

**Excellence in doctoral supervision: An examination of authoritative sources across four countries in search of performance higher than competence**

Alistair McCulloch, Vijay Mallan, Susan van Schalkwyk & Gina Wisker

**Contact details:**

**(Corresponding author): Alistair McCulloch**, Teaching Innovation Unit, University of South Australia, Australia. [alistair.mcculloch@unisa.edu.au](mailto:alistair.mcculloch@unisa.edu.au)

Teaching Innovation Unit  
University of South Australia  
Room P2-28, City East Campus - CEA-16  
North Terrace  
Adelaide, SA 5001  
Australia  
(Tel: +61 (0)8 830 21150) E: [alistair.mcculloch@unisa.edu.au](mailto:alistair.mcculloch@unisa.edu.au)

**Susan van Schalkwyk**, Centre for Health Professions Education, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

Centre for Health Professions Education (CHPE) - Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences  
Stellenbosch University  
PO BOX 941, Cape Town, 8000  
South Africa  
(Tel: +27 21 938 9054) E: [scvs@sun.ac.za](mailto:scvs@sun.ac.za)

**Vijay Mallan**, Higher Education Development centre, University of Otago, New Zealand.

65/75 Union Place West  
Dunedin 9016  
New Zealand.

(Tel: +64 3 479 8489) E: [vijay.mallan@otago.ac.nz](mailto:vijay.mallan@otago.ac.nz)

**Gina Wisker**, Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton.

Education Research Centre  
B322  
Checkland Building  
University of Brighton  
Falmer  
Brighton  
BN1 9PH (Tel: +44 01273 643446) E: [G.Wisker@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:G.Wisker@brighton.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

Supervision is generally recognised as playing a crucial role in the quality of a research student's doctoral experience and their academic outcomes and, in common with most areas of higher education, there is a desire to pursue excellence in this important area. Excellence in research degree supervision is, however, an elusive concept and on close scrutiny most of the discussions of high quality supervision, even those which purport to be identifying excellence, are couched in terms of competence rather than excellence. This paper examines two potentially national authoritative perspectives from which excellence in research degree supervision might be explicated (codes of practice and learning and teaching awards) from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom, but concludes that the complex nature of the activity and the complexity of the concept itself mean that rather than identifying excellence in supervision we can only respond to claims for excellence.

## **Keywords**

Research degree supervision, doctoral education, research degree supervisors, awards for supervision, learning and teaching awards, codes of practice, quality code

## **Excellence in doctoral supervision: An examination of authoritative sources across four countries in search of performance higher than competence**

### **Excellence in doctoral supervision**

A cursory search of policy documents and the scholarly literature on higher education rapidly reveals that there is no shortage of desire that all aspects of higher education should be excellent. From Ruben's 2004 book *Pursuing Excellence in Higher Education: Eight Fundamental Challenges*, to the UK's 'Research Excellence Framework' and its antipodean counterpart 'Excellence for Research in Australia', through the World Bank's launch in 2013 of '*Centres of Excellence...aimed at strengthening capacity in universities in West and Central Africa*' (University World News, 2013), and New Zealand's Todd Foundation Awards for Excellence (Universities) (Universities New Zealand, 2015), excellence as something to be striven for is ubiquitous across the world's higher education systems. Doctoral education is no exception. The European University Institute (2015) website says: 'Doctoral supervision is a core activity of the European University Institute. Of course, the excellence of the EUI as a whole depends on the excellence of its core activity – the preparation of the doctoral thesis' and the University of Cincinnati's website (2015) discusses the Dean of the Graduate School's *Strategy for Excellence in Doctoral Education*. In the same vein, Australia's University of Technology, Sydney's (UTS 2015) website notes that the 'role of the University Graduate School is to promote innovation and excellence in research education'. Nulty et al (2008, p. 694) say that 'research intensive universities have focused increasing attention on enriching supervisory excellence as one tool to enhance research students' publication activity'. Finally, an internet search produces a host of links to individual university awards for supervision excellence (the search phrase "university award for excellence in supervision" produced over thirty two million hits when run on Google on 19 April 2015).

This search for excellence in doctoral supervision is predicated on the reasonable and widely held belief that the quality both of the research student's experience and also the outcomes of their period of study are related in a significant way to the quality of the supervision received. (Renske et al, 2015) Further, we believe that the idea of excellence and the possibility of identifying it underpins a number of desired outcomes. Firstly, individual supervisors would be more readily able to reflect on their supervisory practice and identify where and how they can improve. Secondly, understanding excellence would assist academic developers to draw with confidence upon a greater degree of consensus in their supervisor development practice. Thirdly, identification would enable universities and national bodies to make more robust judgements about Learning and Teaching awards, including awards in the area of research degree supervision. However, in order to deliver these outcomes, there needs to be some characterisation of the notion of supervision excellence. This article argues that, to date, no such characterisation has been developed and, as a result, desired outcomes such as those outlined above remain difficult to achieve.

This article is intended to begin the process of addressing this omission and is structured in three parts. The first explores the challenges associated with identifying excellence in doctoral supervision and the second the extent to which national authoritative statements might have the potential to identify excellence in supervision. These sources are national codes of practice and frameworks which have emerged since the mid-1990s (termed the 'regulatory' perspective), and national awards for learning and teaching', which allow for awards to be made on the basis of supervision (termed the 'professional' perspective).

