

QPR26: Transforming Graduate Supervision for the Future: Creating and curating change

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UK Council for
Graduate Education

The Global Context

Scale: In 2019, the average share of 25–64-year-olds with a doctorate across the OECD was around 1%. **if current trends continue, it is estimated that 2.3% of today's young adults will enter doctoral studies at some point in their life** (OECD, 2019b identified in Sarrico C (2022)).

Employability. Two decades of commitment to developing candidates' transferable skills to enable wider employability means that **doctoral candidates are now much better equipped to enter a wider range of jobs.**

Finance: Statistically **doctoral graduates earn more than UG or Masters graduates over the course of their lifetime.** ([QS Top Universities Salary Benefits](#))

The Next Generation Research SuperVision Project (RSVP)

1. The role of team supervision
2. Supervision practice in different disciplines and contexts
3. Supervising different types of research degree
4. Understanding and combating poor supervision practice

RSVP Terminology: the language of Super- Vision

- **Academic Supervisors** - based in HEIs p primary or secondary, with expertise in the discipline(s)
- **Industry Supervisors** - external to the HEI(s) based in an industry - creative, arts and heritage, STEM, clinical and health practitioners.
- **Assistant Supervisors** - postdocs, research associates, technicians
- **Rescue supervisors** - typically an academic but sometimes an industry supervisor who 'takes on a candidate previously supervised by someone else' (UKRSS24)

The academic supervisor experience

UK Research Supervision Survey (UKRSS)

First ran in 2021 and again in 2024. It will run for a third time in 2027.

48 questions covering the following themes:

- Characteristics of supervisors
- How candidates are recruited and selected
- Supervision workload, recognition and reward
- Support given to research supervisors
- Team supervision situations
- How supervisors perceive and approach their responsibilities
- Motivations for becoming involved in research supervision

Overview of respondents

- **Responses: 3,453 (2021), 5,174 (2024).** Will run again in 2027
- **158 institutions (2021) 141 UK institutions (2024)**

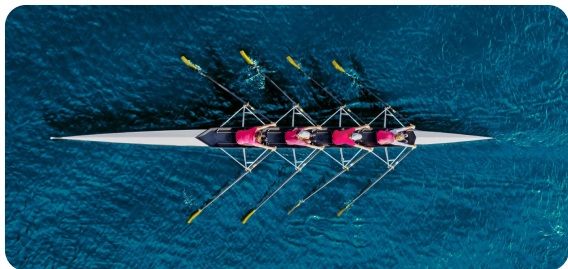
The good stuff



Joy of supervision

91% enjoy being a supervisor and feel valued by their supervisees.

Many describe supervision as one of the most rewarding parts of academic work.



Team Supervision

76% indicated they 'frequently' or 'always' took part in team supervision.

70% of these felt that team supervision gives doctoral candidates a better experience.

It broadens subject expertise, strengthens methodological support, and brings in more than one source of feedback.



Impact on their research

79% agreed that supervision improves the quality of their own research.

Supervisors who had undertaken professional development also felt more confident in their practice.

The challenges



Lack of recognition

Supervisory work is often under-recognised.

Many supervisors put in substantial extra time that is not reflected in workload allocation or reward systems.



Stress and confidence

1 in 3 said supervision caused anxiety and affected sleep.

Many felt underprepared to support candidate wellbeing.

83% said this was not covered in non-academic career development.



