continuity of attention. A single supervisor travels, becomes ill, changes institution or loses interest, and the candidate's project depends on the continuity of one person's attention. A team of three supplies a rota and a mitigating redundancy that no individual arrangement can provide.

The second is the correction of a judgement. A supervisor who is convinced that a project is close to completion is not the best judge of whether it is, and a second reader who says that the third chapter does not work performs a service that the candidate cannot perform for herself.

The third is the introduction to a network, which is the resource that distinguishes a doctorate completed in four years from one completed in seven. The team's value here is uneven: a team of specialists in the same institution supplies little that a single well-connected supervisor does not, and a team that spans institutions supplies an access that nothing else supplies.

3. Why the Single Model Persists

Three forces keep the single-supervisor model in place, and none of them is a defence of its merits.

The first is the budget. A team costs money in time that the institution does not reimburse, and the recognition of supervision in the workload model is calculated per candidate rather than per hour of supervision delivered. The second is the culture of autonomy: a professor who is asked to share the supervision of a candidate reads the request as an assessment of her competence, and the reading is not always wrong.

The third is the law of the award. In several systems the supervisor's signature carries a legal weight that cannot be shared, because the regulation that governs the award names a person who certifies that the

thesis is the candidate's own work. A team can advise; only a named person can certify.

The reform that would matter is not the abolition of the named supervisor but the separation of certification from supervision in the regulation, so that a person can certify the integrity of the work while a team answers for its quality.

4. Making the Team Accountable

A team that is not accountable is a committee of advisors with no consequences, and the absence of consequences is the reason many teams dissolve into a single functioning relationship and two signatures.

Accountability requires three instruments, and all three are documentary. The first is a supervision agreement that names each member's contribution: who reads which chapter, who is responsible for the method, who answers for the ethics approval, who is the point of contact in an emergency. The second is a record of meetings, kept by the candidate, minuting the advice given and the decisions taken, so that a disagreement about what was agreed can be resolved by reading. The third is an annual review conducted by someone outside the team, which is the only instrument that can detect a relationship that has stopped working.

Instrument	Failure prevented	Owner
Supervision agreement	Unclear contribution	The team
Meeting record	Disputed advice	The candidate
Annual review	Silent breakdown	The institution
Certification clause	Collective denial	The regulation

Table 1 Three instruments and the failure each prevents

5. The Candidate's Position

The team changes the candidate's position in a way that the literature describes less often than the benefits, and the change is a shift of power.

A candidate with one supervisor negotiates with one person whose judgement she must accept and whose favour she requires. A candidate with three negotiates with a group that can disagree, and the dis-

agreement is an opportunity: she can test an argument against two readings before committing to it. The opportunity is real and it is also a burden, because a group that disagrees transfers the resolution of the disagreement to the person with the least authority in the room.

The instrument that manages this is the agreement again, with a clause on deadlock: which member decides when the team cannot agree, and what the candidate may do when the decision is adverse. The clause is unpleasant to draft and it is the one that candidates invoke most often in the cases that reach an ombudsman.

6. Implications for Institutional Policy

Four measures would move a doctoral school from a regulation that names one supervisor to a practice that supports several.

The first is to write the team into the regulation with named roles and a deadlock clause, so that the arrangement has a legal form rather than a customary one. The second is to count supervision in the workload model by the hour delivered rather than by the candidate supervised, because the current count pays for a signature and not for the reading.

The third is to fund the team's meetings as a cost of the programme, since a team that meets without a budget meets once. The fourth is to require the annual review from outside the team, and to make the review's report the instrument by which the school learns about a supervision that has failed before the candidate withdraws.

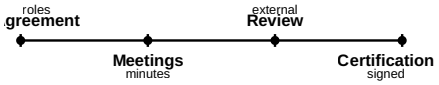

Figure 1 The supervisory year

7. Conclusions

The single supervisor is a legal fiction that the practice has outgrown, and the team is a practice that the regulation has not yet recognised. The gap costs candidates the continuity that a rota would supply and costs institutions the information that a record would preserve.

Three conclusions follow. Supervision should be understood as a collective practice with a named certifier, which requires the separation of certification from supervision in the regulation. Accountability comes from documents rather than from goodwill: the agreement, the minute and the outside review are the three instruments that convert a team into an accountable body. And the counting of supervision by the hour is the measure that determines whether the team exists outside the regulation that names it.

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