Examples of these two types of documents drawn from four countries - Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom – are examined. Having done this, the third

part of the article draws conclusions and suggests that we need new ways of thinking about excellence in the area, and proposing further work. In addition to those utilised in this article, two others also suggest themselves. These are the 'How to...supervise' literature (termed the 'practitioner' perspective) and the developing scholarly literature (termed the 'academic' perspective). However, neither of these is 'authoritative' in the same way as national codes and award schemes. These other perspectives are discussed further in McCulloch (2010).

### **Challenges in identifying excellence in doctoral supervision**

The study of excellence is furthest developed in the management literature where four analytically distinct approaches have been identified. (Emerson & Harvey, 1996 and Peters and Waterman, 1982) These view excellence as purpose-driven (i.e. goal-centric and measured by outputs), customer-centric (i.e. the extent to which the customer and other stakeholders are satisfied), process-oriented (i.e. the extent to which the process was administered in a smooth and timely fashion), and structure-supported (i.e. the extent to which all the necessary inputs and supports were in place).

While it is useful to have these four perspectives explicated, in and of itself they do not provide a simple answer to the issue under examination. Even if agreement within the doctoral education community about which perspective should be used was to be achieved, identifying excellence in doctoral supervision would remain difficult for a number of reasons. The first is rooted in recent 'changes in the nature of doctoral study' which challenge the 'nature of research supervision'. (Green and Powell 2007, p. 151) These changes include increasing diversity in the form by which the PhD is presented for examination, increasing diversity in modes of study, and most importantly the change in the primary purpose of the PhD toward that of training an individual for research rather than being focused simply on the research project being undertaken (Green and Powell, 2005, Lee and Danby, 2012). These challenges are compounded by the increasing dominance of supervisory teams containing at least two but often three individual supervisors. Taken together, these developments have led to an increasing uncertainty about the supervisor role (Bitzer and Albertyn, 2011).

Further, in an era in which supervision may be regarded as something which is delivered by a university as a whole (see, for example, Cumming, 2010) or at least through a number of units across the university, there is a serious level of analysis problem. As Nulty *et al.* say, any 'greater emphasis on excellent supervision requires a mechanism to demonstrate the outcomes of such practices at the individual, faculty and university level.' (p. 694) Put simply, and taking into account the increasing complexity of the supervisory role, the issue here is, how can the input of a single member of staff to a complex process like the completion of a doctoral thesis be separated out from the totality of the input?

In addition to the existence of competing perspectives from which excellence can be demonstrated/assessed, and challenges inherent in the changing nature of doctoral study, a further key factor which those trying to examine excellence in supervision must take into account is the relationship between excellence, standards and evidence. As Chism argues, first, there must be clarity about the criteria being used; second, that criteria and evidence should be linked; and third, that the question of distinguishing 'an extraordinary level...from ordinary levels' must be addressed. (pp. 608-610) This issue is relevant to which whichever of the four perspectives identified above is adopted. The first focuses on activity and measurable outputs and the remaining three are dimensional in nature. All four require the development of standards in order for the identification of excellence as opposed to competence to occur. Only one article has dealt with excellence in doctoral education in a substantial way and, in it, Nulty *et al.* support our argument that the practice of '*demonstrating* good supervisory practice is unlikely to be simple' (2009, p. 698) not least because, as Lewis noted in respect of university teaching, whilst it may be relatively simple to say what is acceptable or competent practice, '(e)xcellence has many more dimensions

than competence' (Elton, 1998, p. 35, cited in Chism, 2006). Excellence, however desirable it may be, is not simple and identifying excellence in an area such as doctoral supervision is complex – a complexity that encourages analytical slippage in discussions about its nature. It is interesting to note that in one of the very few discussions which attempts to address the issue of measuring either competence or excellence in a systematic way, Nulty et al (2009) talk of 'effective', 'attentive' and 'good' supervision, and also of 'highly successful' supervisors. This conceptual slippage between degrees of success in supervision is not uncommon in the literature and is an added problem for those seeking to define excellence in supervision. Difficulties with identifying excellence in supervision because of the complexity of the concept is compounded by the increasing complexity of the supervisory role. (Kobayashi, Grout, & Rump, 2015)

The complexity involved in defining excellence in supervision is demonstrated in Nulty et al where a framework for evidencing or claiming supervisory excellence is developed. However, despite the fact that it identifies a range of dimensions and potential datasets which could be used to evidence/claim excellence, it says very little about what might actually constitute 'excellence'. In a section addressing the 'supervisor's perspective' on excellence, the reader is told that excellent supervisors 'will likely have achieved broad experience across a number of supervisory contexts and roles.' Volume and range, however, are not in themselves indicators of excellence and indeed, the only potential indicator of excellence identified is 'the ability to be flexible and to adaptively facilitate the process'. The section also demonstrates a high degree of slippage between concepts with 'effective supervisors', 'attentive supervisors', '(g)ood supervisors' and '(h)ighly successful' all being used (p. 695). These terms are not, however, synonyms for 'excellent' and the paper fails to recognise this. In the subsequent section of the paper characterising supervisory excellence from the candidate's perspective, the term 'excellence' does not appear at all and while the paper addresses stakeholders in supervisory excellence, purposes in trying to identify excellence, the associated quality management processes and potential sources of supporting data, it does not address the issue of what excellence might actually be. This is not meant to detract from the value of the article which gives valuable guidance in constructing a claim for excellence, but rather to point out that it fails to define what excellence might be.

