Supervision in Europe

To further innovate or to consolidate, that's the question[1]

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1. Opening

In this introduction, I will dwell on three questions concerning the supervision of PhD students.

I will finish with the latter, in line with the invitation: what are the next steps with regard to the supervision of PhD students. "We would like you to speak about how universities have improved supervision, if It has worked and how to do things better".

Prior to this, two other questions are urgent: what do we know about our PhD students and their supervision, and which tools are already available to facilitate the supervision of PhD students. Thus: what do we already know, and what do we have already have? As a working hypothesis for my introduction, I give you a provisional answer to the main question:

Universities, but – all over Europe - perhaps a small number of them, have increased the quality of supervision,
in other places, no great change is visible yet, apart from scattered experiments without much continuity.
The main problem is not that we have too little knowledge or too few tools to improve supervision,
the biggest problem is that it lacks forums where frontrunners and potential innovators can meet to discuss and transfer good practices.

How to do things better? This question leads this introduction.

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[1] Text of presentation at the EUA Council for Doctoral Education Annual Meeting, 18 - 19 June 2015 at the Technical University Munich in Germany

2. What we know

The leading thesis: The world of the doctoral studies has no more secrets.

2.1 Let's first map some macro-developments

Great changes have been put through. The number of candidates has increased considerably. A democratization of the doctoral studies. The percentage of women has increased. And more than ever we see foreign PhD students arriving in our doctoral programs.
Changes in thinking about the PhD trajectory and the supervision of our candidates are taking place like the slow creeping of a glacier because new generations of supervisors assumed office. The changing of the guard. These new supervisors were trained in a system that is slowly but surely renewed. And they bring this new dissertation culture into their practice of advising and supervising. And this culture change is not triggered by any top- down decision or directive.

In other cases, changes in the practice of the doctoral programs are taking places, without being recognized as 'silent revolutions'. An example is the changing perspective on therecognition and selection of doctoral talents.
First, there was a firm belief in a go / no go process by the end of the first year of the doctoral trajectory to decide whether a candidate would be able to complete the program successfully. However, we saw we didn't dare to send out weak candidates.

Thereafter, the moment of selecting and accepting a candidate seemed the most important to me. However, we realized that for most applicants we could not decide on the basis of snapshots during the selection process whether they are suitable or not. In addition, we saw that nice and objective proceedings were disrupted by patronage and preferential treatments.

Finally,we realized we can determine the best qualities of the potential candidates by working at an earlier stage with them to develop a dissertation plan. Think of the English MPhil programs and the Dutch Research Master's programs. Thinking about the PhD program did change. The first two years are critical, not the last two. If serious problems occur, and the dissertation will not be ready within four years, then that is visible at the end of the second year!

In summary….Preferably we see a potential PhD candidate working before the start of the doctoral research. The buzz word is: talent scouting, scouting, scouting.

2.2 Benchmarks

We know what the benchmarks are to assess an environment of doctoral studies. Departments and supervisors do it properly if they can refer to a completion rate of 75% in the case of full-time doctoral students with a four-year program. They do very well when scoring between 80 and 90%. They do well if dissertations are not disputed when it comes to the judgment in the defense committees.

We know that most PhD students are satisfied with their supervisors. Again and again, supervisors do score on average a 7,5 (on a scale of 10). We also know that about 10% of the PhD students evaluate the supervisors with a 'just enough' or lower. We know how difficult it is to get in contact with those candidates.

We also have the research tools to conduct research among our PhD students about their satisfaction with the environment and the supervision. We don't need them to develop them from the start. We must adapt them to the characteristics of our own environment.

2.3 Supervision: quality by experience, Achilles heels and dangers

We know the criteria of good supervision, the ways how to reward excellent supervision. Slowly but surely, we realize that the PhD supervisors need support to develop their guidance qualities. We have good practices in the field of programs for the supervisors.

We also know that a lot of supervisors do a good job in guiding their candidates to the dissertation by intuition and experience. For example, consider the publication Supervisors at work, based entirely on recommendations and reflections of supervisors who had followed any course (Delft University). We have dispelled the myth of the supervisor as a novice and as the main cause for failing dissertation trajectories. The world is much more complicated.

