

Why the Early and Ethical Withdrawal of Doctoral Students Can Sometimes Be the Best Option

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This paper argues that ethical supervision includes recognising when the withdrawal of a doctoral student is the most responsible course of action. Undertaking a research degree, particularly doctoral study, can be demanding both in terms of intellectual independence and emotional resilience. Doctoral study also requires the capacity to navigate complex and unpredictable research processes. When a doctoral student has persistent difficulties, whether these be academic, personal, financial, or health-related, and these difficulties cannot be resolved through structured intervention and support, then continued enrolment may not be in the student's best interests (Gutman *et al.*, 2026).

Decisions about doctoral progression are often framed around maximising the doctoral student's chances of completion, yet there are also circumstances in which continuing to support a struggling doctoral student may inadvertently prolong their distress and delay an inevitable outcome. In such circumstances, by continuing to supervise, we may increase the likelihood that any eventual failure is more damaging and demoralising for them. It is therefore true that in some cases, withdrawing our support, and enabling the doctoral student to exit with dignity, is not only appropriate but it is the ethically responsible action of a good doctoral supervisor.

Doctoral supervisors may observe early indicators of a misalignment between a doctoral student's abilities, their personal circumstances, and the demands of the planned programme of doctoral research. In some cases, targeted support, revised milestones, additional mentoring, and specialist wellbeing interventions can help these doctoral students to recover their focus and momentum. However, these measures are not effective in all cases. Instead, for some doctoral students, the pressure of progression milestones can exacerbate their mental health challenges (Casey *et al.*, 2024), thereby undermining confidence and creating a cycle of missed deadlines and escalating anxiety. On these occasions, encouraging withdrawal can protect the doctoral student's long-term wellbeing, financial stability, and professional identity.

Non-completion almost certainly carries emotional and financial implications which doctoral students may initially be unwilling to accept. However, the reality is that a graceful exit supported by compassionate guidance, may provide them with an opportunity to reframe the decision as being a redirection of their professional development (rather than being a failure).

Withdrawing doctoral students is a very difficult decision to take because as supervisors we recognise the potential consequences for them, and we may also worry about implications for our own academic reputations. However, withdrawal can sometimes be the right course of action as it preserves academic integrity by ensuring that doctoral awards remain grounded in genuine research competence. Furthermore, it releases our supervisory capacity which can then be redirected to students with a stronger likelihood of being successful.

Ultimately, recognising when continuation is no longer in a doctoral student's best interest is a hallmark of responsible doctoral supervision. Withdrawal, when handled sensitively, can be a positive, protective and empowering outcome rather than a defeat. However, before making the decision to withdraw a doctoral student, supervisors are advised to follow the seven-point action plan detailed below.

Action 1: Diagnose the Problem. To avoid misunderstandings, ensure the withdrawal decision is based on a clear and well-documented pattern of behaviour. Identify whether the issue is academic, personal, financial or relational. Gather evidence such as missed milestones, quality of draft materials, attendance at mandatory training and meetings, and communication patterns. Ensure the student understands the seriousness of the situation.

Action 2: Implement Structured Support. Provide the student with a fair and transparent opportunity to recover their momentum before withdrawal is considered. Supervisors should provide the student with a written action plan that details specific monthly goals and provides a clear expectation of the quality required for draft work. The action plan should include an agreed review cycle with measurable outputs.

Action 3: Add Targeted Resources and Mentoring. Ensure the student has every reasonable opportunity to succeed by introducing additional support such as an additional mentoring supervisor to provide a fresh perspective, skills training, pastoral/wellbeing support referrals and (if possible) inclusion in peer writing groups.

Action 4: Assess Capacity and Wellbeing. Supervisors should protect the student from prolonged distress or deterioration by honestly evaluating if circumstances realistically allow continuation, if the student is experiencing escalating stress or harm as a result of these interventions being introduced, and if the continuation of the interventions is likely to worsen their situation.

Action 5: Formal (and Compassionate) Review. Ensure the student is fully informed and empowered by presenting them with evidence of their progress (or lack thereof). Explore the student's own sense of capability and desire to continue. Discuss realistic timelines and outcomes. Introduce withdrawal as being a positive and protective option (not a punishment).

Action 6: Consider Alternatives to Withdrawal. Ensure withdrawal is genuinely the best option by exploring the potential benefits for the student offered by a period of interruption, by re-scoping the project, and/or by moving them to a part-time mode of study.

Action 7: Make the Decision Based on Evidence. If milestones remain unmet, the student's wellbeing is deteriorating, circumstances cannot be resolved, and/or continuation would likely lead to failure, then withdrawal becomes the ethical choice. To support a graceful exit for the student, provide a clear explanation of the process, reframe the decision as being a redirection (not a failure), offer career guidance for alternative pathways, and provide emotional support. By doing these actions you are attempting to preserve the doctoral student's dignity, confidence and future potential.

References

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