

From PhD to ECR: Supervisory relationships, precarity and the temporal regimes of academia

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The expansion of higher education in the United Kingdom (UK), the multiplication of doctoral routes and the increased precarity of academic jobs (Leathwood & Read 2020) have been associated with more uncertainties regarding the transition taken to a permanent academic position (Le Feuvre 2015). This paper seeks to examine and problematise the structures and practices recent PhD graduates from UK universities face as they navigate the transition to their first post-PhD position in higher education contexts characterised by temporal regimes which regulate access to an academic position. The data informing this paper are derived from our project studying the transition from PhD to academic position (*Precarious transitions? Doctoral students negotiating the shift to academic positions*, funded by British Academy-Leverhulme, 2020–2022). Particular attention is drawn to the role of supervisors as gatekeepers, able to give and withdraw opportunities to their doctoral students with significant consequences for career prospects. The concepts of mentorship and sponsorship are used to make sense of the different support received by doctoral students. We argue that practices of mentoring and, to an even greater extent, sponsoring, ease the transition from doctoral research to early career academics, with patterns of supervisory support legitimised through the mobilisation of narratives such as elective affinities or talent spotting.

Keywords: precarity; doctoral students; higher education; neoliberalism; mentorship; sponsorship.

Introduction

The expansion of higher education, the multiplication of doctoral routes in the UK (including professional doctorates and PhDs by publication) and the increased casualisation of academic posts (Leathwood & Read 2020) have been associated with more uncertainties regarding the transition to a permanent academic position (Le Feuvre, 2015). These uncertainties and the rise in the costs of higher education borne by doctoral students – a significant proportion are now self-funded (Hewitt 2020) – have well-identified effects on the wellbeing and mental health of doctoral and early career researchers (Moreau & Robertson 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has only exaggerated existing inequalities due to the closure of university campuses and concerns related to student recruitment and retention (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021). Whilst not discussed in this paper in any detail, we also acknowledge the challenges facing part-time, unfunded students who are particularly at odds with the discourse of timelessness as they often have other commitments such as work and/or family ties that require them to balance multiple demands on their time.

This paper seeks to examine and problematise the structures and practices that reinforce a discourse of timelessness in academia facing early career academics navigating the transition to their first postdoctoral post (Leathwood & Read 2020). Our focus is on the dynamics of power that are at play in the supervisory relationship. The changing temporal rhythms of higher education, in part due to neoliberal ideology, policies and practices, alongside associated growing cultures of over working, have resulted in an intensification of academic work that begins, we argue, from the doctoral submission stage, sometimes earlier. The competition for posts creates an environment where doctoral students must achieve more in less time.

The data informing this paper are derived from our project studying the transition from PhD to academic position (*Precarious transitions? Doctoral students negotiating the shift to academic positions*, funded by British Academy-Leverhulme, 2020–2022). The study explores how students enrolled on a PhD programme in the UK build up to an academic career and how they navigate the transition from PhD student to academic, drawing on symbolic, social, cultural and economic capitals. Particular attention in this paper is drawn to the role of supervisors as gatekeepers, able to give and withdraw opportunities to their doctoral students. While doctoral programmes have diversified over the past decades, the original study underpinning this article focuses on the traditional PhD due to the scale of the original project and to acknowledge that a PhD degree has long been viewed as leading to an academic career in some academic disciplines, including the social and natural sciences.

Specifically, in this paper we address the following research questions:

1. How do doctoral students experience the supervisory relationship?
2. What role is played by their supervisors in enabling access to networks, opportunities and resources that support doctoral students' transition to an academic position?

Such questioning takes place against a background characterised by 'social precarity' – drawing on Butler's and Waite's writings (Butler 2004a, 2004b, 2009; Waite 2009) – and by neoliberal spatio-temporal regimes which endorse a discourse of timeliness in higher education. The dataset for this project is formed of 26 semi-structured interviews with doctoral students who had graduated less than 18 months prior to the time of interview and interviews with six doctoral supervisors to gain their perspectives on the process of deciding who to supervise and the forms of support they offered. The paper is underpinned by the theoretical work of Butler (2004, 2004a,

2009) and Waite (2009). In what follows we provide the background context, methodology and key themes from the data analysis.

