

# Confronting decisions related to the termination or continuation of doctoral supervision: a supervisor perspective

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper explores theoretical perspectives on supervisors' pedagogical dilemmas when deciding whether to terminate or continue problematic supervision relationships. This paper aims to unravel the complexities and challenges inherent in such decision-making processes while also discussing potential support mechanisms for supervisors.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Adopting a reflective narrative approach, this paper presents a fictional narrative to illustrate the intricacies of doctoral supervision. The narrative is divided into three parts, each followed by an analysis rooted in theoretical perspectives.

**Findings** – This article offers guidelines across individual, departmental and organisational levels to address critical moments in doctoral supervision. By incorporating various strategies and perspectives, it helps to understand the dilemmas that supervisors may encounter. A decision-making support guide is also provided to suggest ways of handling these challenging situations.

**Practical implications** – Drawing from theoretical perspectives, this paper offers practical solutions. A supervision support guide is developed to help establish support mechanisms at different levels, assisting supervisors in managing critical moments in doctoral supervision.

**Originality/value** – Addressing a rarely discussed issue, this paper highlights the complexity of supervisors' decisions regarding the termination of PhD students. It not only sheds light on these difficult choices but also offers practical guidelines for supervisors navigating such scenarios.

**Keywords** Decision-making, Critical moments, Termination, Doctoral supervision, Supervisor work situation, Supervision relationship

**Paper type** Conceptual paper



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## Introduction

The workload and work expectations of academics have changed profoundly in the past two decades. Academics identify a lack of resources, poor working relationships, challenges with management and lack of involvement in decision-making as contributing factors to an increasingly stressful work life (Kinman and Johnson, 2019). Moreover, Kinman and Johnson (2019) indicate that the traditional protective factors, like tenure, autonomy, collegiality and role clarity offered previously by universities, have diminished.

The feeling of increased workload and lack of institutional support in academia is also documented among doctoral supervisors (Clegg and Gower, 2021). A factor that influenced the workload of supervisors is policies in various countries that expect doctoral students to complete within three years (Taylor, 2012). The impact of this has been a drastic change in workload and expectations of senior academic staff in doctoral supervision (Clegg and Gower, 2021). They are required to supervise more students and to adhere to new ways of supervising because of the increasing complexity of modern doctoral education (Taylor, 2023). According to Taylor (2023), modern supervision is much more than being responsible for the quality of producing a thesis. Supervisors must also project manage the research process, apply for funding, deal with multiple demands in the context of supervision and support the students' well-being within this process. To add to the complexity, the level of doctoral student preparedness may vary significantly. Many doctoral students are academically underprepared and need additional support, e.g. in academic writing or research methods that further pressurise supervisors to deliver (Devine and Hunter, 2017). Together with this, the managerial approach tied to performance-based measures in higher education is not contributing to a supportive working environment for academics (Chetty and Louw, 2012).

Doctoral education is a complex aspect of academic teaching (Halse and Malfroy, 2010), with Grant (2003, p. 189) describing it as "challenging and chaotic" and Bastalich (2017) as a fragile relationship. In research on doctoral education, the supervision relationship stands out as a key factor determining students' progress and well-being (Polkinghorne *et al.*, 2023). The success of the supervision relationship depends both on the matching of the topic and the interpersonal compatibility of the individuals (Bastalich, 2017). The supervision relationship is not an equal or democratic relationship due to the doctoral student's dependence on the supervisor and the supervisor's responsibility to attend to the needs of the student (Halse and Malfroy, 2010).

Although doctoral supervision is important for supervisors' career progress, supervision also provides further developmental opportunities in terms of intellectual and pedagogical enrichment (Han and Xu, 2021), personal development and interpersonal development in terms of understanding the student's experience (Kaur *et al.*, 2022). Most supervisors enjoy supervision and report that supervision also improves their research practices and makes them feel valued by doctoral students (Clegg and Gower, 2021). Doctoral students' satisfaction and progress are positively related to regular (preferably weekly or more often) supervision and negatively related to the supervisor having many doctoral students (Corsini *et al.*, 2022). This can be problematic if the supervisor is pressured to have too many doctoral students or if the university's allocated resources for supervision are minimal per doctoral student. It may be burdensome for the individual supervisor to refuse to take on additional doctoral students to supervise due to expectations from the university and wanting to succeed in academia through showing supervisory capacity.

