

2022

## Issues of belonging, pedagogy and learning in doctoral study at a distance

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### Recommended Citation

Mandalawi, S. M., Henderson, R., Huijser, H., & Kek, M. Y. (2022). Issues of belonging, pedagogy and learning in doctoral study at a distance. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 19(4).  
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol19/iss4/15>

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## Issues of belonging, pedagogy and learning in doctoral study at a distance

### Abstract

In this paper we present a case study of doctoral study at a distance, and we explore issues of belonging, pedagogy and learning as part of that process. As a team of one doctoral researcher and three supervisors, we critically reflect on the place of belonging in the context of doctoral study by distance. In this case study, the importance of belonging was heightened due to a high-risk and highly volatile context in which the doctoral researcher lived, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. We further explore the elements that developed a sense of belonging, aided by a range of digital technologies. Our findings suggest that the place of belonging in learning needs further examination in higher education contexts, especially when universities are keen to increase distance enrolments.

### Practitioner Notes

1. Belonging plays a crucial role in learning, including doctoral study, and should be considered in the design and delivery of all doctoral programs.
2. Doctoral supervision, including supervision at a distance, is a pedagogical activity, and critical reflection offers a useful tool to understand how the pedagogy is working and to consider how it might be adjusted.
3. Digital technologies, and social media in particular, can be highly effective in developing a sense of belonging in doctoral study from a distance.
4. Doctoral supervisors should ensure that doctoral researchers, especially those studying at a distance, are introduced to a range of relevant academic communities, including their doctoral research peers, to build and expand their sense of belonging.
5. Because doctoral supervisors need to tailor learning and pedagogy for each of their doctoral students, it is vital that they see themselves as learners who are willing to teach their institutions about the contexts of doctoral study at a distance.

### Keywords

belonging, doctoral study, doctoral supervision, distance learning, pedagogy of belonging, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

## Introduction

When Sazan, the first author of this paper, enrolled in a doctoral program, she wanted to remain at home—in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq—even though she had enrolled in an Australian university. Although she planned to travel to Australia at some time during her candidature to experience the university campus, meet face-to-face with her supervisors, continue working on her thesis and join into academic community events, the COVID-19 restrictions on international travel meant that her plans did not come to fruition. At the end of 2021, Sazan submitted her thesis for examination, having not met her supervisors in person. Her experiences have raised multiple questions about the place of pedagogy, belonging and learning in a doctoral program, especially in light of the distance component and the range of risks that accompanied her candidature.

Taking the lead from Kamler and Thomson (2006), we call Sazan a “doctoral researcher,” to acknowledge the expertise and capabilities she brought to her study and to represent our attempts to avoid the “institutional power relations” (p. 2) or hierarchies often inherent in student-supervisor relationships. As described elsewhere (Huijser et al., 2022), we worked towards establishing and maintaining a community of peers, rather than a hierarchical supervision. This was assisted by Sazan’s distance study and COVID-19 lockdowns, because our regular Zoom sessions were located inside home and family contexts, rather than in the institutional spaces of the university. For Sazan, distance study was a choice and a pre-pandemic decision.

Doctoral study is about learning and faculty staff facilitate learning, including the production of knowledge (Bair et al., 2004). Digital technology has made study from a distance easier (Castañeda & Selwyn, 2018; Van de Laar et al., 2017), and doctoral study by distance has become an accepted practice, particularly in open universities and disciplines such as education, the arts, business and the social sciences (Tait, 2018). With the advent of COVID-19, distance learning became a reality for many university students, including doctoral researchers, even for those who had not planned on studying in that mode. Indeed, many universities had to initiate “emergency eLearning” (Murphy, 2020, p. 492), which required transition for many students and supervisors (Torka, 2021). Yet, doctoral study has seen resistance to distance learning (Slagle et al., 2021; Wikely & Muschamp, 2004). Indeed, Slagle et al. (2021) reported that, in some disciplines, there is still a preference in university employment for “traditional brick-and-mortar doctoral program graduates” (p. 16). For some doctoral researchers, however, online doctoral study is the only feasible option. This was the case for Sazan.

As a team—one doctoral researcher and three supervisors located at a distance from each other—we thought our practices were reasonably successful, despite Sazan’s context being characterised by anxiety, instability, uncertainty and risk. Not only was she studying at a distance from the university and in a different time zone from her supervisors, who themselves did not always share a time zone, there were risks and threats in her living and research locations: data collection in two refugee camps, Turkish attacks on northern Syria (Regan & Britton, 2019), Iranian missile attacks on a US military base in her city (Romo, 2020), extensive outbreaks of COVID-19 and the isolation of long-term lockdowns. In this context, maintaining a sense of belonging—to her research project, to a distant university, to an academic community, and even to people beyond her immediate family—was challenging but important.