Not enough time

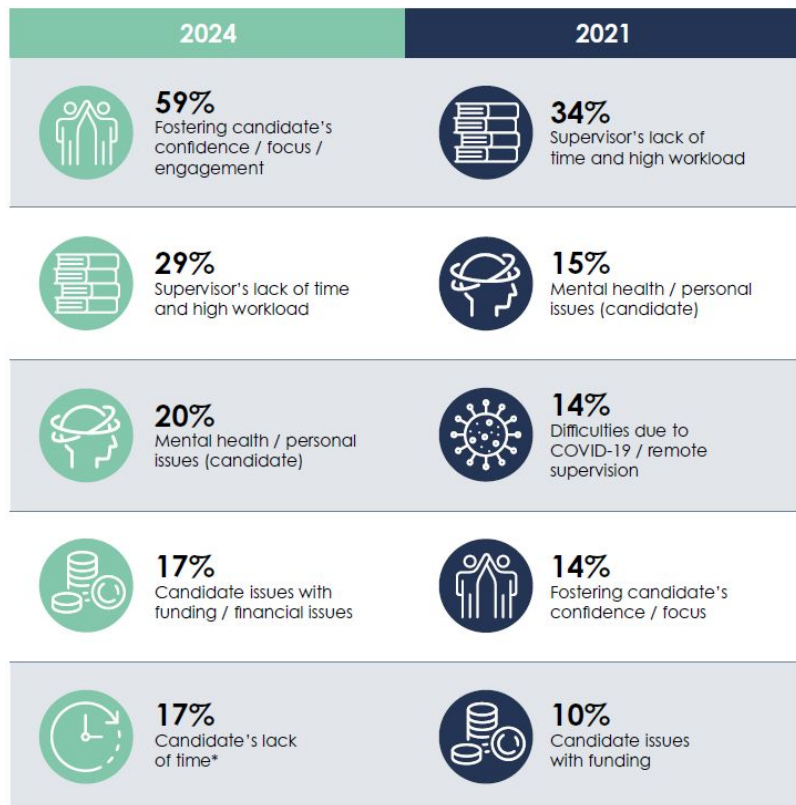
Workload allocation for supervision is often inadequate.

The pressure increases for those supervising 5+ candidates.

Many institutions still lack a clear workload policy.



Top 5 challenges



"...Workload is provided but it is nowhere near adequate, and as expectations placed on supervisors increase, this is increasingly challenging..."

"[We need] Better financial and employment status support for PhD candidates led by norms set by UKRI. Currently candidates are paid at a level where many experience hardship at some point during their studies and usually not classified as employees with the associated rights."

Limited opportunities for mentorship, role-modelling, and sharing of practice

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80% infrequently learn through sharing of practice

20% stated that they 'frequently' were provided opportunities to **learn from more experienced supervisors through role modelling or shared practice.**

74% infrequently take part in mentoring

26% of respondents reported that their institutions '**always' or 'frequently' provided opportunities for mentoring with other supervisors.**

22% reported that they had '**never' been offered an opportunities for group discussions.**

27% of respondents said they rarely had informal types of support such as time or space for groups within departments or institutions.

"One thing that would make my role as a research supervisor better is having access to **additional resources for professional development and training in mentorship techniques.** This could include **workshops, seminars, and access to a network of experienced supervisors to share best practices.** Enhanced training would enable me to better support my students, address their diverse needs more effectively, and stay updated on the latest developments in research supervision. **This, in turn, would improve the overall research experience for my students and contribute to their success.**"

The industry based supervisor experience

What do industry supervisors bring to the table?

Enablers: 'you have to to catch yourself and stop just giving them the answer, [you have] to try and **provide suggestions of how they might go out and find their own answer and encourage them to take that ownership of the project** ... they're not just collecting data for us -. sometimes have to stop yourself from saying "that's not how I would do it", as opposed to "could you do it this way", or "could you do it that way" or "just ignore me".' (Participant 17, A&H)

Mentors: '...normalising the fact that it's okay to fail, just, like, try to find the edges of failure. That's all great...and that can be, you know, quite at odds with, with how we tend to work here. It's good to work with the students in that way.' (Participant 29, STEM)

Guardians: 'I think perhaps a useful word here is "care" in all senses of that word. The PhD system ... does have a strong personal engagement, engagement and care go hand-in-hand together.' (Participant 10, STEM)

'We want to be the **"everyday parent"** – not the one that just shows up with the Christmas presents, because [what we do] is important for many different areas (Participant 20, STEM)."

