



Mentoring international postgraduate students and early career researchers through transnational telecollaboration: a supervisor's autoethnography

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Abstract

The high-calibre education in Australia has attracted overseas students to pursue a Higher Degree by Research (HDR) every year. While HDR training is crucial for all HDR students, international students are relatively vulnerable due to the challenging demands of academic writing and research, coupled with the cultural and language barriers different from their own. To worsen the situation, the global pandemic forced face-to-face supervision into remote supervision mode, thus exacerbating students' social-emotional learning state even further. This article transports readers to a telecollaborative project that I initiated amid the pandemic through an autoethnographic approach. Propelled by the urgent need to better support supervisees beyond boundaries, I enacted a transnational telecollaboration to mentor international HDR students to position themselves as emerging researchers. Informed by participatory action research (PAR), I guided my junior colleagues (early career researchers (ECRs)) to conduct HDR needs analysis, hold HDR training webinars, build a virtual community via Facebook, and shadow HDR students throughout their reflection journaling via Google Docs. This viable supervision model broke down the power structure by creating an ecologically balanced framework, thus promoting collaboration rather than isolation.

Keywords: Autoethnography; higher degree by research (HDR); online mentoring; pandemic; social-emotional learning; telecollaboration.

Background story

Higher Degree by Research (HDR) supervision and early career researcher (ECR) mentoring has always held a special place in my heart. As a transnational postgraduate student in Canada (M.Ed., 2001-2002) and the US (Ph.D., 2007-2012), I have been there, done that, and can fully relate to my supervisees during their HDR journey Down Under (in Australia). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, overseas students yielded approximately \$37.4 billion to the Australian economy before the pandemic, a majority of

which came from higher education (\$25.4 billion) (Ferguson & Spinks, 2021). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) also noted that overseas student enrolments represented at least 28% of tertiary students in Australian higher education. If we zoom in on the recent HDR enrolments, 48% of the international students enrolled in Master's degrees, followed by 32% in Ph.D. programs (Lee, 2019). Similar to other higher education providers in the Global North, the fact that Australian universities rely heavily on international students cannot go unnoticed due to its impact on Australia's workforce, education, and society.

Even though international HDR students contribute to national economies and revitalise cultural diversity in society, their social-emotional learning is less talked about publicly and usually sidelined by how well they can perform academically (Chen et al., 2023; Prieto et al., 2022). The elephant in the room is that international students often struggle to cope with not only intellectually challenging demands in academic writing and research but also barriers raised by the new culture and language different from their own. The solitary nature of the HDR journey also exacerbates their social-emotional state and wellbeing. Some HDR students, if not all, have experienced the so-called "PhD stress", evidenced in low self-esteem, constant fear of failure, and mental exhaustion, which negatively affects their work performance and leads to depression (Hayton, 2013). In fact, one of my HDR students sadly had to withdraw from his PhD studies and return to his home country just because the PhD stress had taken its toll on his mental health. Other HDR students also experienced a similar sense of "isolation" as anecdotally shared by my colleagues.

The situation was even worse when the COVID-19 pandemic turned the whole world upside down, forcing the higher education sector into emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020). This unprecedented shift from the face-to-face (F2F) mode to ERT, coupled with social distancing and global border closures, hit universities particularly hard. Empirical studies have also reported on the intensified emotional rollercoaster impacting the mental health of the stakeholders due to the drastic shift to and unpreparedness for ERT (see, for example, Appel & Robbins, 2022; Chen,

2022; Kozhabayeva & Boivin, 2022; McAlinden & Dobinson, 2022). For example, one of my supervisees expressed how social distancing and border lockdown inflicted agony on his mental health and research plan amid the global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020:

When my life becomes smaller, just spending my time from my laptop, bed, and kitchen only, it is very frustrating for me... The pandemic also makes me worried about my health...I am afraid if I get infected and die while I am here in Australia so far away from my family... COVID-19 has also changed the schedule that I had planned before (HDR student, reflection journal, 18 May, 2020).