### **Authoritative statements on excellence in doctoral supervision: *regulatory* and *professional* perspectives**

In response, this article now moves to consider the possibility of identifying excellence in doctoral supervision. It does this through a consideration of two contexts. The first examines authoritative statements about research degree supervision in four countries. These authoritative statements are nationally accepted codes of practice or frameworks of good or best practice. The second context draws on the selection criteria for national learning and teaching awards. These are respectively labelled the *regulatory* and *professional* perspectives. Documents characteristic of these two perspectives drawn from four countries are discussed and assessed against a series of questions emerging from the earlier discussion. These questions are designed to ascertain the contribution, if any, that the documents might make to the identification of excellence in supervision. The questions relate, first, to the identification of the role and the elements involved in the performance of that role, second, whether the basic standard of competence in the performance of that role is identified, thirdly, whether the criteria along which a higher level of performance can be measured are identified, fourthly whether the standard of performance at which excellence can be said to be present are identified, whether there is any consideration of the difference or impact the supervisor has made and, finally which, if any, of the understandings of excellence are implicit in the approach. The specific questions asked of each are: Does it define the role of supervisor?; Does it distinguish the contribution of the 'individual supervisor'?; Does it identify

‘competence’?; Does it consider impact?; Does it address any of the four dimensions of excellence discussed above, i.e., is it purpose-driven, customer-centric, process-oriented and/or structure-supported)?

Before moving on to the discussion of the various authoritative statements, we should point that, in addition to emerging out of the above discussion, these criteria also reflect our own positions as Academic Development practitioners with a specific interest in doctoral supervision and that we are making implicit normative statements about what we consider to constitute dimensions of excellence if not the criteria by which excellence might be determined.

In the next part of the article, we examine nationally accepted codes of practice or frameworks of good or best practice and the selection criteria for national learning and teaching awards across four countries- Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

### ***Excellence in supervision in Australia***

The Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDoGS) *Framework for Best Practice in Doctoral Research Education in Australia* was first promulgated in 2007, revised in 2010 and replaced by the *Graduate Research Good Practice Principles* (DDoGS, 2014). Surprisingly, this has very little to say about the nature of supervision other than saying a supervisory team is the default position, asking that supervision be seen as a ‘workload-bearing academic function’, that supervisors be research-active and identifying the necessary qualifications for appointment as a supervisor, requiring the provision of appropriate development opportunities and calling for relevant institutional policies and procedures to be in place. In terms of assisting the identification of excellence in supervision, this document offers little help.

More recently, a project funded by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) to develop a Good Practice Framework for Higher Degree Research Training Excellence (GPF) has been undertaken at the Edith Cowan University with the support of DDoGS. (OLT 2013) This Framework ‘provides institutions with a structured means of reviewing and evaluating their research training practices to help identify gaps and research training areas that can be developed or improved’ (p. 2) and is referenced directly to the UK’s QAA Code of Practice developed in 2004. Whilst the Framework ‘enables Australian institutions to align their research training processes with national good practice guidelines, and identify both their areas of strength and opportunities for improvement’, it backs away from the identification of excellence because ‘(r)ather than specifying levels of performance, the GPF...provides processes... that enable universities to review alignment to their goals, priorities and practices with the GPF’. (p.7)

On the specific issue of supervision, the focus is entirely on policy and process with no reference to supervisory practice. There are references to institutional responsibilities for ensuring that supervisor capacity is maintained, that supervision is included in workload planning and that there should be limits to the numbers of students that may be supervised. There is a section on staff eligibility to supervise which includes reference to supervisory expertise, levels of research activity, qualifications and ongoing involvement in professional development relevant to supervision. Supervisors should ensure that candidates are aware of the importance of and have access to professional and career development opportunities. Reference is also made to the need for clarification about the roles of members in a supervisory team and the need for supervisor induction programs and mentoring in supervision for Early Career Researchers and the need for institutions to have ‘a system for monitoring supervisor performance and managing under-performing supervisors’ (p. 18). The GPF also says that progress review processes ‘should allow for...Effective processes to respond immediately when supervision is below expectation’ (p. 20), but offers no guidance

as to what should be monitored or how institutions might be able to identify such 'underperformance' or 'below expectation' performance. This is despite a major purpose of the GFP being to work at a developmental rather than a regulatory level.

Turning now to awards, since 1994, the Office for Learning and Teaching (previously the Australian Learning and Teaching Council or ALTC) has made awards for supervisory practice. However, none of these awards has been devised specifically with supervision in mind, as can be seen from their titles, Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning, Australian Awards for University Teaching, Career Achievement Award, and the Prime Minister's Award. It should be noted that the latter award has never been made on the basis of supervision, but always on the basis of teaching in the setting of the taught course. Universities tend to nominate their 'excellent supervisors' for a Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning. This invites applicants to 'nominate one or (at most) two selection criteria for assessment'. The available criteria are (a) approaches to the support of learning and teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn, (b) development of curricula, resources and services that reflect a command of the field, (c) approaches to assessment, feedback and learning support that foster independent learning, (d) respect and support for the development of students as individuals, and, (e) scholarly activities and service innovations that have influenced and enhanced learning and teaching. As can be seen, these 'selection criteria' have clearly been developed around the model of 'taught learning' rather than 'research learning' although they can, and are, used to structure successful applications. However, despite enabling this, it must be pointed out that they do not define excellence, they only allow an individual to claim excellence for themselves which is a very different thing.