Careers, Skills & Networking

'very often the whole point of collaboration is that the student is going to learn skills that they wouldn't get in a standard university PhD project that they're going to be working directly with collections that we have in the museum... it's my role to make sure they have those skills, to teach them and kind of guide them while they're doing that.' (Participant 38, A&H)

'We're interested in the student as a person as well, and making sure that they can develop in a way that's going to be relevant for industry...so that when they finish their PhD, they become effectively a good potential recruit for us. And to get those skills and **to get that understanding of how the industry works** is a key part of that...we as industrial supervisors are the main way of providing them with that understanding and **getting them industry ready at the end of their project.**' (Participant 2, STEM)

Networking is a particular key skill 'Connectivity internally, but also **connectivity to other researchers, to our clients and policymakers and others as well.**' (Participant 13, STEM)

'I would like to second the networking thing...**one thing you provide is access to all of these other people that you could be speaking to, and it's your job to get them [PGR] in front of as many people as you possibly can and that the student is comfortable with.**' (Participant 3, STEM)

How academic and industry supervisors define good and less ideal supervisory practice

Good practice

- Setting expectations and build a framework
- Supporting independence as researchers
- Sensitivity to PGR needs

Poor practice

- Limited engagement
- Micromanagement
- Bullying and harassment

The HDR/PGR experience

Doctoral Researcher experience: the headlines

[Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2025:](#)

- **89% were satisfied with their supervision** - only 65% feel a sense of belonging.

[Nature PhD Survey 2025:](#)

- independence and relationship with supervisor the most positive elements. 2 in 5 report experiencing discrimination. Just 28% feel empowered to speak out about their experiences.

The international journal of science / 23 October 2025

nature

What makes PhD students happy? Good supervision

Supervisors who invest in positive mentoring relationships with their PhD candidates also reap benefits for their own research.

students tend to lead more-productive, more-collaborative groups and attract stronger future students than those who do not (go.nature.com/47e6xfk). Other studies, notably a 2022 review on the quality of academic mentoring, describe how supervisors who engage closely with their students can benefit by learning new techniques and discovering emerging fields, and say that they often feel intellectually recharged (S. E. M. Hill *et al.* *J. Clin. Psychol. Med. Settings* 29, 557–569; 2022).

Major concerns

Nature's survey also brings into sharp focus a related, but altogether darker, side of supervision: bullying and harass-

If they had to do it all again... 22% would change their supervisor
(26% would change their institution)



Nature 2025 PhD Survey: what matters

- Feeling supported/cared for
- Given advice and guidance
- Provided flexibility
- Encouragement
- Being available
- Mentoring and teaching
- Helped me get financial support

"Being encouraging and helping me celebrate small wins. She gives me intellectual independence and does not micro-manage but is there to advise when needed."

- Trans masculine, aged 25-34

"Excellent mentor regarding external activities/concerns. Extremely considerate to cultural differences and disabilities, making a lot of effort to create an accepting work environment."

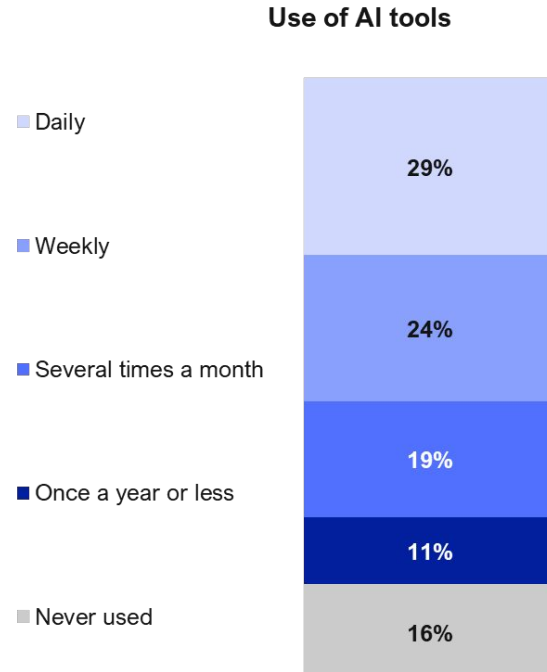
- Female, aged 25-34

"Try to make sure your supervisor is someone you like and get on with, both professionally and, to an extent, personally. It will make your PhD experience significantly easier."