Background contextualisation: Neoliberal, temporal regimes of academic precarity

For decades now, neoliberalism as a political and economic ideology has informed higher education systems. Neoliberalism, according to Harvey (2007, p. 22) refers to ‘a theory of political economic practices proposing that human wellbeing can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework, characterised by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade’. In the context of UK higher education, neoliberalism has been interpreted and enacted through policies and practices, summarised by Olssen and Peters (2005, p. 313) as follows:

The ascendancy of neoliberalism and the associated discourses of “new public management”, during the 1980s and 1990s, has produced a fundamental shift in the way universities and other institutions of higher education have defined and justified their institutional existence. The traditional professional culture of open intellectual enquiry and debate has been replaced with an institutional stress on performativity, as evidenced by the emergence of an emphasis on measured outputs: on strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits.

This shift to neoliberal policies and practices has been keenly felt by students, who are repositioned as consumers in policy discourses, and are constructed as if they are operating with a market logic. In 1994, Acker noted that students felt ‘buffeted about’ due to the competing demands on their time and the difficulties of managing their studies alongside family and professional commitments. Almost 30 years later, this experience has only intensified. The current UK higher education context is characterised by an increasing level of financial and political uncertainty linked to changes to the funding mechanisms of higher education, of heightened national and international competition for students, including doctoral students, and of the UK exit from the European Commission (Blanden & Machin 2013; Carpentier 2004; UCAS 2021). These macro and micro shifts have contributed to an increase in precarious academic posts, as these posts cover the ebbs and flows of teaching and research demands. Spina and colleagues (2020, p.2) powerfully highlight the impact of an increasingly casualised workforce and suggest ‘the image of homo academicus, if it ever existed at all, is now only experienced by a very small minority’. They contend that universities are reliant on a temporary and casualised academic staff body because of broader shifts towards increased accountability, efficiency and fluctuating market demand. The shift from permanent, secure posts, to casualised contract-based work has been guided and steered by neoliberal influences and ideology that place pressure on universities to operate in an ‘increasingly competitive post-imperial international environment’ that places higher education at the centre of efforts to ‘systematically improve the economic performance’ of the UK (Radice 2015, p. 411). Others have noted how the spatio-temporal demands of neoliberalism place academic positions out of reach for those who do not neatly align with the figure of a bachelor boy, with gendered, classes and racialised implications (Lynch 2010).

Neoliberal influences have played a key part in driving the expansion of higher education, not only in the UK but the Global North and Global South. Expansion has encompassed the multiplication of doctoral routes (including professional doctorates and PhDs by publication). Over 100,000 doctoral students have enrolled in research programmes in the UK over the last

five years (HESA 2021), in a context where the amount of doctoral holders significantly outnumbers the number of academic posts available. The combination of an increase in precarity of permanent academic posts and the exponential increase in numbers of doctoral students has been associated with more uncertainties regarding the returns of a PhD and has narrowed the possibilities available to early career academics seeking to transition to a permanent position (Le Feuvre 2015; Leathwood & Read 2020). Meanwhile, precariousness has become more broadly a condition of life, including academic life, with minoritised groups at greater risk of their academic identity being under threat (Butler 2009; Ivancheva, Lynch & Keating 2019).

