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How to cite this publication
Please cite the final published version:


Publication metadata

Title: Successful development programs for experienced doctoral supervisors – What does it take?
Author(s): Gitte Wichmann-Hansen, Mirjam Godskenes & Margaret Kiley
DOI/Link: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2019.1663352
Document version: Accepted manuscript (post-print)
Successful development programs for experienced doctoral supervisors –

What does it take?

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Successful development programs for experienced doctoral supervisors – What does it take?

Abstract
In this paper, we focus on professional development for senior academic staff, in particular, doctoral supervisors. Using an authentic case as an example of a long-term, comprehensive, and mandatory development program for senior staff, we analyse the challenges and benefits of such a program and identify issues for consideration. The main issues include: 1) the need for strong incentive structures initiated by the top management; 2) teaching principles that are aligned with the group of senior academics; and 3) a well-evaluated course that, in the long term, encourages supervisors to participate due to their inner motivation.

Keywords
Doctoral supervision; professional development; reflective practice; senior academic staff

Introduction
Senior academics are seldom the target group for educational development, and, even if there are programs for them, it is often difficult to encourage attendance. This also applies to senior doctoral supervisors. Given that this group is in a position to teach and mentor junior colleagues rather than being ‘learners’ themselves in a development program (Raffing, Jensen, & Tønnesen, 2017), senior academics naturally prefer advanced development activities that match their positions and build upon their repertoire of supervision strategies. As the supervision process requires advanced research-based disciplinary knowledge, it is also fairly natural for senior, longstanding academics to assume that they are uniquely well qualified to undertake supervision activities (Spiller, Byrnes, & Ferguson, 2013). Experienced supervisors might also be particularly ‘allergic’ to programs that could be interpreted as
further instances of the quality assurance agendas of governments and university administrators (Manathunga, 2005).

Several counter arguments support the necessity and relevance of ensuring continuous professional development for experienced supervisors. First, one could argue that experience is not necessarily equivalent to quality. Second, the need for further development increases as the supervisor’s responsibility and workload increases; seniority is often proportional to increased economic responsibility, management, administration, and coordination. Third, senior supervisors also need regular updates on institutional and national regulations within doctoral education, especially if they get a new position at another university (McCulloch & Loeser, 2016). Fourth, the new context of higher education (HE), with increasingly diverse student cohorts and new financial models, brings additional complexity into the supervision process, to which experienced supervisors also need to adapt (Taylor, 2016). Finally, senior academics are the culture-bearers at a university and thus, they should be the main target group of a professional development program in order to create cultural change at an institutional level (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004).

These arguments make us query why experienced supervisors are generally absent in academic development. In this article, we examine the apparent gap more closely by reviewing the literature on doctoral supervision programs and by analysing an authentic supervisor program aimed at senior supervisors which proved successful in terms of being large-scale, well-evaluated, and producing local cultural-change.

Aim

The aim of the study is to examine potential barriers and options to be taken into account when designing development activities for experienced doctoral supervisors. Particular issues
include whether programs should be mandatory or voluntary, who takes responsibility for overseeing involvement, and the use of various rewards, or otherwise, for involvement or not.

**What is an ‘experienced’ supervisor?**

There are different ways of defining experience across institutions and nations. In Denmark, an *experienced* supervisor would generally be considered someone who has, as the main supervisor, supervised to successful completion three or more candidates. A *senior* supervisor would be someone experienced in supervision *and* at a senior level, that is associate professor and professor. The right to supervise in Denmark follows the academic position. The Ministerial Order on PhD Programs in Denmark (2013) requires Principal Supervisors to be recognised researchers within the relevant field, generally interpreted, at minimum, as Associate Professor. Thus, a Principal Supervisor holds a senior position but might not have extensive experience as a supervisor. Staff with lower positions such as Assistant Professors and Post-docs often serve as co-supervisors in a panel of two-three supervisors in total (which is the norm in Scandinavia). They are not allowed to act as Principal Supervisors, even though they might have secured the external funding of the project. In this paper, we define an experienced supervisor as a Principal Supervisor, because it equates to a senior academic position and presupposes supervisory experience from at least co-supervision of doctoral students.