There are two other categories of ALTC/OLT award, but one, the Teaching Award, is focused even more strongly on the 'taught' model of teaching than the Citations, referring to curriculum design, creation of resources for teaching and integrating assessment strategies. The other, the Career Achievement Award, is awarded to individuals who have 'made an outstanding contribution to learning and teaching that is recognised across the higher education sector.' The latter does not identify standards of excellence in practice but, rather, an outstanding individual.

The situation regarding authoritative statements in the Australian context regarding supervision and the possibility of saying what 'excellent supervision' might constitute is summarised in Figure 1. In neither the case of the national Teaching and Learning awards nor that of the national Good Practice Framework, is there much scope for identifying excellence in supervision.

**Figure 1 here**

### ***Excellence in supervision in New Zealand***

There is a close relationship between the doctoral education communities in New Zealand (NZ) and Australia (reflected in the fact that nine New Zealand universities are associate members of the Australian DDoGS) and there is a high level of exchange between the two countries both in terms of personnel, ideas and also approaches to academic practice. New Zealand does not have an equivalent to the OLT/DDoGS Good Practice framework but the acknowledgements in the project report cites 'the Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDoGS) from both Australia and New Zealand' as having contributed to the project. (p. iii) It is therefore appropriate to use the framework in Figure 2 for New Zealand in the same way as it was used for Australia and to conclude that again, there is little here that will help to identify what might constitute excellence in supervision.

Teaching in NZ universities is predominantly recognised against criteria set by the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence which is also known as *Ako Aotearoa*. As is the case in Australia, these are focused heavily on the ‘taught program’. The national level award was established in 2001 “to recognise and promote sustained excellence in tertiary teaching”. Twelve Sustained Excellence Awards are made annually – ten of these are for a general category and another two are reserved under the Maori category. There is also a Supreme Prime Minister’s award which is awarded to one recipient of a sustained excellence award. We can see here that there is an emphasis on excellence being delivered or maintained over an unspecified period of time rather than at a single point on time, but there is little by way of substantive focus on the nature of excellence. For example, under the Maori category, excellence is demonstrated if a nominee can provide evidence on one of the following criteria: a focus on encouraging excellence, encouraging achievement in higher education, and demonstrating commitments and openness to excellence. However, the term *sustained excellence* under the general category and *kairangi* (meaning excellence in the Maori language) remains ambiguous as no criteria, descriptors or expected competency standards are described.

A second instance where reference is made to excellence is that awardees are asked to write a brief article for the ‘Excellence’ booklet which profiles the current year’s awardees. A review of these booklets over the past 5 years indicates that awardees provided narrative accounts of their supervisory experiences which indicates that each experience is unique and individual. While some speak of the number of students they graduated, timely completion, collegiality, specific strategies that worked and even intense period of friendship, no particular references have been made as to what entails excellence in supervision. The New Zealand situation is summarised in Figure 2.

### **Figure 2 here**

#### ***Excellence in supervision in South Africa***

The postgraduate landscape in South African higher education is not in good standing. A 2009 Council on Higher Education (CHE) review highlighted the fact that despite numerous policy documents that have sought to encourage improvement, since the political change in 1994 with its consequent increase in enrolments and diversity at postgraduate level, little progress has been made in improving graduation rates (CREST, 2009). An example of this focus is found in the National Plan on Higher Education which sought to give effect to the following priorities: increase the graduate output, especially doctoral graduates; increase research outputs; sustain existing research capacity and create new centres of excellence; facilitate partnerships and collaboration in research postgraduate training; and promote articulation between the different elements of the research system (Department of Education, 2001, 70).

The CREST review (2009) describes the ‘pile up’ of students caused by increasing enrolments at Master’s and Doctoral level without a concomitant rise in graduation rates. This has led to the ‘burden of supervision’ that is increasingly being placed on South African academics whose numbers have only shown a 40% growth for the same period. The “average” supervisor in 2005 would have to supervise 7 Master’s and Doctoral students, high by international standards, and does not take into account the unavailability of young lecturers to supervise immediately or the ageing of the more senior supervisory cohort who may not be taking on new students. There are also huge field differences with the burden of supervision in the social sciences estimated at nearly 12 students per supervisor (CREST, 2009). This reality has relevance for any discussion about excellence in postgraduate



supervision. For many academics in South Africa the focus would be on simply keeping their heads above water with notions of excellence probably far from their minds.

In 2004, the CHE published criteria for the institutional audits that were to be conducted in all of South Africa's higher education institutions. Two of these criteria (15 and 17) have relevance at postgraduate level, but they have a strongly operational focus on issues of policy and strategy regarding quality assurance, development and monitoring. There is no reference to the practice of supervision and as a consequence no clues are afforded as to what excellence in supervision might look like.