Enactments of the supervisory relationship

In this section we provide an overview of existing research examining the varied and diverse enactments of the supervisory relationship. The research literature confirms that understandings about supervisory practices are mixed and there is variation in enactments of existing supervisory approaches (Akerlind & McAlpine 2017; Bastalich 2017). While measures of accountability directed towards individual institutions are on the rise, little is known on how supervisory relationships relay or resist policy discourses to increase numbers of doctoral completions in shrinking timeframes. The supervisory relationship is often left unexamined and untheorised, possibly reflecting some of the individualised terms which frame the way some of our participants talk about it. Research on supervisory relationships tends to embrace uncritically neoliberal ideals, focusing on effectiveness and management techniques such as conflict resolution, rather than engaging in deeper and more meaningful ways. According to Deuchar (2008), supervisory styles can be understood as four distinct paradigms. First, *laissez-faire*, which views candidates as autonomous and agentic, able to manage their doctoral project, academic trajectory and broader existence. Second, the *pastoral* style that views students as autonomous and agentic but in need of personal support. Third, a *directorial* style, which positions students as in need of support for their research but not themselves. Fourth, *contractual*, where the focus is on agreement between the parties about the support provided in relation to the research and personal support. In the current context the emphasis, Deuchar (2008) argues, is on the neoliberal *directorial* style where students are expected to be self-directing and motivated and require help and support only in relation to their research. Such an approach is potentially less time consuming for supervisors and thus provides an efficient model that appeals to neoliberal higher education institutions (Deuchar 2008). Other descriptions of the supervisory relationship have questioned if the relationship is that of teacher, guide or exploiter, raising questions about the problem of ‘over-’ and ‘under-supervising’ doctoral students (Hockey 1994, p. 1995).

In the current context of higher education, Brabazon (2016, p. 26) argues that the neoliberal global university is ‘particularly destructive for doctoral education’. She notes that ‘doctoral programmes are destabilized’, and that supervisors now move around more and are under increasing pressure to move doctoral students through their PhD as quickly and efficiently as they can. This temporal pressure has eroded the potential for many supervisors to have the time needed to support their students as they would want to (Brabazon 2016). This discourse of timeliness where one goes swiftly from being a PhD student to being an academic is also embedded in accountability indicators. For example, in the UK where we write from, universities are made accountable regarding the ‘timely’ completion of PhDs. In turn, this timely completion is underpinned by a model of the doctoral student and scholar in general as carefree, free to develop a research and teaching portfolio during and after their PhD. This view of the scholar as autonomous denies the existence of the multiple relations of care-giving and care-received they are embroiled in, both outside and in academia (Moreau 2016). Indeed, reforms to doctoral provision introduced in the UK (for example: QAA 2018; Roberts 2002) tend to diagnose issues

(for example, high attrition and poor timely completion rates) and offer solutions (for example, institutional and sector-broad indicators, skills development programs for students) which assume youth and carefree-ness.

To capture and characterise the supervisory relationship in our analysis of the data, we drew on the concepts of mentorship and sponsorship as defined by Hoskins (2012). In her work, she defines mentors as providing guidance, advice and counsel to junior colleagues, and provided to them by their institutions as an aspect of formal career support. Mentors offer mentees ‘a helping hand’, ‘someone to talk things over with’ and opportunities for ‘working together’ to produce meaningful publications. Mentors are particularly useful for ‘getting on’ and progressing through the academy (Hoskins 2012, p. 80).

Sponsorship includes many elements of mentorship but extends beyond and refers to the actions of a more experienced or senior colleague who selected students to provide support above and beyond the requirements of the supervisor role (Hoskins 2012). Sponsorship is conceptualised as ‘very useful’ and ‘very helpful’, particularly for ‘getting in’ to an academic post, prestigious institutional committee or research group and was even viewed as ‘necessary for [academic career] success’ (Hoskins 2012, p. 80). In sum, sponsorship will go well beyond the boundaries of mentorship and will encompass sustained support to access some of the more prestigious areas of the academy, providing understanding and insights into the expectations of academic life and helping to navigate the transition to that academic life. In this paper, we consider the different styles perceived and discussed by our participants, conceptualised here in relation to mentorship and sponsorship (Hoskins 2012) to understand how they perceive the support they received both during and after completion of their PhD.

Methodology and methods

The study draws upon a qualitative methodology to provide detailed and rich accounts from the participants’ perspectives on their experiences (Wisker 2017). This qualitative approach provides insight in their world views, as they share and give meaning to life events. To generate the data, 26 interviews were conducted with students who had completed a PhD in a UK institution less than 18 months prior to the time of interview. Participants were based across a range of subject areas (including the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)) and in a range of institutions across the UK (pre-1992, including Russell group institutions, and post-1992 universities) as discussed below. (In the UK the higher education sector is formed of ‘new’, so-called post-1992 universities that were former polytechnics, contrasted with the established ‘old’ pre-1992, Russell Group and civic university sector.)

