

RESEARCH SUPERVISION RECOGNITION PROGRAMME PUBLICATION

# A GUIDE TO ONLINE SUPERVISION

Guide for Supervisors

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# Introduction

Traditionally doctoral candidates studied on campus and, fieldwork apart, were in close proximity to supervisors throughout their studies. But in recent years there has been a rapid growth in the numbers of students undertaking most of their studies off-campus, often at a very considerable distance from the institution.

This development has been made possible by advances in information and communication technologies (ICT), which have enabled candidates to communicate with supervisors and others (Maor, Ensher, & Fraser, 2015).

The purpose of this guide is to identify the benefits of online supervision, to consider the challenges, and to suggest ways in which supervisors might be able to overcome them.

It is not intended just for present circumstances where campuses are locked down because of the Covid-19 virus, but more generally for situations where candidates engage in research at geographical distance from the institution, or in programs that involve online components.

The guide looks at the benefits of supervising in an online environment, outlines the issues and challenges for supervisors and candidates, and suggests strategies and practices for supervisors to consider when working with candidates engaged in research at a distance.



# 1 Benefits

The key benefits of online supervision are that it:

- Facilitates access to doctoral education for candidates who might not otherwise have the opportunity, enabling them to remain in their communities, families, and jobs (Andrew, 2012; Kumar, Johnson, & Hardeman, 2013; Pappas & Jerman, 2011).
- Enhances diversity in doctoral education by enabling the recruitment of under-represented groups, for example, women, those from minority ethnic and racial groups including indigenous peoples, and those with disabilities (Roumell & Bolliger, 2017).
- Enables qualified academics to supervise from anywhere in the world with the relevant technical infrastructure (Frederick, Zaikina-Montgomery, Rasmussen, & Slaya, 2016). This is particularly relevant to disciplines where researchers have to travel to conduct their own research, but need to supervise candidates who are located on campus or elsewhere.



## 2 Challenges for Supervisors and Doctoral Candidates

The challenges faced in online supervision vary considerably depending upon the contexts and the individuals involved in the process. But eight frequently found challenges are:

### 2.1 Connecting

Navigating different time zones and the technologies that are needed to communicate and collaborate about research processes at a distance can be challenging for both supervisors and doctoral candidates (Bender, Rubel, & Dykeman, 2018). Doctoral candidates often feel isolated online, often hesitate to initiate contact with their supervisor, and thus lack a sense of connection with the supervisor when working on their research at a distance (Erichsen, Bolliger, & Halupa, 2014). Additionally, candidates' technology access could influence the means and process of communication (Deshpande, 2017).

### 2.2 Communicating

In the online environment, the focus on research and the thesis/dissertation can be hindered by the need for supervisors and/or doctoral candidates to learn how to use technologies appropriately, communicate effectively online, manage the online environment, and contribute to the creation of a comfortable atmosphere. This learning curve might also discourage the supervisor or candidate from continuing online interactions. Additionally, situations often arise during thesis/dissertation processes where both supervisors and/or candidates might find it challenging to communicate in writing (for example, an email). For instance, even in the case of pre-existing relationships, candidates who are at a distance can struggle to



communicate in an email life events or personal problems that hinder their research progress.

### 2.3 Building a Relationship

Pre-existing relationships and established supervision processes in an on-campus environment allow for continued building of trust and collaboration in the online environment (deJanasz & Godschalk, 2013). Embarking on a supervisory relationship in the online environment necessitates the building of trust and personal connection (Rademaker, 2016) that is difficult in the absence of non-verbal cues and informal interactions (Kumar & Johnson, 2019). Furthermore, social and cultural differences might influence supervisors' and doctoral candidates' communication, interactions, and/or self-direction online (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015).

### 2.4 Understanding Expectations

If doctoral candidates have not previously worked with their supervisor or peers on campus, they can be ignorant of academic processes, ethics, accepted academic practices, and their responsibilities in addition to research processes and writing (Kumar & Johnson, 2014). Supervisors who are tasked with communicating information and knowledge in these areas in addition to research supervision at a distance can be overwhelmed.