**Literature review**

The majority of the wide body of literature about the impact of academic development activites in HE addresses teaching development programs (e.g. Parsons, Hill, Holland, & Willis, 2012; Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015), whereas studies reporting *impact of supervisor* development programs are almost absent (McCulloch & Loeser, 2016). However, from the literature it is possible to cautiously argue that professional development of supervisors does
work. Hammond, Ryland, Tennant, & Boud (2010), based on a project undertaken in Australia and New Zealand, found that research supervisors learn to supervise through four main ways: the way they were supervised themselves; learning from being in positive co-supervisory relationships; reflecting on practice; and workshops. Though fourth on the list, workshops are still an important way for supervisors to learn their ‘craft’. From their study the authors conclude: “there was general agreement on the need for systematic support for new supervisors...however, the findings also indicate considerable resistance from more experienced supervisors to compulsory centralised and formal training programs and strong preferences for locally and informally supported learning” (p. vi). In light of the above, the work by McCulloch & Loser (2016, p.10) is helpful. Following the evaluation (n=94 respondents) of a specific supervisor development program, they reported positives relating to: an understanding of the national context; developments in doctoral education over the past 20 years; and institutional policies and procedures. In terms of the program’s impact, one in five had followed up voluntarily with further supervisor development programs and almost half planned to undertake some follow up. Thus, the study indicates the importance and relevance of a professional development induction workshop on supervision practice.

National overviews of development programs offered

A few studies have provided national overviews of supervisor development programs offered in Australia (Kiley, 2011), New Zealand (Rath, 2008), Denmark (Kobayashi, Godskesen, & Wichmann-Hansen, 2017) and the UK (Taylor, 2018). The studies do not report on impact, but, rather, map the range of programs offered and their characteristics such as length, content, and institutional policies for participation. In New Zealand, only a few universities offered formal programs (Rath 2008), whereas almost all universities in Denmark offered formal programs on a regular basis (Kobayashi et al., 2017). Most Danish programs were referred to as mandatory, but the rule was seldom enforced by the management. They were
often organised as two full-day courses and mainly attended by new supervisors. All eight Australian universities in Kiley’s sample (2011) offered supervisory programs of some kind. Half mandated attendance and the programs were often organised as short workshops, seminars, or one-day induction courses for new supervisors. Furthermore, as in many situations, successful completion of some form of training resulted in gaining ‘registration’ which allowed them to supervise under certain conditions (Taylor, Kiley, & Humphrey, 2018).

All four studies highlighted the diverse institutional policies and practices in relation to supervisors’ professional development, and a lack of programs for experienced supervisors in most universities in their samples.

**Institution-specific programs**

In addition to the above mentioned national mappings, research on supervisor professional development includes studies on local initiatives at specific institutions. Most such studies are conducted within an Australian, New Zealand or UK contexts (see Hill & Vaughan, 2017) and the vast majority report on programs that frame supervisor training as a ‘reflective practice’ in opposition to an ‘administrative framing’ of supervisor training (McCormack, 2009). Overall, the initiatives described represent an impressive range of methods applied to stimulate ‘reflective practice’, including small group discussions (Spiller et al., 2013; Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007; Manathunga, 2005), narratives (Lindén, 1998), story-telling (McCormack, 2009), online cases (Brew & Peseta, 2004), writing approaches (Manathunga, Peseta, & McCormack, 2010), and log journals (Clegg, 1997). The studies generally suggest that participants appreciate the reflective and dialogue-based approach in terms of stimulating personal and critical inquiry and creating a space for supervisors to test out concerns around their experiences and perceptions. Findings also reveal that participants highly value the
process of learning with, and from, each other via exchanges of experiences and sharing of practices.

Despite the positive findings, the authors caution against making general claims about the ‘impact’ of their institution-specific initiatives. First, data is based on so-called post-event evaluations or ‘happy sheets’, which do not indicate whether change in behaviour has taken place (e.g. Spiller et al., 2013). However, the studies show changes at a cognitive level, referred to as supervisors’ individual knowledge and understanding by McCulloch & Loeser (2016). For instance, several programs resulted in a significant change in supervisors’ thinking (Brew & Peseta, 2004), feelings (Manathunga et al., 2010) perceptions (Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007) and level of reflection (Spiller et al., 2013). Second, the relatively small number of attendees at limited one-off programs makes it difficult to measure ‘impact’. Most events are organised as short meetings or half-day workshops, and attendees number around 5-40 participants. One exception describes an institution-wide initiative based on a large-scale change process that included a colloquium program for supervisors, online guides, establishment of induction processes, and creation of new positions responsible for research (candidates) (Reid & Marshall 2009).

