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Title: The politics of Higher Degree supervision. Or: why Einstein would never get his PhD!

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Example citation: Ressel, J. (2014) The politics of Higher Degree supervision. Or: why Einstein would never get his PhD! *Law, Culture & Ideas Blog*. **01/04/2014**

Version: Published version

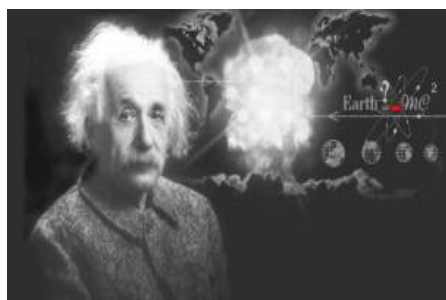
Official URL: <http://lawcultureblog.wordpress.com/2014/04/01/the-politics-of-higher-degree-supervision-or-why-einstein-would-never-get-his-phd/>

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/6613/>



The Politics of Higher Degree Supervision. Or: why Einstein would never get his PhD!

Posted on [01/04/2014](#)



I am currently being ‘trained’ as a PhD supervisor, and this article is a short reflection based on some work on the course. But to start with a caveat: my intellectual background lies in the humanities and law, and in this context my comments are necessarily limited to the humanities and legal research.

The course is interesting, and it made me question to what extent it is possible for universities to introduce formalised accredited systems for generating research outputs and research training. Are formalistic systems institutional responses to the instrumentalisation of intellectual endeavour and research? It made me wonder whether what is assumed to be ‘effective’ research degree supervision aiming to help research students plan, undertake, complete and disseminate their PhD research can in fact contribute creatively to the body of human knowledge and promote original findings.

Research students come in many shapes and sizes – some do it for instrumental reasons perhaps to progress their professional careers outside the academy, extrinsic reasons, others for intrinsic reasons and undertake research for their own intellectual pleasure and love of knowledge, or personal development, perhaps perceiving a PhD as an apprenticeship to the academy.

Similarly supervisors come equipped with their own often unacknowledged assumptions and belief systems. Thus it seems to me that to develop an ‘effective’ supervisory practice one needs to examine (in the Aristotelian sense) one’s own unstated, hidden assumptions and beliefs as located within and mediated by the supervisor’s institutional setting. The reflective inquiry would also include the recognition of external pressures and changes. Though a process of internal and external self-examination the supervisor can generate a critique of the supervision and, in my view, only a critical position can offer an original contribution to the body of knowledge, in short this is the ‘politics of supervision’ a play of powers.

The external themes informing the politic include increasing democratisation and expansion of postgraduate education, not only nationally but globally. For instance, at one university in Singapore admitted its first electrical engineering postgraduate students in 1986-87 and that only six years later the engineering faculty had 515 postgraduate students including 394 PhD by research candidates [1]. Similar pattern of increasing recruitment of postgraduate students to taught only, masters ‘top up’ degrees, and research studies and other glorious permutations can be seen at most universities.

Moreover, in the current adverse economic climate pushing UK universities to the ‘diversification’ of their income streams, postgraduate students, especially those from overseas and ones not physically attending the home university, are often seen by university bosses as a lucrative source of extra income.

Further, the injection of the imperatives and values of the ‘market’ driven by the myth of some sort of social-Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’, into the UK higher education sector, accompanied by the rhetoric of individual consumer rights transforms intellectual inquiry and the way the research student is perceived and behaves. As Holligan [2] notes the research student once seen as “*disciple with duties and obligations*” becomes a “*consumer with rights*” [3]. Any shortfall in meeting the demand of a ‘consumer right’ can be

measured and monitored, in the language of ‘performativity’, manifesting itself in terms of measurable skills audits, training, statistics and performance criteria.

On the other hand, it may not be impossible to say that some academics may construe this trend as the expression of increasing ‘professionalisation’ of the research degree process quite in tune with the prevailing economic considerations (perhaps analogous to Stalin’s five year plans) seemingly a ‘good thing’, at least in the utilitarian instrumentalist sense. Although even J S Mill would argue that the higher form of happiness afforded by high art, intellectual and moral pleasure is to be preferred to contentment and mere physical pleasures.

It has become a deeply held institutional belief, expressed as common ‘good practice’, internalising the discourse of the market, that ‘performance’ [4] can be monitored, audited and measured against targets and other apparently objective criteria, but quite possibly set by the mythical ‘market’ or some other convenient ideology. Measuring and assessing performance, ‘performativity’, located in the audit culture is justified on the grounds of openness, transparency, accountability and even objectivity [5].