We sought diversity rather than representativeness in relation to these multiple criteria that form the basis of our sample. This approach is consistent with the ‘long-established tradition of post-positivist qualitative, narrative analysis’ (Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant 2003, p. 96; Herman & Vervaeck 2019), with the main concern focused on how individuals negotiate their identities within specific academic cultures framed by a broad range of national, sectorial and institutional influences. We also completed interviews with six supervisors, based in similarly diverse institutions, to understand how they support students seeking an academic career. We asked supervisors to discuss the motivations for accepting a student and to describe the supervisory approach and commitment. These accounts, however, are not explored in this paper (for details, see Moreau et al. 2022).

The interviews with all participants took place online, due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and due to the geographical spread of the participants (some of whom had moved abroad, although all had studied in the UK at some point during their PhD). The interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes and were digitally audio recorded and professionally transcribed. They were analysed through a thematic content analysis combined with discourse analysis, to enable us to identify dominant themes and discourses within the participants' experiences. Specific attention was given to the influence of two overarching themes: the support Early Career Researchers (ECRs) perceive they receive from their supervisors and how it translates into privileges, through the mediation of social class, gender and ethnicity. In this article, we focus on the first of these aims and examine the support ECRs received from their supervisory team.

Participation in the research was entirely voluntary and the informed consent of all participants was sought prior to the interviews. Those who took part in the research were assured that their comments would be treated in confidence and any quotes used would be anonymised. The research complies with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA) revised ethical guidelines (2018); the British Sociological Association (BSA) ethical guidelines (2017); and Anglia Ruskin University's and Brunel University London's ethical guidelines.

Sample

Among the ECRs who participated in this study, 18 identified as female and eight as male; age varied, with five participants aged 25–29 (three women, two men), nine aged 30–34 (8 women, one man), four aged 35–39 (one woman, three men), and two (both women) aged 40 and above (six participants did not state their age). Participants were asked to describe their social class position and as the sample table confirms, only three identify as working-class, five as working-middle, 17 as middle-class and one as upper middle-class. In terms of ethnicity, 18 identified as White or White British, three as White 'Other', three as Asian and two as Black Africans. Participants represented a broad array of disciplines, including Arts and Humanities (for example: Archaeology, English Literature, Geography, History, Law and Politics; eight participants in total), Social Sciences (for example: Anthropology, Education, Psychology, Religious Studies and Sociology; 12 participants), STEM subjects (for example: Health Studies, Life Sciences and Medicine; five participants) and Business (one participant). Four participants had gained a PhD from a post-1992 university (all women), 22 from a pre-1992 (14 women and eight men), including 12 from a Russell group institution (four men and eight women). Twenty-one ECRs had completed their PhD in an English institution (16 women, five men), one in Northern Ireland (woman), two in Scotland (one man, one woman), two in Wales (both men).

Table 1 - Sample demographic data

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Social Class	Field of study
Alice		Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Connor	35	Male	White British	Middle	Arts and humanities
Evie	33	Female	White British	Working/middle	Social sciences
Frank	39	Male	Black African	Upper (Liberia) Working (UK)	Arts and humanities
Gillian	27	Female	White British	Working/middle	STEM
Grace	32	Female	White British	Middle	Arts and humanities
Jade	29	Female	White	Working	Social sciences
Jasmine	33	Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Jason		Male	White	Middle	STEM
Karen		Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Kiara		Female	White British	Working/middle	Social sciences
Marcus	35	Male	White British	Working	Arts and humanities
Nick		Male	White British	Working/middle	Social sciences
Olivia	54	Female	British Nigerian	Middle	Social sciences
Penelope	30	Female	Greek	Middle	Arts and humanities
Rachel		Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Sadie	34	Female	White British	Middle	STEM
Simon	34	Male	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Sofia	29	Female	Greek	Middle	Social sciences
Sonia	32	Female	Malay Malaysian	Working/middle	Social sciences
Stella	44	Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Susan	30	Female	Goa Indian	Middle	Social sciences
Tanya	30	Female	White British	Upper middle	STEM
Toby	29	Male	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Umar	27	Male	Indian	Middle	Social sciences
Vicky	37	Female	White Italian	Middle	Social sciences

