



'We can work on this': exploring supervisor approaches to feedback in the context of writing for the professional doctorate.

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‘We can work on this’: exploring supervisor approaches to feedback in the context of writing for the professional doctorate.

Abstract

Purpose

This paper aims to show how an Academic Literacies lens can contribute a deeper understanding of writing for the Professional Doctorate (PD) by focusing both on the language of supervisors' written feedback, and on student and supervisor perspectives on feedback throughout Year 1 (Y1).

Study design

First, written feedback summaries on formative assessments across two Y1 cohorts on a UK PD programme were analysed thematically to identify patterns in feedback practices. Secondly, two longitudinal, detailed student/supervisor case studies were developed, drawing on multiple data sources.

Findings

Supervisors' written feedback enacted an encouraging dialogue around assessed writing, discursively constructing a sense of solidarity on the doctoral journey, focusing on the 'long view'. Case study analysis, however, revealed tensions centred around jarring discontinuities in students' feedback experience as they transitioned from formative to summative assessment at the end of Y1.

Originality

This article reports on an innovative research design which combined a textual 'snapshot' of supervisory feedback, paying close attention to language, with detailed longitudinal case studies exploring perspectives on feedback over time. It contributes to doctoral writing research by throwing light on the relatively underexplored domain of writing in the taught phase of the professional doctorate. It contributes to doctoral education studies by highlighting the central role of feedback on writing in shaping the experience of PD researchers.

Research Implications

The article demonstrates that an Academic Literacies approach can offer valuable insights into the specific, situated context of writing for a distance learning Professional Doctorate and makes the case for greater attention to writing in contexts of partly taught doctorates.

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3 *Practical Implications*
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6 Findings suggests that PD programmes should work towards providing continuity of
7 feedback experience, through supervisor and examiner training and through assessment
8 arrangements which support students to navigate challenging transitions between
9 formative and summative phases of assessment.
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13 **Keywords**
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15 professional doctorate; academic literacies; doctoral writing; feedback practices; assessed
16 writing; doctoral supervision.
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Introduction

Professional Doctorate (PD) programmes typically differ from PhDs in important respects. They are generally partly taught in the early stages, usually involving summative assessments which act as gateways to later research stages (Kumar and Dawson, 2018). PD students often face acute practical barriers, usually studying part time (Gardner and Gopaul, 2012) while functioning in demanding professional and personal roles (Gibson *et al.*, 2017). While often new to research, they also have a high level of practitioner expertise, and so must navigate complex issues of self-confidence, identity and status (e.g. Buss, 2022; Burnard *et al.*, 2018). Writing is recognised as a key site in which such issues play out within doctoral study, with extensive research across different national contexts (e.g. Subedi *et al.*, 2022 in Nepal; Thesen and Cooper, 2014 in South Africa; Negretti and McGrath, 2020 in Sweden; Starke-Meyerring, 2011 in Canada; Carter and Kumar, 2017 in New Zealand; Sala-Bubaré *et al.* in Finland, Spain and the UK; Lei and Hu, 2019 in China). However, less attention has been paid to writing in the specific context of the PD. At the same time, expanding research on professional doctorates has yet to fully address the central role of writing in students' journeys through this epistemologically hybrid terrain. The study discussed here was informed by work in Academic Literacies which conceptualises literacy as situated social practice (Author, date) and recognises academic writing as bound up with identities, power relations, epistemology and equity. Academic literacies is grounded in ethnographically oriented exploration of academic reading and writing in specific contexts, including contexts of doctoral study (e.g. Thesen and Cooper, 2014; Badenhorst *et al.*, 2016; Creaton, 2015; McMullan, 2018). In their literature review on the development of academic identity, Inouye and McAlpine (2009: 17) call for more research on doctoral students' use of feedback and recommend longitudinal and case study work to trace micro-level processes 'in response to various ... milestones' and 'different types of feedback'. This paper aims to show how an

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2
3 Academic Literacies lens can contribute to this agenda in the context of the PD, and to
4
5 exemplify the kinds of insight afforded by focusing specifically on emerging evidence of a
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7 problematic discontinuity in students' experience of feedback in Year 1 (Y1) of a PD
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9 programme at an English University.
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16 **Writing for the Professional doctorate in doctoral writing and education research**

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20 The expansion of PD programmes in many national contexts (Wildy et al. 2015) has
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22 been accompanied by increasing research interest, although the PD remains less visible than
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24 the PhD. The focus ranges from PD programme design (e.g. Kumar and Dawson, 2018) to
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26 'feedback' (e.g. Adams, 2019; Carter and Kumar, 2017; Creaton, 2015), 'identity' (see
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28 Inouye and McAlpine, 2019 for a systematic review) and pedagogic relationships (e.g.
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30 Jacobsen *et al.*, 2021). However, studies often background writing, surprisingly given that
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32 PD graduates themselves have highlighted writing as a site of identity work, intellectual
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34 grappling and self-doubt in their studies (e.g. Martin, 2021). Writing is occasionally
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36 referenced as a key aspect of PD design (e.g. Kumar and Dawson, 2018) but relatively few
37
38 studies investigate the impact of writing-focused curriculum (Eastman and MacGuire, 2016 is
39
40 an exception). Micro-pedagogies such as individual feedback are even less well understood in
41
42 the specific context of the PD.
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48 An empirical interest in doctoral writers and their experiences emerged in the early
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50 2000s (see Sala-Bubaré *et al.*, 2018) and has flourished in the past decade (Gimenez *et al.*,
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52 2024). Qualitative studies have focused on the social (Kim, 2018), wellbeing (Lonka *et al.*,
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54 2019) and affective (Wei *et al.*, 2019) dimensions of doctoral writer experience. Doctoral
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56 writing has also received increasing attention across a number of language-oriented fields of
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58 research and practice, including English for Academic/Specific Purposes (e.g. Negretti and
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3 McGrath, 2020; Lei and Hu, 2019); Second Language Writing (e.g. Anderson, 2021), and
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5 Genre/Rhetoric studies (e.g. Paré, 2014; Starke-Meyerring *et al.*, 2014). However, the
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7 majority of studies focus, explicitly or otherwise, on the PhD. Diverse studies recognise that
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9 writing for a doctorate is a complex social practice, often best supported through writing
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11 group pedagogies, both in person (e.g. Aitchison and Guerin, 2014) and online (e.g. Guerin *et*
12
13 *al.*, 2020). However, few studies involving writing groups have focused on the PD. To a
14
15 lesser extent, there has been a parallel interest in the support of doctoral writers within
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17 supervision (González-Ocampo and Castelló, 2018; Maher and Say, 2016; Kamler and
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19 Thomson, 2006). Some research has focused specifically on supervisor feedback (Wei *et al.*,
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21 2019; Carter and Kumar, 2017). As with writing group research, much empirical work on
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23 supervision focuses on the PhD, with some recent exceptions (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2021; Adams,
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25 2019; Mawson and Abbott, 2017). Nevertheless, the writing dimension within these studies
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27 remains implicit. This may perhaps mirroring the perspectives of many PD supervisors
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29 themselves, who may not see themselves as academics (Gourlay, 2011) let alone as academic
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31 writing experts, even though their tacit expertise as writers in their disciplines is potentially
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33 the most valuable resource new PD writers have at their disposal.
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44 **Doctoral writing as situated literacies**