We also know where supervisors least meet the expectations of their candidates. First, the management of the PhD trajectory. This means that key decisions are sometimes delayed irresponsibly. And we almost never give effect to Umberto Eco's suggestion: let candidates as soon as possible issue a Table of Contents and a draft of an introduction, both as working hypotheses for the research to come.
Second, the danger of taking over a project or the writing process. Not because our supervisors are fraudeurs by nature, but because they want their pupils to finish the dissertation at all costs!

We also know what supervision mistakes lurk. The gap between us as supervisors and prospective doctoral students gets bigger and bigger. We know more and more, we assume as much known by our PhD students. But our starting candidates remain the same young scientists who have much to learn.
We also know how we can spoil the work of a supervisor. Just think of the forced guidance. A young supervisor gets a doctoral candidate assigned without having been involved in the selection procedure.
In some universities we struggle with the problem of 'dead souls'. Supervisors face quasi PhD students who may register as candidates but do not seriously work on a dissertation. We also know the temptations. International PhD students come with their own money to our institutions and the pressure is great to accept them. Even though they may lack essential qualities.

2.4 Some psychological aspects of supervising

More and more we have a grip on the psychological characteristics of the relationship between supervisor and PhD candidate. Their relationship will go through stages, from a learning and guided position to that of a more and more independent researcher. In essence, the art of supervising comes down to a balancing act and shifting gear. We must find a balance between supporting and evaluating. Between guiding and promoting independence. Between clear statements and - sometimes - silencing our worries not to create a self-fulfilling prophecy. All these supervisors and all those PhD candidates, they often do not tell each other what they really think and feel. And that's not bad. That is an art.

We know how difficult it is to decide on a 'no go' because of things that have nothing to do with the qualities of the candidate. A defended dissertation could open the way to a promotion of the supervisor. Or: defended dissertations can lead to considerable financial gain. Or: there is the fear that a prematurely ended doctoral research has implications for the acquisition of subsidies or new candidates in the future.

Supervisors are also more uncertain than necessary. They are hindered by not taking note of benchmarks for good supervision. Every time, the response of supervisors having talked with colleagues about their experiences: Hey, I thought that I did not do well at all, but I can be proud of some aspects of my working with doctoral candidates.

2.5 Our knowledge about essential supervision issues : the literature

We know which factors play an important role in the success or failure of a PhD program. We don't have to study them anymore. At best we can determine if these same factors play a role in our own environment. And sometimes we encounter a surprise.
There is the existing knowledge in terms of literature. There are hundreds of books and guides for PhD students about doing PhD research. There are a dozen books for the supervisors. The Anglo-Saxon world has been careful to ensure that we do not have to find out much extra. We have books about successful supervision and brilliant work on assessing dissertations. However, books and guides for PhD students and teachers together are rare. Virtually absent are the guides for those who must lead doctoral schools, graduate schools and research schools. These benevolent amateurs are thrown into the deep end.

2.6 Our knowledge about organizational principles

We have become much wiser regarding some organizational principles. Within less than ten years, we will have graduate schools, doctoral schools or research schools in most European countries. Not only for doctoral candidates but also for advanced master students. We know their optimum size and annual intake, balancing between too small and monstrous.
We know subtly to deal with the value of a bureaucratization and formalization 'light' with regard to the monitoring of supervisors and PhD candidates. In contrast to what we often thought, they can help supervisors and candidates to get less preferred but essential items

on the agenda of their communication.

Slowly but surely, we know how we can best monitor the quality of the doctoral environment. Principles of deregulation are important here. Under-Performing departments can count on our particular attention. High performers we give confidence and - the highest academic reward - autonomy. But they know: their performance must be able to be substantiated at any time with "hard facts."

Finally, we are aware of the dangers of the ritualization of the consultation of our PhD students. Satisfaction surveys that are repeated every so many years, but have very little impact on the practice of doctoral studies.

3. What we have

Besides knowledge, we also have the tools and programs to facilitate advising, guidance and doing a PhD. There are scripts for programs for potential doctoral students to support them developing their study techniques and PhD research plans.

The same goes for the supervisors: we have dozens of programs available for supporting supervisors in their advising and supervision.

There are formats for programs that can help PhD students in planning their PhD program. For international doctoral students there are programs that help them to land in a new research environment.

For the supervisors, we have tools like ….