Theoretical framework

The article is informed by the concept of precarity to highlight those individuals who experience life worlds characterised by ‘uncertainty and instability’ (Waite 2009, p. 415). The term precarity can be conceived as either a ‘condition’ – a more generalised condition of life in the twenty-first century characterised by fear and malaise – or a more focused descriptor of particular experiences derived from the labour market (Waite 2009, p. 415). It is the second definition, as Waite (2009) argues, that has been adopted by social-justice groups and scholars as a potential point of ‘mobilisation’ among those experiencing precarity. For Waite (2009), the analytical advantage of the concept of precarity is that rather than just focusing on individualised experiences of precarity, it incorporates the political and institutional context in which the production of precarity occurs. Such an approach enables us to analyse participants’ experiences of accessing the labour market, focusing on any contextual challenges they encountered as they navigated the transition from PhD student to early career academic.

This article is also informed by Butler's work (2009, p. 25), which views precarity as a 'politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death'. For Butler, the concern is with how vulnerability is unequally distributed across different groups and within different spaces (Butler 2004a, 2009). The idea of 'social precarity' has been developed from Butler's (2004) work and used as an analytical frame to understand the social conditions required to make 'life livable'. A central core of Butler's (2004) work is the question of what constitutes 'livability'. Butler (2004, p. 39) states that 'when we ask what makes a life liveable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life'. Within this configuration, precariousness is a condition of an unlivable life, which creates the conditions that can exacerbate the effects of social precarity.

To examine the temporal challenges of securing a typically precarious first post in higher education, we now examine the participants' descriptions of the supervisory relationship and draw on the concepts of mentorship and sponsorship to characterise the support they had received.

Describing the supervisory relationship: Mentorship and sponsorship

The supervisory relationship was described in different ways ranging from very positive and highly supportive to negative and unsupported. Frank (all names in use in this article are pseudonyms) was a good example of a participant who identified mentorship as the approach he had experienced. He described the supervisory relationship as 'mentorship rather than sponsorship. It wasn't very hands on where they say, "I've seen this position, I think you might be interested in it, can you apply for this and that, send it to me and I'll do this and that". It was more of, "I'm here, if you need anything"'. Thus, the support was less proactive and more reactive. Frank felt supported, but he had to seek out opportunities at the point of transition into his first academic post. Based on the definition above, Grace similarly reported a mentoring relationship: 'I found perhaps the wording of the first one [mentor definition] was more relatable and that guidance, advice and someone to talk things through with and sort of yeah the advice/counsel side, that seemed to relate more to how we work together definitely.' Mentors here provided a helping hand and strategic counsel useful to navigating higher education. Sometimes this support extended well beyond the supervisory period as with Jade who told us 'I would have said it was mentorship rather than sponsorship. But I feel like some of that mentorship wasn't just for the PhD, so I still have a good relationship with my supervisors now'.

Student participants were asked if they had experienced sponsorship, which we suggested in earlier work could be guided in part by perceived class, raced or gender allegiances, as well as being a 'pleasurable exchange for both parties.' In our sample several participants described experiencing sponsorship into the first academic post, sometimes extending well beyond the completion of the PhD, as in the case of Alice:

And I think that's where my supervisors have been instrumental. They're always giving me work, always giving me opportunities that will look good on my CV, so that when the point comes where a job goes up that I want, I've already gathered the experience. But it does sometimes feel unfair. But the other side of that is that I am hugely grateful to my supervisors, because they don't have to. They don't have any obligations to me anymore, they've done their jobs. They are still supporting me post-PhD to try and get ... You know, I send articles to them, and they review them for me and send them back still, and I finished a year and a half ago.

Karen also benefited from support that went well beyond reasonable expectations of the supervisory relationship,

So, sponsorship, the latter, probably – and your definition of it – more appropriately captures the level of support ... it's been above and beyond I think what is required of a supervisor or mentor. I think they've really taken me under their wing in a different way ... And I think what's evolved has been more in line with sponsorship ... because it's so much more than a PhD.