It broke my heart to know that the sense of isolation, stress, diminished self-worth, and challenges in conducting research remotely had negatively impacted our HDR students. There is definitely more to HDR training that we (senior/junior supervisors alike) can enact than what has been exercised in our own institution. Based on my years of supervisory experience and observation, it pains me to posit that the current HDR training model is still doing them a disservice, following a 'microscopic' approach that conditions HDR students to work in silos. I can't help but wonder, 'How can we revamp our HDR supervision approaches to better understand and support international HDR students' social-emotional learning in a time of crisis like this?' More specifically, 'How can we innovate inclusive and needs-based practices to empower HDR students' agency as emerging researchers beyond boundaries?'

Taking an autoethnographic approach (Adams et al., 2017, 2021; Ellis et al., 2011), I invite readers to walk into my critical reflection on my first-hand experience and lessons learned from a telecollaborative project arising from the pandemic crisis. The project was set up to develop a more ecologically balanced HDR model that focused not solely on student academic achievements but instilled empathy into social-emotional learning by building a supportive (online) community of practice. Through digital mining, I documented how the project was implemented, illustrated by my supervision journaling, student reflection entries, ECR colleagues' reports, and a series of HDR training webinars and activities. This chapter concludes with recommendations made for a more sustainable, needs-driven framework that can benefit both international and domestic HDR students and, reciprocally, their supervisors and other stakeholders involved in HDR supervision and administration.

Autoethnography

Autoethnographic studies have grown exponentially over the years; more and more emerging and seasoned researchers are using autoethnography to conduct research in social science, education, and applied linguistics (Adams et al., 2021). It is encouraging to see autoethnography resonate with many qualitative researchers, as rightly explicated by Adams and his colleagues (2021):

autoethnographers recognize and embrace the reality that the person and personal are always present in social life as well as in the processes of

research and representation. Everything we say and do—the language we use; the texts, images, and embodiments we create; the values we espouse—all are guided by perspective, experience, and social position. In this way, autoethnography is a research method that allows us to explicitly bring together the personal and the political as we face and address the challenges of today in a move toward envisioning a better tomorrow (p. 1).

As a legitimate research method (Stafford, 2022), autoethnography encompasses three key elements to "use personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno')" (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1). To account for true autoethnographic research, the study needs to comprise all three elements rather than focus solely on one or another, such as only offering a personal narrative without considering the cultural aspect (Adams et al., 2021). To illustrate how this research project captures the true essence of autoethnography, I use my personal story (self/auto) to depict and understand my first-hand experience as a participant observer in an online community of practice (graphy), shaping and shaped by transnational HDR students and ECRs throughout the pandemic year of 2020 (ethno). By critically reflecting on my lived social experience amid COVID-19, I intend to not only portray how the struggles and anxieties had impacted all the international students, me, and my ECR colleagues but reveal the silver linings for resilient strategies and opportunities on future HDR training in a broader context (Adams et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2011).

Evidently, the past three pandemic years (2020-2022) have spawned even more autoethnographic studies as this unprecedented crisis has pushed us to dive deep into the personal, emotional, professional, and sociopolitical challenges faced by us (Chen & Sato, 2023; McAlinden & Dobinson, 2022; Morales et al., 2022). In some ways, the pandemic also provides a third space for us to spin a yarn on the impact of the ERT phenomenon on us and how we can transform the way we teach and research in the post-COVID era. As this telecollaboration HDR project was conducted fully online, I attempted to weave the vivid digital trails into my autoethnography, drawn from my researcher journal, HDR training webinar activities, student reflection journals using Google Docs, and my colleagues' project reports. By retelling a holistic and compelling story, I hope to help readers better understand what happened in this virtual transnational project vis-à-vis social distancing and border lockdown and how the lessons gained from our first-hand experiences can refine the current HDR model or in Adams et al.'s (2021) term, "in a move toward envisioning a better tomorrow" (p. 1).

In what follows, readers will discover how I interact with my autoethnographic account through critical self-construction, tapping into my own memory, critical reflection, digital trails, pivotal moments, and events to help analyze data and bring it all together in my narrative. Evidently, my own personal experience has also embodied the data and shaped my storytelling.