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47 A considerable subfield of doctoral writing research has adopted elements of an
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49 Academic Literacies approach (e.g. Thesen and Cooper, 2014; Badenhorst *et al.*, 2016;
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51 Creaton, 2015; McMullan, 2018). This tradition has origins in New Literacy Studies,
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53 particularly the work of Street (1984), which theorises reading and writing as highly situated
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55 practices which are shaped by, and draw meaning from, the specific social and cultural
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57 contexts in which they occur. In contexts of doctoral study, this implies an epistemological
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3 understanding of writing as both rooted in and constituting disciplines, and as tied to the
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5 politics of knowledge production and circulation. Academic literacies' attention to power also
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7 implies a critical orientation which speaks to matters of access and equity in 'mono-
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9 normativ[e]' (Blommaert and Horner, 2017) academic evaluation regimes (Author, date).
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11 Methodologically, Academic Literacies entails an ethnographic interest in the perspectives of
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13 academic text producers and readers, as well as in the language of texts themselves, aiming to
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15 produce a rich description of practice by drawing on multiple sources of data. Work in this
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17 tradition has also increasingly adopted a dynamic approach, gathering data longitudinally
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19 (e.g. McMullan, 2018). Academic Literacies thus offers a powerful lens for examining the
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21 complex challenges encountered by students on their journey towards a professional
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23 doctorate, as a very specifically configured evaluation regime, fraught with tensions between
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25 academic/vocational forms of knowledge (San Miguel and Nelson, 2007) and between
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27 expert/novice identities (Lei and Hu, 2019). The study described here adopted an Academic
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29 Literacies approach, using language-sensitive, ethnographically oriented methods to throw
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31 light on feedback on writing during Y1 of a PD programme, specifically to address the
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33 following questions: 'What patterns can be identified in written feedback practices of
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35 supervisors on Y1 of a PD programme?' and 'what light can detailed case studies throw on
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37 these practices and their potential impact on the experiences of PD writers?'
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48 **Context of the study**

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50 A blended model of PD delivery is now common in the UK and increasingly
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52 supervisions across doctoral programmes are being conducted online rather than in person
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54 (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2021). The PD programme in this study is delivered through online/distance
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56 modes, supported by a structured VLE, except for an annual residential weekend. Students
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58 pursue a Doctorate in either Education (EdD) or Health and Social Care (DHSC).
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Supervision meetings are held at least six times a year. Programme materials often refer to the notion of the doctoral ‘journey’, particularly in relation to assessment points. Table 1 shows the programme outline with details of Y1 assignments. Students must pass summative Assignments 3 and 6 to continue to the next year of study; they are offered one resubmission opportunity at these ‘gateway’ points. Anonymous independent examiners are chosen by programme leaders from the pool of current PD supervisors, or occasionally from the wider pool of academic staff in the Faculty where the programme sits. While efforts are made to provide a good match, examiners may be relatively unfamiliar with their examinees’ research topic.

Table 1: Professional Doctorate programme outline

| Phase | Programme Year | No of supervisors | Assignment no., topic and mode of assessment. | Assessed by |
|------------|----------------|-------------------|---|------------------|
| ‘Taught’ | 1 | 1 | 1. An evaluation of the research context – formative. | supervisor |
| | | | 2. A preliminary literature review – formative. | supervisor |
| | | | 3. Literature review and Researching Professional Development Plan – summative. | examiners (2) |
| | 2 | 2 | Formative (4. and 5.) | supervisors |
| | | | Summative (6.) | examiners (2) |
| ‘Research’ | 3 | 2 | Formative (7., 8. and 9.) | supervisors |

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|--|---|---|---|-------------|
| | 4 | 2 | Formative (10.,11.,12. - thesis drafts) | supervisors |
| | | | Final thesis/viva | examiners |

Feedback processes on the programme are partly structured through proformas tailored to assignment-specific criteria. From an Academic Literacies perspective, standard proformas represent an attempt to ‘design in’ specific professional practices, and their attendant social relations and identities, although individuals’ use of proformas may not conform to designers’ intentions. Figure 1 shows extracts from a sample formative feedback proforma for Y1: Section 1 is completed by the student, encouraging them to raise issues for discussion with supervisors, who complete subsequent sections. This format thus entextualises (Blommaert, 2005) the notion that PD researchers should be pro-active in initiating and steering feedback conversations with supervisors. This is in keeping with the current broad view of feedback in higher education as dialogue (e.g. Ajjawi and Boud, 2018), but also conveys the more situated message that PD students are agentive ‘researching professionals’ (Lindsay and Floyd, 2018).

Section 1 – Doctoral researcher**To be completed by doctoral researcher and submitted with Formative Assessment 01.**

Please comment by typing in the boxes below (they will expand as required).

We use anonymised versions of formative Assignment Commentary and Feedback forms, and of Year 1 and Year 2 Summative Assessments for staff development and scholarship purposes; if you agree that your work can be used for this purpose, please check this box.

1. Achievements since starting the programme (see Note 1 below)

2. Areas I wish to discuss with my supervisor (see Note 2)

3. Any other thoughts or issues prompted by the Researching Professional Development Framework (see Note 3)

Section 3 – Supervisor Feedback**To be completed by your supervisor.**

Please comment on the following aspects by typing in the boxes (they will expand as required).

1. Demonstrates your developing knowledge of the macro, meso and micro context of your research

2. Demonstrates your ability to think critically on the context for your research and your role as a researcher within your area of practice

3. Demonstrates your ability to draw effectively on background literature to illustrate the relevance of your research for your area of practice

4. Written expression (clarity of the writing style, structure, presentation, references)

5. General Comments

Figure 1: Extracts from a Y1 Assignment 1 feedback proforma: sections for student and supervisor to complete.

Data were gathered from two Y1 cohorts 2019-2021, hence in part during the Covid pandemic. Possible consequences of this timing for study findings are discussed below.

Data generation and analysis*Methods*

Aiming for both breadth and depth within time constraints, the study had two stages.