But sometimes, supervisors might be confronted with situations that lead them to reconsider supervising a student or even withdraw from a supervision team. Wisker and Robinson (2013) identify problematic situations experienced by supervisors related to student learning, the supervisor's personal and professional situation and institutional

problems. Problems related to student learning are how students conduct the research, prior learning deficits, feelings of anxiety and frustration about a lack of student progress or quality of the doctorate work (Polkinghorne *et al.*, 2023). Personal or professional dilemmas are related to the relationship with the student and the management of stress, identity development, well-being, emotional resilience (Wisker and Robinson, 2013, 2016), power dynamics, ambiguity in roles (Kaur *et al.*, 2022) and institutional problems such as a lack of management support (Kaur *et al.*, 2022). These problematic situations are described in the literature as pedagogical dilemmas. A pedagogical dilemma refers to a challenging situation or conflict, where the educator must make difficult decisions that often have no clear or straightforward solution. It is often used to study pedagogy in teacher education (Kavanagh *et al.*, 2020). In doctoral supervision, the predominant dilemma described in the literature is between supervisor control and student independence (Wichmann-Hansen and Schmidt Nielsen, 2023) but many dilemmas are at play in doctoral supervision that arise from competing educational goals, values or responsibilities. Dilemmas may involve ethical, practical, relational and resource-related issues because these are often deeply interwoven in a complex setting such as supervision. These dilemmas can serve as a trigger to reflect on current practices that can lead to addressing deficiencies in the system (Tillema and Kremer-Hayon, 2005).

Decisions about terminating a supervision relationship are often brought forward by a longer period of experiences of unproductive work collaboration, lack of mutual understanding and feelings of being caught in an uncomfortable, problematic or unsolvable dilemma. These problematic situations are according to Kaur *et al.* (2022, p. 792) “messy and troublesome and can involve moments of resistance and disagreement”.

An example of such a pedagogical dilemma is anecdotal evidence that universities will likely have some support structures in place for doctoral students who experience conflict with a supervisor, but rarely are the same support structures in place for supervisors. Although there may be institutional rules for supervisors in conflictual supervisory relationships, supervisors are often left on their own when deciding to terminate or continue collaboration and how to confront the students in case of problematic supervision conflicts. Discussing troublesome supervision situations with colleagues can be difficult out of fear of being seen as lacking supervision competence or having collaboration difficulties, especially as doctoral supervision is part of being able to succeed in academia. Fear of discussing these problems can increase the risk of supervision dilemmas remaining unsolved for extended periods and increase the risk of decreased well-being of supervisors and doctoral students.

Only a few studies have identified concrete suggestions for how supervisors can act in case of disputes (Ahern and Manathunga, 2004; Albertyn and Bennett, 2021; Devine and Hunter, 2017). These studies identify a pressing need for tools and strategies to support supervisors if they need to terminate a dysfunctional relationship due to personal or strategic reasons.

This article presents theoretical perspectives on some of these pedagogical dilemmas that create critical moments where supervisors need to decide whether they will terminate or continue a problematic supervision relationship. The aim is also to unfold complexities and dilemmas in the decision process and to discuss potential support mechanisms available for supervisors on both individual, departmental and organisational level.

We ask the following research questions:

*RQ1.* How can different perspectives assist in analysing and understanding doctoral supervisors' decisions on terminating or continuing a supervision relationship?

RQ2. What potential strategies and support mechanisms could be considered by individual, departmental and organisational supervisors to address challenges in supervision?

### *Perspectives to support problematic supervision dilemmas*

From a theoretical view, various perspectives can assist in identifying problematic situations. [Wisker and Robinson \(2013\)](#), in their research of difficult supervision situations, draw on theoretical perspectives of well-being and emotional resilience. Our approach is similar in using perspectives in different fields and applying them to the doctoral supervision situation in a pragmatic way. We use perspectives on critical moments, stress management, decision-making and reflection to provide practical advice to supervisors in these situations. Pragmatism focuses on the consequences of action and the interaction of humans with the environment to create knowledge. It is important that the perspectives selected solve the problem and address the experience of the human ([Allemang et al., 2022](#)). In analysing pedagogical dilemmas, [Tillema and Kremer-Hayon \(2005\)](#) indicate that these dilemmas lead to reflection, a potential change in action and the development of coping strategies to deal with the dilemma. Therefore, each of the perspectives discussed in the next section provides a better understanding of the complex situation that a supervisor will have to deal with in grappling with the dilemma. A critical moment serves as a trigger that can start the change process. These events can be stress-inducing and managing stress well can lead to better decision-making. By incorporating decision-making, a complex process is broken down into manageable chunks. Reflecting on the events helps to close the loop and assists in handling these types of situations better in future. Together, these perspectives assist in providing guidance from the start of the dilemma, the problematic supervision situation, to applying concepts to understand one's own reaction better and identify workable solutions. The combination of the perspectives provides tools to analyse problematic supervision situations and build resilience in dealing with these complex situations.