In this paper, we reflect critically on the ways our team worked during Sazan’s candidature. In doing this, we set out to think about our intent (the why), the focus of learning (the what) and the pedagogy (the how) (The New London Group, 1996), to explore our approach to supervision from

a distance. Our reflections form the core of this paper, which addresses issues of belonging, pedagogy and learning in a single case study and in a context of high risk. We begin by considering relevant literature related to doctoral learning, belonging and pedagogy. We then discuss the methodology we used, before presenting a narrative of our combined reflections. We conclude with a consideration of supervision and a pedagogy of belonging in risky environments at a distance.

## **Belonging, pedagogies and learning**

In higher education, doctoral study involves the production of original knowledge and the development of a range of skills, including leadership, creativity and entrepreneurship, for the application of research findings to real life uses (Stamou, 2017). All of these aims involve learning. As part of that process, students enter into an “individualised relationship” (Halse & Bansel, 2012, p. 378) or partnership (Kaur et al., 2021) with academic supervisors. At the university where Sazan enrolled, the role of supervisors was noted online as sharing expertise with doctoral researchers, offering them support and advice, and introducing them to the broader research field.

To use Gee’s (1996) explanation of Discourse with a capital D, doctoral supervision can be viewed as a pedagogical practice that aims to build a particular Discourse: the “ways of being in the world” (p. viii) of academic communities. Membership of such communities is associated with particular ways of “behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and ... reading and writing” (p. viii). In other words, this is about learning to socialise into a scholarly community (Cantor, 2020) and to feel socially included (Edgeworth & Santoro, 2015). This aspect of doctoral study aims to nurture belonging. However, over time, doctoral research has been increasingly impacted by the use of technologies for distance learning (Castañeda & Selwyn, 2018; Phelps, 2016), by universities’ risk management strategies in relation to plagiarism, ethics and researcher safety (Evans et al., 2005; McWilliam et al., 2002) and, more recently, by increased vulnerability and uncertainty from COVID-19 (Marinoni et al., 2020). Each of these is likely to contribute to doctoral researcher stress or anxiety. More than ever, a sense of belonging is important for doctoral researcher success.

There is general agreement that pedagogy in doctoral study and in higher education more broadly has not been an institutional focus. Zeegers and Barron (2012), for example, highlighted how pedagogy tended to be absent from research training discourses, while Castañeda and Selwyn (2018) noted that discussions in higher education often “pay little consideration to underlying pedagogies and teaching models” (p. 3). In the absence of research about potential pedagogies of supervision, there is a sense that the pedagogies employed are often unknown, inconsistent and used intuitively, or even randomly, and that they are generally not a topic of conversation amongst supervisors and doctoral researchers. Even when universities provide supervisor training, the focus is often on topics other than pedagogy. Jara (2021), for example, found that supervisor training mostly addressed “regulatory issues ... rather than pedagogical topics” (p. 441), while Walker and Thomson (2010b) suggested that supervision “in managerial times has an unfortunate resonance with technical processes of surveillance and audit” (p. xv).

Despite reports of the limited place of pedagogy in institutional doctoral practices, there is a growing body of research addressing pedagogical considerations and reframing them (e.g., Walker & Thomson, 2010a), generally in relation to belonging. Kamler and Thomson (2006), for example, have written extensively about pedagogies relevant to supervision, with their work looking closely at doctoral writing as a social and discursive practice. They were interested in “the connections

between academic writing practices and the formation of ‘the doctoral scholar’” (p. 2). As they argued, doctoral examination focuses squarely on the thesis, with “critical scrutiny” (p. 2) from academics. Receiving a positive response from this particular audience is a necessary part of the doctoral process at examination stage. To be successful, doctoral researchers have to learn to produce and represent knowledge in a scholarly way, which shows that they are able to use the social, material and discursive practices of particular disciplines and academic communities, thus demonstrating that they have learnt to belong (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Walker & Thomson, 2010a).

Other researchers have also emphasised the social and discursive aspects that impact higher education study. Matheson and Sutcliffe (2017), for example, discussed the importance of informal learning and social interaction. In talking about belonging, both directly (e.g., Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017; Walker & Thomson, 2010) and indirectly (e.g., Kamler & Thomson, 2006), such research emphasises the social elements of learning. This seems to stand in contrast to studies that explore loneliness—a lack of the social—as an individual trait affecting doctoral researchers, although such studies often highlight the impact of contextual factors. Whether investigating ways of understanding the causes of loneliness (e.g., Barry et al., 2018; Cantor, 2020) or how to overcome it (e.g., Goldstone & Zhang, 2021; Janta et al., 2014), this research is often from a psychological perspective and promotes activities that boost individuals. In addition, it is often assumed that working alone is necessary for “independence of thought, and originality” (Bastalich, 2015, p. 5), which are often highlighted as attributes for successful doctoral research. It is apparent, however, that some of the suggestions on offer for overcoming loneliness (e.g., Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017) are clearly suitable for on-campus situations, but they do not address distance study. Despite this, some of what is promoted, such as developing trust relationships, does have relevance, regardless of context.