- Female, aged 25-34

Nature 2025: Over half reported using AI weekly to support their PhD

- Preparing job application materials - 53%
- Summarising scientific literature - 52%
- Tracking scientific literature - 43%
- Writing a research article - 1%
- Designing experiments - 30%
- Collecting and analysing data - 29%
- Conducting a peer review - 23%



PRES Deep Dive on Supervision

What aspects of supervision did participants describe as most impactful on their research progress and milestones?

Strongest link to overall satisfaction are a sense of belonging and valuing and responding to feedback

- **Quality and Supportiveness of Supervisors (34.3%)** The expertise, commitment, and encouragement provided by supervisors were consistently cited as central to research progress and milestone achievement.
- **Supervisor Expertise and Research Alignment (14.3%)** Supervisors' subject knowledge, research experience, and ability to provide relevant academic guidance were critical for advancing research and overcoming challenges.
- **Regularity and Structure of Supervision (19.2)** Consistent meetings, clear communication, and structured guidance from supervisors were identified as key enablers of research progress and milestone completion.

Deep Dive on what PGRs really think about supervision

Positive Outcomes and Exemplary Practices

Despite challenges, numerous participants reported significant personal and professional growth, attributing this to effective supervision and institutional support.

- Supervisors who acted as **mentors, role models, and advocates** were credited with fostering **confidence, independence, and a strong professional identity**.
- Exposure to **diverse training, interdisciplinary collaboration, and real-world applications (e.g., industrial doctorates, placements)** enhanced employability and readiness for varied career paths.
- **Supportive environments that combined academic, emotional, and practical guidance** were seen as instrumental in enabling doctoral researchers to thrive and prepare for future careers.

Data from forthcoming commissioned report from Advance HE on PRES data 2020-2025)

Risk

Quality Assurance & Professionalism

Supervision as “The last bastion of unregulated practice”

“Who supervises the supervisors?”

Lack of accountability + Lack of proof of return on investment = institutional and individual vulnerability

Lack of consistency in use of rubrics and feedback

“Within a context of accountability and quality assurance/total quality management, the range and specificity of criteria that are used to judge doctoral work is of particular relevance, but it has, until recently, sadly been neglected”. Denicolo, P.

In Grainger P, et al (2027), Using rubrics as feedback mechanisms for doctoral supervisors and researches

Mental Health, Well being and Safeguarding

“Over the course of eight months, my great supervisor had become an unrecognisable master of psychological abuse. We were engaged in a war of attrition, a war that took me to the edge of my psychological and physical wellbeing”

The Thesis Whisperer, Professor Inger Mewburn. [When Good supervisors go bad 2014](#)

...psychological safety and trust are crucial for supervisor-supervisee relationships. Supervisors in my study aimed to cultivate a culture of care by showing genuine interest in every PhD candidate ...This approach included respecting mental health, work-life or work-family balance strategies, and cultural practices.

Recognising Responsible Supervision, Dr Tamarinde Haven, University of the Netherlands. Supervising PhDs Bogy, Feb 2026

**What does good
supervision look and feel
like?**

What does good supervision CPD look like?