First, written feedback summaries (see e.g. Figure 1) on formative assessments across two Y1 cohorts of the programme were anonymised, gathered and analysed (see below). This textual

‘snapshot’ enabled the researcher to pay detailed attention to the language of feedback across the programme, which in turn indexed wider supervisory practices around writing. Secondly, two student/supervisor pairs were recruited during a residential weekend for the second Y1 cohort, forming the basis of two in-depth, longitudinal case studies (Yin, 2018) of feedback practice during Y1. In keeping with an Academic Literacies approach, these case studies enabled the research to account more fully for the wider practices of production and uptake surrounding written assignments (Author, date, date). Data gathered included texts, videorecorded supervisions and interviews carried out within two weeks of each Y1 assessment including the final, summative Assignment which was marked by examiners (see Figure 2), who were not interviewed, as they remained anonymous to the researcher as well as to both students and supervisors.

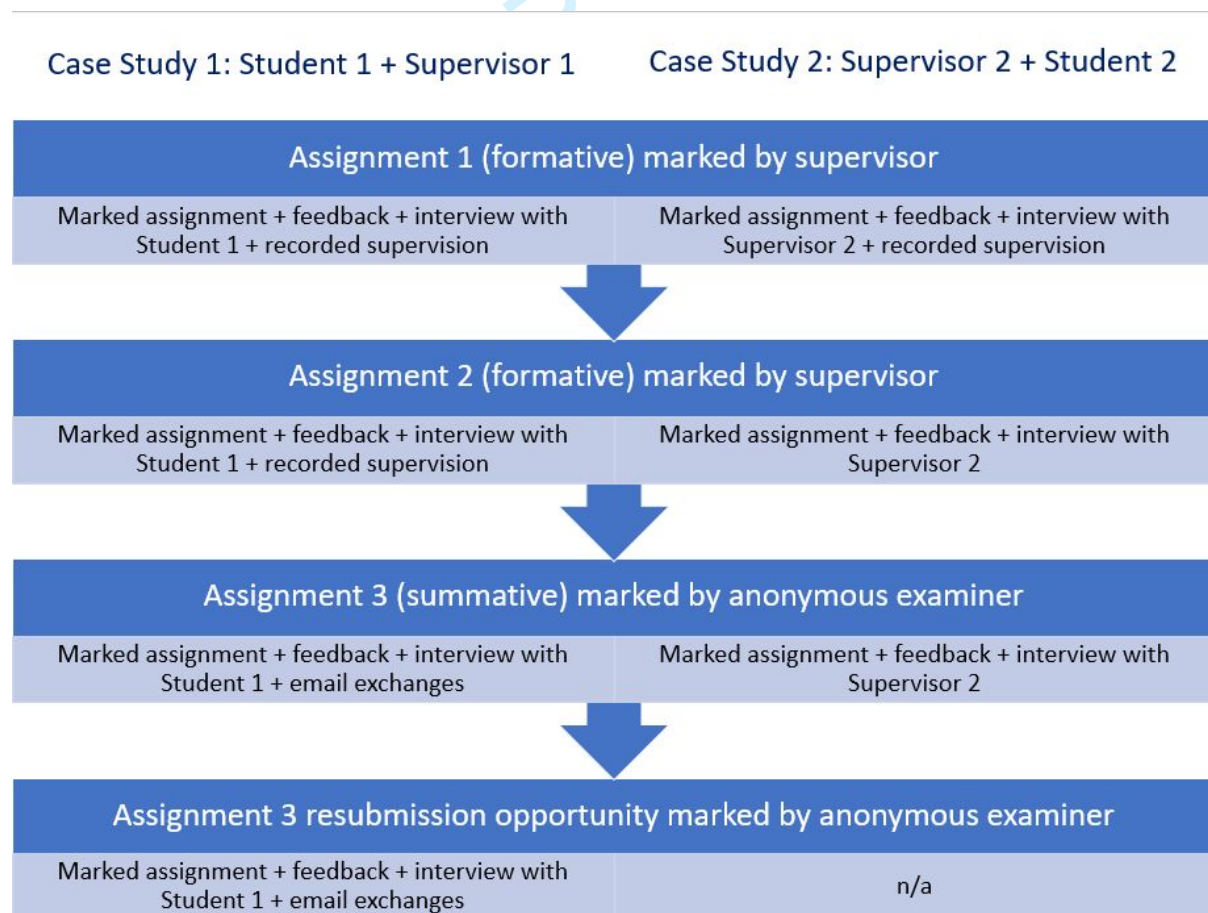


Figure 2: Case study data generation throughout Y1 of a part-taught PD programme.

Ethical considerations

Students gave consent via a ‘tick box’ on feedback forms (see Figure 1). Supervisors’ and examiners’ consent to use their written feedback was covered by the staff privacy notice at the site institution. All case study participants worked for the institution in the study; this inevitably shaped supervisory relationships (Boncori and Smith, 2020). Each case centred on either the student (Case 1) or the supervisor (Case 2) in each pair, enabling the researcher to capture both student and supervisor perspectives while minimising the risk of interfering with ongoing supervisory relationships. Issues of power, identity and positionality were actively considered throughout the research process (Lillis, 2008). The researcher had some insider knowledge as a supervisor on the programme but did not supervise or examine participants. In-depth qualitative research often entails complex ethical issues which may arise as a study progresses; in the current study, one participant received an upsetting fail grade (see Findings) which required particular sensitivity. Care was taken to treat participants’ information respectfully, to share transcripts and drafts of outputs with participants and programme leaders to ensure that individuals and programme were fairly represented and that anonymity was preserved.

Data analysis

Feedback summaries were initially coded using NVivo through multiple readings under three broad categories: aspects of writing – supervisor focus (distinguishing positive and negative mentions); student perspectives; supervisor approaches to feedback. This coding structure arose from the researcher’s interest in writing, writing pedagogies and the nature of the data as structured by feedback forms (see Figure 1). Themes were then developed inductively within each category with attention paid to the language of feedback messages as well as content. Issues emerging in earlier phases of analysis were raised in later case study

interviews. Data for the two case study pairs were transcribed, then incorporated into a second iteration of thematic analysis. Figure 3 illustrates the thematic structure generated in relation to the overarching category of ‘supervisor approaches to feedback’ which is the main focus of this paper. Two case studies were then drafted by moving repeatedly between texts, interviews and transcribed supervision data to build a detailed picture of the perspectives and practices of participant student/supervisor pairs as these unfolded over Y1. The following discussion draws on both thematic and case study analysis.