It is evident that there is a tension between research that says doctoral research is characterised by loneliness and research that focuses on embedded social and discursive aspects. Cantor (2020), for example, suggested that multiple factors cause feelings of loneliness in doctoral researchers: the insecurity and uncertainty of open-ended research, physical isolation (e.g., in another country, in a laboratory, doing fieldwork away from home, long periods of time spent reading), poor relationships between doctoral researchers and their supervisors, and the personal transformations that are required (e.g., becoming a competent researcher, being able to write a thesis); however, he also acknowledged that discussions of loneliness seem antithetical to expectations for doctoral researchers to get to know, and belong to, their research communities, such as through conference attendance.

There are, however, ways of thinking differently about that tension. Antonsich (2010) recognised how the notion of belonging has been “vaguely defined and ill-theorised” (p. 644), with a reliance on commonsensical understandings and the assumption that everyone understands the term. He argued for a multidimensional view that understands belonging as “particularly concerned with forms of territorial belonging as implicated in the mundane, banal claim ‘I belong here’” (p. 645) and influenced by autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic and legal factors. In contrast to some of the literature that differentiates different types of belonging or demonstrates different theoretical perspectives, Antonsich proposed that belonging has two dimensions: personal place-belongingness—the “emotional feeling of being at home in a place” (p. 647)—and a resource in the politics of belonging—described in terms of “socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion” (p. 645). This work is useful because it resists the psychological-sociological divide and brings personal and social perspectives together.

Recent research has indicated that loneliness, which can be understood as an absence of belonging, has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has isolated and socially distanced people. Bonsaksen et al. (2021) highlighted social and emotional loneliness as issues related to COVID-19, while recent studies on doctoral research have focused on the shift to distance learning and the use of technology (e.g., Reis & Grady, 2020; Wang & DeLaquil, 2020). There is not always agreement about the effects of this shift. Wang and DeLaquil (2020), for example, highlighted the reduction of “diversified interactions” (p. 1348) and noted that the virtual space is challenging for sustaining relationships. According to Reis and Grady (2020), however, the changes to interactional processes have provided opportunities to expand the relationship between doctoral researchers and supervisors. Indeed, they commented that supervisors were meeting doctoral researchers virtually in their home environments, thus capturing “visuals of children being fed, pets getting walked, knocks on doors, and multiple noise-producing concentration-breaking interruptions, including garbage trucks” (p. 138). They concluded that the overall outcomes of this change are not yet known, but there is already a sense that life experiences have been integrated into doctoral relationships, thereby transforming learning and creating “a more diverse and supportive advising practice” (p. 139).

Such ideas seem to build on the work of Phelps (2016). Although writing before COVID-19 and focusing on international doctoral researchers, she highlighted the effects of globalisation, global networking and transnational spaces and the need for a reconsideration of place and belonging in relation to doctoral research. Indeed, the research field indicates the importance of continuing to investigate the notions of belonging, pedagogy and learning in doctoral research.

## **Constructing and framing our investigation**

In this paper, we use our doctoral team as a single case study, drawing on critical reflections (Henderson & Noble, 2015) from Sazan (the doctoral researcher) and her three supervisors (Robyn, Henk and Megan). During her enrolment, Sazan was mostly located in Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This region has a long history of conflict and, since 2013, has seen the arrival of over 256,000 refugees from Syria (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). Multiple refugee camps provide accommodation for this population. Sazan’s research investigated a peer education program conducted for adolescent girls who live in the refugee camps, and she collected data in two of the camps.

Sazan’s supervisors, however, were located elsewhere, mostly in Australia, but not always. At times, they changed locations, as a result of work, conferences and sabbatical opportunities. In addition, COVID-19 lockdowns shifted academics into home environments. For most of the time, the supervisors were working in three different universities, with supervision continuing despite career relocations. One supervisor retired during Sazan’s candidature, but continued her supervision role.

For this paper, we were interested in our lived experiences as a doctoral team (doctoral researcher and supervisors) within the constraints of distance supervision, a context that was embedded in perceived and real risks (e.g., international conflict, political turmoil, COVID-19), and university requirements for safe and ethical research. To this end, we reflect on aspects of our supervision—our intent (the why), how risk shaped our supervision, learning and teaching in relation to belonging (the what), and pedagogy (the how)—and what our supervision meant for Sazan’s experiences as a doctoral researcher.