However, the alleged essential objectivity of the idea of measurement (which gives it the force) is I believe rather troublesome. Its etymology in the Latin word *mēnsūra*, suggests concepts of ‘limit’, ‘capacity’, ‘power’ and ‘extent’, themselves immeasurable notions suggesting that the notion of measurement is itself indeterminate and far from being objective but is in fact contingent on what is being measured. Or, in other words, the thing that is subject of measurement determines, or at least influences its apparently objective measure and the mode of its measurement.

It may be illuminating (in his words) to remind ourselves of the words of John Henry Newman writing in 1858 on the *Idea of a University* [6]. He draws a clear distinction between ‘instruction’ and ‘knowledge’, a distinction I am afraid we can easily overlook.

Newman writes that: [Liberal] “...*knowledge is not a mere extrinsic or accidental advantage, which is ours today and another’s tomorrow, which may be got up from a book, and easily forgotten again, which we can command or communicate at our pleasure, which we can borrow for the occasion, carry about in our hand, and take into the market; it is an acquired illumination, it is a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment.*”

“*We are instructed, for instance, in manual exercises, in the fine and useful arts, in trades, and in ways of business; for these are methods, which have little or no effect upon the mind itself, are contained in rules committed to memory, to tradition, or to use, and bear upon an end external to themselves. But education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent...*”

Perhaps we should ask how it is possible to perceive knowledge as anything but in terms of a ‘personal possession’, an ‘acquired illumination’ ‘a habit’ and an ‘inward endowment’. However, it may rather hard to locate ‘knowledge’, in Newman’s sense, in the prevailing discourse of performativity, commercialisation, the rhetoric of ‘transferable skills’ seen in largely economic form, skills that “we can borrow, carry about and take to the market” the audit culture, targets and the unflinching violence of the market; in short ‘things’ that can easily be forgotten.

So how does the internalised market discourse effect the generation of knowledge through research. For instance, Holligan notes that “the quantitative discourse of centralised success criteria” may pose ethical dilemmas on supervisors, “some of whom may feel compelled to over-direct” [7]. The ‘over-directed’ response is explained by Holligan as a response to the “consumerist-orientated ideology” generating the ‘engineering

model' [8] of research and higher degree supervision. It results, he claims, in an academic environment where students "expect 'quick-fix' solutions to their academic difficulties", whilst their supervisors will remain loyal to 'old' discourses and "respond with antipathy to insidious, commercialised discourse of performativity" [9]. It is possible that misunderstanding could arise from the dissonance of the competing expectations and the discourses of commercialisation transforming the academic milieu.

Unfortunately such misunderstandings are often not mediated amicably, and manifest themselves in terms of the "discourse of derision" – that is critical statements in the press and from funding bodies as to the alleged shortcomings of supervisors [10].

On the other hand Murphy *at al* express no surprise at "problems with supervision" [11] and report that the research into issues such as alleged supervision problems have looked at 'policy and administration', supervision practice, and at largely administrative attempts to "define and encourage good practice" but to no avail. Further, many attempts to 'engineer out' the alleged 'problems' have not been successful. This suggests that the discourse of the market is inadequate as a mechanism for adding to the body of human knowledge.

Briefly, 'engineering out' involves the production of 'learning plans' intended to identify "the knowledge and skills gaps" [12] and how those gaps were to be bridged by attendance at compulsory courses. We can recognise in this approach a blurring of Newman's 'training'-knowledge' distinction; the boundary between something illuminating and inherent, and an instrumental skill that can be taken to the market and then forgotten. Moreover, the subsumption of knowledge into a memorised and learned skill raises questions about intellectual originality and creativity of the piece of research, apparently located in the personalised consumer rights culture of audit and accountability.

Sathye [13] describes well the various techniques and processes of the 'engineering' model. He sets out how learning plans, characterised in mechanistic terms as an 'inventory of knowledge and skill level of the student' are developed by a central committee established with the aim of determining "what set of skills and knowledge are expected of research students" in order to secure instrumental outcomes of 'timely' completions designed to mitigate centrally imposed financial penalties and to achieve measurable targets as to numbers of completions and student satisfaction. Mechanisms which are not necessarily conducive to increasing abstract understanding and knowledge.

Such an approach begs the question, which is not a politically neutral question, of who actually determines and sets the intellectual level and values of skills and knowledge expected of research students thus returning us to the critical idea of the politics of supervision. We need to ask whether the level is to be set in order to secure completions avoiding financial penalties and the corresponding metrics, or whether to bear the risk of compromising originality (the consumer-orientated discourse of individual rights), or set to respect the apprenticeship discourse of duties and obligations to the academy and one's own 'inward endowment'.