### *Critical moments*

Critical moments are seen as events that can trigger or leverage change but it depends on the interpretation of those involved that makes defining critical moments complex ([Silva et al., 2018](#)). The theory of critical moments (TCM) offers a useful analytical approach to understanding and acting on problematic supervisory situations. [Laws \(2020\)](#) regards critical moments as those that are influenced by a person's subjective experience or a conflict, forcing a person to evaluate one's behaviour. It often involves questioning a situation: what was surprising and what are possible actions?

These critical moments usually lead to change or begin the process of reflection. Being aware of critical moments assists individuals in recognising and acknowledging problems instead of ignoring them. Critical moments are essential in creating change in various forms; in direction, conversation, relationship, assessment or decision ([Silva et al., 2018](#)).

Critical moments are seen as an event that happened in the past and that the individual is not aware of in the moment, but critical moments are also future-orientated and certain actions like humour, irony, restorative turns and uncertain positions can support the change and shape the interaction ([Barrett, 2004](#)).

Critical moments play out on various levels and present awareness of both the problem at hand and the interaction in the relationship ([Barrett, 2004](#)). Paying attention to critical moments is relevant in a supervision context to help supervisors and students avoid continuing the current path and ensure timely action when critical moments occur.

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### *Understanding stress*

Kinman (in [Grove, 2018](#)) found that 55% of UK academics experienced mental health symptoms caused by increased demands, higher in comparison to other occupational groups. The impact of the demands influences an individual on a behavioural, cognitive, physical and emotional level. By paying attention to the strains experienced, one can identify situations that cause problematic situations. Specific interventions can be proposed by understanding the link between the demands and strains.

[Han and Xu \(2021\)](#) identify increased managerialism, pressure to perform and focus on accountability as some of the demands faced by doctoral supervisors. Demands on the supervisor can be task-related (lack of control, career progress concerns, new technology), role-related (role ambiguity or role conflict), interpersonal (poor communication or leadership challenges, verbal harassment) – or a combination of these. Addressing the demand can assist in eliminating or at least decreasing the problem and the cause of stress ([Quick and Nelson, 2011](#)).

Strains are usually an indication that a situation has an impact on the individual's functioning. Strains are classified into four categories: behavioural (e.g. lack of sleep, impulsive, aggressive behaviour, isolation or withdrawal), cognitive (e.g. feeling powerless, self-doubt, difficulty in making decisions), physical (e.g. constant fatigue, frequent headaches, getting sick more easily) or emotional (e.g. anxiety, frustration, irritability, apathy, negativism, suppressed anger, oversensitivity) ([Chmiel, 2008](#)). Strains experienced by doctoral supervisors include anxiety, frustration, anger, guilt, disappointment and exhaustion ([Han and Xu, 2021](#)).

In dealing with stressful events, three intervention levels are proposed ([Quick and Nelson, 2011](#)). On a primary intervention level, it will always be best to identify the demand causing the strain and to reduce, modify or eliminate it. When supervision dilemmas are complex, and a solution from a primary intervention level is not apparent (e.g. difficult personalities), one can consider interventions on a secondary level. On a secondary intervention level, the supervisor will have to learn to live with the demands and the solution to this would be to modify the response to the demands ([Quick and Nelson, 2011](#)) like avoiding the situation, changing the situation, cognitive restructuring, attention deployment or extrinsic emotion regulation ([Han and Xu, 2021](#)). A tertiary-level intervention focuses on the symptoms or addressing the consequences of dealing with the demand, e.g. exercising. Consequently, the strain will continue to exist but the idea is to apply intervention strategies to keep the distress minimal ([Quick and Nelson, 2011](#)).