### 2.5 Undertaking the Research Project

Unless doctoral candidates have previously had opportunities to work with their supervisors in a research apprenticeship context, they do not often possess research experience or the knowledge and skills needed for thesis/dissertation research. Supervisors are then tasked with providing support at a distance throughout the



thesis/dissertation process from the selection of a thesis topic to the design and implementation of research to writing the thesis/dissertation. This is extremely challenging for online supervisors and compounded due to the absence of peer modelling and support, and the on-campus academic environment (Kumar & Johnson, 2019; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017).

## 2.6 Producing Writing

As Wellington (2010) has argued, all doctoral candidates need to write frequently and regularly throughout their candidatures to help them develop their ideas and organise their thoughts, learn and understand their material, express their emerging arguments and conclusions, and communicate these to their supervisors. This can be difficult for those studying on-campus, but is often more so for those studying online who may have less experience of writing longer pieces of work, who are without face-to-face support, and who may be subject to more distractions because of employment and family circumstances (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Kumar & Johnson, 2019; Sussex, 2018). Also, candidates on campus have opportunities to present their work to colleagues and fellow-candidates face-to-face or in writing groups, which are not available to those studying online.

## 2.7 Giving Feedback

Supervisors often find it challenging to provide feedback solely in written form, unaccompanied by verbal feedback, in the online environment, also because of the absence of verbal or non-verbal response cues from the doctoral candidate confirming their understanding of the feedback (Kumar & Johnson, 2019). Studies (Andrew, 2012; Erichsen et al., 2014; Kumar et al., 2013) affirm that many candidates struggle to understand asynchronous or written feedback provided in the absence of





verbal cues (for example, tone of voice) and/or find it unduly critical, and can as a result lose confidence and/or motivation.

## 2.8 Isolation

The thesis/dissertation process is isolating and challenging even for doctoral candidates in on-campus programs (see for example Donelan, 2016; Jairam & Kall, 2012; Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014). These challenges are compounded in the online environment where candidates are not on a campus, are not surrounded by peers, professors, and research activities, and lack opportunities for sharing, collaborating, and interacting with peers and experts (Kumar & Johnson, 2014). Likewise, if supervisors are unable to work on-campus, the absence of informal and formal conversations about candidates, strategies, and policies can cause a sense of isolation.



## 3 Strategies and Practices

It should be recognised that many strategies and practices suggested in this guide overlap with those for effective or successful in-person supervision.

But there is one major difference; when interacting on a campus, supervisors have multiple opportunities (formal and informal) and many cues (for example, body language) to do these things face to face, whereas online they have to be created, planned, and structured with much more intentionality and purpose (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Kumar & Johnson, 2019).

### 3.1 Connecting

#### Guidance

- Initiate and schedule the first meeting in the online environment, even in the case of pre-existing relationships.
- Establish a convenient common time across time zones (if applicable) that works for both supervisor and doctoral candidate.
- Identify a mode of communication (for example, telephone, audio conference, or video conference) for the meeting that both supervisor and candidate are comfortable with, and that takes into account the technology access for both (for example, if bandwidth availability is a problem for either candidate or supervisor, it might not be possible to hold a quality video conference and an audio conference would be more conducive to avoid technical problems during the meeting).
- Establish and communicate 'virtual office hours' at regular intervals (for example, weekly or bi-weekly) and identify a permanent virtual location (for example, Zoom link) where the supervisor will be available.



## Supporting Evidence

Studies (Erichsen et al., 2014; Kumar & Johnson, 2019; Kumar, Johnson, Dogan, & Coe, 2018) have found that doctoral candidates largely hesitate to initiate contact with their supervisors online, and that it is often necessary for supervisors to connect with candidates and establish a mode of communication in the online environment. Where supervisors and candidates are in different time zones, account needs to be taken of this in scheduling meetings. Likewise, access to technology or the quality of connections where the supervisor and candidates are located should also be taken into consideration. In addition, to help candidates who might need spontaneous meetings and to protect supervisor time outside formal supervisions, Wisker (2007) and Nasin and Matfakheri (2013) suggest that supervisors should schedule a regular virtual 'office hour'.