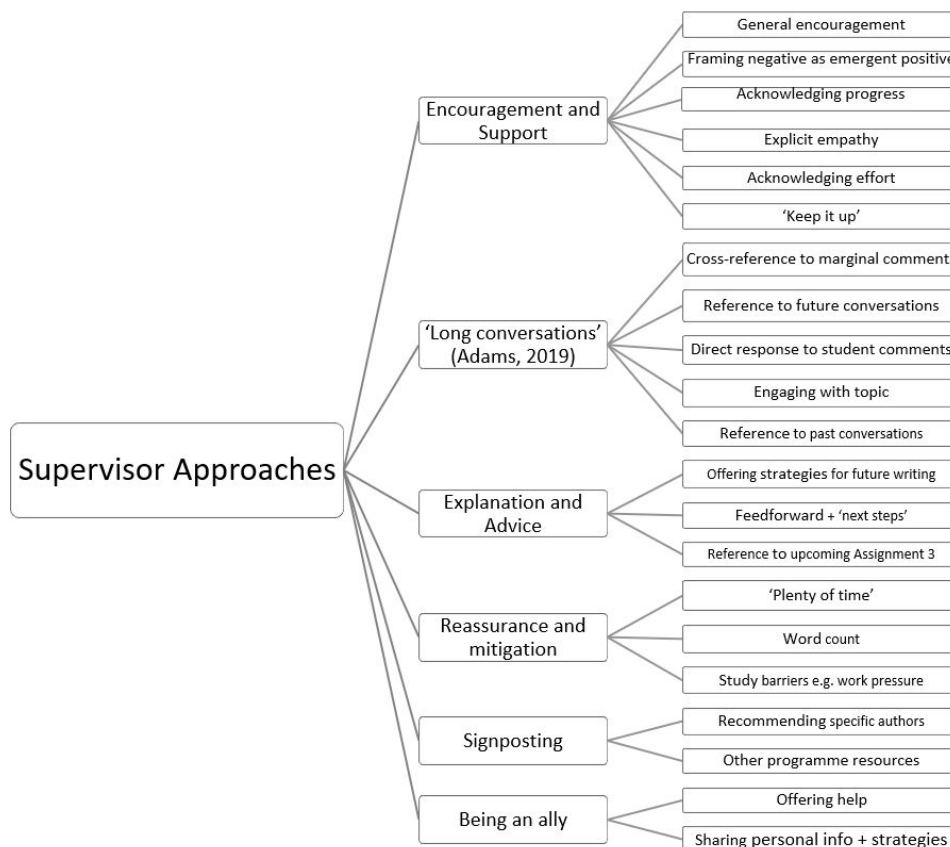


Figure 3: Themes and main sub-themes developed through analysis across data under the category ‘supervisor approaches to feedback’.

Findings

This section focuses first on supervisor approaches to feedback on writing given at formative assessment points 1 and 2 (see Table 1), rather than on the content of their concerns, across the data. This is followed by a discussion of a critical moment in one student's experience after the summative assessment point 3 (see Table 1).

Supervisor approaches to feedback

Written feedback summaries frequently referred to past and future supervisory conversations, forming a clear impression of feedback as part of a wider conversation: 'you have evidently reflected on and used feedback from our earlier discussions'; 'let's talk this through at our next supervision.' This seemed to exemplify a pedagogy of educational dialogue as defined in different traditions of research on academic writing (e.g. Lillis, 2006; Paré *et al.* 2011) and feedback (Ajjawi and Boud, 2018); it also appears to reflect programme leaders' intentions as expressed in feedback form design (see Figure 1). The following analysis examines supervisors' part in that dialogue in more detail.

Overall, supervisors' orientations to PD assessed writing were positive, with more positive comments (n=428) than comments on areas which could be improved (n=354). The affirmative tone of summaries was occasionally conveyed through a sense of personal engagement with specific aspects of the text: 'I really enjoyed your sub-headings'. However, the large majority of positive evaluations of writing in both summaries and case study data were expressed in very general terms e.g. 'your written expression is good', 'you write well'. For some assignments submitted, supervisors had also identified many areas for improvement, the five most salient categories across both cohorts being: source use, criticality, clarity, structure and focus. When offering advice, feedback summaries occasionally suggested how improvements could be realised in writing, e.g. 'you sometimes need to ... introduce quotations ... to make the sources "work" for you'. More frequently,

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3 however, precisely *how* PD writers could rewrite their text to improve in these five areas
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5 remained implicit. For example, the need to be more ‘critical’, a common area of concern,
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7 was mentioned alongside ‘taking a stance’, avoiding ‘description’ or finding a ‘voice’, yet
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9 explicit examples of how such critical approaches might be worded were absent from
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11 feedback summaries.
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15 Feedback summaries often commented indirectly on the quality of writing in terms of
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17 whether the text was ‘easy to follow’ for an imagined reader, e.g. ‘it might be good to
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19 establish some definitions and explanations for readers whose knowledge is less than your
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21 own?’ This type of advice suggests supervisors were engaged in a process of helping PD
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23 writers to develop a rhetorical awareness of a disciplinary community readership (Tardy *et*
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25 *al.*, 2020; Paré *et al.* 2011; Ivanič, 1998). However, Y1 examiners were not mentioned, and
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27 the need to address this distinct, but important, readership remained implicit at most in
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29 feedback summaries. Case study analysis suggests that supervisor comments on assignment
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31 scripts may invoke examiners as future readers more often than was evident in feedback
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33 summaries. A marginal comment by Supervisor 2 made this connection: ‘I am reading like an
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35 examiner and my comments are things that they would ask’. Nevertheless, explicit reference
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37 to examiners only occurred in this single instance in data for the two case studies. This is
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39 surprising given that Assignment 2 is in effect a formative draft of the summative Literature
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41 Review Assignment 3 which will be marked by two anonymous examiners. Indeed, specific
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43 discussion of the wording of written text, whether of completed assignments of or those to
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45 come, was notably absent from observed case study supervisions.
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53 Supervisors used a wide range of written feedback strategies to build a sense of
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55 solidarity with students. For example, often when tackling aspects which were proving
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57 difficult for students, supervisors used ‘we’: ‘we can work on this’; ‘we need to get to the
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59 bottom of why it’s been harder for you to marshal your thoughts this time’. Sometimes they
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3 actively shared their own past struggles as postgraduate researchers: ‘I most certainly did the
4 same thing ... early on’. They empathised with students’ personal feelings: ‘At the moment
5 the area might still seem overwhelming’ and professional situations: ‘I do hope that your
6 work pressure has eased’. They frequently acknowledged both effort and progress: ‘I can see
7 your hard work and commitment to your research ... well done!’ These empathetic strategies
8 were deployed most intensively wherever gaps or potential problems were being pointed out.
9 Both case studies evidenced a similar strategy of solidarity-building. For example, Student 1
10 recounted that Supervisor 1 had shared some of their own academic struggles: ‘[they] talked
11 about, which was really nice, their journey, where they have been rejected a couple of times
12 and had to do things [to secure publication]’. Supervisor 2 made a striking marginal written
13 comment on Student 2’s Assignment 2: ‘Oooh interesting – I must admit I haven’t heard
14 much about this before’. At interview, they explained: ‘if [Student 2] **were sat next to me**
15 and I’m reading through it, I’d be, ooh, yeah, this is interesting ... so it’s a way of trying to
16 capture that ...’ⁱⁱ suggesting that such levelling, companionable moves could be consciously
17 adopted to mitigate the online/distance context.