Where it all started: an international HDR mentoring project amid COVID-19

This is probably one of the most long overdue and challenging telecollaboration projects I have embarked on. So let me break it down here: In collaborating with VG from Aberdeen, we received the grant approval last November (2019) for this project, "Mentoring HDR students in Applied Linguistics and TESOL through interinstitutional telecollaboration: A participatory action research design". We were pumped (well, at least for me)... Given our personal and academic experiences of navigating through the PhD trajectories, we know how much this project could benefit our students, reciprocally enabling us to learn and grow as HDR supervisors. Little did we know that the COVID-19 pandemic delayed our proposed timeline and derailed our plan. It's particularly in VG's case, as he had to move all the F2F units fully online overnight. It's also hard to collaborate internationally during the most troublesome time. No one knows what the future holds— let's expect the unexpected (researcher journal, 23 April 2020).

When the border closures and social distancing started to hit us all hard at the beginning of the pandemic year, I initiated a telecollaboration project in response to the impact of COVID-19 on HDR supervision between my school and a sister school in Aberdeen, Scotland. Due to the context-responsive nature of telecollaboration, I adopted participatory action research (PAR) that "embraces the concerns experienced by a group, community or organization" (Wimpenny, 2013, p. 4). PAR requires the sustained involvement of the participants and empowers them to be agents (McTaggart, 1997; Jason et al., 2004) in order to transform their particular set of circumstances (Taylor et al., 2004). Specifically, it gives voice back to the HDR students, and lessons learned from the PAR process can potentially strengthen the quality of HDR supervision, thus making a wider impact on the community (Baum et al., 2006).

As a mid-career academic, I always embrace the notion of sharing my expertise with ECRs and mentoring HDR students. In this project, my research assistant (RA), SJ, is a PhD candidate, and my project collaborator, VG, is both an ECR and a junior supervisor in his institution: "I was just beginning my career as an HDR supervisor, so am really still in the process of figuring out my supervision 'style'" (VG, mid-project report, 30 September 2020). To ease them into the realm of online HDR supervision, I conducted a debriefing session on the co-design principles (e.g., reflective practice) whilst guiding them through a robust project implementation process. Informed by PAR, we discussed how to provide better support for the student participants remotely, such as developing a needs analysis survey to identify their urgent needs, planning HDR training workshops on topics reflecting their interests, and piloting telecollaboration platforms using Zoom (for workshop webinars), Facebook (for virtual community building), Google Docs (for supervisors' and students' reflective journals). More importantly, this telecollaboration project

would allow us to establish a reciprocal mentorship model, conducted remotely but connected social-emotionally, for fostering ongoing professional development of both HDR students and ECR colleagues.

Good things don't always come easy, especially during a crisis like the pandemic. After the ethics application was approved by both institutions, we held an online information session to debrief interested HDR students on the project goal, required tasks, and duration of the study, and how their participation could benefit their networking with other HDR students and professional growth, particularly in research capabilities. They were also ensured that their confidentiality would be protected, and they could withdraw at any point of the study without coercion. Finally, they were fully aware that any video and audio recordings, as well as screenshots of online activities, were used only for the purposes of data analysis and research dissemination. Nevertheless, we only received informed consent from a handful of our HDR students. This low participation rate was due to the fact that:

most of my HDR students are PhD candidates who have completed their thesis research and don't think this mentoring support is urgent or as much needed as their junior colleagues... while VG's students have shown high interest, they are worried about the intensity and time commitment for this project besides their academic studies (researcher journal, 23 April, 2020).

My research gut feelings told me to recruit more HDR students to pre-empt the participant attrition down the track. We also needed to sort out the meeting time (considering the time difference), webinar topics, and potential guest speakers, as well as sustain virtual community building. After our Facebook group was created, only one student posted his self-introduction. I started getting a bit anxious about whether this project would fly or sink given the 'dormant progression'. So, I emailed both VG and SJ to express my concerns and also suggested that we start the first telecollaboration soon so as to stimulate the dialogue and enable students to see the merit of this project.