As far as can be discerned, there are no national awards in South Africa for excellence in postgraduate supervision. There are, however, the National Excellence in Teaching and Learning Awards which represent a partnership between the CHE and the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) and have been in place since 2009. Although a 'taught learning' model is evident here with references to pedagogical approaches and teaching time and criteria that focus on teaching efficacy, these awards foreground excellence and emphasise qualities of leadership and scholarship to enhance the stature and quality of teaching (Leibowitz et al, 2012). However, despite the apparent applicability to supervision, in 2012 and 2013 there is no indication that any of the awardees received their award for their work in regard to doctoral education. (HELTASA 2012 & HELTASA, 2013) Rather the focus is entirely on taught programs with the guidelines for applications in 2013 asked for information on the applicant's 'teaching context (...discipline taught, size of classes, teaching context...)' reflecting that emphasis. This is despite the emphasis placed on increasing doctoral education capacity within the country that is evident in the South African government's 2013 *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training*. (Dept of Higher Education and Training, 2013) It must, however, be noted that the *White Paper* does not mention research degree supervision at all.

There are other awards that recognise teaching including the South African Association of Health Educationalists (SAAHE) annual distinguished educator award and the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) which acknowledges educators (one senior and one junior) at its annual conference. While winners of these various awards are often involved in postgraduate and indeed doctoral supervision, there is no overt focus on this role nor any guidance on how excellence might manifest within it. The situation in South Africa is summarised in Figure 3.

### **Figure 3 about here**

#### ***Excellence in supervision in the United Kingdom***

The period since 2004 has seen three authoritative documents address the issue of postgraduate research degrees and at first sight they seem to offer rather more assistance than those examined earlier given that they each detail a number of responsibilities which supervisors might expect to play. The *UK Quality Code for Higher Education* (QAA, 2015) superseded the earlier (2004) *QAA Code of Practice* although the later documents saw few changes from their 2004 predecessor with regards to supervision other than the addition of a supervisor responsibility to introduce the new student to the department in which s/he would be working. Three of the 2004 responsibilities were split into separate bullet points with the only responsibility dropped completely being that of 'ensuring the student is aware of...equal opportunities policy'. (QAA, 2004, p. 16) In the light of this, it is sensible to focus on the most recent document. The 2015 Code states that:

'supervisory responsibilities may include:

- introducing the research student to the department (or equivalent), its facilities and procedures, and to other research students and relevant staff
- providing satisfactory and accurate guidance and advice
- monitoring the progress of the research student's research programme
- establishing and maintaining regular contact with the research student (guided by the higher education provider's stated regulations and guidance)
- being accessible to the research student to give advice (by whatever means is most suitable, given the research student's location and mode of study)
- contributing to the assessment of the research student's development needs
- providing timely, constructive and effective feedback on the research student's work and overall progress within the programme
- ensuring that the research student is aware of the need to exercise probity and conduct his or her research according to ethical principles, including intellectual property rights, and of the implications of research misconduct
- ensuring that the research student is aware of sources of advice, including careers guidance
- helping research students understand health and safety responsibilities
- providing effective pastoral support and/or referring the research student to other sources of such support, including student advisers, graduate school staff and others within the research student's academic community
- helping the research student to interact with others working in the field of research, for example encouraging the research student to attend relevant conferences and supporting him/her in seeking funding for such events
- where appropriate, giving encouragement and guidance to the research student on the submission of conference papers and articles to refereed journals
- maintaining the necessary supervisory expertise, including the appropriate skills, to perform all of the role satisfactorily, supported by relevant continuing professional development opportunities.' (QAA, 2015, p. 19-20)

The list is cited in full to illustrate how problematic it is for those who want to address the issue of standards other than in terms of 'competence'. To demonstrate this point, it is useful to try to think what 'excellence' in each task or activity might comprise other than by inserting the word 'excellent' into the element. The elements of the Code are, in the main, things that a supervisor should be doing as part of their basic role and many are not capable of being moved beyond 'competent' performance to 'excellent' performance. Take, as an example, the first, which states that supervision might involve 'providing satisfactory guidance and advice'. This is something which is not capable of being performed excellently as opposed to being performed competently. Advice is either appropriate to the purpose for which it is being sought or it is not. Satisfaction with the way that an element of a role is provided may be capable of being determined either in terms of satisfaction on the part of a recipient or in terms of degree of compliance with process requirements (for example), but these only go part of the way towards unpacking the notion of excellence and how it can be distinguished from competence. (In order to illustrate the point being made, the reader is invited to consider what 'excellence' in each of the supervisory responsibilities identified above in the *QAA Quality Code* might look like in comparison to what might constitute competent performance of the responsibility.)

While chapter B11 indicates that the 'research student-supervisor relationship is of paramount importance in all research degrees', and requires higher education providers to 'establish systematic and clear supervision arrangements' with supervisory teams being considered the norm, the only mention of excellence relates to supervisor involvement in research, rather than supervisory excellence itself. The relevant section reads: 'At least one

member of a student's supervisory team is currently engaged in excellent research in the relevant discipline(s), ensuring that the direction and monitoring of the student's progress is informed by up to date subject knowledge and research developments' (QAA, 2015: p 18). The document refers to industry engagement, supervisor engagement with academic standards, *Vitae* in terms of a development framework, and PRES (the HEA survey for postgraduate research degree candidates), but excellence is not defined beyond expected competence.