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Another common communicative strategy, was the widespread use of tentative language wherever weaknesses were being pointed out. This could take the form of framing devices such as ‘to me’; the use of verb forms such as ‘might’, ‘could’; hedging expressions such as ‘it seems that’, ‘I was wondering if’, ‘perhaps’; or the use of question marks. Different hedging features were often combined, resulting in a highly tentative style: ‘So **as I read** [this] ... there were **a few things** in the wrong place **maybe?** ‘**Perhaps** an issue for you to resolve is, **I think**, ...’. This approach was also evident in case studies. For example, Supervisor 2 explained her approach to written feedback at interview:

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3 it's very much about ... being able to be supportive ..., whilst at the same
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5 time recognising that this person is a perfectly capable and confident being
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7 in their own right
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10 Supervisors also sometimes used a very assertive tone to frame negative feedback
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12 positively: '**I'm not worried – I know** you can write **much more** clearly than this'; '**you will**
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14 develop this way of writing over the next few months.'
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18 Feedback summaries deployed other face-saving strategies, apparently designed to
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20 maintain student confidence and preserve a positive supervisory relationship, especially when
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22 identifying areas for improvement.. For example, some cited restricted word count as
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24 mitigation for deficiencies in criticality: 'You have demonstrated critical thinking throughout
25
26 this assignment **bearing in mind the word-count limit**'. Sometimes supervisors indicated
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28 that criticality was developing generally but had not *yet* been demonstrated in writing: '**There**
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30 **is no doubt** that you are a critical thinker, and **this should develop further with time and**
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32 **help**'. Some feedback distinguished between students' skills 'in the round' and their ability to
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34 evidence these skills in writing, as in this example:
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40 **In our discussions** it has been clear that you have a strong grasp on who the
41
42 main stakeholders will be ... However, **in your assignment** you could have
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44 provided more detail.
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47 These distinctions seemed designed to reassure students that good writing would follow:
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49 '[criticality] is an area that normally develops throughout the years of doctoral research'.
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52 Another frequently used softening device was to invoke a long timescale in which
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54 improvements could be made. Feedback frequently reassured students that there was 'plenty
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56 of time to get this right'; 'it is very early days'. Such comments place the emphasis on longer
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58 term development, discursively directing the student's gaze towards a more distant point on
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3 their doctoral journey. While this ‘face work’ (Goffman, 1972) may be effective for
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5 maintaining trust, it may downplay the need to address certain issues by the end of Year 1,
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7 when students’ written work will be judged outside the context of the supervisory
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9 relationship by powerful gatekeeper examiners. The next section focuses particularly on this
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11 final part of the Y1 trajectory as revealed by the case studies, particularly Case Study 1,
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13 which identified a disjuncture in Student 1’s experience of feedback which would not have
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15 been discernible through analysis of written feedback alone.
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23 *A critical moment in one student’s journey*

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25 From the outset of Y1, Student 1 expressed awareness of a shift in positionality on
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27 commencing doctoral study: ‘I’ve come from a senior management position ... to be a
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29 student, so ... it feels like I’ve taken a step back.’ This complex identity positioning,
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31 documented elsewhere (e.g. Boncori and Smith, 2020; Martin, 2021), formed a background
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33 to what became a critical moment: unexpectedly (apparently to both student and supervisor)
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35 Student 1 received a Bare Fail for Assignment 3, prompting a personal crisis. After receiving
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37 examiner feedback on Assignment 3, Student 1 commented at interview that their supervisor
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39 ‘did say to me it would be a journey and my goodness [they were] so right’. Case study
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41 analysis helped to uncover the contrast in approaches to feedback encountered by Student 1
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43 as they moved from formative Assignment 2 to summative Assignment 3, which helped to
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45 explain this response.
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51 In their written marginal and summary comments on Assignment 2 (a literature
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53 review), Supervisor 1 liberally deployed strategies identified in the above analysis of
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55 supervisor approaches across the cohort. Commenting on understanding and critical analysis
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57 of the literature, they minimised the negative (‘you could be **a tad** more critical’) and used
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verbs emphasising continuity and progress, in present continuous form ('you **are developing** an excellent understanding of the literature'). These comments could be read as presenting Assignment 3 (a developed literature review) as a straightforward step into Year 2.

Examiners, who failed Student 1's Assignment 3, described their main concern as 'extensive use of direct quotes' - an issue which was not raised in formative supervisor feedback.

Comments on the quality of Student 1's writing also exhibited a marked discontinuity in tone.

Table 2 highlights selected comments received on Assignments 2 and 3 relating to 'written expression'.

Table 2: Feedback on 'written expression' for Student 1's Assignments 2 and 3

| <p style="text-align: center;">Assignment 2</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Supervisor Feedback summary</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Formative: literature review)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Assignment 3</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Examiner Feedback summary</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Summative: developed literature review)</p> |
|--|---|
| <p><i>You write well and on the whole the clarity of writing is excellent. I do feel at times that you could consider toning down some of your ideas as some paragraphs in my view can be too complex to understand and I'd welcome your thoughts on trying to convey your ideas that aren't heavily reliant on academic language...</i></p> | <p><i>Please take care with your signposting There are several examples where it is not clear what is being referred to ...For instance, page 12 first paragraph: to what does this research topic area refer? ... [gives 5 more examples] ...</i></p> <p><i>There are also some sentences that are difficult to understand, for example ...</i></p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p><i>This is only a minor point and shouldn't detract from your competent writing style and excellent presentation.</i></p> | <p><i>there are quite a few typographical area [sic = errors] some of which are obvious and should have been checked before submission. This suggests a lack of care which, from the clear effort you have undertaken in writing this assignment is unfortunate ...</i></p> |
|---|--|

Supervisor 1's asserts that 'on the whole... clarity is excellent', while examiners repeatedly refer to features which are 'unclear', deploying categorical feedback language: '[errors] ... are obvious and should have been checked'. The supervisor uses tentative language ('in my view'; 'I'd welcome your thoughts...') to comment on paragraphs '... too complex to understand' and qualifies the criticism: 'this is only a minor point'. Examiners also comment on sections which are 'difficult to understand', but with less hedging, and most of their suggestions for improving written expression focus on typos, spellings, table headings and 'signposting'. This finding is consistent with much Academic literacies research which has linked a decontextualised, 'deficit' framing of student writing with a preoccupation with technical features and errors (Turner, 2011; Ivanič, 2004).