Although of course it is accepted that all students will need to have developed a range of skills (including reading, writing, analytical, and critical frame of mind) before embarking on higher degree research, the connection between mechanistically taught skills and the production of original knowledge expected at the research level research is not always clear.

Rather, the 'engineering/engineered model' of supervision necessarily predicated on tight controlling supervisory practice supported by formulaic skills training focused on manufacture of completions, which, as in a factory, can be audited and measured. As we know the etymology of word '*audit*' comes from Latin and means the public 'hearing' or 'examination' of official accounts, a process we may not consider as appropriate when we seek to 'measure' knowledge in accountancy terms.

We could wonder whether we would have ever heard of the general theory of relativity had Einstein had to produce a 'learning plan', for instance. Undoubtedly Einstein was an intellectual giant and contributed hugely to the body of human knowledge for the common good. However, any brief consideration of his self-confessed lack of life skills [14] suggests that he would have quite likely have failed any research skills audit expected at a modern university and may never been awarded his doctorate!

Murphy *et al* [15] describe the tension between the market driven discourse of accountability, student satisfaction and completion rates, policed by the "controlling and task-focused" supervisor and the discourse informed by Newmanian ideals manifest as the "guiding and person-focussed" supervisor. However, unlike Holligan [16] who portrays the tension as arising from consequences of external politics and centralised regulation coupled with consumer-orientated ideology, Murphy *et al* [17] adopt an apparently neutral process of 'social science' methodology and look to the inner belief systems of the supervisor.

Thus we may conclude that generation of knowledge and the process of research student supervision cannot be simply left to the whims of the violence market forces, student satisfaction surveys and metrics of completion rates. Rather, it is argued, that it involves a critical engagement in a political moment of recurring internal and external self-examination generating a critique of supervision as an original contribution to the body of human knowledge.

Footnotes and references:

[1] Murphy *et al* (2007) 'Orientations to research higher degree supervision' *Higher Education*, 53 at 209.

[2] Holligan, C., "Fact and fiction: a case history of doctoral supervision" *Educational Research*, (2005) 47:3 (267-278).

[3] Consumer rights, unlike human rights, are perceived though rhetoric of disengaged individualised entitlement. By contrast, the jurisprudence of human rights generally frames human rights in terms of a just balance between equally valid human (not individual) rights.

[4] And even the notion of 'performance' can be contested, suggesting something analogous to a speeding motor car, rather than intellectual endeavour and inquiry.

[5] Objectivity is often used to exclude moral values, and refers rather to procedural principles than to any substantive values.

[6] '5th Discourse Knowledge its Own End' in *The Idea of a University* – 1858 available at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/> .

[7] Holligan, C., "Fact and fiction: a case history of doctoral supervision" *Educational Research*, (2005) 47:3 at 268.

[8] Hammersly, M. (1993) *Educational Research: Current Issues* (London, Paul Chapman)

[9] Holligan, C., "Fact and fiction: a case history of doctoral supervision" *Educational Research*, (2005) 47:3 at 208.

[10] Holligan, C., "Fact and fiction: a case history of doctoral supervision" *Educational Research*, (2005) 47:3 at 208.

[11] Murphy *et al* (2007) 'Orientations to research higher degree supervision' *Higher Education*, 53 at 210.

[12] Sathye M., (2005) 'Supervisory Practice: A Qualitative Study' *FQS Forum: Qualitative Social Research* Vol 6, No 2, Art 26.

[13] Sathye M., (2005) 'Supervisory Practice: A Qualitative Study' *FQS Forum: Qualitative Social Research* Vol 6, No 2, Art 26.

[14] See for instance Gareth Hew Davies, who in 'The Secret Life of Einstein', writes that "[d]espite his academic success, Einstein's last letters reveal his sense of emotional failure. "I can love humanity, but when it comes to close relationships, I'm a horse for single harness. I failed twice, rather disgracefully." As for marriage: "An unsuccessful attempt to make something lasting out of an incident. All marriages are dangerous." Available at <http://www.fortunecity.com/emachines/e11/86/secret.html> .

[15] Murphy *et al* (2007) 'Orientations to research higher degree supervision' *Higher Education*, 53 at 209 and 216.

[16] Holligan, C., "Fact and fiction: a case history of doctoral supervision" *Educational Research*, (2005) 47:3.

[17] Murphy *et al* (2007) 'Orientations to research higher degree supervision' *Higher Education*, 53.

Suggested citation: J Ressel 'The Politics of Higher Degree Supervision. Or: why Einstein would never get his PhD!' *Law, Cult. & Ideas Blog* (1 April 2014) (available at <http://lawcultureblog.wordpress.com/>)

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