The ‘professional supervisor’: (re)describing the work of supervision

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In doctoral education literature, scholars have endeavoured to capture and describe the diverse intellectual, physical and emotional elements of doctoral supervision. Arguably, the current context for doctoral education in Australia, with its focus on completions, its more diverse student cohorts, and new accountability and quality assurance measures for supervisors and universities, has intensified the imperative to clearly articulate exactly what supervision involves. In this paper, we address the question: What do contemporary supervisors do and what does this mean for universities? Our response is based on empirical evidence drawn from our larger cross-disciplinary, qualitative study on the impact of the doctorate on students, supervisors and external stakeholders in a large, metropolitan university in Australia. Extended interviews with 26 supervisors across three broad Fields of Study (i.e., Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Health and Science, and Business and Economics) were conducted and analysed using systematic, inductive coding and constant comparison. Informed by conceptual frameworks from fields like medicine, our research indicates that contemporary supervisors have adopted a ‘professional’ identity in their approach to doctoral supervision and engage with supervision a particular form of ‘professional’ practice. We outline the key domains of the ‘professional supervisor’ and argue that this identity offers a more all-embracing yet precise notion of supervision that has particular value for training, managing and improving supervision in contemporary universities.