Although the overall fail/resubmit outcome itself was clearly a major cause of Student 1's distress, their frustrations were apparently exacerbated by the *language* of examiner feedback, which brought them to tears:

I have spoken with [Supervisor] about feeling very despondent, disappointed and upset around the way in which feedback has been worded as I have

1
2
3 perceived it as very unhelpful, negative and ... rather patronising [email sent
4
5 2 weeks after receiving 'Fail- Resubmit' outcome].
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8 Student 2, who obtained a Clear Pass in Assignment 3 also reportedly shed tears in response
9
10 to feedback, according to Supervisor 2 '[they were] really upset about it', reinforcing the
11
12 inference that the wording of feedback mattered, not only the grade. The feedback which
13
14 Student 1 seems to have found most stinging to receive related to 'written expression' (see
15
16
17 Figure 1):
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21 I must have read this assignment twenty times, I knew it off by heart ... then
22
23 what [they] said- 'this suggests a lack of care' and I thought 'outrageous! ...
24
25 we had to write ten thousand words in six weeks, right, working full time ...
26
27 that was the final straw ...
28
29

30
31 Several factors seem to have contributed to Student 1's distress. Examiners' language
32
33 represents a marked departure from the tenor of feedback received prior to this point.
34
35 Mitigations such as those discussed above, offered in the context of the ongoing supervisory
36
37 relationship, are less evident, and the tone shifts away from hedging and a 'subjective'
38
39 framing to a more monologic stance. This prompted a shift in identity positioning for Student
40
41 1, from being a colleague and fellow researcher to feeling patronised: 'it feels like I'm back
42
43 in secondary school'. An apparent further trigger was examiners' suggestion of a 'lack of
44
45 care' which felt like a *personal judgment*. Research on assessed writing has shown that
46
47 surface errors can be frequently 'read' as indicating something negative – lazy, careless –
48
49 about the writer rather than simply being a feature of the text (Author, date, date). The
50
51 examiners referred to 'the clear effort ... undertaken'; however, the negative effect on the
52
53 student remained considerable: 'I just felt absolutely worthless'. 'Mixed feelings' persisted
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3 several months afterwards. Even after Student 1 had resubmitted and passed, she commented
4
5 that she was still ‘constantly questioning myself and my abilities’ [email].
6
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8
9 Longitudinal case studies allowed a glimpse of the double adjustment expected of PD
10
11 researchers at this critical point in their study trajectory. First, they are for the first time
12
13 subject to an assessment based on their text alone, rather than in the context of a long
14
15 supervisory ‘conversation’ where written assessments are part of a wider interaction.
16
17 Secondly, they feel judged but without the same degree of hedging, positive regard and
18
19 encouragement which, as the earlier analysis shows, are routinely used in supervision to
20
21 make critical messages easier to take on board. The examiners were unlikely to be aware of
22
23 the emotional impact of their comment. However, these findings are consistent with
24
25 Academic Literacies research which has mapped the links between students’ writing and their
26
27 sense of self-worth, or its converse (e.g. Lillis, 2001) exacerbated by pervasive ‘deficit’
28
29 discourses of language or skills at all levels of study (Turner, 2011). They also point to a
30
31 significant contrast with typical PhD upgrade processes where assessors are not anonymous
32
33 and students have an opportunity to defend their work at a ‘mini-viva’ (Heron et al. 2023).
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39 **Discussion**

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41 These findings reveal supervisory pedagogy around PD writing as a ‘flowing conversation’
42
43 (Adams, 2019) or an ongoing shared journey, rather than ‘telling what to do’ (Gonzalez-
44
45 Campo and Castelló, 2018: 396). Attention to the language of feedback in both parts of the
46
47 study shows that supervisors are exercising ‘relational expertise’, perhaps to a greater extent
48
49 than writing expertise, in their brokering of academic writing (Heron *et al.*, 2022). Through
50
51 written feedback and talk in interviews and supervisions, participants’ perspectives reflected
52
53 the sense of a shared endeavour in which supervisors adopt the role of allies, perhaps
54
55 particularly appropriate in the context of the PD, where students and supervisors may share a
56
57 profession or, as in this case, be distant work colleagues. This discursively constructed
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2
3 partnership was apparently present from the outset, in contrast with the early days of a PhD
4
5 supervisory relationship as reported, for example by Gimenez *et al.* (2024: 502) who found
6
7 that early stage doctoral researchers in their study had a ‘distant, directive and expert-to-
8
9 novice’ relationship with supervisors which only later evolved into a more ‘colleague-to-
10
11 colleague’ relationship. This collegial approach appears to reflect programme intentions and
12
13 represents good practice in the light of what is known about the particularly complex identity
14
15 positioning and practical obstacles to be navigated by PD writers (e.g. Buss, 2022; Martin,
16
17 2021; Burnard *et al.*, 2018; Mawson and Abbott, 2017). Case studies, however, revealed
18
19 discontinuities within the Y1 writing ‘journey’, principally centred around assessment. While
20
21 the written word and the need to consider real examiner-readers remained largely invisible in
22
23 supervisory conversations, they became visible as ‘error’ at a crucial point. The final
24
25 summative piece, marked anonymously by examiners, seemed to introduce more hierarchical
26
27 identity positionings in problematic ways – threatening to subject PD candidates to a reversal
28
29 of the evolution from novice to colleague identity noted for example by Gimenez *et al.* 2024
30
31 in the case of PhD students. Its gatekeeping function in the evaluation regime of the PD
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33 seemed to cut across the longer path of collaborative progress mapped discursively through
34
35 the language of supervisor feedback, interrupting the supervisory conversation with the more
36
37 prescriptive, less contextualised voices of examiners.
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45 Close analysis of feedback summaries along with written and spoken interactions in
46
47 both case studies indicated that although written work was visible in terms of its content,
48
49 expectations of written language were vaguer and less explicit in supervisory interactions.
50
51 This may have stemmed from an understandable tendency to downplay language issues to
52
53 avoid potential threats to students’ confidence as new researchers, or from supervisors’ own
54
55 lack of confidence in articulating what desirable qualities such as ‘criticality’ or ‘clarity’
56
57 *might look like on the page*. Research has shown that a lack of supervisor confidence in
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3 matters of academic writing may be particularly acute in practice-based disciplines (Author,
4 date; Gourlay 2011) in which PD programmes specialise. In contrast to Gonzalez-Campo and
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matters of academic writing may be particularly acute in practice-based disciplines (Author, date; Gourlay 2011) in which PD programmes specialise. In contrast to Gonzalez-Campo and Castelló's (2013) study based on doctoral supervisors' self-reported practices, 'hands on' writing development strategies such as modelling effective language were not evident in feedback summaries (though access to more marked assignment texts and supervisions may have revealed more of this). Attention to the wording of assessed writing was almost completely absent from case study supervisor feedback or supervisions. Examiners in the two case studies did focus on specific textual features but associated these with students' intellectual or personal deficits, rather than foregrounding epistemological discourses of writing (Author, date; Ivanič, 2004). This disparity may have contributed to the shock experienced by students receiving feedback from examiners who were responding to their texts alone, at a consequential point.