Another distinct feature of most institution-specific supervisor programs is the voluntariness of participation. For example, Manathunga (2005) warns against forcing supervisors to attend development programs. If the programs are perceived as representing only a liberal, administrative discourse they risk doing more harm than good and hence, causing increased resistance among the supervisors.

Only very few studies report on development initiatives aimed at experienced supervisors. Spiller et al. (2013) implemented a series of conversation meetings for experienced supervisors. Held at six-weekly intervals over a period of two years, around 30
supervisors attended, with each meeting lasting two hours. The choices of discussion themes were solely determined by the supervisors. The authors stress the difficulty of documenting whether the conversations had an impact on supervisors’ practice and whether the conversations stimulated the culture around postgraduate supervision and research as intended. A similar but smaller scale project was carried out by Emilsson and Johnsson (2007). They developed a ‘supervision on supervision’ program, in which seven experienced supervisors participated in 12 three-hour meetings through a period of 14 months. The majority of participants report that they changed perceptions of their initial supervision problems and in most cases the ‘new problem perception’ gave them more room for action.

**Methodology**

The case presented in this study can be perceived as purposively sampled in that it represents an unusual case (Palinkas et al, 2015, p.4) within the research literature on supervisor development programs. It deviates from most of the programs described in the studies above because it is long-term, aimed at experienced supervisors, and encased in a strong incentive structure. It may even be categorised as leading-edge because the program is also mandatory, though mandatoriness is less exceptional today than it was ten years ago when the program was first introduced.

In line with Bamber & Stefani (2016), we argue that a heterogeneous mix of evaluation data helps us to evidence ‘value’ and not solely ‘impact’. Thus, we derive the material in our case study from a number of sources. The major source is formal data based on descriptive statistical analysis of:

1. *The program evaluation forms.* Since Spring 2009, the program has run regularly twice a year. By June 2018, a total of 265 experienced supervisors had completed the program out of approximately 350 potential participants. Each program was evaluated online on the
final course day. Response rate: 86% (n=228). The evaluation included closed as well as open-ended questions. The latter were coded thematically and then counted to identify prevalence.

2. **Survey data on students’ perceptions of supervisor quality.** Every fourth year, the university runs a validated survey. The survey population is PhD students in the four Faculties. The survey has so far been conducted twice, in 2013 and 2017. Even though the surveys do not include information about whether the respondents’ supervisors have attended the development programs, it is still worth mentioning the data because it enables comparisons between the four faculties and because the response rate is very high (2013: 79%, n=1780; 2017: 75%, n=1739).

Additional formal data included in our study are institutional statements about initiatives taken at departmental level that provide anecdotal evidence of the program’s effect. Informal data includes the program leader’s naturalistic observations of interactions in the ‘classroom’ during the course days.

**The case**

In this section, we unfold the case of a specific Danish supervisor development program called “Course on Supervision of Doctoral Students, Master’s Thesis Students, and Peers”.

The program is located in a social science faculty, one of four faculties at a large research intensive university in Denmark. The faculty has six departments, with almost 250 doctoral students, and close to 600 faculty members. In 2007, the then Dean of the faculty wanted to implement a competence development program aimed at improving supervision. His arguments were two-fold: 1) The faculty was going to increase the intake of PhD students over a short period of time in line with government policy, and 2) Master’s thesis supervision was (and still is) an important, widespread, and resource-demanding method of teaching at the
The Dean argued that supervision at the faculty had largely been taking
place behind ‘closed doors’ and was not addressed in the other teacher training courses. The
Dean asked the head of the local HE development unit at the faculty to design a program and
test it as a pilot project during spring 2008. The course was facilitated by two co-teachers, one
of whom is the first author of this article and who became course leader in 2013. The head of
each department then carefully recruited 2-3 of their senior supervisors to participate in the
project (13 participants in total). The pilot project was extensively evaluated and documented
in a report sent to the faculty management team. Based on the report and dialogue with the
Dean and head of departments, adjustments were made and a final program agreed upon, and
announced as a permanent offering each semester from then on. However, no supervisors
signed up for the first course after the pilot in Autumn 2008. The course was cancelled and, as
a result, the Dean claimed his right to ensure a strong incentive structure around the program,
from Spring 2009.