One thing we all learned from the pandemic is to adapt, recoup, and be resilient. In my researcher journal entry (9 May, 2020) entitled "The power of social networking!", I wrote:

Just when I thought the ship was going to sink due to the disappointing number and stagnant interaction between students in the FB group, a silver lining just shone through! Recall that I was exasperated by the low number of participants and less active interaction among both cohorts? To mitigate the situation, I decided to send out the project invites to my other Facebook Professional Groups. Voilà— we have received a good number of expressions of interest (EOIs) from other international students around the world, so much so that I needed to broadcast that the recruitment is closed now! It's definitely a pleasant surprise for us, and the overwhelming EOIs further justify how this project resonates with international students amid COVID-19. Never say never!

My acumen brought 15 international students located in Australia, Britain, the USA, Thailand, and Vietnam to join this telecollaboration HDR project. A few of them were English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teachers keen to grab this opportunity to better understand what is expected in HDR studies before pursuing a postgraduate degree in the future. Table 1 summarises the needs analysis results based on the online survey we sent to all the student participants. This scoping helped us tailor the workshop topics to the interests and needs of our participants before we invited the potential guest speakers who were the domain experts.

Table 1. Summary of the needs analysis survey results.

Target area	Summary of responses
Demographic info	Gender: 9 females, 6 males Native language: Arabic, Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Polish, Thai, Turkish Age range: 20-30 years old (33.3%), 31-40 years old (53%), 41-50 years old (13.3%) HDR status: newly admitted (26.7%), pre-candidacy (26.7%), post-candidacy (33.3%), near thesis completion (13.3%)
Research areas	communicative language teaching in EFL contexts multimodality, task-based language teaching (TBLT) vocabulary learning teacher education L2 writing, second language acquisition (SLA) reading comprehension in L2
Challenges	finding gaps in literature review time management distanced from family pilot delayed by COVID-19 research planning and data analysis use of statistical tools language barrier, lack of concentration, loneliness (anxiety, insomnia, etc.)
Expectations	honing research/academic writing skills steps in publishing inspired by seasoned researchers in the field networking with other HDR students to discuss research learning something new about doing PhD research
Potential workshop topics & timetabling	Icebreaker: Where I come from and my research agenda? (Facebook) W1: How to develop academic writing skills W2: How to write a lit review W3: How to develop survey items and interview protocols W4: How to publish your first article in an international journal W5: How to design research and analyse data W6: How to transcribe and use coding software (e.g., NVivo) W7: Guest speaker series (action research, journal editors' advice, etc) W8: 3-minute thesis presentations W9: Project evaluation & FAQ

Hit the ground running

Today is the day. We have finally kicked into gear and are about to start our first virtual session in 15 minutes! I am as excited about seeing the whole group for the first time as I am nervous about how the first webinar is going to turn out. A lot of unforeseeable factors may go against us, such as technical glitches. May the force be with us (researcher journal, 14 May 2020).

As stressed above, the project aims to empower HDR international students through empathetic mentoring whilst fostering their professional outlook and capability, resilience, and agency in the global community. We held guest speaker webinars where scholars shared their insights with our HDR students, created a Facebook group to bring everyone closer, and provided ongoing guided support in students'

journal reflections. Although the workshop planning had the participants' needs and interests at heart, our first webinar was a rollercoaster ride. The first guest speaker (*ML*) was unaware of the intellectual levels of our cohort (be they PhD candidates or English language teachers), talking to them as if they were all ESL learners. After we opened the floor for discussion, it went much better as students started to ask questions about social-emotional learning strategies and even shared their struggles to find peer support or ways to hone their academic skills. When one of my own students talked about his lack of self-worth and efficacy due to his 'mediocre/poor' English and how isolated he had felt as a PhD student, especially during this social distancing time, that pulled at our heartstrings. Evidently, his story made a compelling case for conducting this project.

For us HDR supervisors, especially junior ones, it is pivotal to critically evaluate what worked and did not work in each implementation phase of the telecollaboration project. This would help us refine the HDR mentoring model that was operated in a fully online, global space, informed by diverse academic needs and experiences, and shaped by a myriad of multicultural/lingual backgrounds. Both *VG* and *I* reflected on the whole experience after the first session and how we could improve next time:

VG: Going forward the talk should be on research and research writing... I think we should do one session without a guest speaker and focus on using breakout groups before bringing it back to a whole group discussion. I learned a lot as well.