Individual case studies cannot be used to make general claims. However, the study exposes a potential disjuncture between the formative and summative phases of the PD in Y1 (and by implication, Y2), perhaps even more challenging than in the case of a typical PhD 'upgrade'. The student may initially experience a steady and supported, journey but then encounter a potentially damaging obstacle, discursively 'hidden' because supervisors' feedback language focuses on the longer view. 'Plenty of time to get this right' quickly becomes a short and pressured phase where the risks are high. And a mutually respectful conversation between professional colleagues – characterised by strenuous face work, especially where issues of writing are concerned – reverts abruptly to the asymmetrical language of anonymous examiners. The habitual practice during the earlier phase of Y1 is to leave specific writing issues unarticulated, while examiners may 'home in' on textual blemishes. The PD student's identity as an emerging researcher may receive a severe jolt. The timing of this study during the pandemic may have intensified students' need for

1
2
3 supervisor reassurance (Wisker *et al.*, 2021), exacerbating the discontinuity between
4
5 formative and summative assessment feedback. However, these findings point to the
6
7 perennial challenge of holding difficult but essential conversations within a PD supervisory
8
9 relationship which *directly* address the specifics of writing for anonymous examiner-readers,
10
11 thereby better equipping students for higher stakes assessment, while avoiding erosion of
12
13 their potentially fragile sense of identity and status as doctoral researchers. These insights
14
15 were made possible through this study's deployment of an Academic Literacies lens,
16
17 combining analysis of written feedback summaries with the development of two
18
19 ethnographically oriented, longitudinal case studies, placing supervisory feedback practice in
20
21 its wider context.
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26 27 **Recommendations**

28
29 Findings point to the need for 'systematic attention to writing' (Kamler and Thomson,
30
31 2006: 144) by supervisors, involving text-focused feedback conversations which recognise
32
33 the 'delicacy' of the PD feedback context (Carter and Kumar, 2017) and preserve collegial
34
35 pedagogic relations without avoiding trickier discussions, should these be needed, about
36
37 expectations of writing at end of year Y1. This could include using modelling and re-writing
38
39 techniques such as 'joint texting' (Kamler and Thomson, 2006: 53-57), supported through
40
41 supervisor training, or even simply using 'tracked changes' (Carter and Kumar 2017)
42
43 followed by discussion before changes are 'accepted' or 'rejected'. Supervisors need support
44
45 to recognise that 'language work' is an integral part of the intellectual labour of supervision
46
47 (Turner, 2016). In addition to the more general work of helping research students orient their
48
49 writing rhetorically to a specific disciplinary readership, supervisors can be encouraged to
50
51 bring anonymous examiners 'into the room' during writing conversations, invoking them
52
53 explicitly as readers prior to the summative stage. PD supervisory practice needs to take
54
55 account of the subtly distinct conditions of writing for a PD, particularly the complex
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3 messaging required to support writing development in the context of more symmetrical and
4
5 collegial pedagogic relations. Internal examiners (who generally also supervise) need support
6
7 and training to meet the challenges of commenting appropriately when evaluating written
8
9 work anonymously at this level and where their expertise in the student's specific field may
10
11 be relatively limited. Through programme design, PD leaders can nurture an institutional
12
13 writing culture which acknowledges the 'centrality of text' (Aitchison and Lee, 2006: 265) to
14
15 doctoral research. Students may need intensive programme-level support to navigate the
16
17 transition between formative and summative phases of the 'journey'. Findings favour
18
19 summative assessment arrangements which, at least in Y1, involve a combination of the
20
21 student's own supervisor and one anonymous examiner and so support the reality, as well as
22
23 the metaphorical notion of, a continuous doctoral journey. Finally, this paper provides
24
25 evidence of the need to extend this work by conducting additional longitudinal and
26
27 ethnographic work with PD and other part-time, professional doctoral writers and their
28
29 supervisors, and so to inform the development of supervisory writing pedagogies which are
30
31 well tailored to the needs of PD researchers.

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38 <Acknowledgements and Declaration sections to insert here.>
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42 ⁱ In this paper ‘summative’ refers to formal assessments at gatekeeping points on a PD programme. Clearly
43 these also have a formative, i.e. developmental and pedagogic function.

44 ⁱⁱ Bold font within data extracts indicates author’s emphasis here and throughout.
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Section 1 – Doctoral researcher**To be completed by doctoral researcher and submitted with Formative Assessment 01.**

Please comment by typing in the boxes below (they will expand as required).

We use anonymised versions of formative Assignment Commentary and Feedback forms, and of Year 1 and Year 2 Summative Assessments for staff development and scholarship purposes; if you agree that your work can be used for this purpose, please check this box.

1. Achievements since starting the programme (see Note 1 below)

2. Areas I wish to discuss with my supervisor (see Note 2)

3. Any other thoughts or issues prompted by the Researching Professional Development Framework (see Note 3)

Section 3 – Supervisor Feedback**To be completed by your supervisor.**

Please comment on the following aspects by typing in the boxes (they will expand as required).

1. Demonstrates your developing knowledge of the macro, meso and micro context of your research

2. Demonstrates your ability to think critically on the context for your research and your role as a researcher within your area of practice

3. Demonstrates your ability to draw effectively on background literature to illustrate the relevance of your research for your area of practice

4. Written expression (clarity of the writing style, structure, presentation, references)

5. General Comments

Figure 1: Extracts from a Y1 Assignment 1 feedback proforma: sections for student and supervisor to complete.