**Incentive Structure**

The Dean decided that the course should be mandatory for all senior supervisors in the faculty
applicable from Spring 2009. This conformed with local policy for other faculty members in
that the total mandatory formal educational training for staff members at the faculty
corresponds to about 8 weeks from student assistant to assistant professor. Thus, he enforced
the following regulations that applied from 2009:

1. newly appointed professors must complete the program within two years after
   recruitment, and the other professors must complete within a few years
2. completion of the program is part of a professor’s job description and thus a prerequisite
   for being eligible to supervise
3. each of the six departments in the faculty are guaranteed three course seats per course (the course runs once a semester and each course accommodates 18 participants)

4. if the Head of Department does not make use of his/her three course seats, the Dean withholds 6,500 Euro (USD 7650) from the department’s budget

5. each participant is awarded a bonus of 1,500 Euro (USD 1720) for completion.

**Program design, content, and pedagogical approach**

The semester length program does not include a pass or fail examination. To get a final Course Certificate, participants must attend all seminar days and complete all the home assignments. The amount of time spent on the program totals approximately 60 hours per participant, based on a combination of four face-to-face seminar days (28 hours in total) with homework in between. See Figure 1.

Figure 1.

The program’s scope is supervision of doctoral students and master’s thesis students, with the aim to promote structured sharing of experiences between senior supervisors in the faculty, and increase individual supervisor’s skills. It focuses on three core supervisor skills:

1. text related skills: to assess students’ text drafts and to provide constructive feedback

2. relational and process management skills: to establish and maintain constructive work relationships with students and co-supervisors, to match expectations, and to evaluate the collaboration, the quality of the project, and students’ progression
3. Communication skills: to ask questions that promote students’ independence and to listen actively and attentively.

The teaching format is highly interactive and structured. It combines themed group work, interactive quiz tools (e.g. MentiMeter) and plenary discussions based on input from the participants’ home assignments. The home assignments are critical in terms of time and content, amounting to approximately 30 hours for each participant, and helping to make the program authentic and practice-related. For example, participants are asked to: 1) upload excerpts of students’ text drafts including the supervisor’s feedback; 2) write an MoU and give feedback on the MoUs of others; 3) write and share a concrete case (about a current, unresolved challenge in their supervision); 4) write and share a final scholarly essay about their learning; and 5) do peer observations in groups.

The latter assignment involves several tasks. Each supervisor is invited to video record an authentic meeting with his/her doctoral student and analyse the video afterwards, keeping in mind the strict rules in Europe regarding managing personal data. Simultaneously, two colleagues from the program observe the meeting in situ and provide feedback.

In addition to the very practice-related approach, the program is research-based. First, the program is structured around three main themes/skills (see Table 1) carefully selected beforehand by the program leader, with reference to research. Second, the program leader is an active and publishing researcher within the field of supervision and an experienced doctoral research supervisor. Third, the seminar days include several lectures in which the teacher presents research-based tools.

Results

The majority (93 %, n= 212) evaluated the program as ‘very useful’ (44 %) and ‘useful’ (49 %) on a 4-point likert scale (from very useful to not useful). The majority (98 %, n= 223) also
recommended the program to their colleagues ‘without changes’ (71 %) or with ‘minor changes’ (27 %).

Participants’ responses to the open-ended question: “Which elements of the program did you find most valuable?” indicated that it was the high degree of interaction and exchange of experiences with colleagues. In particular, participants stressed the gains of sharing practices across departments because it broadened their repertoire of strategies:

- the practice-based approach, including concrete tools and exercises based on their own authentic material
- peer supervision as a tool for competence development. They noted that colleagues were the most critical of this part when they began the program because they perceived it challenging in terms of logistics, time, and trust. However, they concluded that it was surprisingly rewarding, and worthwhile doing because it was an efficient tool for reflection.

The evaluation formula included an additional open-ended question: “What will you change/implement in your supervision practice as a result of the program?” An analysis of the answers showed that most participants wanted to:

- Be more dialogical, e.g. ask more open-ended questions and listen actively
- Carefully clarify expectations with students and co-supervisors
- Implement new text feedback strategies.