- Policies and Processes
- Ethics
- **Inclusive supervision**
- **Reflective Practice**
- Understanding the PhD process
- Building Effective relationships
- Communication
- **Pedagogic knowledge**
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Career development
- Publication and writing
- Departmental/local culture
- Sustainable development

*“The syllabi promoted the idea that PhD supervisors should **reflect on their role as well as different aspects of the supervision process**; for instance, they could reflect on inclusive practices and their own experiences as PhD students”.*

“We propose inviting all stakeholders (including PhD students) to share their reflections and initiate actions regarding different supervisory practices.”

Karampelias C, Stigmar M and Auer N (2024) [Behind the scenes of doctoral success: a mixed methods approach to exploring PhD supervision courses in Swedish higher education institutions](#). In Studies in HE

Good Supervisory Practice Framework



1. Recruitment and Selection
2. Supervisory relationships with candidates ✓✓
3. Supervisor relationships with co-supervisors (and teams/TAP members) ✓✓
4. Supporting candidates' research projects ✓
5. Encouraging candidates to write and give appropriate feedback ✓
6. Keeping the research on track and monitoring progress
7. Supporting candidates' personal, professional and career development ✓
8. Supporting candidates through completion and final examination
9. Supporting candidates to disseminate their research ✓
10. Reflecting upon and enhancing practice ✓✓

Good Practice in Supervision

- *Discuss and agree expectations with the whole team*
- *Agree roles and responsibilities*
- *Support independence*
- *Foster trust, support, compassion and care*
- *Be available*
- *Actively listen*
- *Be empathetic*

“Excellent supervision practice is someone who inspires curiosity for those research goals, but doesn't forget to nurture and cultivate the person that is going to eventually become the leader.” (STEM focus group participant)

“PGRs are diverse and we should be sensitive and aware of those diversities as a matter of practice.” (AHSS)

What is good Supervision?

'being approachable, being seen as part of a team, being open and having that scientific discussion, seen as being trusted by the student and by the academic group, and being able to demonstrate the value that we bring, so that they can see why it's worthwhile, that we're part of their world.' (STEM, Industry)

'it really comes about being closer to them, actually being open that this is a collaboration, where at the end of the day, we all have something to gain and [and that we] have those very open discussions where we constructively challenge each other ... that's really where I draw the line for [a] good supervisor.' (STEM, Industry)

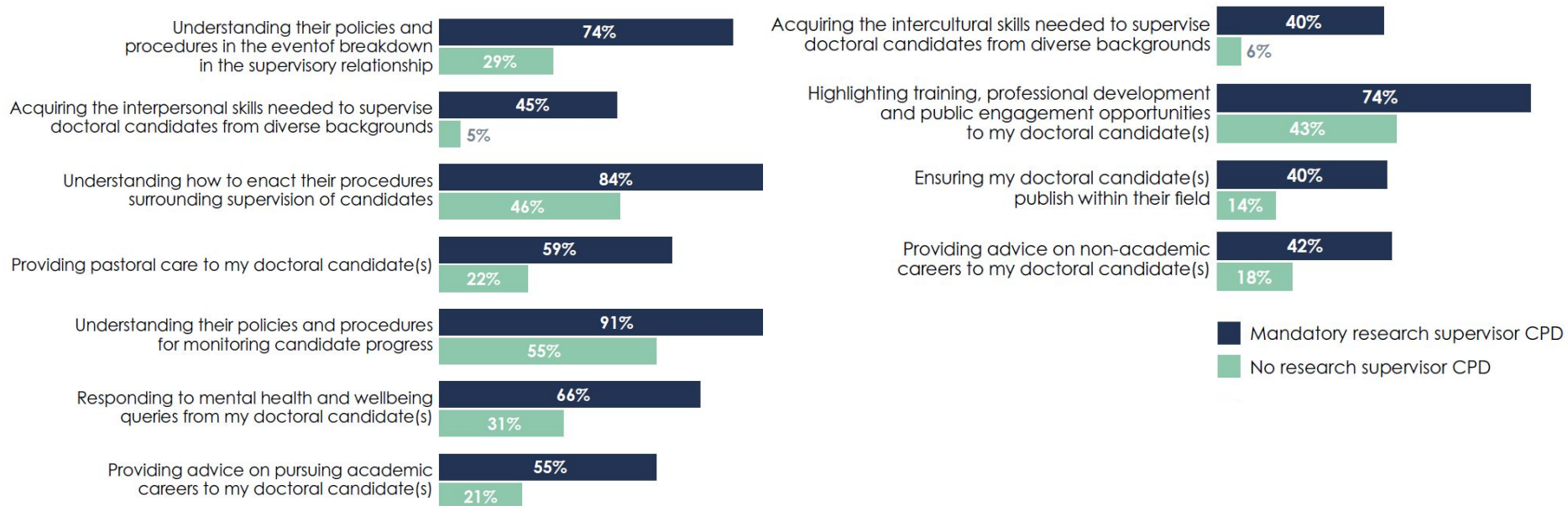
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How are we supporting supervisors?

