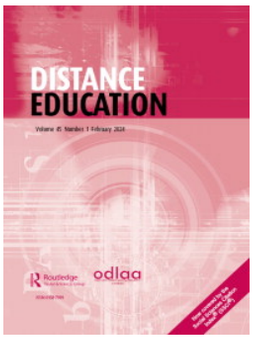

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# Developing a distance-based doctoral supervisory model: Inquiry over disrupted trajectories

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper proposes a distance-based doctoral supervisory model to support students in the process of navigating self, agency, and emotions over their doctoral journey. The model emerged through our examination of the lived experiences of three Chinese female doctoral students who, though enrolled as internal students in our New Zealand university, were prevented by the pandemic from returning from their Spring Festival sojourn to China, and continued their study by distance. We employed narrative analysis to deeply engage with their stories shared in diaries and one-on-one interviews, alongside social media interactions. These revealed a strong commitment to study emanating from answerability toward their research projects, already underway, and agentive actions to maintain peer-to-peer academic and emotional support, enabling resilience and reflexivity about personal values and needs. Learning from this experience, we emphasize in our model the need to nurture important bonds between students, their peers and their supervisors in online environments.

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agency; emotions; international students; doctoral supervision; narrative analysis

## Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions around its effects on (international) higher education have emerged (Green et al., 2020). Calls for new conceptual and operational models that may better reshape sustained operation within the sector have attracted much academic attention, particularly on internationalization (Xu & Tran, 2021). Most studies have focused on the struggles experienced by international students, in terms of racial discrimination, financial challenges, unemployment, migrant status, and (im)mobility capital (Cairns et al., 2021; Farbenblum & Berg, 2020; Ma & Zhan, 2022). Evolving geopolitics and diplomatic relationships potentially affecting future Chinese students' choices and plans are also noted (Mok & Zhang, 2022; Qi et al., 2020). Doctoral students who pursue their research studies and academic and professional endeavors overseas are a special cohort. Using a sociomaterial lens, Xu (2022) investigates a group of international doctoral students navigating

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their trajectory during COVID-19, arguing for consideration of assemblages of agency, including people, physical settings, space, time and place, which influence doctoral students' relational awareness and contribute to (re)shaping their approaches to agency enactment. The Chinese doctoral students who participated in Xu's study deemed their experience of internationalization at a distance (Ramanau, 2016) was compromised when unplanned emergency responses to the situation were made, and educational mechanisms were not fully developed, highlighting the need for a more systematic approach to internationalization at a distance. In another study, by interviewing 16 Chinese doctoral students, Xu and Tran (2021) revealed their PhD trajectories were disrupted by the outbreak from the perspectives of microsystem (personal and family), mesosystem (doctoral community), and exosystem (institution). The students enacted needs-response agency, which emerged at each of these system levels in order to deal with demands rising from enforced internationalization at home (Xu & Tran, 2021). The authors pointed out that doctoral students' enactment of agency not only meets the needs of "here and now" but also prepares them for "there and then" (Xu & Tran, 2021, p. 5). The findings of these studies pay attention to the important role doctoral students' supervisors, peers, families, and friends have played in positively affecting students' disrupted academic trajectory in the pandemic. However, little emphasis has been given to how individual students create, maintain, and convey new co-configurations of social and academic networks through digital technology for the optimal enactment of educational practices and life trajectory at a distance.

Our own investigation of PhD students dislocated by the pandemic was based not only on their stories but also on our own reflections on what, when, why, and how their doctoral trajectory became disrupted. Working together during the pandemic, we noticed that we all had to explore ways to live with uncertainties in day-to-day practice. Learning from students' lived experiences through their storytelling has encouraged us to rethink and reconsider future doctoral supervision in a world of digital technology. We share Leask's (2020) view that the pandemic has disrupted our usual routine but undoubtedly provided an opportunity to transform how we think about preparing doctoral students to cope with challenges and embrace possibilities in times of crisis and beyond. In light of students' experience, agentive actions, emotional accounts, and our reflections, we believe it is timely to propose a supervisory model which nurtures important bonds between students, their peers, and their supervisors, supporting them to achieve their desired doctoral trajectory and developing selves.

In this article, we report on the lived experiences of three Chinese female PhD students who had begun their studies in the field of applied linguistics as internal students on campus in New Zealand, but whose intended brief visits home for Spring Festival in January 2020 were forcibly extended by the closure of borders, resulting in the need to continue their studies at a distance and at home. The article recounts their moves to reconstruct ways to maintain their momentum, to reach for and provide support, academic and personal, and to rebond with each other as peers and with their families. Their experiences encouraged us to rethink our online practices by developing a distance-based doctoral supervisory model, which will be introduced toward the end of the article.

