



# SUPERVISION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Research Ethics Perspective

Line Wittek



**GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

# SUPERVISION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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# SUPERVISION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A RESEARCH ETHICS PERSPECTIVE

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Line Wittek** is Professor in Pedagogy at the University of Oslo. She researches Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, with a particular focus on Supervision, Student learning, Peer feedback and Research ethics. She has broad experience in research, recently she was leading an extensive study financed by The Norwegian Research Council that focused on the

challenges that teachers in higher education experienced as supervisors and teachers. The empirical data included information about what types of challenges supervisors of master's students and PhD candidates experience and how they talk about this in peer mentoring groups and find measures for how to proceed. Wittek is a member of the National committee for research Ethics in the Social sciences and the Humanities in Norway.

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## PREFACE

The current volume focuses on supervision in higher education, a field that I have been interested in as a researcher for several years. Based on international research, it is possible to draw some rather agreed conclusions, such as that trust between the parties is crucial and that clarification of expectations can help increase the quality of the supervision. Another field I have been interested in is research ethics, and this has grown stronger during four years as a member of the National committee for research Ethics in the Social sciences and the Humanities in Norway (NESH). The role of supervisor for master's or PhD candidates include many aspects that must find their shape in a fine-tuned way through communication between the supervisor and supervisee. Teaching the candidate about research ethics is part of the supervisor's obligations, and so is leading as a good example in demonstrating how research ethics should and can be safeguarded in practice. To cut a long story short; I was inspired to find out how research and recommendations from the field of research ethics could fill out and complement the body of research on supervision in higher education. It was an exciting and educational journey for me, and this is what the book is about.

Many thanks to all colleagues with whom I have discussed supervision and research ethics over the years. Thanks to all master's students and PhD candidates whom I have been able to follow in my role as supervisor and for the trust you have

shown in me, it has been both educational and fun working with you. I would like to thank the other members of NESH for insightful and thought-provoking discussions on several different topics. Thanks also to the publisher, Emerald for professional support throughout the process, and a special thanks to Kirsty Woods, who contacted me and set this journey in motion. Finally, a warm thank to Vidar Enebakk (secretary of NESH) and associate professor Anita Iversen who has contributed valuable comments to this manuscript along the way.

Line Wittek  
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# ABSTRACT

*This book is about the multifaceted, complex practice of what we refer to as supervision in higher education. My aim is to offer new perspectives and linkages between evidence-based insights and advise on supervision and research ethics. While supervision is the central focus of the book, research ethics is the chosen framework. The themes discussed in this volume are: (1) Research ethical guidelines for supervisory practices in higher education. (2) Roles and interaction in supervisory relationships and how the research ethics guidelines can be translated into action. (3) How collegiality can be applied systematically to ensure quality in supervision and incorporate research ethics norms into professional cultures. (4) How higher education institutions can fulfil their responsibility to ensure quality in supervision and, as part of this responsibility, train supervisors in ethical norms in research. The book is based on three different knowledge resources, the first one is empirical research shedding light on research ethics in supervision and the supervisor–candidate relationship. The second is principles of research ethics/integrity devised by the European Code of Conduct for research Integrity (ALLEA), and the third is examples and cases from the higher education sector. The overall aim of the book is to demonstrate the potential implications of current research ethics principles in the supervision of PhD candidates and master’s students. I will also clarify and critically examine these principles and*

*illustrate the challenges of adhering to them. A third objective is to highlight relevant tools that can be used to promote RRP in supervision and to prevent breaches of ethical norms in research. The book is primarily aimed at supervisors of master's students and PhD candidates, but supervisees are also included in the target audience. The principles referred to have relevance for supervision in general. Parts of the book are also relevant for heads of research groups and institutions, as well as those responsible for organising supervision and training in research ethics for supervisors and supervisees.*

#### KEYWORDS

Responsible supervision; higher education; research ethics; responsible research practices; collegiality; institutional responsibility; trust; interaction

## THE BOOK IN A NUTSHELL

In this book, I aim to shed light on the multifaceted, complex practice of what we refer to as *supervision* in higher education. Barbara Grant (1999) proposed the apt metaphor of *walking on a rickety bridge* to illustrate the complexity of the supervisory relationship. Crossing a rickety bridge with someone requires a strong situational presence and flexibility. The bridge sways in response to external forces like weather and wind, as well as to how you and your companion move across it. You need to stay alert, adapting and adjusting your movements to everything happening around you. Once you both find a rhythm, things become much easier. Likewise, supervisory practices are also shaped by various forces, where movements on one side necessitate adjustments on the other. I do not intend to explore all of these forces and movements but will instead shed light on supervision in higher education in the perspective of research ethics.