In addition to the written evaluation data, the institution holds relevant information about initiatives taken at departmental level that can be perceived as evidence of the program’s effect. For example, the study director in one of the departments has required all supervisors to write a supervisor letter, put it on their individual university web page, and
use it in the process of clarifying expectations with their master’s thesis students. In another department, the head of the PhD program has established a biannual meeting with all doctoral supervisors in which they take turns to bring a personal current case similar to the case-method applied in the program. These are a couple of examples of potential cultural changes initiated by former program participants in senior positions.

Data from the local Quality in PhD Processes survey at the university shows that students in the faculty report the highest level of satisfaction with their supervisors compared to other faculties (84% and 88%, See Table 1). The table also shows a significant increase in students’ satisfaction with their supervisors at this faculty over the four year time span from 2013 to 2017. In other faculties, supervisor development programs are shorter and mainly aimed at new supervisors. However, it is not possible to establish a causal relationship between students’ responses and the effect of the supervisor development programs.

Table 1.

Finally, the program leader (first author) has a detailed account of experiences from teaching the program for 10 years. Due to the informal nature of this data set, we only report on three particularly relevant experiences here. First, during the initial years, the seminar days were characterised by a generally high level of resistance among participants in terms of negative attitudes, demonstrable passivity, and challenges to the teacher’s authority, compared to participant behaviour in other supervision programs that were not mandatory. Second, the personal resistance decreased as the program progressed throughout the year. The most reluctant participants often introduced themselves on the first course day by stating they had very low expectations of the program, and were only attending because they were ‘forced’ to. These participants stand out at the end of the program by stating they are pleasantly surprised
and learned a lot. Third, the general resistance has decreased over the program’s history. In recent years, more and more participants stress that they have been looking forward to the program because of its good reputation. These changes are not reflected in the evaluation data though. The program has been positively evaluated from the beginning. The turning point in resistance occurred when the program had been running steadily for about 6-7 years, because the ‘good rumours’ had spread and the program had become an unquestioned part of the institution.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The case shows that a long-term, large-scale, and mandatory development program for experienced supervisors has a positive impact on a) supervisors’ competence development and learning; b) the local supervision culture; and c) it even indicates a possible, though indirect, effect on doctoral students’ satisfaction with their supervisors. Evidently, there is big potential if universities adopt a comprehensive and structural approach to competence development of doctoral supervisors. However, it did not happen without resistance from the supervisors. The resistance bears witness to the conflictual nature of mandatoriness, which we unfold below.

**Mandatory Programs need to be clearly backed up by Institutional Management.**

In our case, participants displayed resistance but, in hindsight they evaluated the experience as very valuable. It indicates that supervisors might know what they want but not what they need. It also indicates that a possible benefit of mandatory programs is the involvement of the supervisors who are deemed to ‘need’ such development but are highly unlikely to choose to attend workshops and courses (Kiley, 2019). One of the issues here is where staff report experiencing considerable time pressure from an overload of administrative requirements (Bexley, James, & Arkoudis, 2011). Therefore, most importantly it points to the crucial role
of the institution and the resources invested by the institution towards the advancement of supervision. Our study suggests that policy on mandatory training in HE can only have “success” if linked with structures and resources (cf, Trowler & Bamber 2005): ‘Support needs to be more than rhetorical’ (p. 89). In our case, economic incentives were used both as “a stick and a carrot”. The stick motivated the Head of Departments (HoD) in the form of a potential budget cut, while the carrot motivated the individual supervisors in the form of a personal honorarium. While not all universities will be in the financial position to be so generous, honoria and recognition of other forms might be valued by various participants. Saroyan & Trigwell (2015) also stress the aspect of resources. They argue that it bears evidence of the extent to which management value and reward supervision and thus, it can be a driver and extrinsic motivation for academics to prioritise professional learning amongst other academic duties.