In terms of formal awards made in respect of excellence in supervision, while many universities have their own individual awards (one of which, at Durham University, is discussed in some detail in McCulloch, 2010), there is no national award. An examination of the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA)'s National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) which 'recognises, rewards, and celebrates individuals who are judged to make an outstanding impact on the student learning experience' shows that, while (in a similar way to the Australian OLT criteria) the criteria are written broadly so as to allow for a claim to made for excellence in supervision, awards in the area are difficult to find. In 2013, for example, the 60-page booklet celebrating the 50 awardees (HEA, 2013) contains no reference to an award being made solely for supervisory practice (although in one case it appears that supervision in the field of professional doctoral education was part of the claim for excellence) and the word 'supervisor' is mentioned twice (both in the sense that 'the awardee is a supervisor'), and 'supervision' once. Overall the focus is completely on the taught student experience. A similar pattern can be seen in the 2012 booklet (HEA, 2012). When the criteria in the 2014 NTFS guidelines (HEA, 2014) against which nominations are judged are examined, while they identify areas where evidence of excellence might be sought (at the three levels of the individual supervisor enhancing and transforming the student learning experience, in supporting colleagues and influencing support for student learning, and having a commitment to ongoing personal professional development in the field), they offer no assistance as regards standards of performance. These have to be argued for on an individual basis for each individual case.

The situation in the United Kingdom as regards the identification of excellence in research degree supervision is summarised in Figure 5.

**Figure 4 here**

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this article we have argued that that none of the nationally-based perspectives on supervision really engages with the contested issue of excellence. Some fail to define the role. Some address one or two of the academic perspectives on the notion of excellence. None addresses in a comprehensive manner the issue of excellence as something beyond basic competence, nor the criteria by which excellence may be distinguished from competence, nor the evidence that would apply to those criteria. They are equally silent on the vexed issue of the identification of individual excellence within team supervision or as part (albeit it a key part) of a wider university support structure. Until there is clarity about the supervisor role in a setting in which team or institutional supervision is regarded as the norm, higher education will be unable to define clearly what constitutes competence in supervision and only then will it be possible to consider what constitutes individual or team excellence. Two significant implications flow from this lack of clarity. Firstly, reflection by supervisors and academic development delivered in support of supervisors are unlikely to deliver their full potential. Secondly, the decision-making process around the national and university Learning and Teaching awards in the area of research degree supervision is likely to remain more of an art than a science.

The notion of excellence which is being applied in the area of research degree supervision derives from normative business models which have been brought into the higher education sphere without significant consideration of their appropriateness and transferability. We believe that the stated intent of the various schemes discussed in this paper that is, to identify excellence, represents a genuine search for achievement in practice which exceeds competence, and to reward it. However, we also believe that the tools and necessary conceptual clarity are not yet available to allow us to do that at least in the realm of research degree supervision. One possible solution would be to retreat into the realm of metrics as is happening in England in regard to higher education teaching. The current Higher Education Minister, Jo Johnson, has recently announced plans to institute a Teaching Excellence Framework which will depend in large part on metrics for its judgments, the Minister expecting the new Framework 'to include a clear set of outcome-focused criteria and metrics'. (Johnson 2015). Further, like the business models on which current understandings of excellence draw, the Framework appears as though it will operate at institutional level rather than at the level of the individual academic. It is doubtful whether these models offer a useful way of establishing excellent practice on the part of the individual rather than on the part of the larger organisation. In particular, given the low volume of students supervised by any one individual at any one time and given the highly personal and individuated nature of the research student-supervisor relationship, relying solely or even largely on metrics (as models derived from business tend to encourage) or drawing on models focused on the 'whole' rather than on an individual actor within that 'whole' is unlikely to offer the profession a way forward. The authors find it hard to believe that we are the first to identify the problems associated with recognising excellence in academic practice and in recognising individual rather than institutional excellence, but we do believe that we are the first to give public voice to it, at least in regard to doctoral education.

To move beyond the current situation, we need, first, to acknowledge the realities of the contemporary doctorate and also the increasing complexity associated with the supervisor role. The role (in the sense that it comprises a number of tasks associated with supervising a research student) and the level of competent performance in playing that role is laid out in some of the documents examined above. It is also laid out in the 'how to do a PhD...' literature, and many universities have a document detailing what students can expect from their supervisors. This element should be a relatively straightforward task. Having identified the role, the more difficult task is to unpack the notion of *excellence* as a level of performance above and beyond (and probably different in nature from) that of *competence*. Having laid down the challenge, the authors of this article have decided that it is one they should pick up themselves rather than leave it to others and we hope to publish the results of our collaboration shortly. In the meantime, we leave this discussion with the observation that, given the current state of play, rather than being able to identify excellence in supervision by reference to some external and generally agreed reference points, we are currently only able to respond to situations where individuals claim excellence for themselves. This means that we can only react rather than be proactive in identifying and rewarding excellence. We hope to be able to move beyond this current impasse in our next piece of writing.