> Forms for Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis of projects & candidates
> Flow charts for planning a project
> Self-evaluation forms
> Dissertation criteria
> Formats for a PhD research proposal
> Formats for progress monitoring and giving feedback

For the directors of graduate programs, procedures are available to give shape to the selection procedures and the assessment at the end of the first year. They don't have to search for a long time to find questionnaires for PhD candidates to find out how they think about the quality of their doctoral environment and supervision. We know how to spot The Best Supervisor 2015. Procedures are there and tested in practice. Formats for PhD data bases are ready.

For PhD students and supervisors jointly, there are tools that can help them to clarify reciprocal expectations.

You might wonder: how is it that I hear this all for the first time? Here we touch the core of the greatest challenge of this moment: the sharing of knowledge and the transfer of good practices.

4. What we have to do in view of PhD supervision

Does this all mean that there is no more work to do? That everything is under control? No. Here, I will formulate four policy priorities.

1. *Studying successful cases, instead of only focusing on what is not going well*

First, we must give more attention to identifying those candidates who do well. Why do they manage to write a good dissertation within a reasonable time? The same applies to the supervisors. We are focused on supervision issues, the incidents. Let's give more attention to those supervisors who do very well given their results and given the judgment of colleagues and doctoral students. In general, we tend to focus on problematic situations. We can also learn a lot of situations where it is going well.

2. *Listening more carefully to the supervisors*

We also tend to look mainly to the doctoral candidates and to listen to them. We need to get more insight in the troubles and advices of the supervisors. With which issues do they wrestle. An example is the hardest part of their job, as they perceive it often: changing roles, changing from the position of a supporter, nearly a colleague, to the position of assessor, a strict judge.

3. *Special attention for the 'taking over risk', the major ethical challenge*

This suggestion is related to the risk of taking over by a supervisor of the project and the writing process. How far do we go in editing texts of our candidate? Do we use Track Changes or Comments? A fundamental decision. In other words, how do we ensure that support for a candidate doesn't turn into fraud?

4. *Tailor made support for supervisors*

This all leads to the question of how we can support our supervisors the best. Remarkably, a 'formalization light' plays a positive role. The beauty of the form. We must provide our supervisors and PhD students tools that facilitate their communication. Which ensure that sensitive issues cannot be avoided. The yearly filling in of a Doctoral Traning and Supervision Plan is essential in this respect.

Secondly, we must give a clear place to a formal review of the project progress. There is a big difference between giving feedback and a formal assessment of progress. Often, the two are mixed. Of course there has to be that assessment at the end of the first year that a good director of a research school or school graduate will supervise. Secondly, there is the hard

question at the end of the second year: will the project be finished in the given time, and if the progress is convincing at the end of the second year, what are PhD candidate and supervisor doing together to save the business.

But most important is the peer support for supervisors. Which is lacking at present. Time after time, I learn from the supervisors how much they develop their supervision in isolation. Exchange of views at a high level of reflexive counseling and discussing difficult cases at the level of the departments are almost absent: that means introducing **Intervision**. In each super-vision workshop, this is also the part that is most appreciated. [2]

5. Facilitating the exchange of good practices and some innovative steps

As we argued, the biggest problem for the coming years does is not lying in a lack of knowledge. The trick is how supervisors, directors of research and graduate schools and doctoral students can take note of good practices, from home and abroad. Even within one and the same university, departments are unaware of major innovations developed by their closest colleagues.

At an international level, there is an important role for the CDE. Workshops may be organized to provide frontrunners with a platform and to let them brainstorm with all those who want to implement innovations in their own environment. Let's ask the frontrunners - supported by the CDE that has spotted those frontrunners – to share.

While we give most of our time to the transfer of knowledge and good practices, let's work on particular topics that deserve more attention and are neglected in the literature so far.

1. Starting a study of the quality of our dissertations.

2. Gaining insight into the black box of the dissertation process, the assessment of dissertations

3. Studying the issue of writing fraude (whose text is it?)

4. Description of very good supervision (a book titles 'How best supervisors supervise')

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[2] There are several options to diminish the solitude of the PhD supervisor.
a. say goodbye to solo supervision ; always do it in teams
b. there is the teachers meeting at the departmental level of within the research group; there the progress of the candidates can be discussed collectively
c. there is the possibility of professional peer review to discuss difficult cases with colleagues
d. there are the support programs for supervisors of which intervision should always be a part.

The challenge at this time is not to invent new things yet again. It's about making available to our colleagues all what we know and have. At this time, the challenge is more to consolidate, to transfer and to implement than to grasp all sorts of new issues by the horns.