Our reflections were written retrospectively after Sazan had submitted her thesis for examination, to encourage open comments about the workings of the doctoral team (see also Huijser et al., 2022, p. 4). We used a two-step process: the individual thinking and writing of the reflections (the production of data), and Maxwell's (2012) process for connecting them. Rather than "fracturing ... and resorting" ideas in our reflections (p. 112), we looked for relationships that enabled us to "connect statements and events within a context into a coherent whole" (p. 113) (the analysis and re-presentation of the data). This second step produced a narrative, which McAlpine (2016) has argued is an "everyday activity" (p. 34), enabling the documentation of our lived experiences.

Our narrative is framed by Kalantzis et al.'s (2005) pedagogical model, selected because it allowed us to conceptualise learning as well as the pedagogy of supervision. The model draws together ideas about formal learning (occurring as part of doctoral research) and informal learning (from "living, growing and having experiences," p. 38). Kalantzis et al. identified belonging and transformation as necessary conditions for learning, enabling learners to link to what they already know and to move out of their comfort zone. Pedagogy and learning were framed as involving four processes or "ways of knowing" (p. 72):

- experiencing what is already known and being immersed in new learning;
- conceptualising by defining, using theory and building abstract knowledge and generalising;
- analysing functional elements and doing critique;
- applying knowledge to typical as well as new situations. (p. 74)

These processes provided a way of connecting our critical reflections about pedagogy and learning and allowed us to incorporate another layer of critical reflection: confronting and deconstructing our experiences as a team, theorising what happened, and thinking otherwise about what would have benefitted from change or a different approach (Henderson & Noble, 2015). The narrative we produced focuses on our understandings of pedagogy and belonging in supervision, and it is interwoven with Sazan's reflections on learning (in italicized, indented text).

## **Our narrative of pedagogy, learning and belonging**

### ***Building a relationship at a distance***

Sazan's doctoral research occurred in what might be described as a context characterised by distance, risk, anxiety, instability and uncertainty. These contextual characteristics occurred on many levels: the political (internal and international conflict), the institutional (university processes at a distance), the local (data collection in refugee camps; issues of safety in the political context), and the personal (safety; the impact of COVID-19). Robyn reflected on the importance of building "a working relationship as a doctoral team and experiencing the importance of belonging to that team, especially at the beginning of the doctoral journey." Sazan explained her perspective:

*Did I feel belonging? I ask myself as I write this reflection. In almost six years [part-time] of my PhD candidacy, with a pregnancy, two children, moving countries, political instability reaching its peak at the point of my data collection, a global pandemic, all whilst being a 17-hour flight from the location of my university, which I belonged to. The answer is: To some extent.*

As Sazan indicated, multiple contexts impacted on how she felt during her candidature. Context also had an effect on how her location was perceived by university personnel, including her supervisors. When Sazan was first enrolled, Islamic State controlled Mosul (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022; United Nations Human Settlements Programme in Iraq, 2016), a city just over 80 kilometres from Sazan's residence. Despite the media images of death, damage and destruction, Sazan assured us that there was no danger for her or her family. However, political events that occurred later in her candidature, especially an Iranian missile attack (Romo, 2020), were of concern. As Megan revealed, "I remember having heart palpitations when thinking of Sazan's safety," and "I felt paralysed at the time when tensions over there were high, with bombings near Erbil, and was so relieved when we heard from Sazan that she was safe."

Through the discussions around political issues and around the elements of doctoral research, it became clear that we had to build a team relationship that relied on trust and honesty. Henk reflected that "trust is the most important and fundamental element in doctoral supervision ... directly related to the development of a learning environment that is conducive to the intense intellectual work involved in doctoral study," and noted that the word *development* referred to "the co-construction of a learning environment that has enough scaffolding in place to support the doctoral researcher, but ... is ultimately designed to allow for strong agency to develop." Trust, of course, is "a crucial element in this process, as the doctoral researcher needs to be confident that the project they are embarking on, and are going to spend at least three years [full-time equivalent] of their life working on, is firstly of significant worth and secondly achievable" (Henk).

While Sazan had to trust that her supervisors would be effective "guides on the side" (Henk) who would help with useful ideas and thinking, the trust relationship had to be reciprocal. This was particularly evident in the approvals that occurred as part of ethical clearance and the risk management plan that the university required. As explained elsewhere (Huijser et al., 2022), "the refugee camp locations probably rang alarm bells" (p. 6) for some university staff, especially those required to approve Sazan's research plans. There were elements of trust in those approvals: trust that Sazan would conduct the research as per her approvals and that her supervisors would support her through potentially risky situations. In fact, the university required a supervisor to be responsible for each student's actions in relation to data collection, even when that collection is occurring halfway across the world. There was "a clear and constant need for supervisors to be *there*, whenever difficult and unexpected situations arose, which was often" (Henk).