Me: Right on, *VG*. I think we all learn from this whole virtual mentoring experience. That is why I have been keeping a researcher journal myself to reflect on my own supervision capacity more critically. I wasn't planning to include HDR students other than ours. But I am glad I did. Look how vibrant and enriching the community has evolved now compared with the initial stage (email exchange, 14 May, 2020)!

Collaborating internationally and remotely was undeniably challenging during the pandemic, much less inviting guest speakers and scheduling webinars to accommodate the time differences. We were not even sure whether those scholars would graciously accept the invite and speak with our student participants (for free). I was (still am) extremely appreciative of their unconditional generosity and solidarity in sharing their expertise on the topics we proposed (e.g., how to publish). This will serve as a constant reminder that giving back to the community and making an impact on students' lives is as important as building one's research track record, if not greater.

Not only did the students benefit greatly from the invited scholars' knowledge sharing, but we, as HDR supervisors, were also inspired by how much we still did not know, motivating us to keep upskilling. COVID-19 may have closed some windows for us at the time, but it has also left others open for us to see through the world. Above all, it has brought us together from different continents, institutions, and corners of life whilst pushing us to think, research, and teach

outside the box and connect to people that we wouldn't have previously considered. For example, I would not have reached out to and discussed research collaborations with those well-renowned applied linguists had we not all been impacted by the pandemic. Another case in point is that we invited a language pracademic (DB) to unpack the framework and practice of doing "action research" (AR) (Figure 1). In my journal (entry #11), I reflected that:

DB's talk couldn't have been more timely and inspiring. As our project is situated in AR, his expertise in doing AR fits perfectly into the nature and scope of our research. It also resonates with all of us, especially students who are language teachers but don't know where and how to start conducting teacher research in their own setting (researcher journal, 9 July, 2020).

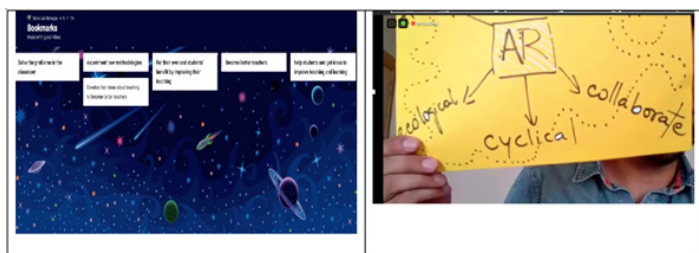


Figure 1. Guest speaker's webinar activities using Padlet for brainstorming (left) and a poster for illustration (right).

Both VG and I also used our own PhD journey to further motivate and engage our students. In the second webinar, I shared my story as an international postgraduate student in Canada and the US. I candidly described how I initially struggled with finding my own niche and strived to break through the hurdles through conference presentations and networking with the professional community. I illustrated how I rose to the occasion by being proactive and strategic about publishing my course assignments as an ECR and collaborating with other scholars across disciplines. This resonated so well with the participants that they posted on Facebook right after my led webinar (Figure 2). Nothing is more relatable than being vulnerable, humane, and candid about what made us who we are and how we can get stronger (together).

Student voices heard and responded to: an inclusive HDR mentoring approach

I truly enjoy reading students' reflection journals. I am also grateful to them for sharing with me their ups and downs in life and what got them into this HDR journey... One of VG's students talked about how much sacrifice he has to make and how hard it is to be away from his beautiful wife and kids. It brought back those bittersweet memories I had when doing my own PhD... it's certainly not a path for everyone, as some of them just drop out without seeing the finish line. So I totally got him (researcher journal, 16 May 2020).



Figure 2. Student Facebook posts after my led workshop (28 May 2020).

Before the first workshop, I asked students to give us some ideas on where they would like to keep their journals, such as via email, Google Docs or just on Facebook directly. Thankfully, most of them did not mind sharing their journals with each other using Google. We provided prompts for them to post their reflections in relation to workshop topics, such as "How I got into my PhD/MA/MPhil studies and embarking on this journey as an emergent researcher?" or "How COVID-19 has impacted my studies, engagement with my supervisor, peers and dissertation/HDR research?" To build a virtual community of practice and sustain member engagement, I invited VG to also provide mentoring support via dialoguing with the HDR students in their reflection entries (see my mentorship example using the commenting feature in Figure 3).