### *Decision-making*

According to [Jonassen \(2012\)](#), decision-making is a way to solve problems. [Jonassen \(2012\)](#) identifies two broad categories of decision-making, normative models that postulates that as rational human beings we use standards and norms to get to the optimal decision, whereas naturalistic models look at how we actually make decisions by using emotions, unconscious factors and previous experiences. The steps in the rational decision-making process follow a logical way of considering the problem and getting to the core of the problem before alternatives are listed and evaluated. Thereafter, the best alternative or combination of alternatives will be implemented. The implementation process must be monitored to identify whether the problem has been solved or then to propose other interventions ([Quick and Nelson, 2011](#)). Other normative models include the use of decision matrixes, analytical and risk assessment models, SWOT and force field analysis, argumentation and cost-benefit analysis ([Jonassen, 2012](#)).

[Jonassen \(2012\)](#) indicates that inexperienced problem solvers usually use normative models, as they are more effective for inexperienced problem solvers. Most decisions do not follow this model. People tend to implement the first acceptable solution without considering whether the solution is the best fit for the problem, referred to as bounded rationality, usually due to contextual factors like time pressure ([Robbins and Judge, 2017](#)). These naturalistic

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approaches include narrative-based decision-making, identity-based decision making or using unconscious processes, like scenarios and mental simulations, to assist in decision-making (Jonassen, 2012).

### *Confronting the problematic dilemmas through reflection*

After the critical moment or strains have been identified, it is important to know how to act on these. One way to deal with problematic situations would be to follow the decision-making process discussed in the previous section. Other options would be to focus on self-reflection and learning how to deal with stressful events.

Reflection is the process of analysing experiences that lead to new understanding. This can be an individual process or a collaborative process. In the educational context, a differentiation is made between reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-on-action usually happens after the event. Through analysing the event, an evaluation is made on how to do things differently. Reflection-in-action occurs during the experience. Decisions are made immediately to adapt thinking and behaviour to solve a problem experienced (Merriam *et al.*, 2007).

Schön's work on reflective practice is appropriate in a research supervision as it provides information on the supervision relationship and emphasises self-reflective practice on various levels – the task, the dialogue in co-creation and the relationship (McMichael and McKee, 2008). Reflective practice provides opportunities to maximise learning not only for supervisors but also for students and serves as a tool to enhance supervision development (McMichael and McKee, 2008).

### **Methods**

This paper follows a reflective narrative approach, because it provides a systematic lens for analysing complex human interactions and it allows contextual and detailed information to be considered (Chambers, 2003). The information provided by narratives are valuable sources that allow closer examination and facilitate discussions essential for reflecting on practice and learning from it (Moen, 2006). Therefore, the reflective narrative approach was deemed the best method to approach this article. Our article is guided by a deep interest in understanding the complexity and the dilemmas involved in supervisors' decision-making processes, and, therefore, we chose to narrate a story derived from lived experiences that includes all the contextual messiness that real life entails. Moreover, we chose to put emphasis on reflection by offering theoretical perspectives that invite the reader to interrogate and discover and perhaps even redefine their existing views (Chambers, 2003). Although we, the authors of the narrative, can benefit from the internal reflection process of writing a story, the main purpose is to offer an external reflection for readers (Colomer *et al.*, 2020).

The data that are used for the study is a fictional narrative based on the reflections on supervision by doctoral supervisors in Denmark, Norway, South Africa and Sweden. The fictional narrative was created from our personal experiences as supervisors and from our experiences with guiding other supervisors in a learning and development context. Various individual reflections and discussions by the authors lead to the writing of the narrative, and therefore, it is our representation of a fictional dilemma. It is not bound to a specific country or discipline. Our experiences are all as women in academia, from various scientific disciplines and several universities and those experiences have of course coloured our perspectives when writing the narrative (Moen, 2006). However, we represent a heterogenous author group in terms of disciplines, institutions, positions and nationalities, and thereby we were able to develop the fictional narrative to be representative of various supervisor populations. The advantage of this is that anonymity is ensured and the fictional narrative is transferable to various scenarios. Gibson (2021, p. 6) indicates that fictional

narratives provide a new way of looking at data and are “generalised descriptions of social phenomena without reference to specific instances” and can, therefore, be seen as “representations of society”.

The following section presents a fictional narrative about a supervision dilemma from the supervisor's perspective. Although the supervision dilemma can also be analysed from the student's perspective, the focus of this section is on the supervisor's perspective. The fictive supervisor is Professor Kim, an early career academic at an established university. She has supervised four doctoral students to completion as the main supervisor so far and is currently supervising three doctoral students working on the same externally funded project.