Impact of mandatory supervisor development: UK Research Supervision Survey (UKRSS) 2024 data

My workplace/institution adequately supports me with...



Supporting Research Supervision Practice: a review of UK provision

Professor Stan Taylor
School of Education, University of Durham

February 2026

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There is evidence (Bitzer 2010, McCulloch and Loeser 2016, Guerin et al 2017, Haven et al 2022) that, **where new supervisors are supported by initial professional development programmes (IPD), they are more able to be effective in their roles.** The reports shows it focusses on regulations and procedures .

147 UK institutions

- 94% of institutions made provision for the initial professional development of supervisors
- In 84%, this was mandatory;
- In 59% of these mandatory cases, this consisted of a half-day or less, and in 81% a day or less;
- **The content of training was predominantly on regulatory matters and pedagogy with over 90% dealing with these areas followed by student support.**

“it was notable that a quarter of institutions made no (CPD) provision at all, which suggests a major gap in updating experienced supervisors”

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

experienced supervisors can benefit significantly from updating their knowledge and skills through continuing professional development (CPD). Wichmann-Hansen et al 2019.

Summary

- 76% of institutions made provision for the continuing professional development of supervisors;
 - In 48%, this was mandatory;
 - The modal interval between mandatory updating sessions was three years;
 - In duration, over three-quarters of sessions were less than half a day;
 - The content was dominated by updates to rules and regulations and pedagogy

Are we asking too much of supervisors?

“Despite our best efforts to make workshops and courses relevant and interesting, some supervisors avoid doing any professional development....I think **we need to challenge the ‘supervisor as superhero’ idea and replace it with something more, well – human.** But where can we look for these human-yet-awesome supervisor models?”

The Thesis Whisperer, Professor Inger Mewburn. [Supervisor or Superhero?](#) April 2025



Image generated using Gemini AI

Recognition and Awards

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Taylor's report (2026) shows that the provision of institutional awards for outstanding/good supervision are increasing as is support for gaining External Recognition is also increasing - albeit slowly

External Recognition



Awards



**What one thing can you
do to effect positive
change around
supervision?**

Stepchange? RSVP Interventions

Designing CPD to meet supervisors' needs

What we know from focus groups, UKRSS 2024, existing scholarship...

- ALL supervisors want **more opportunities to engage in discussion, peer support and to share experiences.**
- **Strong preference from more experienced supervisors for conversation-based sharing of practice and reflecting on experience.**
- Less experienced supervisors (including ECRs) welcome CPD opportunities and to be **recognised for their engagement and contribution to supervision.**
- UKRSS - just 13% stated they had opportunities to reflect on their supervisory practice. Our interventions maximise this.

'...we'll never use the word CPD because they will run a mile from it....there's always going to be probably 25% of people who will never turn up to just anything if you're trying to force them...so I'd much rather have the 25% of people who are great supporters of us and the middle 50% who will come along if they don't think it's going to be too awful, OK and focus on them.'