## REFERENCES

- Bitzer, E. & Albertyn, R., 2011, 'Alternative approaches to postgraduate supervision: A planning tool to facilitate supervisory processes', *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 25(5), pp. 875-888.
- Chism, N., 2006, 'Teaching awards: what do they award?', *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77(4), pp. 589-617.
- Centra, J., 1993, *Reflective faculty evaluation*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

- Centre for Research on Science and Technology (CREST), 2009, *Higher Education Monitor no. 7: Postgraduate Studies in South Africa: A Statistical Profile*, [http://www.che.ac.za/media\\_and\\_publications/higher-education-monitor/higher-education-monitor-7-postgraduate-studies](http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/higher-education-monitor/higher-education-monitor-7-postgraduate-studies) (accessed 8 May 2015).
- Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDOGS), 2007 (Updated July 2008), *Framework for Best Practice in Doctoral Research Education in Australia*. <http://www.ddogs.edu.au/> (accessed 8 May 2015).
- Cullen, D., Pearson, M. Saha, L., & Spear, R., 1994, *Establishing Effective PhD Supervision*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Cumming, J., 2010, 'Doctoral enterprise: a holistic conception of evolving practices and arrangements', *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(1), pp. 25–39.
- Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDoGS), 2014, *Graduate Research Good Practice Principles*. [http://media.wix.com/ugd/f39714\\_171714a9c1584ca3ac4fd8125c2e6739.pdf](http://media.wix.com/ugd/f39714_171714a9c1584ca3ac4fd8125c2e6739.pdf) (accessed 8 May 2015).
- Delamont, S., Atkinson, P., & Parry, P., 2004, *Supervising the Doctorate: A Guide to Success*, Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Department of Education, 2001, *National plan for higher education in South Africa*. [http://education.pwv.gov.za/Doe\\_sites/Higher](http://education.pwv.gov.za/Doe_sites/Higher) (accessed, 8 April 2014).
- Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013, *White Paper for Post-School education and Training: Building an expanded, Effective and integrated Post-School System*. [http://www.che.ac.za/media\\_and\\_publications/legislation/white-paper-post-school-education-and-training](http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/legislation/white-paper-post-school-education-and-training) (accessed 8 May 2015).
- Elton, L., 1998, 'Dimensions of excellence in university teaching'. *International Journal of Academic Development*, 3(1), pp. 3–11.
- Emerson, R. & Harvey, C., 1996, 'Visions of excellence in Australian and Canadian human services organizations', *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 9(5/6), pp. 109-124.
- European University Institute (2014) *Website*. <http://www.eui.eu/ServicesAndAdmin/DeanOfStudies/DoctoralSupervisionEUI.aspx> (accessed 8 May 2015)
- Gibbs, G., 1995, 'Promoting excellent teaching is harder than you'd think', *Change*, 27(3), pp. 17–20.
- Green, H., & Powell, S., 2007, *Doctoral Study in Contemporary Higher Education*. Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Higher Education Academy (HEA), 2012) [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/ntfs/HEA\\_NTFS\\_booklet\\_2012.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/ntfs/HEA_NTFS_booklet_2012.pdf) (Accessed 8 May 2015)
- Higher Education Academy (HEA), 2013 [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/NTFS/HEA\\_NTFS\\_booklet%202013\\_v3.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/NTFS/HEA_NTFS_booklet%202013_v3.pdf) (Accessed 8 May 2015)
- Higher Education Academy (HEA), 2014, *NTFS guidelines* <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ntfs/resources> (Accessed 8 May 2015)
- Higher Education Academy (2015), *Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)*, [www.heacademy.ac.uk/PRES](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/PRES) (accessed 8 May 2015).
- Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), 2012 <http://www0.sun.ac.za/heltasa/mod/page/view.php?id=37%20%20&%20http://www.che.ac.za/content/heltasa-che-national-excellence-teaching-awards-2013> (Accessed 30.5.14)

- HELTASA (2013) <http://www.che.ac.za/content/heltasa-che-national-excellence-teaching-awards-2013> (Accessed 30.5.14)
- HEQC (2004) [http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/CHE\\_Institutional-Audit-Criteria\\_June2004.pdf](http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/CHE_Institutional-Audit-Criteria_June2004.pdf) (accessed 8 May 2015)
- Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). (2004). Criteria for Institutional Audits. Council on Higher Education (CHE). [http://www.che.ac.za/media\\_and\\_publications/frameworks-criteria/criteria-institutional-audits](http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/frameworks-criteria/criteria-institutional-audits) (accessed 8 May 2015)
- Hounsell, D., 1996, 'Documenting and assessing teaching excellence', in Aylett, R. & Gregory, K. (eds.), *Evaluating teacher quality in higher education* London, London, Falmer Press, pp. 72–76.
- Johnson, J., 2015, 'Teaching at the heart of the system', speech delivered to Universities UK, London, 1.7.15.
- Kamler, B. and Thomson, P., 2008, 'The failure of dissertation advice books: towards alternative pedagogies for doctoral writing', *Educational Researcher*, 37(8), pp. 507-14.
- Kobayashi, S., Grout, B., & Rump, C., 2015, 'Opportunities to learn scientific thinking in joint doctoral supervision', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(1), pp. 41-51.
- Lee, A. & Danby, S., (eds.), 2012, *Reshaping doctoral education: international approaches and pedagogies*. London: Routledge.
- Leibowitz, B; Farmer, J & Franklin, M. (2012). Teaching Excellence Awards in South Africa: a national study. HE Monitor no. 13. CHE. [http://www.che.ac.za/media\\_and\\_publications/higher-education-monitor/higher-education-monitor-13-teaching-excellence](http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/higher-education-monitor/higher-education-monitor-13-teaching-excellence) (accessed 8 May 2015).
- McAlpine, L., & Harris, R., 2002, 'Evaluating teaching effectiveness and teaching improvement: A language for institutional policies and academic development practices', *International Journal of Academic Development*, 7(1), pp. 7–17.
- McCulloch, A., 2010, 'Excellence in doctoral supervision and its implications for academic development: Competing models of what constitutes good supervision', paper presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> *Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference*, Adelaide, Australia, April 2010.
- McCulloch, A. & Stokes, P., 2006, 'Beyond the doctoral process: A call for the re-focussing of "How to...Get a PhD" literature', *Journal of Graduate Education*, Autumn, pp. 107-115.
- Nulty D., Kiley, M. & Meyers, N., 2009, 'Promoting and recognising excellence in the supervision of research students: an evidence-based framework', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(6), pp. 693-707.
- OLT, 2013, *Good Practice Framework for Higher Degree Research Training Excellence*. <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-best-practice-framework-inform-and-guide-higher-degree-research-training-excellence-australi> (Accessed 8 May 2015)
- Peters, T. & Waterman, R., 1982. *In search of excellence: Lessons from America's best-run corporations*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2015, *Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality*. B11 *Research Degrees*. London, QAA, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b> (Accessed 20 May 2015).
- Renske A.M. de Kleijn, Paulien C. Meijer, Mieke Brekelmans & Albert Pilot (2015) 'Adaptive research supervision: exploring expert thesis supervisors' practical knowledge', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34(1), pp. 117-130.