## 3.2 Communicating

### Guidance

- Initiate and lead online communication at least for the first few months of the online supervisory relationship. As doctoral candidates become more comfortable with supervision and the research process, consider a gradual transfer of responsibility for communication to the candidate.
- Schedule online meetings with candidates at least once a month. In the initial phases of research or to build a relationship with the candidate online, more frequent meetings might be needed.
- Choose and use technologies based on the goals of the meeting (for example, if discussing data analysis, a technology that enables screen sharing might be needed) and access to technology at that time. This can change during the process based on the location of the supervisor and candidate.



## Supporting Evidence

Given that there will be few if any face-to-face meetings, the first priority in any online supervisory relationship is to establish a communication strategy. This, as Albion and Erwee (2011) have pointed out, needs to cover who communicates, when and how.

With regard to the 'who', Watts has suggested:

...maintaining effective communication is the responsibility of the supervisor, as part of both what the student [or sponsor] is paying for and if the informal, if not explicit, learning contract between them (2008, p 371).

At the same time, as doctoral candidates make progress during the thesis/dissertation, supervisors have found it valuable to establish the expectation that the candidate will communicate with the supervisor at regular intervals, or provide updates (Kumar & Johnson, 2019).

With regard to the 'when', there is a need to strike a balance between keeping in touch and potentially overloading the candidate (too frequent demands to report on progress) or the supervisor (too frequent demands for help and support). Watts (2008) has suggested that formal supervisions should minimally be scheduled at around one per month. This reduces isolation for candidates, ensures that they feel supported and motivated in an online environment, and enables supervisors to keep track of research progress (Kumar et al., 2018). The frequency of online meetings influences both candidate progress as well as satisfaction in online supervision, with researchers recommending the importance of consistent and frequent communication, but the frequency of meetings might differ based on the stage of the thesis/dissertation process and how much support candidates need at the time (Broome, Halstead, Pesut, Rawl, & Boland, 2011; Jacobs, Doyle, & Ryan, 2015; Kumar & Coe, 2017). For example, during the first year, meetings on a fortnightly basis



might be more helpful to help candidates get started and to build a relationship with them.

With regard to the 'how', both technology and strategy play a role in a successful online supervisory process. The choice of medium is determined by the preferences of supervisors and candidates, by their access to technologies, and their familiarity as well as expertise in using those technologies. Research (see Dowling & Wilson, 2015; Kumar & Johnson, 2017; Maor et al., 2015) suggests that supervisors and candidates should choose technologies appropriate for their specific context and situation, be it e-mail, phone or audio Skype, videoconferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom or social media such as Facebook or Twitter. For example, bandwidth for videoconferencing might be difficult during field research, but possible when the supervisor and candidates have stable Internet connections. Comfort with the technology, and the purpose of the meeting should drive the choice of the technology used during a supervisory meeting. Whatever the preferred medium it is important, as Nasiri and Mafakheri (2015) have argued, not to let the technology become a distraction so that more time is spent trying to get the technology to work than focussing upon the research, so often the simpler the better!



### 3.3 Building a Relationship

#### Guidance

- If at all possible, try to meet face to face with the doctoral candidate early in the candidature and lay the basis for your future relationship.
- Be aware that, as well as formal communication, informal communication and humour can help to build relationships and establish trust.
- Take time to get to know the personal circumstances of your candidates and to understand how these might impact upon their studies.
- Be flexible, encouraging, and ready (literally) if things become too pressured, to suggest a break.
- In the case of candidates from other countries, find out about social and cultural differences and take these into account when communicating with candidates.