## International students' agency

Agency has been identified as a key factor in international students' experience of higher education. Integrating agency and positioning theories, the concept of *agency-for-becoming* has emerged from the life-course and identity strand of theorizing agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). This concept emphasizes the self-development and enactment of international students involved in transnational social practices (Tran & Vu, 2018). It suggests that international students enact agency not only in the service of their own becoming but also for transforming the "space of possibilities" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30) of a wider community. Others also see international students as self-forming agents (Marginson, 2013; Pham & Tran, 2015; Tran, 2016). Focusing on the individual's active engagement in constructing their own life-course (Elder et al., 2003), agency-for-becoming sheds light on "influences from the past and orientations towards the future" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital, Consoli (2022) suggested the term *life capital* to emphasize the reflexive configurations of one's life. Life capital highlights a holistic perspective that values and recognizes the unique trajectories of individuals' stories (Consoli, 2022) as they interact with other people, things, information, and ubiquitous technologies and engage in multiple different spaces over time, (re)shaping learning and teaching behaviors (Benson, 2021). In relation to international students, these interactions and their impact begin before and extend beyond their sojourn in response to emerging needs (Tran & Vu, 2018).

Sociomaterialist frameworks, entwining human and nonhuman forces, have recently been observed in (international) doctoral student trajectories (Carvalho & Freeman, 2022; Xu, 2022). Sørensen (2009) has argued for the notion of patterns of relations through which humans and non-humans (e.g., animals, objects, human-invented technologies) coexist in the universe, emphasizing the "understanding of connections and the dynamic practices that emerge" (Carvalho & Freeman, 2022, p. 5). This approach considers technologies and human resources to be mutually influenced and transformed, forming an interconnected relationship. As Xu (2022) noted, doctoral students stranded in China need to readjust, relying on ubiquitous technologies enabling them to maintain an experience of internationalization, through the interplay of human and non-human forces acting, coordinating, and supporting a sustained, stable, educational endeavor. However, more attention is needed on students' development and the relational practices between students, their peers, and their supervisors in which ubiquitous technologies enable social presence encompassing their doctoral trajectories.

Doctoral candidates must be considered intelligent individuals who are ready to embark on a new adventure navigating their (continued) growth and becoming, both at academic and (inter)personal levels, and managing the interactions of agency and emotions (White, 2018) in their relationships with others, things, and information. We identify four capabilities that contribute to this process—*answerability*, *accountability, the ability to create affordances*, and *resilience*.

Answerability represents agency in a moral sense (Bakhtin, 1984; Dufva & Aro, 2014; Vitanova, 2010). Answerability is an ethical response advocated in an individual's lived

experiences, which Bakhtin (1990) defined as "I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced" (p. 1).

Accountability is an agentic action expected in doctoral supervision (Halse, 2011), leveraging doctoral students' engagement and empowerment as it offers opportunities for them to participate (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and contribute (Eccles, 2008) to scholarly communities (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). The literature on doctoral supervision has often considered accountability from an institutional viewpoint, as a warrant to policy and leadership initiatives (Manathunga, 2005), claiming to improve educational quality or performances (Hyatt, 2013) and equity outcomes (Harris & Hopson, 2008) and provide necessary support (finance, infrastructure, scholarship) for doctoral candidates' persistence to completion (Rigler et al., 2017). However, we argue that, while essential, this external accountability needs to be complemented by the doctoral students' internalized awareness of accountability as they take ownership of their research project under supervision.

The ability to create affordances, from an ecological perspective, refers to the process of developing relationships of possibility in multimodal communications (Kress, 2000; van Lier, 2007). Doctoral candidates are situated in a resource-rich environment which guides their perceptions and actions toward arrays of affordances that can further their goals. Barton and Potts (2013) defined affordances as "the possibilities for action which people identify in relation to specific resources" (p. 810). Reciprocity and reflexivity are the core dimensions of affordance toward building perception-in-action that is central to learning (Gibson, 1979). Sinanan and Gomes (2020) have claimed that in responding to these affordances, students may create a doctoral community which enables them to develop "transient friendships" that endure as they study together and are oriented to shared concerns (p. 687).