The WhatsApp platform was a useful communication conduit. Sazan and Robyn used WhatsApp for direct and fast communication throughout the research project, but particularly during data collection. The use of social media for communication was unusual (Megan). As Megan reflected, there was a pastoral care element to our supervision: "looking after [Sazan's] cognitive, but also social and emotional aspects of learning." The use of WhatsApp enabled "photos, texts – guidance, advice, suggestions, words of comfort during challenging times and laughter during happy times ... the artefacts of the collective thoughts (learning and teaching) of many people" (Megan). As Henk explained, it was important for the team to operate with "strong and responsive communication channels ... aided by a range of different technologies" which "were key to maintaining that much-needed sense of belonging." From Sazan's perspective, there were benefits in using social media:

*In emergency moments, instead of knocking at a professor's office door on campus, I would send a WhatsApp message to Robyn, and always received a reply in minutes.*

The immediacy of WhatsApp chat enabled problems to be discussed and solved quickly. From Robyn’s perspective, this meant that she “often ‘lived’ Sazan’s thinking about issues, in a way that was very different from previous supervision experiences.” Some of these experiences related to “the emotional aspects of learning” that Megan referred to. For example, during the data collection phase, Sazan found that she needed to be sure of her role in relation to the adolescent girls she was observing. In WhatsApp, she messaged Robyn: “One of the girls came and asked me for advice/thoughts. She’s 13 and has a ‘marriage proposal’ from a ‘handsome boy.’” This raised questions about the perceptions of research participants in relation to Sazan’s role in the field, and caused Sazan to reflect: “Am I a friend, a stranger, a researcher?” It also highlighted some of the characteristics of the vulnerable population Sazan was observing, as it was evident that “these girls are desperate for a friendly face, or someone to appreciate and listen to them.”

Situations like this were evidence of Sazan’s experiences of being a “lone researcher” who wanted to reflect with others on her field experiences. While the swiftness of WhatsApp communication worked well for particular situations, especially those relating to safety in the field, video conferencing using the Zoom platform was also important for the doctoral team as part of developing a sense of belonging to that team. Sazan explained:

*I belonged to my “community of peers” (Huijser et al., 2022, p. 4) almost every Friday morning, between 6 and 7 am my local time. There is a seven-hour time difference between Erbil and Brisbane.*

Our doctoral team—which we styled as “a community of peers, a team of equals with differing areas of expertise (both academically and culturally)” (Huijser et al., 2022, p. 4)—met on Zoom on a regular basis, using the beginning of Sazan’s weekend (Friday morning in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq) and what is often a relatively quiet time for university staff (Friday afternoon in Australia). As we have explained elsewhere (see Huijser et al., 2022), these meetings followed an unplanned, but consistent format, with time for personal and academic discussions (p. 5). This meant that we were able to build a vibrant working relationship while considering and debating issues relevant to Sazan’s research project.

Our narrative so far has focused on the importance of doctoral research relationships and belonging; we now move to our experiences of pedagogy, framed by Kalantzis et al.’s (2005) four processes.

### **Experiencing**

The pedagogical process of experiencing involves recognising what is known from everyday experience and “immersion in new information and experiences” (Kalantzis et al., 2005, p. 73). For doctoral researchers, particularly in Australia where learning comes through the lived experiences of being a (usually) novice researcher, experiencing is an important process. Sazan described her learning environment:

*My learning environment was never a campus library or any other library. My literature review was written in warm London cafes. My methodology was written in cosy coffee shops in Erbil, where I was located. I was able to go to work in places where my mind was most productive and creative. The data chapters were written on my favourite sofa at home during a complete global lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic.*

For Sazan, a sense of belonging to place was important to ensure she was productive. For her supervisors, the regular Zoom meetings were opportunities for immersion in the research topic and vicarious immersion in the research context. These meetings were opportunities for dialogic encounters about Sazan's research, but also about research and methodology more generally, and about what was happening in her part of the world. It was important that her supervisors understood the context and we learnt a lot through those discussions, particularly about the historical and political situation and the relationship of Sazan's research to its cultural and social context.