#### Supporting Evidence

Supervisors might be fortunate enough to have pre-existing on-campus relationships with doctoral candidates that they build upon online, and this makes the whole process much easier. However, this is not always possible and supervisors may have to embark on a supervisory relationship in the online environment.

The chances of building a good relationship can be greatly influenced by the online presence of the supervisor - the extent to which he or she is perceived to be present and available to the candidate, and is able to convey his/her personality during online communication, despite being geographically at a distance.



As Schichtel (2010) has shown, in order to convey their personality, supervisors need to be competent in online communication and also socially competent in the online environment. Duffy, Wickersham-Fish, Rademaker, and Wetzler (2018) suggest the use of humour, occasional social and informal interactions online, and the provision of advice can all contribute to building good online supervisory relationships. In utilising humour, it is important to ensure that it is both relevant and appropriate (Bakar, 2019) to the supervision content.

Additionally, it is important that supervisors have an empathy with the issues that can be experienced by their candidates. As Kumar and Johnson (2019) have pointed out, “Unlike full-time on-campus students, who worked with faculty members and had a support network on campus, online doctoral students... worked full-time, many had families, and many were embedded in professional and social communities that did not understand the dissertation process or allow time for it” (p 66). So being flexible, providing encouragement (Erichsen et al., 2014), and knowing when candidates might benefit from taking a break from their studies are all important in building online relationships.

Finally, online supervisors need to be alert to the social and cultural differences that can influence expectations, communication, and understanding between themselves and their candidates and consider and be sensitive to cultural differences when attempting to build supervisory relationships online (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015).



## 3.4 Understanding Expectations

### Guidance

- Ensure that your doctoral candidate has an induction into the institution, its policies and procedures, the programme, and research resources.
- Spend time at the start of the relationship with the candidate developing a mutual understanding of your respective roles and responsibilities.
- Consider formalising this via an agreement or learning contract.
- Identify milestones for the research project and regularly review progress towards them.
- Set deadlines for sharing drafts and giving feedback.
- Put candidates in touch with further advanced candidates to discuss candidate and supervisory roles.

### Supporting Evidence

Induction into the university, its policies and processes, and other resources needed for research (Wisker, 2007) is extremely important for all doctoral candidates, face-to-face or online, to succeed. Institutions, departments or programmes can provide previously scheduled or even pre-recorded online orientations to doctoral programme policies, requirements, and online resources available at the institution for candidates (for example, access to technologies, online tutorials, access to research software) – these can be used by multiple supervisors and can reduce the time and effort expended in these areas by individual online supervisors (Kumar et al., 2018).





Doctoral candidates (both on-campus and online) often lack the information literacy skills that are foundational to any research or thesis/dissertation project, and are also ignorant of the skills they need or how to acquire them. If they are on campus, they have opportunities to learn through available training, with help from librarians, or from peers. Supervisors whose candidates are not on a university campus can be greatly assisted in this endeavour if institutions provide webinars, step-by-step online tutorials, and resources on library websites about various information literacy topics (for example, searching academic databases, use of bibliographic software) (Kumar & Dawson, 2018). In the absence of such resources, supervisors have found it helpful to collaborate with librarians at their institution who can create, update, and make available such resources for online supervision.

Studies (Guccione, 2018; Heyns et al., 2019; Holbrook et al., 2014; Moxham, Dwyer, & Reid-Searl, 2013) show that it is vital to the success of the candidacy for supervisors and candidate to understand their respective roles. This is normally done face to face, often by going through a questionnaire with the candidate such as the Supervisory Expectations Questionnaire (Kiley & Cadman, 1997). In online supervision, supervisors and candidates can complete the questionnaires independently and then discuss their responses during an online meeting.