We invite the readers for joint analysis and reflection on the narratives from the supervisor's perspective as we introduce the supervisor dilemma. The fictional narrative is divided into three parts to break down the complexity and the influence of time on the dilemma. After each part, the theory is applied as an analytical lens to provide guidance to the fictional character:

*I have tried my best, but it does not work as expected.*

I am in a challenging situation. According to the work plan, one of my PhD students is halfway through his study and is greatly behind schedule. The process started well though. During the interview for the position, I got the impression that he knew what he wanted and had high self-esteem due to his many years of practical work experience. After the first six months, my initial evaluation of his academic ability changed: he would like to have quite fine-grained advice and was very insecure about decisions to be taken. I also started to lose faith in his research knowledge. I was simply not sure he has sufficient knowledge to select the correct research method for the study. I have tried my best and put some effort into the supervision and to inform him kindly about the problem and suggested additional courses but with minimal success. He is quite a vulnerable and sensitive person who has invested a lot in the identity of being a doctoral student, and I'm afraid he will not realise that this is the wrong path for him before his project is terminated due to lack of progress.

### *Theoretical analysis of the narrative*

From the narrative, there are various indicators that this situation could be problematic. Using the TCM assists in identifying reflection to look at the situation. Concrete observations are made, e.g. “the initial evaluation [...] changed”. In this moment, what kind of behaviour did the supervisor observe in the student and in the self? Reflection on the critical moment and feelings could lead to various potential solutions related to the student but also reflecting on the process and self-reflection. Reflection on the student's journey can lead to realising the student's insecurities and the impact that this can have on self-belief, including identifying potential skills gaps and looking into solutions to solve this. Self-reflection can lead to a critical unpacking of the insecurities of the supervisor, the relationship with the student (e.g. lack of honesty and openness towards the student) but also identifying developmental areas in providing supervision. This can also lead to a realisation of gaps in the processes, lack of mentoring in a specific area, lack of support or harnessing organisational structures.

In this process, it is also important to reflect on the feelings that the situation provokes, e.g. “[...] started to lose faith [...]” and “[...] I'm afraid that [...]”. These feelings indicate that Prof Kim experiences potential strains and could be a signal to identify what in the current situation is causing these strains.

The reflection on the situation assists in identifying the problem (supervision is not working) and the potential underlying reasons for the problem (lack of certain skills from the student, potential lack of supervision experience on how to guide students in these

situations), followed by a better understanding of the problem (What is this problem about and why is it occurring?), before acting on the perceived problem. Here, the first steps of the decision-making process can assist in drilling down to the real issue.

Suppose supervisors recognise critical moments repeatedly and realise they are signs of potential conflicts or challenges. In that case, it can assist in the decision-making process of either termination of the doctoral supervision relationship or the realisation that change is needed. Termination of doctoral studies, instead of completion, represents a loss for everyone involved (economic, psychosocial and opportunity costs) (Schmidt and Hansson, 2018). There may be situations where the investment in time, resources and well-being may not align with the potential outcome. Instead, the cost can be higher if the doctoral student proceeds with the doctoral education for example with burnout, research misconduct, limitations in funding and workplace conflicts. But critical moments can also be a powerful tool to realise that change is needed and can potentially lead to positive changes, enabling continuing the supervision process and completion of the thesis. This process can also be seen as a teachable moment for supervisors, where they can reflect on previous experiences, reframe the current situation and focus on what is needed to turn a situation around:

*Communication fails, and I am stressed.*

A year into the supervision journey, Professor Kim made the following observations. “Recently, I encountered serious problems with our communication. The student withdraws from communication and tries to avoid meetings. I am met with passive aggressiveness when I insist on meetings around the PhD thesis. I also just discovered that he has tried to play the team of individual supervisors against each other. I discussed it with the two co-supervisors on the project, and I think they handled it very well. One of them had a very constructive discussion with the student about it.

The whole situation is stressful and influences me negatively: why have I not tackled this situation better? Should I double-check the student’s data analysis to ensure he does not publish incorrect data? I don’t want to micro-manage and control him, but I feel uncertain if the student can conduct the data analysis and I cannot ignore it anymore. I get very irritated when I meet him.

*Theoretical analysis of the narrative*

Part of the reflection on a critical moment can be to identify the source of the problem. Reflecting on the events can assist in identifying the source of the problem that the student continuously avoids communication about a specific aspect of the doctoral process. Through using the decision-making process, the source of the problem is that the student is avoiding communication and feels uncomfortable discussing this with Professor Kim. However, the student had a constructive discussion with another supervisor. In the reflection, Professor Kim can realise that there was a breakdown in the communication between her and the student. Still, the student seems more comfortable discussing this with one of the other supervisors. One way to deal with the situation could be that Professor Kim needs to reflect on communication styles and how she conveys her message but the student also needs to be made aware of the communication protocol between supervisors.