The support discussed by Alice and Karen eased their transition into their first post-PhD positions. Karen explained that she received help from her supervisory team with publishing, teaching together and help with her post-doctoral applications. She obtained a post-doctoral position whilst completing her PhD, making her shift to early career research one of the more secure and straightforward transitions amongst our sample.

In contrast, Evie described the support she had received as 'more towards sponsorship' but that the support faded away, in part due to the temporal pressures experienced by her supervisors to develop their own academic profiles. She explained that 'the other one had a couple of suggestions, but also is insanely busy, and took on a kind of administrative role within research, on top of her lectureship and everything. So yeah, it just kind of fizzled out'. Evie's experience represents that of several of our participants' who noted that their more junior supervisors (lecturers and senior lecturers) needed to build their own expertise, whilst helping and developing their students' opportunities. Such a sentiment was reflected by Stella, who acknowledged that her supervisor was under pressure due to her own status:

She is really in the grind herself. She's a lecturer, she's not that senior, she's just trying to publish and teach and have young children and commute. So I feel like there's definitely an element where there wasn't a lot of time for her to do everything she really wanted to.

For Nick, the support also ceased once he had completed his PhD and he felt let down by his supervisors and institution:

No [support from supervisor post PhD], ...I'm quite disappointed in not just that relationship but the school really, that there's been what I would call a lack of aftercare really, there's been a real absence of any kind of contact or working relationship really which is a bit disappointing.

These examples confirm that aspects of short-termism are commonplace in UK higher education and that not all supervisors are equally placed to support their doctoral students against the effects of social precarity due to their own precarious institutional position (Leathwood & Read 2020). The temporal pressures embedded within higher education around the need for staff to regularly publish, bid for research funding and ensure impact and knowledge exchange, alongside their teaching and supervisory commitments, can contribute to an environment that perpetuates and reinforces inequality in terms of the support they can provide to doctoral students. Such conditions, we argue, intensify the opportunity for social precarity to grow, with consequences for the liveability of life for those at the junior career level (Butler 2004).

The pressure to maintain different areas of academic responsibility that span teaching, research, supervision, administration, knowledge exchange and impact are differently experienced by academics depending on their seniority. Our participants' experiences draw attention to the variation in supervisory relationships, with more senior academics better placed to ease their doctoral students into academic posts. This finding raises questions about the sustainability of academic cultures and practices that reduce doctoral supervision and any subsequent support to a neoliberal box ticking exercise for institutions, seeking to maximise the capacity of academic staff.

Political projects, finding affinities

To build on the idea of sponsorship, we argue here that an element of who gets sponsored and how sponsorship is enacted, is in part driven by a political project with an explicit or implicit commitment from supervisors to those with whom they have affinities on the basis of identity. We use the term 'political project' to capture the sense of connection and belonging that may form between supervisor and supervisee along the lines of social class, gender and ethnicity. Supervisory relationships enacted along the lines of a political project are framed and expressed in our research in individualised terms of elective affinities, despite clear evidence that these intellectual and social affinities develop on the basis of gender, class and race, as discussed elsewhere (Moreau et al. 2022).

In this section, we focus on the doctoral students' perceptions that they were, or were not, part of a political project to their supervisors, and consider if they perceive they had been supported based on a classed, gendered or raced affinity. Several of our students did express these sorts of sentiments when reflecting on the breadth and depth of the support that they received:

Can you say love?! ... The relationship that I've developed with my supervisors over the three years of the PhD – so one year beforehand, the master's year, and then a year subsequent – it's just been really special, and I feel really fortunate to have met these two wise and kind and pragmatic academics. It's terrific. And it's really grown and changed during that time as well, and now I think I've finished this kind of postdoc year, with me as an ongoing colleague. (Karen)

Yeah, the support from supervisors here, and I think this is something that everybody else has found as well, has been really, really good. As far as I'm aware from speaking to other people, I know that supervisory support can really vary and we are, I've been extremely well supported. My primary supervisor ... has been excellent, we have a really good relationship. (Toby)