A further strategy that can be helpful is to formalise mutual understandings via an agreement or learning contract. These are mandatory in many universities for all doctoral candidates, but they can be particularly helpful in online supervisory relationships where candidates might have no prior exposure to models of supervision or to policies and norms integral to supervision at their university. Negotiation of expectations at the beginning of a relationship or online supervision, and clear written statements of roles and responsibilities can be helpful to both supervisors and candidates (Jacobs et al., 2015). As candidates become independent researchers, and roles change, it is vital that role expectations as well as candidates'



progress towards professional goals are discussed again based on the agreement or learning contract to ensure that they remain aligned.

In the online environment, expectations in terms of the process and timeline also need to be clarified at the beginning and at regular intervals during the thesis/dissertation process. Milestones and deadlines for different parts of the process can increase accountability for both the supervisor and the candidate. In the online environment, where candidates and supervisors do not interact otherwise and conversations cannot happen in passing, candidates and supervisors have found it useful to set deadlines for candidate progress sharing or drafts, and for supervisor provision of feedback (Kumar & Johnson, 2019, Kumar et al 2018). This helps supervisors and doctoral candidates manage their time, and reduces frustration or misunderstandings in the online environment.

Additionally, some supervisors have connected new candidates beginning the thesis/dissertation process with their doctoral candidates who are further along in their research or with those who have successfully graduated so that candidates can receive advice not only about various aspects of the research process, but also about the process of working with that supervisor (Kumar et al., 2018). Such conversations or connections that dynamically occur on campus greatly contribute to candidate success but are often missing in the online environment.



## 3.5 Designing and Implementing the Research Project

### Guidance

- Be prepared to assess whether doctoral candidates possess the basic research skills and, where appropriate, support them to acquire them.
- Be able to provide 'scaffolding' in the early stages to help candidates to build their projects.
- Take advantage of videoconferencing software that enables screen-sharing (for example, Skype, Zoom) for discussions pertaining to data and data analysis.
- Remember that research setbacks can seem less surmountable by online candidates and be prepared if necessary, to intervene.

### Supporting evidence

The process of designing and implementing research for the thesis/dissertation is a complex and challenging endeavour for doctoral candidates in any context (Kiley, 2009). In the online environment, supervisors are often faced with guiding candidates who have not previously conducted research and might not have access to resources available to on-campus candidates. In the absence of research training or courses at an institution that can meet the needs of online candidates, supervisors have to find existing online resources or involve candidates in research projects where they can acquire skills, observe and learn about methods and research processes, and be exposed to other researchers (Erichsen et al., 2014).

With respect to working with online candidates on their research, online supervisors have reported the value of structure and scaffolds, especially when candidates have to conceptualize and communicate research ideas at the beginning of their



thesis/dissertation. In addition to providing different types of resources, reading lists, online research tutorials or excellent theses/dissertations, online supervisors have found the following strategies successful - breaking down the initial process into concrete steps, providing a list of critical questions or step-by-step activities, and providing templates (for example, for logic models) to help candidates conceptualize their projects, develop research designs, and thesis/dissertation proposals (Kumar & Johnson, 2017, 2019). Examples of research or grant proposals and applications for ethical approval of research can also be helpful to candidates.

Such scaffolds motivate and guide online candidates who might not know where to begin or how to proceed, and also help supervisors avoid multiple drafts or conversations that do not encompass required components of research processes. Kumar and Johnson (2019) term these activities as research education that supervisors in an online environment find necessary to develop a quality research product, the thesis/dissertation. As in most supervisory relationships, the balance of supervisor guidance and candidates' independent work has to be constantly negotiated and changed. Supervisors have reported beginning the supervision process in the online environment with structure and scaffolds, but gradually moving towards more candidate autonomy and independence as candidates become more comfortable with research processes (Kumar & Johnson, 2019).

The use of screen-sharing during videoconferences for discussing data, data analysis procedures, and clarifying candidate questions about their findings has been valuable to supervisors and candidates in online supervision (Kumar & Johnson, 2019; Kumar et al., 2018). Candidates can share their data analysis or procedures within their research software (for example, SPSS, Atlas, NVivo) with their supervisors to clarify any questions. This also helps supervisors to identify any discrepancies in data or procedures, and also to model processes for candidates, if necessary.