A large body of literature exists on supervision, but only a few studies examine it from a research ethics perspective. The aim of this book is therefore to offer new perspectives and linkages between evidence-based insights and advice on supervision and research ethics. The European Code of

Conduct for Research Integrity 2023<sup>1</sup> provide the core framework for the supervisor's *responsibilities*, the *roles* of the parties involved and the *interaction* between the supervisor(s) and the student.

The book seeks to unpack research ethics principles and explore their practical implications for supervision. Thus, while supervision is the central focus of the book, research ethics is the chosen framework for addressing the various themes discussed, which are as follows:

- Research ethics guidelines for supervisory practices in higher education;
- The characteristics of roles in supervisory relationships and how the research ethics guidelines can be translated into action;
- The characteristics of interaction in supervision and how the research ethics guidelines can be translated into action;
- How collegiality can be applied systematically to ensure quality in supervision and incorporate research ethics norms into cultural ideas about supervision;
- How higher education institutions can fulfil their responsibility to ensure quality in supervision and, as part of this responsibility, train supervisors in ethical norms in research.

These five themes are closely intertwined, and in the final chapter, I will explore each of them in greater depth and provide a synthesis of the key points from the other chapters. However, the chapters will alternate between the various themes and highlight them in different ways. The red thread

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1 <https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/>

throughout the book is research supervision and what is needed for optimum support of students in various areas, such as developing a *product* that meets academic standards, *evolving as a researcher*, gaining *confidence* in the role and *learning*. I contend that research ethics must be incorporated into supervision to effectively address all these areas, even though supervision clearly involves much more than just research ethics.

There is a growing interest in studying the factors that promote research integrity, with *supervision* emerging as a particularly significant area of focus (e.g. Haven et al., 2022). In later chapters, I will draw on studies showing that working systematically with responsible research practices (RRPs) – specifically in the doctoral supervisor-candidate relationship – strengthens the institution’s focus on research integrity and helps enable new generations of researchers to adhere to RRP (e.g. Pizzolato & Dierickx, 2023B).

## THE MANY LAYERS OF SUPERVISION

As supervisors of master’s students and PhD candidates,<sup>2</sup> there are at least two objectives we must combine. First, we need to help the candidate produce a product that complies with established academic standards. We need to guide them towards a ‘specific destination’ without knowing the precise details of that destination, as it must emerge and evolve throughout the process in a collaboration between the supervisor and the candidate. Meanwhile, we also need to support

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2 The terms ‘master’s students’ and ‘PhD candidates’ vary by country, and in many places, PhD candidates are also students. I have chosen to use ‘master’s students’ and ‘PhD candidates’ in this book.

the candidate's learning, understanding and development. We are appointed as supervisors because of our expert knowledge and comprehension of what is needed to successfully complete a master's dissertation or doctoral thesis. But how can we supervise in a way that also fosters learning, growth and deeper understanding? Søren Kierkegaard provides some valuable insights into the prerequisites for success in such complex processes, as illustrated in the following quote:

*To truly succeed in leading a person to a specific destination, one must first and foremost ensure that they meet him where he is and begin there. This is the secret to the art of helping. Anyone who cannot do this is deluded if they think they can help another. For to truly help someone else, I must understand more than he does – but first and foremost, I must understand what he understands. If I do not, my greater insight does not help him at all. (Translation of original quote in Norwegian) (Kierkegaard, 1859, p. 96)*

One of the prerequisites for successful supervision, considering this, is meeting the candidates where they *are* and familiarising oneself with their situation. The supervisor is the one who possesses the necessary knowledge and understanding, who is well-versed in the field, stays updated on new and relevant research, and excels in the thought processes and practices necessary for advancing knowledge within that field. As Kierkegaard notes, to do a good job in the supervisor role, the supervisor must have more knowledge and insight than the supervisee. However, simply knowing more is not enough to help another person progress. Only if we understand what the candidate understands and does not understand, as well as their strengths and areas for growth, can we effectively apply our knowledge and insights to support their development.

Supervision must, therefore, start with self-reflection and dialogue with the candidate.

Kierkegaard's reflections on the art of helping, as illustrated in the quote above, emphasise both the moral responsibility of the helper and the importance of dialogue. Once the supervisor has understood the candidate's academic interests and current level of knowledge, they can identify the best starting point for supervision. If we bypass this moral responsibility, it is by no means certain that the supervision will be much help to the candidate; at worst, it could even be detrimental.