Various strains are identified in this section of the narrative, namely, the symptoms experienced by the student (“student withdraws from communication”, “avoid meetings”, “passive aggressive”, “tried to play the team of supervisors against each other”) and Professor Kim (“I am stressed”, “influence me negatively” and “irritation”). These strains are further signs that the situation is problematic.



Various interventions can deal with the strains experienced. It will always be best to identify the demand causing the strain on a primary intervention level and reduce, modify or eliminate it. From the narrative, Professor Kim is experiencing a lack of control over the supervision process (interpersonal demands) regarding the breakdown in communication between her and the student. There might also be role ambiguity between her and the other supervisors. According to the primary level of intervention, Professor Kim needs to identify the real cause of the problem. A suggestion would be for Professor Kim to discuss with the co-supervisor that did have a constructive discussion with the student, to find out how her colleague handled the situation and what she can learn to do differently with the student. They might decide that the co-supervisor will be the student's best "go-to-person" in case of future conflict, which could help in dealing with the role ambiguity that Professor Kim is experiencing. Making the student aware of additional resources *outside* the supervision team could also be a way forward to release tensions and role ambiguity. For instance, the student could be teamed up with a postdoc to help with some daily tasks, a statistician to assist the student with data analysis, a co-author to assist with writing or perhaps courses offered by the institutions on data analysis or writing. However, choosing to involve more persons as "ghosts-supervisors" calls for a thorough alignment of expectations within the team and with the student because it consists of the risk of "too many cooks spoiling the broth".

From a primary intervention level, the situation can be addressed by applying various strategies: Professor Kim can reflect on how she can change or improve her communication style to establish a relationship of trust with her doctoral students, clearer guidelines for students indicating how to deal with challenges to avoid students playing one supervisor against another and support mechanisms available in the system needs to be communicated to students. If these strategies do not solve the problem, terminating the relationship is another option from a primary intervention strategy to alleviate the strains.

On a secondary intervention level, the supervisor will have to learn to accept that the student has a different personality or that their personalities are prone to clash. Professor Kim must realise that conflict and continuous communication efforts might be needed to guide the student through the process. Emotion-focused coping is a strategy that focuses on emotional reactions and attempts to change emotions. Here, emotional expression is key and the emotional experience is acknowledged through acknowledging the feelings and taking time to reflect on one's feelings about an event. This type of coping can positively impact coping with the challenge because feelings are not ignored or rejected (Compton and Hoffman, 2013). Professor Kim can arrange a meeting with the co-supervisor where she can voice her emotions and the effect it has on the supervision relationship. This can assist her with insight into how to deal differently with a situation when she is aware of the emotions and the reactions caused by the emotions.

From a tertiary intervention level, Professor Kim must accept that supervision will create strains and that she needs to identify strategies to deal with the strains. As an academic, she will need to have sustainable strategies as supervision will be an expected part of her working life. The strains of supervision are higher in the early career and she needs to deal with the symptoms created by the strains:

*The situation has reached deadlock*

The situation has now reached a deadlock. The student only has half a year left until the funding runs out. Only one of the three planned manuscripts has been submitted, and the student has not drafted new manuscripts. Data still needs to be analysed. He is currently on sick leave. I have realised that investing more time in the student will not solve the problem. I will have to analyse and publish the data myself, perhaps with help from the co-supervisors and the two other doctoral

students on the project. I think that a PhD is simply the wrong track for him. There is no way I feel I can give him this message. How do you handle it if you have a doctoral student who is not up to the task and you cannot get the message across in normal conversations? Do you let the machinery run its course (with the personal and financial costs involved), or do you try to take the difficult conversation upfront once you have lost hope of a good outcome?

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*Theoretical analysis of the narrative*

In this final narrative, it is clear how the situation has escalated. Through using the decision-making process, additional questions might provide information that is important in analysing the problem and not settling with the first solution that comes to mind. Relevant questions could be:

- What are the guidelines for terminating the doctoral project and/or resigning as a supervisor?
- What are the formal requirements and the process?
- Who is responsible for funders?
- Who owns the data?
- How are formal complaints handled and who becomes the problem?