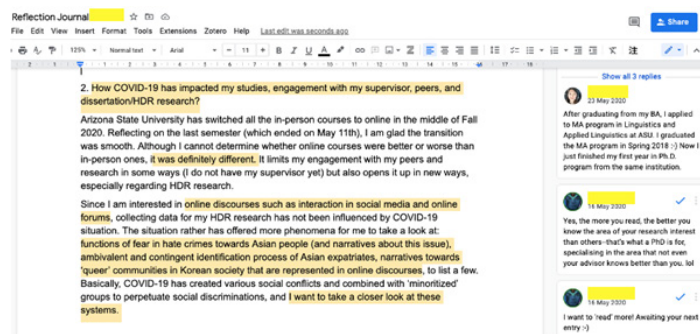


Figure 3. Mentor-mentee dialogue journaling via Google Docs.

As both a participant observer and online member of this telecollaboration community, I was able to shadow international HDR students by reading and commenting on their reflection journals. This online mentorship, augmented by two-way dialoguing, provided an organic, viable avenue

for HDR supervisors to better understand and support students' social-emotional learning, which had been hampered by the pandemic crisis. Without this in place, we would not have known the deeper (sometimes darker) sides of struggles that our students had encountered, particularly at the beginning of their PhD journey. Recall VG's student that I included in my researcher journal (16 May, 2020) above? He also expressed that working from home amid COVID-19 was even harder as he kept being distracted by his flatmates. He further commented that his academic writing was not up to the standards and was advised to seek academic support on campus. He used this opportunity to help him navigate the resources, and now he feels more confident about academic writing.

Is his case new to us? Probably not. It verifies the primacy of establishing this mentoring project to offer students moral and peer support by transforming social distancing into virtual community building, thus breaking down the spatiotemporal and psychological boundaries. Embarking on this telecollaboration project enabled me to help those students given the impact of solitude and self-doubt in HDR studies on their social-emotional learning. Despite the distance, I was able to provide my mentoring support remotely. I hope this project would benefit and empower them to become more socially adapted and academically proactive. Moreover, I was inspired to witness my mentoring—though physically remote but psychologically connected—had transformed the professional growth of the HDR students, and how this project championed diversity, inclusion, and social-emotional learning. I was also humbled to have met such a diverse student cohort from the globe, rather than the original bilateral telecollaboration:

Indeed, this ever-changing time amid COVID-19 has challenged us to be more adaptable and think on our feet—turning a challenge (i.e., lower number of participants) into an opportunity (i.e., reaching out to the FB professional groups) (researcher journal, 16 May 2020).

Reflection on reciprocal mentoring telecollaboration

To assess the effectiveness of this HDR supervision model via a virtual exchange, I gathered stakeholder perspectives (HDR students, junior supervisor, ECR/RA) as part of the project evaluation. I first asked SJ (our RA) to conduct focus group interviews after the project ended. One of the international students is an Italian national who currently lives and teaches English in Vietnam. Before the pandemic, he was only thinking about applying for a Master's degree in the UK or Australia but didn't take action. Throughout the project, not only did he receive the peer and mentor support that led him to become an HDR student in VG's institution, but he also flew with colours academically and was considering pursuing a PhD:

Thanks to the knowledge shared by the group participants and mentors, I discovered new topics and gained new interests. I had the opportunity to get constant feedback on my first-ever research paper thanks to JC's mentorship... I went from "just" a teacher to an MSc student with a book review

and research paper in the pipeline. Definitely happy to have joined and grateful for the opportunity, support, and mentorship I've received (focus group interview, 23 December 2020).

Thus far, this model has helped us better understand the social-emotional learning state of HDR students, exacerbated by social distancing during the pandemic. Besides their expectations to "learn from others and be inspired through the project" or "improve research knowledge and link with other researchers", our international students also faced different levels of hurdles, such as "language barrier, lack of concentration, loneliness, anxiety, insomnia, etc." (needs analysis response, 24 April 2020). These vivid vignettes mirror the rationale of conducting this telecollaboration project. That is, HDR supervision needs to go beyond simply the 'supervision' level. Instead, we should integrate social-emotional learning and connect to students' wellbeing, the latter of which is still 'an elephant in the room' in the current HDR practices. This also indicates the primacy of developing a more viable HDR supervision model as implemented in this project.