As well as supporting the research project, supervisors have to support the candidate to undertake it, advise on academic problems, and demonstrate and model personal and professional ethics (Fedynich & Bain, 2011). Once their topics have been identified, research plans produced, and project-related skills developed, candidates often expect the remainder of their research to be plain sailing, for example a simple linear progression through theory, hypotheses, methods, data collection, data analysis, and results. Setbacks in research – the hypotheses unexpectedly disproved, the experiments that won't work or give negative results, the statistical analyses that contradict each other, the documents that offer inconsistent interpretations of events – can come as a shock to research students. This may be less of an issue for on campus candidates who have opportunities to observe others conducting research and peers with whom they can discuss and, hopefully, resolve, any issues. Supervisors may then need to be prepared to intervene more frequently to support online candidates to see how they might overcome academic problems with the research (Kumar & Johnson, 2014).



## 3.6 Producing Writing

### Guidance

- Start off small and build up to larger pieces of work.
- Provide examples and exemplars of good writing in the discipline(s).
- Discuss writing conventions in terms of citation and referencing.
- Encourage the use of bibliographic software (for example, EndNote, Refworks) for the use of in-text citations and references while writing.
- Where appropriate, refer candidates to institutional sources of support for academic writing.
- Offer advice on writing strategies.
- Establish peer support groups to facilitate writing.
- Provide opportunities for candidates to disseminate their work and receive feedback, for example, online journals, journal clubs and research conferences.

### Supporting Evidence

Here, sources of support for producing writing are, in many cases, identical for online and on-campus candidates.

Where candidates have limited experience of writing longer pieces of work, it can be helpful for supervisors to start off small by asking for short pieces of work, for example book or article reviews, building up to longer pieces of work, for example short research write-ups, and then proceed to ask for lengthier texts, for example a literature review (Wolff, 2010).



A further initial strategy can be to provide candidates with examples and exemplars of writing in the field so that they can become accustomed to the disciplinary genre(s) (Economou & James, 2017). It can be very helpful if online supervisors are able to discuss exemplars with their candidates, particularly if the latter emanate from cultures which have different conventions in terms of citations and referencing (Viera et al., 2013).

In addition, many institutions now have academic writing and support centres, and candidates can be pointed in their direction. Candidates should be introduced to bibliographic software (for example, Endnote) during the first year to facilitate in-text citations and bibliography management in their writing (Kumar & Dawson, 2018). The use of a shared library (within Endnote, for example) can be valuable to doctoral candidates as well as the supervisor. The supervisor can initially add seminal scholarship in the research area to get the candidate started, and the candidate can maintain the library with new resources thereafter, ensuring all resources for the thesis are easily available to both.

Often, online candidates have multiple pressures from family and employment commitments, and finding time to write can be a problem. Here, supervisors can assist by discussing writing strategies with them, for example 'bingeing' on writing when they do have stretches of time and 'snacking' between other activities when time is at a premium (Murray, 2014).

Further strategies include establishing 'buddy' systems whereby more advanced online candidates mentor less advanced ones in their writing (Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009), establishing candidate-only writing groups (see Kozar & Lunn, 2015), or providing both lateral and vertical support for writing with candidates reviewing each other's work before a final review by the supervisor (Kumar & Johnson 2019) which may be conducted by videoconferencing (Konings et al., 2016).



One area where online candidates are at a disadvantage compared to their on-campus counterparts is in terms of opportunities to join in the research lives of academic departments, which studies (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001) have shown are crucial to timely completion. Here it is possible for supervisors to provide or ask departments to provide comparable online opportunities, for example journals, journal clubs, and annual research conferences.