I was incredibly lucky. I love both my supervisors ... I think my supervisors gave me a really good model of you don't have to be hard-nosed and competitive in academia. You can be collegiate and supportive and caring. And I think in the context of such a hyper neo-liberal academy, that's really important to hang on to, that not everybody has to be bastard. (Rachel)

In these three examples, the support provided by supervisors to their students constitutes, in part, a classed political project, even when the relationship is presented by participants in individualised terms as a meeting of minds. All of these self-identified white, middle-class

participants had similarly self-identified white, middle-class supervisors. But it might also represent an affinity, a connection and a sense of belonging with those who share similar identity markers. There were potentially gender allegiances too as Karen and Rachel were supervised by women and Toby was supervised by men. Both Karen and Rachel used the word ‘love’ to describe their feelings towards their supervisors, an indication of the warmth, trust and support that formed the basis of the relationship. Since completing her doctorate, Karen reported the relationship has ‘continued to be really great. We’ve worked together on many projects’. Rachel also worked as a research assistant on several of her supervisor’s projects.

Toby reflected on his supervisor’s ongoing support and said that he ‘is very good at providing that kind of support and going out to bat for you in those kinds of circles as well’, referring to the internal posts that come up. Whilst Toby was planning on a move to a different institution, he noted the potential for a job at his current university was not impossible, even though he was concerned about the perception of ‘nepotism’ from other students. His concerns are well-founded when we consider that according to Wheatley (2016), a vast majority of British workers believe that nepotism exists within the workplace and 60 per cent have witnessed discriminatory favouritism in the workplace, further intensifying the effects of social precarity. Gilani (2020) argues that the role of universities is to challenge nepotism by building up all students’ networks, thus supporting them to all compete on a more level footing than currently exists

These examples represent many of the experiences we noted across our sample. Given the competitive, neoliberal pressures of higher education in the UK, it is perhaps not surprising that supervisors, particularly those who are more established academics, choose to select and support those students whose values, identities and subjectivities match their own (Trowler 2022).

Spotting talent

The final theme we discuss here, which is related to the idea of political projects that rest on some kind of affinity between supervisors and students, is the idea of spotting potential talent. There was a perception amongst some of our participants that their supervisors were often spotting talent when deciding upon which students to supervise, not dissimilar in this to some of the findings of Ingram and Allen’s study about the ‘pre-hiring’ practices of graduate employers (2018) In our data, we identified that ‘spotting talent’ referred to working with those students who are good writers, who are academically successful and who are relatively self-propelling, as these are attributes that are desirable commodities in academia. Some examples from the data include Evie, who told us:

I think they saw that I produced good work quite early on, and basically weren’t worried about me [laughs]. So there would be times when I didn’t see them for four or five months like when I was doing field work. They just were like, “You get on with it and we’ll see you when you’re done.” When I was writing as well, I would just email them a chapter once a month. That was when I saw them the most actually, was when I was writing, because I was producing quite a lot of work, and basically forcing them to read it and meet with me. They were supportive, but there was certainly no hand-holding, let’s put it that way.

It’s incredibly supportive, but not overbearing. I think everybody, when they’re doing a PhD, thinks that they can do four or five PhDs in one. I was always given the space to figure out what I wanted to do without having one particular aspect pushed at me. (Alice)

I have had and continue to have a really good relationship with my supervisor. He's quite I would say hands-off as supervisor in that he gives you a lot of independence to develop your own ideas ... I was already quite an independent minded person, so our relationship works very well because I go and do stuff and then every now and then I say, "Hey is this okay?" Whereas I know that some people come into a PhD maybe needing a little more direct support and I don't know, I mean I have met and talked to others of his students of course but partly they, you develop as a PhD student partly in relationship to what your supervisor does, right? So, we all became very independent thinkers because that's kind of what he assumes you're going to do, "You go and think about this and then come back and we'll talk about it. Yeah, I think it took me probably a few months to really get used to having that level of trust in my work and I can imagine it might be challenging for some people. (Simon)

This 'light touch approach' to supervision by these participant's supervisors has fallen through the gaps of accountability regimes that seek to prescribe the regularity and expectations of supervisory meetings. As Davis (2020, p. 1120) points out, many universities in the Global North have attempted to address the problem of 'negligent' doctoral supervisors identified by the Robbins Report (1963, p. 105) by 'instituting codes of appropriate conduct and professional development programmes to assist new and existing staff members to shape their supervisory behaviour'. Yet despite these efforts, so called negligent supervisors 'remain the elephant in the room' (Davis 2020, p. 1121).