As a mentor for my ECR colleagues in this project, I find it also vital to evaluate how my mentoring has shaped their professional development and agency. As evidenced in the RA's mid-project report:

JC's mentoring has greatly benefited the participants in the project and myself as an early career researcher... JC has demonstrated strong leadership [and] been instrumental in planning topics for the online seminars and for mentoring the participants through reflective journal feedback... He has a warm and approachable style when leading the project, and he always offers feedback and advice on the project's direction (SJ, mid-project report, 28 September 2020).

Indeed, the establishment of this online supervision model has offered both the HDR students and supervisors a viable platform for international networking, fostering professional teacher/researcher identity, polishing academic research skills, and obtaining ongoing peer/mentor support beyond geospatial boundaries. It also helps them gain new knowledge from active engagement (Rosier et al., 2015). I was also touched to know how my mentorship and guidance have inspired and empowered VG, my junior colleague, to refine his own HDR supervision practice:

In the context of the COVID-19 lockdown, engagement in this group has been essential for some of my students and for myself... the international nature of the telecollaboration environment provides a broader view of student experiences and also facilitates networking opportunities for future collegial engagement in research... this is the model that not only should be carried on at my institution, but one that should be highly promoted for all majors at all universities. So, yes, I think the benefits of international telecollaboration are manifold, and I look forward to sharing and promoting this model through

scholarship and conference presentations (VG, mid-project report, 30 September 2020).

This telecollaboration project has enabled me to establish a reciprocal mentorship model, conducted remotely but connected social-emotionally, for fostering ongoing professional development of both HDR students and ERC academics. These best practices, though not privy to the supervisors, are neither organically placed nor well promoted in our current HDR training. As observed in this project, international students need more guided HDR support, even more so during a crisis like the pandemic. This call for a more robust mentoring model infused with empathy is further echoed in my journal:

Conducting this project made me realize that, yes, it's true that each School/Program has its own HDR support. However, not all the support is closely focused on individual students' needs or concerns, but more to do with showcasing the academics' own research (at least in my program). I feel that we can do better than that... HDR students might or might not have the chance to see the other side of the fence. Their journal reflections reveal that they need peer support or simply a group that can exchange ideas or listen to their concerns. I am glad that this project does just that (researcher journal, 28 May, 2020).

Final remarks

This context-responsive project has helped me rethink how we can transform conventional HDR supervision through transnational and telecollaborative exchanges beyond the localized constraints and spatiotemporal boundaries (Tran et al., 2017). The compelling case illustrated above implicates the importance of supporting international HDR students through peer support and ongoing mentoring. International telecollaboration provides an optimal channel for them to build a virtual community of practice where they can mutually support and learn from each other vis-à-vis academic challenges. This viable supervision model breaks down the power structure by creating an ecologically balanced framework in HDR training, thus promoting collaboration rather than isolation. Above all, it offers both the students and supervisors the opportunity to engage in professional dialogues by intellectually challenging each other, sharing know-how, and promoting collaboration. My ongoing reflective observations, students' constructive feedback, and junior colleagues' critical evaluations have validated this innovative HDR supervision that can benefit the impacted stakeholders.

Nevertheless, findings drawn from this unique case study should be interpreted with caution. The 'working in silos' model, which was exacerbated during the pandemic, was based on my observation and experience as a seasoned HDR supervisor in my institution. Hence, it might or might not be shared by colleagues in other institutions adopting different HDR training models. It is also not the intent of this small-scale case study to generalise findings to a bigger population but to honestly report on how this telecollaborative HDR project could make a difference in the

development of professional growth, research capability, and agency of emergent researchers amid COVID-19. As such, the best practices drawn from this study might resonate with like-minded stakeholders who find the transnational, telecollaborative, and empathetic HDR mentoring model transferrable to their own settings.

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