Professor Kim tries to weigh factors of importance through a rational approach, ending in a decision to personally take responsibility for the work being done and terminating the doctoral student's role in the project. However, how to communicate the decision is not solved and it is apparent that Professor Kim feels alone in the situation. Another point to discuss would be whether terminating one doctoral student will improve support for other doctoral students in the project. This implies that Professor Kim will have to go through the decision-making process again to weigh all the various options on the best way to communicate the decision and consider the support for the rest of the doctoral students.

The outcome of the decisions that need to be made can also inform guidelines and processes on a departmental and organizational level. As for example by improving the selection criteria, or adding components to the selection process, e.g. proof of research analysis skills. There could also be an improvement in dealing with students that have missed deadlines, including transparency of the process and acting stricter earlier to avoid the situation at hand. Therefore, the decision-making process should be used to inform not only learning on a personal level but also a departmental and institutional level.

**Discussion**

In general, there are many perspectives and strategies that can be used to assist decision-making and solving dilemmas in supervision. But to make them useful, it is vital to be aware of the available individual, departmental and organisational support in the supervision context and how those support systems have worked and can work in various cases. The first is to ensure clear procedures, knowledge and competence in how to act in supervision dilemmas. The second is to create an institutional culture characterised by a feeling of safety and available useful support for all involved.

Below are examples of supervision dilemmas that can be reflected upon and discussed individually, in collegial teams, and at supervisor development programmes to prepare and support supervisors for making decisions in potentially problematic situations.

- What can a supervisor do in situations with less evident reasons to request a withdrawal from a doctoral student, supervision team or project? When supervisors feel that “something is not as good as it should be” or if a clash in personalities is not reconcilable. How long should a supervisor stay in such a supervision relationship, and what would be sufficient reasons to withdraw?
- What can a supervisor do when a doctoral student does not do the required work or is not progressing as a researcher according to the set research plan? Despite the supervisor feeling that supervision has pointed out the shortcomings on several occasions. What guidelines can be implemented on a departmental level to support supervisors?
- What if there are severe differences in beliefs of scientific conduct in the supervisory team? Where one supervisor has raised ethical behaviour or methodology concerns, but the rest of the supervisory team does not share the same sentiment?
- What about a supervisory relationship where one of the supervisors does not agree with the advice provided to the doctoral student or does not agree on the direction of a study and the supervision group does not seem to be able to solve the situation?
- Failure is not an option in academia and is frowned upon in a “publish or perish” culture. What will be the result on a supervisor’s CV or to a funding body where the doctoral student has been unsuccessful (or withdrawn), or a project has been severely prolonged because the doctoral student has not been able to keep to the project timelines? What are the supervisor’s responsibilities and how can this affect their academic future?

The supervision dilemma discussed in the fictional narrative are often not spoken openly about in academia. Still, they can harm supervision and create mental well-being issues for the supervisor, such as self-doubt and stress. An academic culture with more information and sharing experiences regarding supervision dilemmas can reduce stress, such as regarding information and accepting withdrawal from doctoral studies (Polkinghorne *et al.*, 2023). There are also situations where supervisors experience doctoral students’ motivation and progress stalling and the supervisors need strategies to solve the problem (Ahern and Manathunga, 2004). However, what timeframe would be for this problem-solving process and how much is the supervisors’ responsibility? When having several doctoral students and the set organisational resources for the supervisor is limited, there is a need to look at such problems from the supervisors’ perspective. Especially, as senior academic staff also experience a high workload burden and their well-being at work is closely related to the availability of resources to perform their work, a supportive work culture, opportunities for career development and professional support to provide an environment of learning (Arora, 2020). All those factors are connected and influence both how the supervisor decides to handle the supervision situation and the supervisors’ working situation.

Those problematic supervision issues that supervisors may silently reflect upon or perhaps share within a supervisory group need increased attention and transparency in academia. There may be different challenges for supervisors in various contexts and disciplines. However, regardless of context, there are cases where the working relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral student fails and supervisors need to be supported in handling such issues. Terminating a doctoral project or withdrawing from participation in a doctoral project or a supervision relationship is never an easy

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choice. Still, it needs thorough reflection and support for doctoral students and supervisors throughout the process. As the termination of supervision is not an openly spoken topic, there may be formal rules for the process that may be unknown to the supervisor. Such formal requirements could inform whether a supervision relationship can be terminated before a new supervisor is provided for the study or if termination needs to pass specific formal process steps before being executed.