However, it is also noteworthy that many supervisors in both post- and pre-1992 institutions in the UK will experience significant institutional pressure to ensure doctoral supervisory completions within ever shrinking timeframes (Green & Bowden 2012). As Green and Bowden (2012) note, this pressure for timely completions is a key driver in the quest for university funding and generates significant pressure for supervisors and students. Our study highlights that one response to this pressure is for supervisors to work with those students who have well worked out research proposals and who are capable of working under their own initiative, with minimal intervention and demands placed on the supervisory team. Such an approach raises questions about the future possibilities of widening participation agendas at doctoral level as all of our participants reported in this section are White and middle-class. In contrast, the students from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds in our study all benefited from frequent and supportive supervisory meetings.

Discussion

Over 20 years ago, Johnson and colleagues noted how '[m]ore private than any other scene of teaching and learning, supervision and more generally, the pedagogic practices of the PhD – in the humanities and social sciences at least, have remained largely unscrutinised and unquestioned. Yet the supervision relationship is often fraught and unsatisfactory – as much marked by neglect, abandonment and indifference as it is by careful instruction or the positive and proactive exercise of pastoral power' (2000, p. 136).

The practices we identified would not fit Reimer's model of the pedagogy of 'magisterial disdain' (Reimer 1998) which Johnson and colleagues discuss at length, nor are they strictly determined by more recent trends in doctoral education policies that monitor students' progress and hold institutions accountable through sets of indicators that often fail to capture the diversity

of learners. Rather, this article highlights how pedagogic practices of the PhD (understood broadly) are characterised by a high level of diversity.

In particular, we show how the transition from doctoral research to early career academics is greatly eased by supportive and well-connected supervisors through practices of mentoring and, to an even greater extent, sponsoring (Hoskins 2012). There are uneven patterns of support provided by supervisory teams, despite efforts in UK institutions to regulate expectations around doctoral supervision support. The production of inequalities of support and, ultimately, outcomes is rendered legitimate through various discursive mechanisms of doctoral supervision (for example, elective affinities and talent spotting). For some students, support encompassed help with establishing a publications profile, access to research posts and teaching opportunities, and access to informal and formal supervisor networks. For others, the support was piecemeal, conflicted within the supervisory team and even discouraging. Some supervisors were engaged from the outset of the process and supported students well beyond completion of the PhD, in some instances even becoming colleagues in teaching and research. For others, they lost all contact with their supervisors once the contractual obligations of fulfilling a PhD had been met. Participants perceived that this happened in part because their supervisor was grappling with their own precarity and insecurity in relation to their own employment and occupational status in the academy.

Conclusion

In sum, a key aim of our research involved exploring how privileges and inequities play out in how ECRs tell their stories. Our analysis highlights how our participants embody privileges and equity in distinct ways. The reproduction of these privileges simultaneously depends on the institution and on gender, class and ethnicity, for example students who are privileged (White, male, middle-class) are more likely to use the idea of talent spotting to describe their supervisory relationship. The differences we noted centred around the provision for doctoral students within the dynamics of the supervisory team. There were very mixed experiences as might be expected. To make sense of the divergent experiences, we developed the concepts of sponsorship and mentorship. Those participants who felt most supported and perceived a more straightforward transition into academia, identified sponsorship from their supervisor(s).

As claimed by Johnson and colleagues, ‘the historically produced relations of power and desire between the academic and student are complexly bound up with the production and experience of, and the investment in, “independence”’ (Johnson et al. 2000, p. 136–7). Yet, as the doctoral population has diversified, the figure of the care-free, masculine, elite doctoral student body able to embrace a discourse of timeliness continues to be invoked. This calls for supervisors and institutions to be vigilant as per how power operates through discourses and practices which favour some scholars and exclude others.

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