Resilience is conceptualized as the ability of an individual—whether ecological, organizational, or material—to successfully recover or regain from shocks (Gomes et al., 2021). The study of resilience, drawing on the intersection of education, psychology, and child and youth studies, emphasizes emotional, mental, and social strategies people adopt to overcome traumatizing social practices (Ploner, 2017). In international education, resilience is vital for individuals, demanding positive emotional and psychological characteristics to deal with varied challenges (Gomes et al., 2021). Building students' capacity for resilience is interconnected with the other three capabilities, answerability, accountability, and the ability to create affordances, as they influence and act to contribute to relational capacity at (inter)personal levels.

## The study

### *Context*

In our applied linguistics doctoral program, the proposal, development, implementation, and writing up of the research project comprise the full doctoral journey. There are no taught courses in the early stages of enrollment, and students pursue a very individual course of action from the outset. As supervisors, experience has taught us that this makes major demands, particularly on students whose earlier study was in different academic cultures, and our sense of accountability leads us to mitigate the

challenges. For instance, we invest time and effort in the first year to ensure doctoral students are mentally, physically, academically, and relationally settled. This incorporates scheduling regular meetings; setting up learning spaces; negotiating feedback and reporting cycles; building rapport and trust; and initiating academic, social, and cultural engagement with peers, in the faculty and wider academic communities. Through this, doctoral candidates are positioned to gradually gain confidence in their accountability for their academic and personal trajectory. As ours is a multicampus university, and supervisors are often geographically dispersed, much of this occurs online, so that the Zoom meeting is a familiar meeting space even for internal students.

A very important physical space for internal students is the postgraduate room, which brings doctoral students from a range of humanities fields into daily proximity, which they highly value. As the students are all at different points in their study, longstanding members share their expertise with newer members, providing academic and personal support and some understanding of the trajectory they are on.

The three participant students, Cheng, Hui, and Liang (pseudonyms), were at different stages of their candidature when each took a holiday to celebrate the 2020 Spring Festival with their families in China, found themselves unable to return, and faced the uncertainty of continuing study at home for an unknown length of time. Liang was in the fourth year, close to submission, Cheng in the third year undertaking data analysis and reporting, while Hui had successfully passed her provisional year and started data collection. The three of us were all involved in supervision of either two or three of the students, with Cynthia being the main supervisor.

Our investigation sought to uncover the participants' processes of coping with these challenges based on our reflexivity, theoretical framings, experience, and the sense of resilience we had nurtured in our early work together, viewing the emerging disruptions and uncertainties as challenges and possibilities (Leask, 2020). The inquiry examined the lived experiences of our doctoral students and their developing agency and emotions as they met the challenges imposed by the global pandemic. We asked: How have students managed to navigate and develop their trajectory in the pandemic disruption?

## *Data collection and analysis*

After obtaining ethics approval in mid-2020, we asked all three students to recount in diaries their experience since their unexpected resettlement. There were no specific requirements about what to include. Cheng had drafted a diary as soon as the pandemic started. Hui and Liang had not but were keen to do so because they felt this was an opportunity to record the momentum. They shared their diaries with us in early 2021. I conducted an online semi-structured interview with each of them via Zoom to expand on the information from the diaries. We also analyzed the interactions of the WeChat group they requested me to set up with them, though not those of the student WeChat group they set up as one coping mechanism. Students' narratives (both written and oral) were in Chinese and analyzed through narrative thematic analysis (Barkhuizen, 2016). Narrative thematic analysis involves short story and

thematic analysis; that is, we as researchers make meaning, learn, and (co)construct students' experience through their storytelling to assist us in understanding their meaningful life (Kramp, 2004) and identifying themes within each student's experience and across them (Barkhuizen et al., 2014).

I read each diary and interview transcript at least twice, adding comments in English to record her interpretation of narratives. This step was crucial as Gillian was able to engage with the interpreted data in English and capture potential themes. We organized an online meeting to reflect and agree on three themes identified among students' lived experiences that demonstrate their development of agency and emotional responses over time.

In what follows, we present the four capabilities identified above as contributing to the development of agency as we constructed them from the students' accounts of self-responsiveness to unexpected disruption, social media enabling multimodal peer-to-peer support, and rebonding and reconnecting with family and friends.