Economic incentives or not, our case underlines the importance of engaging and motivating stakeholders at departmental level. The program described in our case was shaped to the local context by means of engaging in real dialogues with stakeholders, in particular with HoDs, because they have the power to promote or hamper change (Trowler & Bamber, 2005). When new initiatives are introduced, established positions and practices will always be provoked, making it vital that changes are aligned with local culture at the university and national practices, meaning, and discourses. In Denmark, for instance, mandatory development programs are not a foreign concept. In 1993, the Ministry of Education made it a legal requirement for all assistant professors to attend a mandatory Teacher Training Program (In Danish: “Adjunktædagogikum”). The program usually lasts for 200-250 hours. In addition, most universities require their PhD students to attend a two-day Teaching Development Program. In other Scandinavian countries, mandatory supervisor development
programs have become standard practice, at several universities in Sweden, for example, in response to a request made by the Council for Renewal of HE in 2000.

**Large-scale and long-termed programs are more likely to enable cultural change**

In line with Trowler and Cooper’s (2002) work on Teaching and Learning Regimes, our study suggests that local departmental and workgroup cultures are more powerful than individual agency. Relying on a few trained, enthusiastic, individuals to make organisational changes in an institution commits the error of overlooking the power of social structures (Trowler & Bamber, 2005). In our case, more than 70 % of the academic staff at the faculty have attended, and the participants represent the culture-bearing senior group at the faculty (Gibbs and Coffey, 2004). This kind of large-scale initiative has enabled cultural changes to happen rather than solely individual competence development.

Whilst the many studies included in our review provide a rich showcase of innovative supervisor development practice, they mainly represent examples of short-term and small-scale initiatives in which the themes addressed are partly self-imposed by the attendees. A review of the impact of teaching development programs in HE (Parsons et al., 2012) shows that it takes at least a one-year training process until positive effects on teachers’ skills and behavior emerge. Shorter training seems to make teachers more uncertain about themselves as teachers, less risk-taking, and thus, even results in a negative effect. Our case study illustrates the potential benefits of an intervention extended over time. For example, peer observations allowed participants not only to talk about supervision, but to give, receive, observe, and practice supervision in authentic settings with peers, which has proven effective in terms of transfer of learning (Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015). This kind of exploratory approach calls for a trustful atmosphere, which is not just given in a hasty few hours. Consequently, to minimise the duration of programs and to accommodate spontaneous
resistance from experienced supervisors might be to shoot oneself in the foot as an educational developer.

**A practice-based and interactive approach matches experienced supervisors**

Finally, our case study highlights the importance of applying teaching methods that match experienced supervisors’ need for reflection on their complex and varied practices. In particular, it includes a very practice-based approach, that is hand-on tools and exercises based on participants’ own authentic case material, e.g. personal text-feedback examples and peer observations in situ. It ensures closeness to practice and thus a feeling of relevance and usefulness, which is appreciated by busy and experienced supervisors. The practical approach does not exclude a scholarly one, though. The facilitator carefully selects research-based tools and strategies and current literature and theory. In addition, participants write a scholarly essay at the end of the program, in which they apply relevant literature. The guiding pedagogical principle is to try out supervision strategies rather than (merely) talk or read about them.

Another important feature is a highly interactive teaching form that stimulates personal and critical inquiry. According to our evaluations, the participants especially appreciated the high degree of exchange of experiences with colleagues. However, it requires advanced facilitation to make senior supervisors engage in classroom discussions and home-assignments and to share openly and honestly. We cannot put this into a simple formula, but to our experience some key components are showing genuine interest and curiosity in supervisors’ practice and to prepare well by reading all their material and using it as a point of departure in class.

**Contributions and implications**
Our study contributes to the literature on doctoral supervisor development by providing evidence of impact beyond happy sheets of a large-scale, mandatory program for experienced supervisors. For educational developers, the key message from this study is to merge several streams if implementing programs for experienced supervisors. First and foremost, it is crucial to align the incentive structure with the local culture and national policies for competence development as well as to engage in close dialogue with stakeholders, in particular HoDs. If possible, one should also insist on long-term interventions that allow for comprehensive development, and to apply teaching principles that match the group of senior academics, e.g. to include participants’ own authentic case material and to ensure a high degree of sharing through discussions and peer observations.

Biographical notes

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Mirjam Godskesen has worked with development of doctoral supervision since 2008. First as a researcher at Danish Universities and since 2014, as an independent consultant and researcher. She holds supervision workshops in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Germany, and Austria.

For many years Margaret Kiley’s research and teaching interests have been related to the education of future researchers, working in Further/Higher Education in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the UK. Margaret now holds an adjunct position at the Australian National University.
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