


Chapter 12

Between Independence and Supervision: A Reflective Account of a PhD Student in the Era of AI

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the self-formation of doctoral students within contexts of limited supervision, institutional power dynamics, and the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI). Using collaborative ethnography and reflexive thematic analysis, six doctoral students participated. The findings reveal that insufficient supervision, often seen as an institutional gap, can foster reflective autonomy, prompting students to negotiate agency, cultivate intellectual independence, and develop resilience through peer collaboration and AI-assisted practices. The study introduces the concept of

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AI-mediated reflexive autonomy, describing how academic independence evolves through the interplay of structural constraints, peer solidarity, and digital support. Ultimately, doctoral self-formation is reframed not as an individual endeavor, but as a collective and reflective process that integrates critical thinking, technology, and human connection to navigate the complexities of contemporary academia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies indicate that 40–70% of PhD students consider leaving their programs, representing a significant concern across disciplines and institutions (Bradley et al., 2025). Mental health challenges, including imposter syndrome, feelings of inadequacy, and academic burnout, are major contributors to this attrition. For instance, in Finland, 35% of students report experiencing imposter syndrome, while 30% report burnout (Hansen, 2025). In Australia, mental health difficulties are the strongest predictor of withdrawal decisions ((Larcombe et al., 2021). Supervision quality also plays a critical role. Approximately half of doctoral students in Denmark who withdrew reported receiving inadequate supervision, whereas effective supervision has been shown to predict doctoral success (Beaudin et al., 2016; Raffing et al., 2017). Financial pressures constitute another dominant factor driving attrition, particularly in the Australian context (Larcombe et al., 2021). In the United States, both academic and social factors influence withdrawal decisions, with international students more affected by program fit and career prospects, and domestic students more influenced by relationships with faculty and the program climate (George et al., 2018). In programs with limited residency, a lack of support from supervisors, dissertation processes, and administrative structures further exacerbates attrition risks (Kennedy et al., 2015).

This largely invisible crisis raises urgent questions about how doctoral students can sustain their research trajectories while navigating such challenges. Beneath the dominant narrative of academic struggle lie deeply personal stories that are seldom articulated with honesty and reflection, particularly regarding the power relations between students and supervisors, and the everyday dynamics that often escape formal academic documentation. In the context of higher education's globalization and rapid technological development, the lived experiences of PhD students have become increasingly complex, especially for those who must simultaneously navigate professional relationships, non-academic demands, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI).

Existing scholarship on doctoral education provides valuable insights into self-formation (Marginson, 2023), power relations in higher education (Choi et al., 2023; Deyrich, 2023; Friedensen et al., 2024; Jones & Blass, 2019), and AI literacy (Pre-

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