## Response to disrupted trajectories

### *Self-responsiveness to unexpected disruption*

Cheng's diary and interview revealed that she adjusted well to resettling at home with family, as she had often been homesick in New Zealand. However, her study was greatly interrupted in the first few months as she was not prepared to be "studying from home" for more than the "four weeks holiday I had planned for." She specified in her diary:

> Given the short period of time at home in the holiday season, I hadn't planned to complete a large task. One reason was that I had shared a draft chapter outline with my supervisors before my travel, and I could have just continued to draft this chapter and start a new chapter while I was at home. (Cheng)

One effect of this disruption was that she found it "challenging to feel rewarded," which made her constantly question her study ethics. For instance, she was attempting to use a theory to underpin her case study analysis and had drafted some chapter sections accordingly. As she continued to read other theoretical lenses that also related to the cases, she realized that the theory she had initially fixated on might not fit well overall and had to be put aside. This process is part of the normal research cycle that every researcher can relate to; but Cheng conceived it quite negatively, criticizing her study progress and even ethics. No longer immersed in an academic ambience, she found other ways to regain self-esteem and pleasure, such as reading "books irrelevant to my research." She narrated in her diary, "Reading those books was only to satisfy myself as I could not gain such a sense of achievement from working on my own research." She felt "guilty" when she could not produce quality writing.

However, her sense of answerability prevailed, and she wrote:

> What remained was writing up the thesis. This means such disruption should not have had a big direct impact on me. I did not have a specific agenda (that needed to be agreed with my supervisors), but I do know what I am supposed to do, and what I need to do next after finishing one step. (Cheng)

She explained why she needed her supervisors' "confirmation" of her progress after each step:

> Because it [the plan] needs consultation with the supervisors on whether I am already ready to move on to another case or they think that I need to keep revising [the current case]. I would say that [the plan] is settled based on my negotiation with my supervisors. (Cheng)

Cheng used "negotiation" to take ownership of her work in progress. Ultimately, this was her study, and she held herself accountable for it with her supervisors in a supporting role. She later affirmed her accountability: "I intended to figure out things myself" without troubling supervisors as she "didn't like to immediately seek supervisors' support, advice or help whenever I encountered problems or issues."

Liang and Hui also revealed a sense of guilt. As Liang wrote:

> I've decided to become a researcher. Initially I thought I would be able to complete the thesis by September 2020, but I was too confident in my progress. I felt that I was not working hard enough since I returned home. The downside of continuing my study from home was that for a short period of time I suddenly could not access the university library to search for literature. I did not need to access it every day, but neither Google Scholar nor the library was working (even with the activation of VPN), which was very annoying and distracted me from concentrating on my study. (Liang)

Although Liang continued to claim in the interview that she was "lazy" as her progress was slow, her supervisors saw her as a committed and hardworking candidate. She was determined to become a researcher and reiterated her accountability: "I had never thought that supervisors should or could support me in finding articles. In my view, things like this should be my own responsibility." She saw her relationship with supervisors as "collaborators." Supervisors "supported" her in navigating her study in the right direction and provided feedback "along the way," while other administrative tasks (e.g., article searching) were "minor" or "not essential." This reflected Liang's belief in drawing a clear line between public (e.g., PhD study as work) and private (e.g., personal relationships) domains. She appreciated the establishment of her personal relationship with supervisors at the beginning of her candidature, for example, through outings to familiarize her with the surroundings and local services. However, she felt that she could not take this for granted, as her relationship with supervisors needed to be "professional" rather than "personal."

Hui was in a more vulnerable situation as she was undertaking complex data collection which required her to adjust her study design, including shifting some case studies online. She went through emotional curves—from her desperately looking for ways to return to New Zealand, resulting in feeling emotionally drained, to slowly drawing her attention back to study. All these, recorded over more than 6 months in her diary, required a self-exploratory journey of growth to strengthen her self-esteem about her doctoral research. Through this, she navigated a range of approaches to adapt to the new learning environment (working entirely online) and the home environment (living with parents). Supported by her supervisors, who advised her that an early return to New Zealand would be impossible, she finally recovered her resilience and realized she was accountable for contingency plans for data collection (C. White et al., 2020; C. J. White, 2018), though with supervisory support. Hui therefore

requested fortnightly meetings, which her supervisors happily complied with, and her study progressed.

### *Social media enabling multimodal peer-to-peer support*

Although each student had resolved a way of continuing their study, the easy membership of a community of learning that the postgraduate students' room had provided was lacking. As Liang explained in the interview, "We (Cheng, Hui and Liang) were basically there every day, Monday to Friday." Despite joking about "spending too much time with them," Liang commented on how important being together with her two study partners had been for her:

> Our research areas are quite distinct, and sometimes I cannot even fully comprehend what they talk about on a specific research topic and challenges faced in their research. We just casually talk with each other about anything we'd like to say, which may not help our own research but help our emotional well-being in dealing with anxiety and stress. In my opinion, the three of us, compared to others in the office, are much more diligent. I don't think it mattered whether the others were in the office or not, as long as we were there that created a very positive study culture that motivated me each day. (Liang)