Source : Permission to use granted by the research site institution

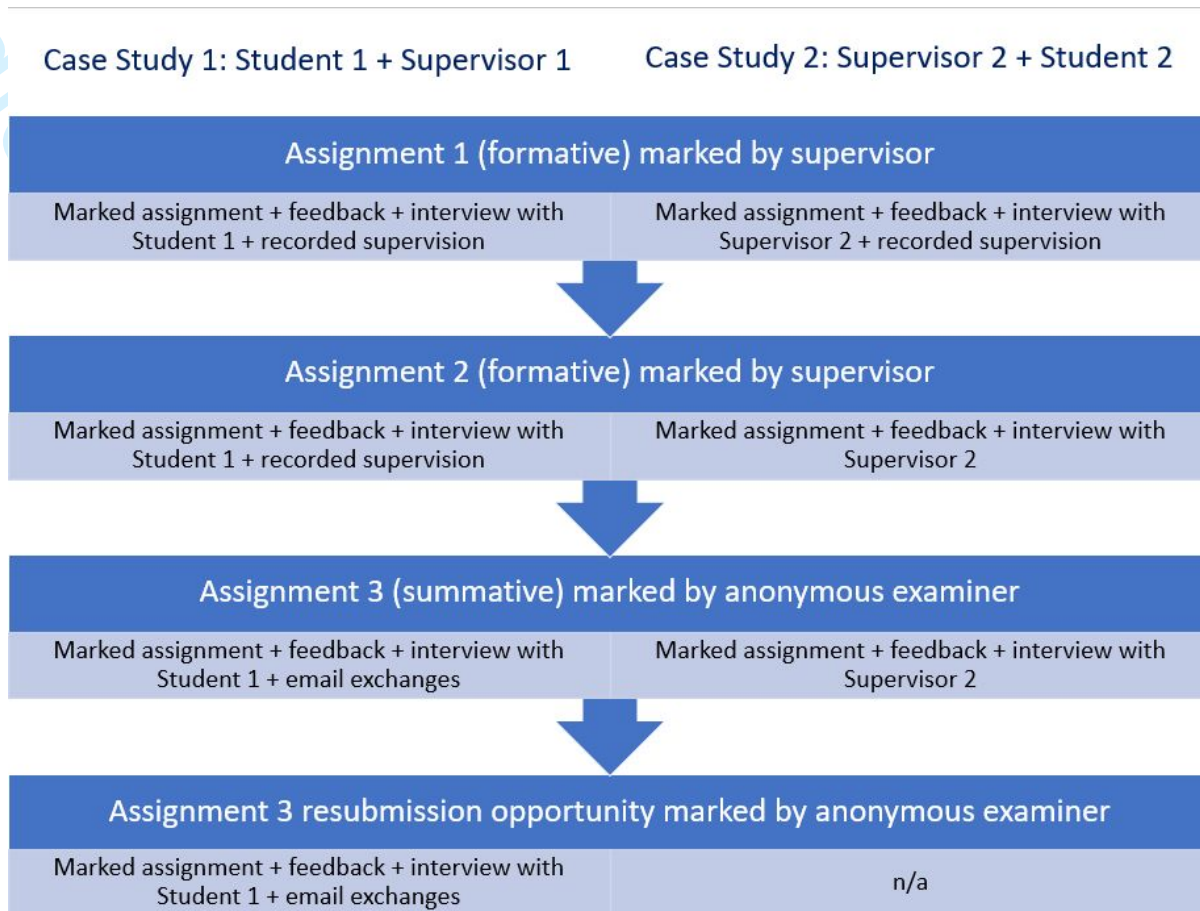


Figure 2: Case study data generation throughout Y1 of a part-taught PD programme.

Source : Author’s own work

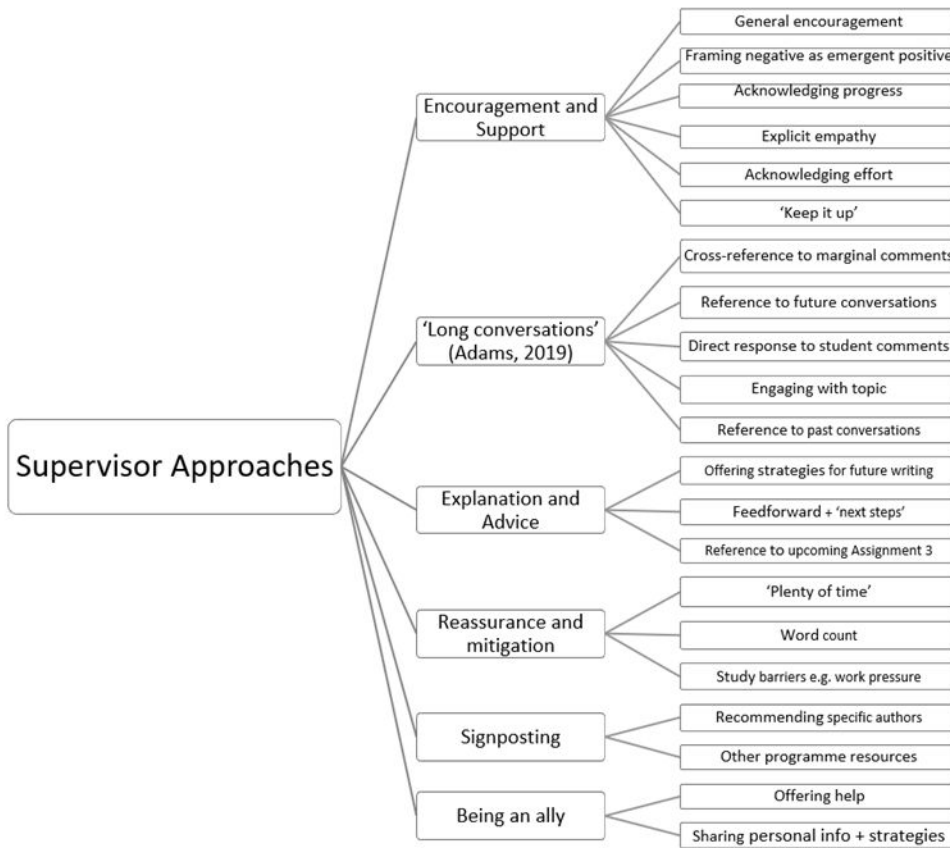


Figure 3: Themes and main sub-themes developed through analysis across data under the category ‘supervisor approaches to feedback’.

Source : Author’s own work

Table 1: Professional Doctorate programme outline

| Phase | Programme Year | No of supervisors | Assignment no., topic and mode of assessment. | Assessed by |
|------------|----------------|-------------------|---|------------------|
| 'Taught' | 1 | 1 | 1. An evaluation of the research context – formative. | supervisor |
| | | | 2. A preliminary literature review – formative. | supervisor |
| | | | 3. Literature review and Researching Professional Development Plan – summative. | examiners (2) |
| | 2 | 2 | Formative (4. and 5.) | supervisors |
| | | | Summative (6.) | examiners (2) |
| | | | | |
| 'Research' | 3 | 2 | Formative (7., 8. and 9.) | supervisors |
| | 4 | 2 | Formative (10.,11.,12. - thesis drafts) | supervisors |
| | | | Final thesis/viva | examiners |

Source : Author's own work

Table 2: Feedback on 'written expression' for Student 1's Assignments 2 and 3

| <p style="text-align: center;">Assignment 2</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Supervisor Feedback summary (Formative: literature review)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Assignment 3</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Examiner Feedback summary (Summative: developed literature review)</p> |
|---|---|
| <p><i>You write well and on the whole the clarity of writing is excellent. I do feel at times that you could consider toning down some of your ideas as some paragraphs in my view can be too complex to understand and I'd welcome your thoughts on trying to convey your ideas that aren't heavily reliant on academic language...</i></p> <p><i>This is only a minor point and shouldn't detract from your competent writing style and excellent presentation.</i></p> | <p><i>Please take care with your signposting There are several examples where it is not clear what is being referred to ...For instance, page 12 first paragraph: to what does this research topic area refer? ... [gives 5 more examples] ...</i></p> <p><i>There are also some sentences that are difficult to understand, for example ...</i></p> <p><i>there are quite a few typographical area [sic = errors] some of which are obvious and should have been checked before submission. This suggests a lack of care which, from the clear effort you have undertaken in writing this assignment is unfortunate ...</i></p> |

Source : Author's own work