Megan suggested that our dialogue might be termed a "conversational pedagogy" that involved a lot of storytelling and was "richer in and with conversations." This aspect of learning, however, was also about listening. Robyn highlighted the importance of "being a good listener and asking questions," and Megan noted that "not fully understanding what she [Sazan] might be going through or went through" resulted in the realisation that "I was there to listen; just listen." Listening enabled us as supervisors to learn about Sazan's context and to understand her learning needs:

*The flexibility of my supervisors and the strong communication and understanding among them allowed me to have this belonging. Amongst themselves, they arranged schedules, meeting times and allocated tasks. They were constantly interested in my context and shared my passion for the research I was conducting. Their strong cohesion helped create my belonging.*

Being a doctoral researcher involved some sense of belonging for Sazan, in particular a sense of belonging to her supervisory team and to online communities of doctoral researchers.

*For the entirety of the program, my academic circle was my three supervisors and an online community of students, who I felt connected and related to. I belonged to a virtual social media PhD community on Twitter and blogs like The Thesis Whisperer. On Twitter, where I am often active, following and interacting with accounts like the PhD Voice, PhD Forum and PhD Students made me feel a sense of belonging. I liked, commented and sometimes shared thoughts that reflected those of my own. I was reminded every time that "I am not alone" in feeling the way I felt.*

It was, however, disappointing for Sazan that there were limited opportunities to connect with other doctoral researchers enrolled at her university:

*The university ... is rich in students' activities, sessions and events. My university inbox is filled with emails and information about these. I often asked, "Can I join virtually?" and unfortunately, for many of these, I could not. ... The feeling of belonging to my campus and department was deficient ... The only form of connection was online, where I followed, liked and commented on university activities.*

Sazan was frustrated by this lack of connection with other students, especially since she knew that the university's student portal was quite active. However, her experiences were exacerbated by time differences. She concluded that:

*For me as a doctoral candidate, the academic and social belonging I shared with my supervisors, to some extent, compensated for the lack of belonging to a physical place like*

*a library to work in, or coffee with colleagues to complain about PhD life and share research updates and findings.*

Although Sazan had plans to visit the campus for an extended period of time as a way of overcoming the lack of belonging, COVID-19 prevented her plans from happening.

*After the data collection in the refugee camps, the initial plan was to travel to Australia to write the findings, conclusion, finalise the thesis, and remain for graduation. None of that occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Australia's complete border closure for two years.*

### **Conceptualising**

In Kalantzis et al.'s (2005) pedagogical model, conceptualising is about “the development of abstract, generalising concepts and theoretical synthesis of these concepts” (p. 76) and usually involves “explicit, overt, systematic, analytic” teaching (p. 77). In Australian university doctoral contexts, explicit teaching does not play a large role. As Robyn explained, supervisors generally support the experiencing aspects of doctoral research, but these incorporate opportunities to develop conceptual understandings. These might be as simple as “providing opportunities for learning, such as suggesting who to read or what search terms or topics to investigate, introducing new perspectives, explaining a concept, or remedying a misunderstanding” (Robyn).

In the early stages of Sazan's research, our team engaged in discussions about different methodological approaches and how they might work, or not, in the proposed study. With supervisors who brought “three quite different research backgrounds and different areas of expertise,” there were opportunities for “debate about different ways of thinking and different ways of making sense of ideas and concepts” (Robyn), for sharing knowledge and for initiating Sazan into a wide range of research ideas. Yet, these were small events embedded in broader dialogic encounters and there was no hard and fast line between experiencing and conceptualising. In fact, just as Kalantzis et al. (2005) had indicated, “there is no necessary order” to the pedagogical processes and they are “not static and clearly defined” (p. 74).

Specific activities, such as ensuring Sazan's confirmation document was in order and dealing with the ethical clearance processes and the request for a safety/risk audit, initiated some direct discussions about what would be acceptable under the university's policies. As Henk wrote in his reflections, our learning environment was “co-created and developed over time, and it involved each supervisor playing a different role to facilitate active learning and work towards an increasing sense of agency (or a valuing of the doctoral researcher's voice).” Robyn expressed similar views about this, explaining that she expected that her “influence on doctoral researchers will reduce as time goes by.” She went on to say that “I feel that my job as a supervisor is mostly done when they talk like researchers, clearly know more than I do about their focus topic/s, and are willing to disagree with what I say with evidence to support their opinions,” concluding that, “if our pedagogical processes do not result in experts in a chosen field, then we haven't done our job. I don't want them accepting the status quo, but I want them contributing new ideas and making others think.”

In addition, supervisors often assist doctoral researchers to develop conceptual and theoretical understandings by introducing them to particular academic communities, including special interest

groups and researchers with specific theoretical or methodological foci. Sazan did not get to experience such communities:

*These meetings [with supervisors] were the only academic conversations I had.*

### **Analysing**

Kalantzis et al. (2005) explained that the pedagogical process of analysing involves “the underlying rationale for a particular piece of knowledge, action, object or represented meaning” and includes critique by “interpreting the perspectives and intentions of those whose interests it serves” (p. 77). Critical thinking and critique are an integral part of doctoral research and they played a significant role in our dialogues throughout Sazan’s candidature.