This account reflects the notion of "being there and being together" (Lehman & Conceição, 2010, p. 12). This peer-to-peer connection had been crucial for all of them. Under pandemic circumstances, they needed to create new affordances for it, so they shifted the face-to-face peer engagement online with the support of the Chinese social media platform WeChat. They created their own WeChat group to continue their study partners relationship and strengthen their community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Qi & Wang, 2018). Although their WeChat interaction was less frequent, they appreciated the support the platform offered for their intellectual exchange. For example, Cheng would often share her thoughts about writing, and Hui would seek support for her challenges from the other members. Cheng also noted in her diary that WeChat facilitated relationship-building by providing a sense of connection and belonging together. Despite their physical locations and her introverted personality, Cheng demonstrated answerability to the chat: "If one of them started a chat in the group, I would follow, asking how they had been, and contribute to the chat." In the first few months, Cheng also supported Hui and Liang individually in one-to-one private chat on WeChat Moment (a space for sharing personal moments with WeChat friends) when she sensed their shared posts indicated particular difficulties.

Cheng's supervisors created a WeChat group for her in response to a temporary Zoom cutoff in China. Although they only used this for a week or so, Cheng suggested that I should extend the connection to Hui and Liang. All students were appreciative of this new group. Liang particularly liked the "daily check-in" interactions (see Figure 1), where the supervisor (green boxes) shared her to-do-list, checked whether the students had completed their planned tasks, and encouraged them to keep going.

This group acted as "peer influence" rather than "peer pressure," which Hui noted in the interview she valued enormously. She recalled an incident where the supervisor shared news about the annual higher degree research seminar being held by the academic unit online under COVID conditions, urging them to participate. Hui said:



**Translation**

*Supervisor:* Come on, three of you 💪 I am also writing. Check in today, to hopefully complete all tasks on my to-do-list. Let's get going!
*Liang:* Morning~ I also come to roar, keeping sober-minded 💪 💪
*Hui:* Here I am.
*Supervisor:* Have you all completed your planned tasks today? Sorry I meant yesterday.
*Hui:* I haven't finish (them) 😔 I will get going today.
*Liang:* I haven't either.
*Supervisor:* (I) need to give you some pressure. Friday (today) is the final working day, (you can) rest in the next two days. Next Monday is also a restful day, public holiday!

**Figure 1.** Screenshots of daily check-in in the supervisor-students WeChat group.

> Since I was encouraged, I decided I should do it although I was very busy at the time. Later I delved into making the PowerPoint slides for the presentation over an entire week. Honestly, that process helped me rethink the research problems and gaps that my study intended to fill. Things might be all clear in my mind, but not necessarily for others. Therefore, this kind of training was very necessary and useful. (Hui)

Figure 2 presents the groups' interactions about the higher degree research seminar. Liang declined the invitation but teased the other two who had not taken part previously. Cheng and Hui were not aware of this until they were provoked by Liang and the supervisor. Liang concluded her actions by using a Chinese idiom—"I drove you to revolt"—joking about the approach she adopted for "encouragement." Such peer influence was perceived positively as Hui and Cheng laughed and teased Liang about her "cruelty." Nevertheless, students organized a practice presentation session for peer feedback, and both Hui's and Cheng's presentations were well received at the seminar, which all members of the WeChat group attended.

### *Rebonding and reconnecting with family and friends*

While their peer connections had to be reconstructed through creating affordances of WeChat groups, the pandemic offered the students an opportunity to reconnect with parents and friends. Recent literature has stressed the vital position of families and friends for international students, particularly those from China (Gomes et al., 2021; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020; Tran & Vu, 2018), but this was a new configuration based on close copresence. In the event, it proved to be a mixed blessing.

Both Cheng and Liang were grateful for this family-bonding opportunity in the very challenging lockdown period. Cheng enjoyed being with family and friends, including


**Translation**
(Supervisor shared the information about annual HDR seminar event which was also sent to students via email)
*Supervisor:* (You) can consider presenting. This, by the way, help foster your progression as sometimes pressure is motivation.
*Liang:* Received. I'd presented last year so I don't plan to participate this year. I remember someone hasn't done so last year
*Cheng:* I haven't received this.
*Hui:* Me either.
…
*Hui:* Alright, thanks! I am still lacking self-consciousness.
*Cheng:* *@Hui* We'd better take time to prepare this presentation
*Liang:* I have just sent that email to your university email address. You may have to register by contacting our HDR coordinator and submitting abstracts etc.
*Cheng:* OK, thanks.
*Liang:* (I) drove you to revolt (a Chinese idiom from the Heroes of the Marshes, one of the four classic Chinese literature)