Quotation from Focus Groups with academic supervisors (in the forthcoming RSVP collection of data reports)

Overview of Phase 1 interventions

GETTING SUPERVISORS STARTED

Designing an impactful induction for doctoral supervisors

BEING A RESEARCH SUPERVISOR

Supervisory roles and approaches: Who are you as a supervisor?

Exploring supervisor approaches: Becoming a flexible supervisor

Delivering engaging CPD on doctoral policies and processes

WRITING AND FEEDBACK

Giving feedback on PGR writing

Supporting PGRs with writing

WORKING WITH CANDIDATES

Supporting international doctoral candidates

Supporting doctoral candidates: How to enhance self-efficacy

Supporting PGR development beyond the project

Establishing boundaries and building rapport with PGRs

Meta-communication in research supervision

Let's talk about preparing candidates for doctoral examination

Enabling conversations: Coaching and mentoring approaches to supervision

WORKING IN TEAM SUPERVISION

Supervising together: Clarifying the co-supervisor role

Enhancing collaboration and aligning expectations in team supervision

Giving consistent feedback in supervisor teams

REFLECTING ON SUPERVISORY PRACTICE

Supervisor Peer Mentoring Circle Programme

Supporting Reflective Practice and Recognition of Research Supervision

Overview of Phase 2 interventions

Starting Strong: A Programme for New Supervisors

Culturally Aware Research Supervision

IPD Programme for Industry based non-HEI supervisors

Neuroinclusive Research Supervision

Learning from each other: Peer observation of supervision

Supervisor Seminar Series

Feedback

“Watching my academic colleagues supervise is like a masterclass, seeing them engage with students. I’ve learnt a lot (peer observation)

“A space that doesn’t exist anywhere else for discussing your experience as a supervisor” (peer mentoring circles)

I found supervisor peer observation to be particularly powerful. Despite having held many supervisor meetings before, I immediately learnt new approaches that I was able to implement in my practice. (peer observation)

“Has made a huge contribution to helping me understand my role as a supervisor” (peer mentoring circles)

York Assistant Research Supervisor Scheme (YARSS)

The York Assistant Research Supervisor Scheme (YARSS) is a new initiative designed to formally recognise the vital contributions made by researchers, post docs, research associates and technicians who informally support Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) supervision. Based on a scheme introduced at Imperial College London, the Assistant Supervisor Scheme ensures that your expertise is appropriately validated and integrated into the official supervisory team.

Conclusions - & Provocation

Can we enable culture change?

Our aim at RSVP is to **normalise Good Doctoral Supervision** and ensure that it is:

- **understood, recognised and valued**
- underpinned by **clear expectations of engagement with initial & continuing professional development**
- demonstrated by institutional and funder commitments to **consistent quality in supervision practice.**

The next generation of supervisors?

- Will *communicate and promote* doctoral education in ways we couldn't have imagined
- *Celebrate* the complex nature of research, disruption and trial and error
- *Maximise* the use of AI
- *Collaborate* with colleagues in industry as a matter of course
- Never supervise alone
- Mentor, coach and role model professional practice
- Expect to be given time and recognition for a core part of their job

Our job?

START - Owning how we articulate the value of the PhD

STOP - Thinking that supervision is a lone activity exclusive to academics.

CONTINUE - To provide opportunities for supervisors at all levels to come together to share experiences, reflect on their practice, develop an understanding of supervisory approaches.

Let's Dance Differently.



Announcing the RSVP International Conference

17-19 March 2027, The Milner Hotel, York

To keep in touch with conference announcements, please sign up for our newsletter: www.rsvp.ac.uk/contact



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- [The Thesis Whisperer](#) by Professor Inger Mewburn
- UK Research and Innovation, [\(2024\) Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training](#)
- Unpublished data from forthcoming reports to be released as part of the RSVP Collection over the next few months

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