Supervision constitutes a significant part of academic staff's duties in higher education. Students spend a considerable amount of time on academic writing, and supervisors dedicate much of their time to providing feedback on candidates' work. However, while such feedback is a vital component of supervision, the supervisory role extends far beyond this. In this book, I will focus on supervision in the context of substantial academic works, specifically doctoral theses and master's dissertations, but much of the content will also be relevant to supervision more broadly.

As supervisors, our focus is on subject-specific issues, and many may contend that academic content is the core element of supervision, or even the sole dimension of responsibility of academic supervisors. However, supervision, by its very nature, involves much more than merely providing expert knowledge; the supervisor must illustrate the typical thought processes and practices within the relevant discipline, which can include structuring an academic text, developing an argument, or supporting and presenting research findings. Other examples of the supervisor's remit include helping to identify the right journals for publication and organising the formal aspects of research collaboration, such as co-authorship and the order of authors. Supervision in these areas is often more implicit than explicit, typically conveyed through the

demonstration of established practices rather than oral explanations. There is also a relational aspect to supervision, and in later chapters, I will elaborate on the importance of this in light of recent research.

When master's students start their first independent research after several semesters of study, they are assigned a supervisor. Although they have experience with academic writing from their previous studies, this is their first extensive independent work. For those pursuing a doctoral degree, the expectations are even higher, both in terms of scope and academic standards of quality. In some countries, PhD candidates are students, while in others they can be employed as research fellows and work alongside their supervisors, which adds another layer to the supervisory relationship.

PhD programmes typically last four years (and sometimes longer), which obviously entails lengthy supervisory relationships. The supervisor's efforts help the candidate to write a master's dissertation, a monograph, a manuscript or an extended abstract, and the specifics of what *else* the supervisor role entails will vary across disciplines and from one relationship to another. It is not uncommon for supervisors to help candidates link up with international networks. Sometimes, supervision can also extend to practical day-to-day matters. One such example is the research fellow that Professor Charles described, who hailed from a perpetually hot country. Unacquainted with winter weather, the candidate found himself unprepared when the first cold snap hit, blanketing everything in snow. His supervisor had to advise him on wool clothing and winter boots, as well as where to find them at an affordable price. Another example is the research fellow under Professor Marion's supervision, who went through a difficult relationship breakup and found it hard to concentrate on her thesis on her worst days. Marion frequently offered the young woman a compassionate ear,

showing empathy and understanding, and encouraged her to take a break from writing until she felt ready to refocus. The research fellow resumed her work once things had settled down and she was able to concentrate again. Marion's support and understanding had been crucial in keeping her from giving up. 'The fact that my supervisor showed humanity during such a difficult time meant everything to me!', she said. 'I was so close to giving up on my doctoral work.'

#### WHY WRITE A BOOK ABOUT SUPERVISION FROM A RESEARCH ETHICS PERSPECTIVE?

What is research ethics, and is there a need for a whole book on supervision from the research ethics perspective? Does it not just ultimately boil down to treating each other with respect in academia, especially in supporting new colleagues and PhD candidates? The answer to these questions is, of course, yes, but my focus on research ethics and supervisory relationships in this book aims at nuancing these claims, and the argument is based on the following factors:

- (1) Supervision is the most influential factor in determining whether a candidate successfully obtains their master's or doctoral degree (Hattie & Gan, 2011; Lee, 2018). A good supervisory relationship hinges on mutual respect and trust. It is also an important principle of research ethics that we treat colleagues with respect and show particular consideration to students and newcomers in the research community (ALLEA, 2023).
- (2) Studies show that doctoral students who learn to conduct their own research in accordance with research ethics guidelines continue to adhere to these in their future research (Haven et al., 2022).

- (3) A variety of tools can be used to promote learning-focused communication in supervision and the application of ethical norms in research. There are compelling reasons to raise awareness of some of these tools within research communities. On this basis, a selection of dialogue tools will be presented in the book.
- (4) Research ethics ground rules and principles are something we must continue to work on at the cultural level for them to become integral to our thought processes and practices. In this respect, an important aim of this book is to explore and critically examine research ethics principles and discuss their implications for supervision. The cases presented can also serve as a starting point for discussions in training sessions or among colleagues.
- (5) Guiding newcomers in academic practices is an excellent opportunity to shine a spotlight on research ethics and its significance in our daily work. It is particularly in the relationship between new and established researchers that there is potential to weave ethical issues into an engaging and dynamic daily discourse. In doing so, both new and more experienced researchers learn Responsible Research practices (RRPs) (Haven et al., 2022).

All the above points will be elaborated on in the following chapters.

## APPROACHES TO RESEARCH ETHICS

An extensive bureaucracy has evolved around research ethics both at an international and a national level, which is tasked with the development and stewardship of research ethics