STUDYING DOCTORAL SUPERVISION QUALITY TO DESIGN AREFERENCE FRAMEWORK:
A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: With this poster and handout the authors intend to briefly present (i) the generic context in which the study supports itself, namely its pertinence, the main theoretical guidelines as well as the challenges when discussing this issue; and (ii) the methodological approach of the study about doctoral supervision quality which is being run at a specific Higher Education (HE) institution with the greater objective of designing a reference framework. Although this research is being developed at a specific HE institution, it is undoubted the general relevance of engaging academic community in discussing conceptions, experiences and practices, since the enhancement of doctoral supervision quality is a pertinent subject to most countries and HE institutions. Thus, the transversal and supra-national character of this issue is unquestionable.

Keywords: Doctoral Supervision, Quality, Reference Framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the international HE agenda, there has been a growing concern with the extension and impact of research at postgraduate level, where doctoral studies and more specifically doctoral supervision are acquiring bigger significance and value. In fact, the international context demonstrates the existence of an increasing number and a greater diversity of students enrolling in doctoral programmes. Therefore, it is considered an international issue and concern to discuss doctoral research and supervision based on quality standards.

Bearing in mind this context, it is observed that in Portugal as it happens also in other countries, there is an urgent need in starting or continuing to develop research in this area,
due to emergent discussions and concerns at HE institutions, the lack of studies and the conceptual, theoretical and empirical gap in many settings concerning this subject. Therefore, more generically this study aims to contribute to rethink and jointly discuss this issue: it is essential to reflect about doctoral supervision quality and to make a regular balance of the actions which must be put into practice to improve its quality.

Thus, more specifically this study aims to share a contribution to the improvement of doctoral supervision both from supervisors and students’ perspectives, by designing a reference framework to enhance and evaluate the quality of doctoral supervision. This framework will be based on both theoretical and empirical data that will be gathered through the analysis of international and national literature, and empirical data which will be collected at a Portuguese HE institution: the University of Aveiro (UA).

It must be highlighted that, although this research is being run at a specific HE setting, the pertinence of discussing and engaging Academia within this reflection is undoubttable. This must be considered a transversal and supra-national issue: academic community will benefit from a desirable and enriching dialogue between experiences, practices and conceptions, where national borders must be considered liquid due to the importance of sharing and reflecting this subject at an international level. Thus, if research run at different HE settings may highlight specificities and contextual data, when properly framed in an international background it may contribute to broaden and enlighten a wider discussion where the greatest challenge is to enhance the quality of doctoral experiences and practices.

2. THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Nowadays, there is an increasing number of international studies that emphasise the need of evaluating and continuously enhancing the quality of teaching, learning and research at HE settings. In fact, it is being strengthen the importance of promoting a culture based on success, quality and excellence in all those processes. However, this culture must not be “empty”: it must be constituted of commitment, ethical, ideological and political principles, so that concepts like “excellence” and “quality” do not lose their epistemological “content”.

The quality of postgraduate research supervision (particularly focused on doctoral studies) is having an increasing relevance both at national and international settings. Thus, it is essential to reflect on the definition of criteria that characterise the quality of doctoral supervision, as
well as the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and students (Pearson & Brew, 2002; Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2006; Park, 2005, 2007, 2008), also considering the emergence of different forms of doctorates that suits this situation of a more complex approach (Park, 2005, 2007, 2008; Kehm, 2009; Costely & Lester, 2010). Simultaneously, it is crucial to discuss the evaluation of doctoral supervision quality (Aspland et al., 1999) where the definition of supervisors and students’ profiles and competences, the process of (new) knowledge construction, and the academic experience are very important aspects to be considered (Cullen et al., 1994; Barlett & Mercer, 2001; Bills, 2004; Soothill, 2006; Petersen, 2007; Lee, 2008; Felton, 2008).

When focusing our attention in those previous aspects, it is also fundamental to take into account several contextual factors that, even though they are permanently dialoguing, they are always changing and diversifying, influencing the discussions and approach to this subject. Consequently, an approach to today’s world characteristics must be considered, so this research may be properly contextualised (figure 1):

![Figure 1: Contextual factors](image_url)
In fact, those previous aspects will influence the institutional culture (Hodson & Thomas, 2003), its dynamics and policies as well as the approach to doctoral supervision quality. Nevertheless, those aspects also give us some lights about the challenges which HE institutions are dealing with and that are particularly related with this issue (figure 2).

Figure 2: Challenges when approaching this issue

3. The research project: The design of the reference framework

In the specific Portuguese HE background, we can observe a high number of theoretical and empirical studies about clinical and pedagogical supervision (Alarcão, 1995; Abreu, 2003; Vieira et al., 2006; Sá-Chaves, 2007; Alarcão & Roldão, 2008). But the same is not true when focusing on doctoral supervision: there is, in fact, a lack of conceptual and empirical studies about this subject. Nevertheless, although we do not have collected evidence nor research-based proofs, it must be emphasised that the Portuguese academic community is starting to be concerned and more aware of the growing number and a greater diversity of students enrolling in postgraduate studies. As a consequence, this situation is promoting some discussions regarding (i) the strategies of research/docotoral supervision that must be adopted, (ii) the quality of those strategies and interventions, and also (iii) the competences and roles which
are required from supervisors and students. Moreover, within some scientific areas (particularly on the Education area), some discussions and reflections are being focused on the higher demand from the same number of supervisors to support an increasing number of doctoral students who are showing (many of them) a lack or a low pattern of research competences and skills.

Thus, facing this context and again bearing in mind the international context, the authors are developing a project at a Portuguese HE institution (the UA) with the major objective of designing a reference framework that can (i) systematise some issues regarding this under-researched topic at Portuguese settings, (ii) stimulate the debate within national and international HE institutions and Academia, (iii) discuss policy and institutional measures, (iv) analyse discourses and conceptions, and (iv) further on be used for systematic and cyclic evaluation of practices, regarding the quality of doctoral supervision. In fact, being aware of the existence of isolated questionnaires to assess the quality of doctoral supervision that are not usually supported by an integrated evaluation reference framework or model, this framework is intended to integrate validated perspectives based on theoretical and empirical findings. Also, it is planned to be holistic and flexible, adaptable to different HE contexts. This framework will gather theoretical, conceptual, ethical and empirical (qualitative and quantitative) perspectives on the quality of doctoral supervision, supported on national and international findings.

Accordingly, the research method chosen to this research is the case study, since it will be analysed a contemporary event that cannot be manipulated (Yin, 1994, p.8) and the research questions are centred on the how and what of a contemporary reality (Yin, 1994, p.9):

- What theoretical basis and concepts should be considered to design the reference framework about the quality of doctoral supervision in Portugal and abroad?
- How to dialogue theoretical and empirical findings, as well as international and national ones, to design the reference framework?
- How to guarantee the flexibility of the reference framework concerning the quality of doctoral supervision process?

To answer those questions, the sample is constituted by doctoral students and supervisors of several academic domains at the UA, and the methodological design is broadly constituted by
a first set of interviews to set up the background, focus groups, another set of in-depth interviews and questionnaires (figure 3).

Figure 3: Methodological design

It was considered that would be important to run the first Portuguese research on this topic only in a HE institution so that variables such as institutional culture could be more or less controlled. After gathering, analysing and discussing all data not only within national “borders” but mainly dialoguing them with the international results and achievements, it will be useful to continuously discuss, rethink and study this subject to enhance the quality of doctoral supervision and research.

REFERENCES