**Figure 2.** Screenshots of supervisor-students interactions about the higher degree research seminar on WeChat.

sharing the joy of baking and eating her handmade sweets, which helped her stay resilient. As she wrote in her diary:

> I often baked with my family in 2020. This was a new skill I learnt since I studied in New Zealand, thus I was very willing to share it with them. Because of COVID-19, I could not share my handmade sweets with friends (and my mother and grandpa did not eat that much) so I had to eat most cakes and cookies myself. I gained weight and gave up baking then. (Cheng)

When regulations allowed more contact, she very much enjoyed this aspect. She said, "I have certainly become more sociable hanging out with my friends rather than just looking at their [WeChat] posts without getting involved when I was overseas." It seems that New Zealand offered her a space to focus on study and work while her personal life was much more fulfilling back home in China. She continued, "I suppose, all my friends are here (in China), and it is more convenient for living." As a single child at home, Cheng also noted that this new normal—overseas study from home—enabled her to take some family responsibility by looking after her grandfather to free her mother for other things. Although this took time and energy, she adjusted well to her new schedule: "My prime study time shifted to evening to midnight, which fit my new lifestyle well."

Liang, lucky to have a father who is a chef, had no complaints about this new normal that allowed her to enjoy family bonding. She joked in the interview that her poor cooking skills meant she could only "basically survive in New Zealand" as she "would cook once a week for the following week," meaning she "would eat the same for at least a week." Once she started "internationalization from home," she never had to worry about cooking and ate healthily and well each day, although she did take responsibility for the dishes. She detailed this at the interview:

> Overall, I feel staying at home this past couple of years is quite nice. I get along well with my parents, and I also feel quite relaxed and settled in life and study. At the very beginning, my dad could have been very lonely by himself if I hadn't been there because my mom needed to care for my big sister who had just had her first baby and was recovering from the birth. My dad had a mission to take care of me so he cooked and we ate well when my mom was away. I don't think this would have happened if I had not been at home with him for company. COVID in some ways gave us more time and space to bond because we stayed home most times, which helped my emotions and mental health. (Liang)

This family bonding strengthened Liang's resilience, enabling her to move on quickly from a down time when she heard she was not part of the first 250 quota for stranded students returning in New Zealand. She recalled her feeling of upset at the interview although she knew that others would be more desperate than she was, because she was at the final stage of her study. Besides this, Liang was pleased with where she was at the time of the interview, particularly as her thesis writing progressed well, and she received positive appraisal from her supervisors. As she went on, "I am now just trying my best to complete a high-quality thesis so that will unlock the doors for me to pursue my research career in China or elsewhere when opportunities arise."

Hui's story with family was bittersweet. She suffered mentally in February, as she wrote in her diary:

> I attempted to collect many funny and interesting emoticons, emojis [on WeChat] and jokes to keep me sane. I simply could not concentrate on doing anything … The only thing that made me excited and happy was to go out with my dad to his garden and pick some vegetables. (Hui)

In spite of her family's obvious affection, the home environment tended to be fraught. She shared her frustration in her diary in April, describing reconnecting with her family as "not easy":

> Home was only my parents and me. It was challenging to get along with my parents during the pandemic. The longer we stayed together, the more we argued. Sometimes I questioned why I was still under their control as I was already 28! In fact, they can't do anything to me but felt certain that they could make me obey them. They often asked me: "Have you had a meeting with your supervisors? What did they say? You need to listen to their advice." They were trying to find a way to mediate our communication. The pandemic really did not help as I had to stay at home so I could not hide from them. I really struggled. (Hui)

The development of accountability exhibiting an aspect of the developing self of the candidate did not align with parental attempts to micromanage. Hui is a very sociable person who had very positive relationships with her supervisors, peers, and faculty

members. Spending most of her time confined to home proved difficult for her, and eventually she moved out and developed new relationships which proved more conducive to her doctoral progress. As she noted in her May diary:

> In May, I started dating a boy. I moved to Chengdu [away from home] and started to have a normal social life. … My study focused mostly on data transcribing. I very much enjoyed this new pattern. (Hui)

Hui thus found a way to live harmoniously and focus more on her research, recognizing her need for space and time for herself. Her experience is reminiscent of one case study (Yiruo) recounted by Martin (2022), in which Yiruo, as a Chinese international student, and her parents had opposing views on her life trajectory. Hui's choice of loosening her reliance on her parents and moving out as she found a boyfriend is an expected step in growing up in the eyes of most Chinese parents. Although Hui was desperately escaping to explore the world outside her family, she might have in fact been following the path her parents wished her to take. Significantly, Hui was the only one of the three who eventually took up the invitation to return to study in New Zealand, arriving back in March 2021.