### 3.7 Giving Feedback

#### Guidance

- Discuss the provision and reception of feedback with your candidate.
- Remember that feedback has emotional connotations, and structure it accordingly.
- Keep the bigger picture in mind and not just the spelling and grammar.
- Respect the candidate's identity as a writer.
- Accept that candidates have the right to disagree.
- Follow up asynchronous feedback with synchronous feedback.
- Always feed-forward as well to enable your candidates to act on your feedback.

#### Supporting Evidence

In both on-campus and online provision, it is important for supervisors to discuss with candidates how they provide feedback, how feedback is crucial to scholarly excellence, and how they themselves handle feedback (for example, peer reviews of journal article submissions).





But this is even more important in the online environment where candidates do not have the privilege of being part of an on-campus research culture or group. Consequently, they might perceive feedback as being about them personally, get extremely demotivated, and no longer communicate with the supervisor online. So, it is important to clarify the purpose of feedback and how it should be received.

The emotional connotations also need to be kept in mind in designing feedback. Here, one technique is to use the “sugaring the pill” technique (Hyland, 2001) where supervisors can start with a positive note about the written draft and then make suggestions on what changes need to be done and end with more positive and kind words. Research on feedback suggests that feedback providers must encourage motivational beliefs. Expressive feedback, such as praise, developmental criticism and offering opinions are useful to enhance self-esteem of the writers and have been reported to provide the most benefit to learners (Kumar & Stracke, 2007).

It also needs to be kept in mind that feedback should really concentrate upon the substance rather than just the style. Some supervisors tend to focus on the mechanics of writing and spend a lot of time correcting editorial aspects of the writing. However, international research on feedback has clearly evidenced that focusing on editorial matters has limited use (Bitchener, Basturkmen, & East, 2010). Feedback is *not* error correction. Supervisors are not editors and at this level of education, the role of the supervisor is to focus on the scholarship. When supervisors are distracted with editorial matters by becoming “forensic”, they tend to lose the bigger picture of the draft they are reading and this can be to the detriment of the development of the research project.

Another temptation which supervisors need to be aware of, particularly with electronic submissions, is to “get into” the draft and start manipulating by changing sentence structures and adding/deleting what they have written. When supervisors do this, they are in fact taking away the voice and identify of the writer! If there are



issues with the writing, perhaps, a comment or suggestion would be pedagogically appropriate as a teaching tool rather than manipulating the writer's text and taking away the writer's identity (Pare, 2011).

Of course, candidates may not agree with your feedback, which can be disconcerting. But when you provide feedback, you need to allow the writer to decide if they want to accept or reject feedback is an invitation for them to reconsider what they have crafted (Pare, 2011). If writers ignore your feedback, do not despair as ignoring feedback is a form of learning too (Carter & Kumar, 2017). If supervisory team members provide conflicting feedback, this is an opportunity to reinforce the notion that knowledge is always contestable in academia. The supervisor can mentor the candidate to justify feedback that is ignored – this is perfect training if candidates want to write for journals at some point in time.

With on-campus candidates, feedback is often given in writing and then followed up by a meeting with the supervisors to discuss the points made and give candidates the chance to seek clarification or argue their case. The parallel for online candidates is to send them written comments within a document (asynchronous feedback), allow them time to reflect and to formulate responses or questions, and then convene a meeting (visual and/or oral) in real time for discussion and clarification (synchronous feedback) (Despande, 2017; Kumar & Johnson, 2019).

A final matter is for you and your candidate to agree what is to be done with the feedback, that is, to feed forward. 'Feed-forward' needs to be well directed, dialogic and contains enough information for the writer to revise and improve their work (Stracke & Kumar, 2016). This can be done in writing by giving detailed advice or by using probing directive questions such as suggestions, questions or instructions (Kumar & Stracke, 2007), but again good practice would be to reinforce this through synchronous feedback.