Factors influencing doctoral supervisors' decisions on terminating or continuing a supervision relationship depend on contextual factors, chosen strategies and available support structures in the specific context. Perspectives of critical moments, coping strategies and decision-making can be useful to support action. With the intention to further provide tools to use in troublesome doctoral supervision dilemmas, a supervision support guide has been constructed with individual, departmental and organisational advice (Table 1).

Dealing with difficult supervisor challenges entails multiple responsibilities involving both the supervisor and the student, the team of supervisors and the organisation. To cope with the demands, it is important that supervisors first and foremost act and identify ways in which they can effectively deal with the demands placed on them. By being proactively engaged in the process, strategies can be determined that will best work on an individual, departmental and organisational level for the supervisor. However, institutions are also responsible for putting structures and processes in place to effectively support supervisors in coping with the changing demands of supervision. This is, especially, important when there is a deterioration of the supervision relationship and a need for a potential separation of the involved parties (Polkinghorne *et al.*, 2023).

### Summary and concluding remarks

Although supervisors generally report that doctoral supervision is a joyful task, supervisors often face dilemmas, where the most critical moments are deciding on termination or continuing problematic supervision relationships. There is a need to discuss strategies and support for those situations in academia openly. As this topic is multifaceted, the article presents how different strategies and perspectives can support understanding supervisors' dilemmas in critical supervision moments. The fictional narrative can be helpful as a base to discuss doctoral supervision dilemmas and assist the development of individual, collegial and organisational strategies for avoiding and managing critical moments in doctoral supervision. By acknowledging experiences of complex supervision dilemmas, it can be normalised as part of the development and training of supervisors.

Although the fictional narrative approach offers unique insights into complexities and dilemmas, we call for further research on critical situations and dilemmas in supervision and on effective support mechanisms. One significant concern about the approach used in this article is that the authors' perspectives may unconsciously influence character development and plot progression in the narrative. Moreover, our narrative focused on the experience of the supervisors and the article is written from a supervisor's perspective. However, this is only one side of the story and not the only truth. Another layer of reflection could be bringing in the student's perspective on these supervision dilemmas to acknowledge their narrative and view of these dilemmas.

**Table 1.** Support guide for doctoral supervisors

Individual supervisor	Department/PhD programme	Organisation/institution
<p>Set a limit for the number of doctoral students you can supervise at any given time</p> <p>Do not accept doctoral students if you feel uncomfortable with the topic/situation</p> <p>Ask for information about individual support mechanisms available at the institution to assist you in your supervision journey (e.g., mentor, training opportunities provided)</p> <p>Be open and transparent towards critical moments in supervision. Use critical moments as an opportunity to reflect on your supervision skills</p> <p>Be a team player in the supervision team and be honest about your observations in the team</p> <p>Be conscious of the supervisors that you work with. Open your boundaries to work with diverse supervisors to improve and expand your supervisor practices</p> <p>Do not wait too long to address issues of concern. The earlier concerns are raised and addressed, the better for all parties involved</p> <p>Investigate different supervision styles and be willing to adapt your supervision style</p> <p>Realise that termination of supervision is an acceptable choice</p>	<p>Determine the number of postgraduate students a supervisor can handle with their current workload</p> <p>Create a supportive culture in the department where supervisors can raise supervision dilemmas and concerns in a safe environment</p> <p>Create opportunities for supervisors to work with different supervisors, e.g. encourage supervisors to assemble a team based on different supervision styles and not only on expertise</p> <p>Have procedures that allow an internal rotation in the supervision team or a complete change in the supervision work relationship. It signals that a change of supervisors can be an adequate solution and it recognises that supervision is an interpersonal construction that needs attention</p> <p>Create an environment where termination of supervision is an option. Provide guidelines and clear regulations when this would be applicable</p>	<p>Ensure comprehensive support mechanisms for supervisors, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An online onboarding programme with information about institutional expectations and procedures for supervision</li> <li>• Supervisory development programmes that offer pedagogical skills training</li> <li>• Institutionalised tools for alignment of expectations to ensure that supervisors and students early and regularly communicate about their work relationship</li> <li>• Mentoring or coaching services for supervisors where they can share confidential issues</li> </ul> <p>Ensure comprehensive support mechanisms for students, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counselling services (to refer students with psychological challenges)</li> <li>• Support services to doctoral students (workshops, student support groups)</li> <li>• Services offered by the library to students</li> </ul>

**Source:** Created by authors

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