## Discussion

We have addressed our research question by reporting on the three doctoral students' lived experiences and life stories of coping with challenges. The strategies and approaches they adopted to navigate ways to continue their educational practices have alerted us to their enactment of agency and emotion development contributing to self-forming, self-navigating, and (inter)personal growth amid the pandemic disruption. Their struggles and resistance transformed into power to reconstruct and reshape themselves as agents confronting "contradictory or otherwise problematic situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1012). We noted Cheng's strategies of building answerability and accountability to respond to the disruption. She enacted decision-making and accountability through her conscious choices of when and for what to ask support from her supervisors. Liang's answerability to problems, such as library access and literature search, demonstrated her relational engagement with her supervisors whom she conceived of as "collaborators." This resonates with her determination to become a researcher. Hui suffered enormously in this disruption but, with her developed accountability, forged spaces—learning spaces and living spaces—that allowed her to carry on data collection in spite of contingencies. Their perception of themselves as "lazy" and "not hardworking," resulting in feeling "guilty" about their slow progress, in turn reflects their trajectory in action (Gibson, 1979). Findings revealed these developing selves created affordances in their commitment to internationalization at a distance and at home (Ramanau, 2016), driven by the desire to be part of a scholarly community (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011).

Their interpersonal development was embedded at the intersection of people, things, information, ubiquitous technologies, and spaces that emerged over time (Benson, 2021). The stories the three students told about their disrupted trajectory transcended the academic domain and engaged with relational and social factors. The trajectory was holistically molded by social agents, emotions, and relationships that

coexisted in their worlds, conveyed by nonhuman factors, such as the Internet and WeChat social media platform, which mediated intellectual sharing and emotional support (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Qi & Wang, 2018). The continuation of frequent Zoom meetings and emails with supervisors supported them to remain on track in their doctoral trajectory. This array of connectedness and belongingness was reconstructed, reshaped, and reconfigured by digital technologies facilitating sustained doctoral supervision in the (digital) social world.

The three Chinese female doctoral students whose stories are shared in this paper also represent the human capital of the highly marketized field of international higher education (Tran & Vu, 2018). Thanks to the pandemic, they were fortuitously given the opportunity of being with parents and friends in China. The bonding of these relationships helped Cheng and Liang stay resilient as they felt attachment to home and reconnected to place(s), people (family and friends), and things around them. In contrast, Hui, apart from pleasure in her father's vegetable garden, struggled and separated from the family to start a new relationship in another city. She understood herself as a new kind of woman "at the very core of what it meant to live" (Martin, 2022, p. 279). Hui's ideal space-time, which she had gained through overseas study in New Zealand, was compromised because of the pandemic disruption. Her desperation to recreate it may indicate a realization of personal needs, growth, and development in relation to the joy of navigating and fulfilling her personal desires. Her resilience developed as she came to understand herself and her needs, and found a way to achieve satisfaction in both personal and academic spheres.

## *The model*

Reflecting on the elements of the experiences of and with our participants, we propose a model intended to represent the experience of the developing self in doctoral candidature and supervision. While it is derived as a representation of their lived experiences, we believe it has value as a guide to ongoing distance doctoral supervision, reflecting the elements that need to be attended to by both supervisors and candidates. Drawing on the reflection of agency development for doctoral students' "here and now" but also for "there and then" (Xu & Tran, 2021, p. 5), our model develops a more systematic approach to internationalization at a distance (Xu, 2022).

The center of the model refers to the doctoral student as a developing self (see Figure 3), reflecting the epistemic concept of life capital (Consoli, 2022). The developing self is also constantly engaged in social practices (Tran & Vu, 2018), thereby demonstrating agency. Four essential capabilities make up the inner circle: accountability, answerability, the ability to create affordances, and resilience. These capabilities, interacting with an outer circle, comprising people, things, information, ubiquitous technologies, and spaces, highlight doctoral students' expected enactment of agency in relation to human and nonhuman elements in navigating their life-course trajectory continuously over time, from the beginning, during, to the end of their candidature, and beyond.