## 3.8 Isolation

### Guidance

- Create a group email or social media group to share resources and disseminate information among a group of candidates.
- Organize virtual group meetings of candidates at different stages of the thesis/ dissertation process to share their work.
- Establish an online portal for resources and documents common to the research group.
- Meet at a seminal annual conference (if possible) to enculturate candidates into the discipline and research community.
- Encourage candidates to connect with leading scholars on social media relevant to their discipline (for example, Twitter, LinkedIn).
- Encourage candidates to participate in activities by leading professional organizations in their discipline.
- Encourage candidates to, if possible, engage with researchers you know of in their field in local institutions.

### Supporting Evidence

When working with multiple candidates on their theses/dissertations in the online environment, supervisors have found it useful to engage in a combination of group and individual supervision to help candidates stay connected, build peer relationships, and collaboratively learn about research processes (Kumar & Johnson, 2019; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017).

Although candidates might be at varying stages of their research projects, they benefit from belonging to a group and developing a community; sharing their



progress, challenges, resources and experiences; and supporting each other both academically and psychosocially (Kumar et al., 2018). This also reduces the need for supervisors to explain more general research or thesis/dissertation processes to individual candidates working at a distance, because candidates are exposed to others in the group who are engaged in various parts of the thesis/dissertation process. Additionally, candidates themselves may have research expertise that they can share with other candidates. Doctoral Peer Support Groups have been reported to provide additional opportunities to develop graduate attributes and contribute to university efforts to instill these attributes by taking into account experiential learning (Stracke & Kumar, 2014).

Similar to individual online supervision, supervisors should initiate communication and provide structure in online group supervision in the form of regular group meetings, clear agendas and expectations for participation, templates or job-aids that can guide candidates, and peer review and feedback.

Other successful strategies in group-supervision include candidate presentations of progress during online meetings; usage of cloud storage for shared resources; discussions of time management strategies, writing challenges, or work/life balance; and provision of feedback to peers on their writing (Kumar & Dawson, 2018).

While the research project is the main focus of online supervision during the thesis/dissertation process, candidates' professional development and preparation for integration into the academic community is also a goal of doctoral education. Online supervisors can reduce the isolation and disconnectedness felt by candidates conducting research at a distance by encouraging them to participate in the activities of professional organizations in the discipline (for example, webinars, conferences), join special interest groups or research groups focused on their specific research areas, attend annual national or regional conferences in their field, and participate in



social media groups specific to scholars in the discipline (for example, follow leading scholars on Twitter).

Academic conferences can not only be opportunities for online supervisors and candidates to meet in person, but also for candidates to meet leaders in their field, and integrate into a community that they aim to participate in in the future (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015).

Additionally, candidates can benefit from connecting with institutions or research groups engaged in similar research in their geographies that are known to the supervisor (Taylor, Humphrey & Kiley, 2018; Wisker, 2007).

Supervisors can also experience isolation if no longer working on a campus, for example, in special circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic, or, when supervising in an online research degree programme. In such situations, they can adopt various strategies to stay engaged with colleagues and discuss their work and scholarship. Participation in formal online professional learning communities or special interest groups within the institution or at professional organizations, informal virtual 'water cooler' meetings or regular online group meetings, and social media groups can help supervisors stay connected and share their online supervisory practices (Duffy et al., 2018)



## 4 Conclusions

Developments in ICT have made online supervision possible, and there can be significant benefits to doctoral candidates, to the inclusiveness of doctoral programmes, and to supervisors. But candidates and supervisors engaging in online supervision can face challenges, which while similar to those faced by their on-campus counterparts, are often intensified by geographical distance.

These challenges are, however, by no means insurmountable, and there is evidence from studies across a range of disciplines (see, for example, Broome et al., 2011; Jacobs et al., 2015; Doyle, Jacobs, & Ryan, 2016; Kumar et al., 2018) that online supervision can comprise very satisfying experiences for both candidates and supervisors. This depends, of course, on doing it well, and hopefully the present guide has supplied suggestions backed by relevant information to support online supervisors to enhance their practice.

This document guides you through the process of reflecting on your supervisory practice and provides examples of how you might evidence the criteria of good practice in your application to become a UKCGE Recognised Research Supervisor.



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