- Ruben, B. D., (ed.) 2004, *Pursuing Excellence in Higher Education: Eight Fundamental Challenges*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass/John Wiley.
- Smith, R., 2001, 'Formative evaluation and the scholarship of teaching and learning', in Knapper, C. & Cranton, P., (eds.), *Fresh approaches to the evaluation of teaching*, New Directions for Teaching, and Learning, No. 88. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, (pp. 51–62).
- Stokes, P. & McCulloch, A., 2010, 'A Generational and Construct Analysis of the "How to Get a Ph.D..." Literature: Towards a Classification of the Genre', paper presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> *Quality in Postgraduate Research conference*, Adelaide, South Australia, 13-15 April.
- Universities New Zealand, 2014, *Todd Foundation Awards for Excellence (Universities)*. <http://www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/scholarships/toddexcellence>. (accessed 8 May 2015)
- University of Cincinnati (2014). *Strategy for Excellence in Doctoral Education*, <http://www.uc.edu/provost/priorities/strategy-for-excellence-in-doctoral-education/about-the-process.html> (accessed 8 May 2015).
- University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), 2014, *Graduate School Website*. <http://www.education.net.au/education/UNIVERSITY-GRADUATE-SCHOOL-/2138/> (accessed 8 May 2015).
- Vitae, 2015, *Research Development Statement and Research Development Framework* <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/rdf-related/researcher-development-statement-rds-vitae.pdf>
- Weimer, M., 1997, 'Assumptions that devalue university teaching', *International Journal of Academic Development*, 2(1), pp. 52–58.
- University World News, 2013, 'World Bank launches 'centres of excellence' initiative'. <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=2013060712280846> (Accessed 8 May 2015)

**Figure titles**

**Figure 1: Excellence in supervision in Australia**

**Figure 2: Excellence in supervision in New Zealand**

**Figure 3: Excellence in supervision in South Africa**

**Figure 5: Excellence in supervision in the United Kingdom**



**Figure 1: Excellence in supervision in Australia**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Whether addressed</b>	
	<i>Regulatory</i>	<i>Professional</i>
<i>Perspective</i>		
	<b>OLT/DDoGS Good Practice Framework</b>	<b>ALTC/OLT Awards</b>
Define role?	No Dimensions of excellence addressed: • process-oriented • structure-supported	No Dimensions of excellence addressed: • Purpose-driven • Customer-centric
Distinguish the contribution of the ‘individual supervisor’?	No	No
Say what competence is?	No	Yes
Consider impact?	No	Yes - partial
Say what excellence is?	No	Some attempt but, overall, No

**Figure 2: Excellence in supervision in New Zealand**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Whether addressed</b>	
	<i>Regulatory</i>	<i>Professional</i>
	<b>OLT/DDoGS Good Practice Framework</b>	<b>Excellence in Teaching Award</b>
Define role?	No Dimensions of excellence addressed: • process-oriented • structure-supported	No
Distinguish the contribution of the ‘individual supervisor’?	No	No
Say what competence is?	No	No
Consider impact?	No	No
Say what excellence is?	No	No

**Figure 3: Excellence in supervision in South Africa**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Whether addressed</b>	
	<i>Regulatory</i>	<i>Professional</i>
<i>Perspective</i>		
	<b>Not addressed</b>	<b>CHE/HELTASA Teaching Excellence Awards</b>
Define role?		No Dimensions of excellence addressed: • None
Distinguish the contribution of the 'individual supervisor'?		No
Say what competence is?		No
Consider impact?		No
Say what excellence is?		No

**Figure 4: Excellence in supervision in the United Kingdom**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Whether addressed</b>	
	<i>Regulatory</i>	<i>Professional</i>
	<b>QAA Codes</b>	<b>HEA NTFS</b>
Define role?	Yes Dimensions of excellence addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer-centric</li> <li>• Process-oriented</li> </ul>	Yes Dimensions of excellence addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer- centric</li> <li>• Process-oriented</li> </ul>
Distinguish the contribution of the ‘individual supervisor’?	No	No
Say what competence is?	Yes	No
Consider impact?	No	No
Say what excellence is?	No	No