The model also reflects our position as doctoral supervisors in a process of scaffolding, facilitating, and mentoring students to develop agency that encompasses

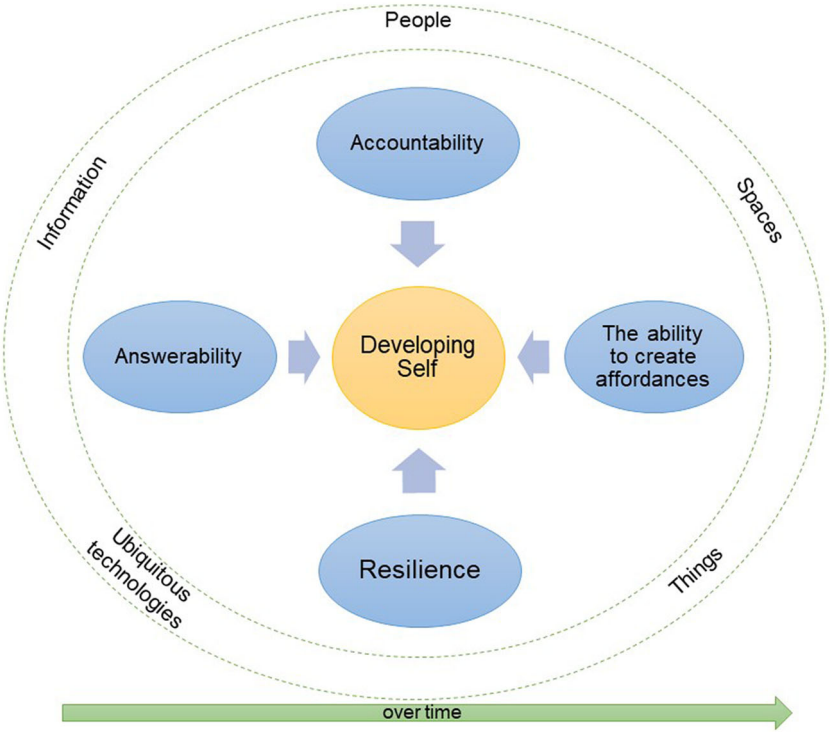


**Figure 3.** The proposed distance-based doctoral supervisory model in a digital age.

this lifelong journey of navigating multiple and dynamic configurations of self. The four capacities allude to ways in which the students' development had been supported in the early process of supervision on campus and were manifest in their experience during COVID. The state of copresence highlighted in the outer circle are intersections, constituting a critical social system for agency and emotion development over time. This system particularly reminds both supervisors and students to enact and develop a capacity for reflexivity that allows "people to aspire, to look up, to look at the future and map plausible routes towards states of affairs that they have reason to value" (Goodyear, 2022, p. 52). This critical stance nurtures us to navigate values and ways of working that we desire in our doctoral supervision.

## *Implications of the model*

We have already acted on the implications of this model in our ongoing supervision of international students who have enrolled in doctoral studies under pandemic conditions and have had an initial extended period of candidature as distance students from their homes. This has led us to attend carefully to the outer circle living conditions and to accommodate those in our meetings and support of the students. In particular, we are aware of the added complexity of the people indicated on the model over time. There is the need to recognize a fundamental change in life at home, where a member of the household becomes a full-time student. The other significant

people (e.g., peers and indeed supervisors and other staff themselves) might initially be seen as absent, and we have developed a strong sense of accountability to make their presence, virtual though it might be, visible. We have worked hard to create events in which we bring together the members of our PhD community in Zoom meetings, for introductory and ongoing chances to meet each other and find out about each other's projects and to participate together in doctoral processes, such as joining confirmation presentations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this torch has been taken up by Hui, back on campus and writing up her thesis. She has taken on a leadership role, expressing her answerability to the PhD community by initiating meetings among the students to support those practicing for important presentations or to celebrate significant events, such as Cheng's submission of her completed thesis. Liang and other students who have completed their study maintain membership of this community, indicating that such friendships may not be as "transient" as Sinanan and Gomes (2020, p. 687) presume.

## Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest the potential of our distance-based doctoral supervision model to facilitate and mentor students' navigation of developing self in (disrupted) doctoral trajectory in online environments. Although the study from which it was developed was limited, based on the stories of just three Chinese female doctoral students and our reflections on them, with the use of narrative analysis, this model holistically illuminates the ongoing academic and (inter)personal growth expected of doctoral students with their supervisors' and peers' support to achieve desired educational success in challenging circumstances. Taking our model as a reference, future studies could potentially apply and investigate it in other contexts, or with more and diverse participants, to contribute to the scholarship of international education and mobility, or indeed immobility, in the post-pandemic era.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

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