Because our supervisory team was diverse, we were always dealing with different perspectives on issues. For Robyn, one of the markers of Sazan’s successful move into the academic community was her decision to change one word in her conceptual framework. Although this might seem like a trivial decision, it was built on extensive reading and thinking about theory. Robyn explained: “It was one of those moments when I knew Sazan understood her theoretical position and could analyse concepts from different perspectives. All I could say was, ‘You’re right. Do it.’” For Sazan, however, such developments were not always visible, because of restricted communication with others in a similar academic situation.

*I did not have friends or colleagues in my circle who experienced what I was going through and I could not take this motivation from anyone around me. I often searched and watched videos of “a day in the life of a PhD student.” It was never like a day in my life, but I somehow connected.*

### **Applying**

The fourth pedagogical process of Kalantzis et al.’s (2005) model involves application: applying “experiential, conceptual or critical knowledge—acting in the world on the basis of knowing something of the world and learning something new from the experience of acting” (p. 78). Although this is clearly evident in Sazan’s completed thesis, this process was occurring throughout her candidature. Milestone events, such as the confirmation seminar and ethical clearance, were points at which she demonstrated her learning and ability to apply that learning.

One such point—the preparation of the risk management plan—proved interesting. It became clear that those who would decide whether data collection was going to be conducted in a safe environment actually had “little understanding of the context where Sazan would be collecting data” (Robyn). This, of course, was unsurprising, since their experience of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was only through what they had seen and heard in the news and, therefore, they brought outsiders’ perspectives. In hindsight, it is evident that we, as supervisors, had developed a sense of belonging to Sazan’s location and to her study. We were “immersed in Sazan’s world” (Megan). At times, we were “also wearing Sazan’s shoes ... [and] there was indeed a sense of belongingness” (Megan). In Sazan’s responses to the risk management plan panel, it was clear that her knowledge, skills and experiences would stand her in good stead when collecting data. She brought her experiential knowledge from working in refugee camps and understood the issues that outsiders might see as risky. In the Zoom meeting with those who had the power to prevent her

research from being undertaken, Sazan demonstrated that she could apply that knowledge to the new task of collecting research data.

For many students, celebrations follow milestone events. For Sazan, her family and friends sat in the room while she presented her confirmation seminar on Zoom and held a celebratory breakfast afterwards. About the seminar, Sazan reflected:

*Belonging is not always just a feeling, but also understanding and knowing a context, the language and background of a particular environment. As a researcher having to convey the field facts to a committee who did not have the belonging to the context of my research was an interesting and challenging experience.*

## Discussion

We recognise that our study represents a single case and is therefore not generalisable, and we acknowledge that Sazan's context had some unusual characteristics. Nevertheless, we think that our considerations of pedagogy, belonging and learning provide rich insights into the importance of belonging, its multiplicity, and its contextualisation. Our narrative has highlighted that doctoral supervision is a complex and multifaceted process. Supervisors bring different experiences, theories and methodologies, and this means that their intentions and expectations (the why), what they see as important (the what) and the pedagogy they use (the how) can differ, even though the focus is on one doctoral researcher and a particular research topic.

Sazan's supervisory team was diverse: three supervisors rather than the usual two, different fields of expertise, different preferences for methodologies, located at different universities and, quite often, in different time zones. While that diversity was a strength and it enabled us to take on different roles during supervision, there was a cohesiveness about how we operated. This came from a number of factors: our individual and collective interest in Sazan's topic, our willingness to learn more about her location and its history and politics, the risks and threats that impacted on her ability to study and conduct research and, over time, our growing insiders' view of Sazan's family and way of life. As Sazan commented in her reflections, our regular meetings included interruptions because her "children played (and fought) in the background and often offered to also type on my laptop."

We were invested in Sazan's research, but became more so as time went on. We were part of that research, albeit in a vicarious way, and the strong academic and personal relationships we had built with Sazan were evident in our concern when she was exposed to risks, including missile attacks and the COVID-19 deaths of neighbours. Technologies were instrumental in shaping how we operated and allowed us to use divergent approaches. Sazan and Robyn's WhatsApp chat history provides a written, spoken and visual record of Sazan's research and daily life. Henk followed Sazan on Twitter, providing insights into the more political aspects of her life. All three of us read and watched online news about the Middle East, so that we were knowledgeable about how events were reported.

The use of Zoom for regular meetings, now used widely by supervisors, provided a window into Sazan's household and family. As recognised by Reis and Grady (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has opened windows into many homes as part of doctoral supervision. This has been accompanied by the intertwining of doctoral researchers' academic and personal lives, along with insights into the home lives of supervisors. Although not exclusive to our doctoral team, this was an important

part of developing a sense of belonging and emotional connection to Sazan's research project. We recognise, however, that the emotional investment the supervisory team felt was probably exacerbated by the risks and threats in Sazan's location, her research topic (which was interwoven with the conflict in Syria) and the impact of COVID-19. Although these contextual factors played an important role, we still regard belonging as a vitally important part of supervision.

When talking about belonging as being important in learning, the literature generally focuses on the learner, in this case, the doctoral researcher. Kalantzis et al. (2005), for example, argued that "a learner will not learn unless they 'belong' in that learning" (p. 43), but this too applies to teachers, including doctoral supervisors. It is equally important for supervisors to feel a sense of belonging. Just as Sazan had to bring her knowledge of life experiences, location and previous study to new learning, her supervisors had to build knowledge of the context and its history and politics to connect initially with the proposed research, then later with the research as it occurred. We all had to learn to belong: to a location across the world, in another time zone, with different cultures, languages and customs. Our learning as supervisors helped to build our investment in and commitment to Sazan's research. Such emotional attachment went beyond what might be assumed as the work expectations of supervisors.

In relation to Kalantzis et al.'s (2005) pedagogical model, we found that experiencing was the dominant learning process. This was not unexpected, because doctoral researchers are generally engaged in self-study, reading, writing, attending seminars, collecting and analysing data, and so on. In other words, they are immersed in research and academic life more broadly and this immersion allows learning through experiencing. We found that the other three processes—conceptualising, analysing and applying (Kalantzis et al., 2005)—were interwoven with experiencing and it was difficult to separate them into discrete groups. Kalantzis et al. also recognised this and framed belonging as a condition for learning. Indeed, our reflective data indicated the significant role of belonging across all four learning processes.

Antonsich (2010) highlighted the ill-defined nature of the term *belonging*. Our experience of its subjective nature and links to feelings and emotions may not have extended understandings in that area. However, we found Antonsich's discussion of belonging as having two dimensions—personal and social/discursive—useful. Our narrative indicated that a personal sense of belonging related to place developed amongst members of the doctoral team. This was probably enhanced by the risks of the overall context and the use of technologies that provided a sense of immediacy and even closeness. However, in terms of the social/discursive dimension, Sazan's sense of belonging to academic communities was incomplete. Socialisation is an ongoing process (Cantor, 2020; Edgeworth & Santoro, 2015; Gee, 1996) and Sazan has demonstrated that she has a position in academic communities, through her completed thesis, publications and participation in online academic activities. Nevertheless, she felt that access to communities of doctoral researchers was absent during her candidature; she craved for more contact with other doctoral researchers and identified loneliness as a disturbing factor. It was apparent that online doctoral communities were not enough and that online chat in real time does not always work when participants are in different time zones.

Such challenges raise questions about how access to doctoral communities might be made available. As Sazan's supervisors, we were able to share our expertise and provide support and advice, but distance and the global shutdowns caused by COVID-19 meant that we were not able to introduce her to all academic groups within a single university, let alone in the broader research field. We are mindful that Sazan's experiences in relation to communities of doctoral researchers are probably not unique, but we also recognise that top-down communities organised by an

institution, or even by representatives of an institution (e.g., supervisors), are not necessarily the answer, because of perceived power relations (Kamler & Thomson, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the role of belonging, pedagogy and learning in doctoral supervision, using a single case study to provide rich details of the lived experiences of one doctoral researcher and her supervisors. Belonging played a crucial role in all parts of the pedagogy and learning processes in use. However, there were places where belonging was partial and this caused feelings of loneliness and isolation for the doctoral researcher. The findings highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of belonging and demonstrate that belonging is important for doctoral supervisors as well as doctoral researchers.

The context of risk and uncertainty, caused by distance, political events and the COVID-19 pandemic, made it easier to identify where belonging was occurring and where it was missing, and to understand its role in pedagogy and learning in doctoral teams. Our findings suggest that the place of belonging in learning and the development of emotional investment need further examination in higher education contexts, especially when universities are keen to increase distance enrolments. In our case study, there was definitely a need for raised awareness amongst university staff who had to make critical and binding decisions that related to a research context about which they knew little or had misunderstandings. Further research on this topic is warranted.

## ***Conflict of interest and ethics statement***

The authors report no conflict of interest. All research reported here is covered by the organisation's ethical protocols. The authors report no special sources of funding for this study.

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