

# Focus Groups Report: Academic Research Supervisors

June 2026

# Acknowledgements

## Author Contributions (CRediT taxonomy)

### Conceptualization:

Karen Clegg (University of York); Liz Quinlan (University of York, now at University of Exeter)

### Data curation:

Liz Quinlan (University of York, now at University of Exeter)

### Formal analysis:

Gill Houston (University of York); Liz Quinlan (University of York, now at University of Exeter)

### Funding:

This work was funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) via a Research England Development (RED) Grant

### Funding acquisition:

Doug Cleaver (Sheffield Hallam University); Karen Clegg (University of York); Owen Gower (UK Council for Graduate Education);

### Investigation:

Doug Cleaver (Sheffield Hallam University); Karen Clegg (University of York); Owen Gower (UK Council for Graduate Education); Rachel van Krimpen (University of Nottingham); Nicola Palmer (Sheffield Hallam University); Alex Pavey (King's College London); Julia Rayner (University of York); Heather Sears (Coventry University); Connie Wan (University of Nottingham)

### Methodology:

Roisin Astell (University of York); Karen Clegg (University of York); Nicola Palmer (Sheffield Hallam University); Alex Pavey (King's College London); Liz Quinlan (University of York, now at University of Exeter); Heather Sears (Coventry University)

### Project administration:

Roisin Astell (University of York); Laura Herriman (Sheffield Hallam University); Thea Jean (King's College London); Tom Jackson (University of York); Reena Morar (University of York); Alex Pavey (King's College London); Heather Sears (Coventry University), Connie Wan (University of Nottingham)

### Supervision:

Karen Clegg (University of York); Tom Jackson (University of York)

### Visualization:

Sally Dunne (sallyillustrates.com)

### Writing – original draft:

Liz Quinlan (University of York, now at University of Exeter)

### Writing – review & editing:

Lucy Atkinson (University of York); Sara Bellan (UK Council for Graduate Education); Karen Clegg (University of York); Tom Jackson (University of York); Hang Li (University of York); Nicola Palmer (Sheffield Hallam University); Heather Sears (Coventry University)

# Contents

<b>1. Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
Scope	4
Supervision in different disciplines	4
Team Supervision	4
Practice reflection	4
Professional development experience	5
<b>2. Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Methodology</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. Findings</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4.1 Supervisory experiences in different disciplines</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4.2 Team supervision: Benefits and challenges</b>	<b>10</b>
Benefits of team supervision	10
Challenges in team supervision	12
<b>4.3 Practice reflection: Defining good and poor supervision</b>	<b>13</b>
Good supervisory practice	14
Poor supervisory practice	16
<b>4.4 Training and development experience</b>	<b>18</b>
Professional training and development experience	18
Supervision-focused training and CPD	19
Duration and frequency of CPD	21
Peer Observation and Mentoring	22
Challenges in CPD engagement	24
<b>4.5 Participant CPD requests</b>	<b>25</b>
Introducing new supervisors	25
CPD topics	26
Peer Support and Mentoring	27
<b>5. Discussion</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Appendix 1. RSVP Cohort A Participant Information Sheet</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Appendix 2. RSVP Cohort A Question set</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Appendix 3. Points of difference between AHSS and STEM</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Appendix 4. Types of Doctorate</b>	<b>37</b>

# 1. Executive Summary

## Scope

As part of the RSVP intelligence gathering activities on research supervision practice, the project has conducted a series of focus groups, with research supervisors from the RSVP consortium institutions. The focus groups were conducted in July 2024. A total of 88 participants attended the focus groups, with 41 coming from subjects within the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) and 43 coming from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), a further 3 from medical fields (MED), and 1 Professional Services staff member (PS). They represented post- and pre-1992 institutions, as well as those across the mission groups. Participants' supervisory experiences varied across the cohort, with some groups consisting primarily of experienced academic supervisors and others including less experienced supervisors, postdoctoral researchers and technicians.

The participants were asked a series of questions divided into two thematic sections. Section 1 focused on supervision in different contexts and Section 2 covered skills and professional development. Transcripts were analysed thematically into this focus group report as a part of the RSVP Collection

## Supervision in different disciplines

Participants discussed how disciplinary contexts shape supervisory practice and expectations. **Participants described AHSS supervision as often following a dyadic model, with less frequent supervisor contact and greater expectations of PGR independence at an early stage.** Participants linked this to the common practice of PGR-proposed research projects in AHSS disciplines. AHSS participants also described often supporting PGRs beyond their research projects.

They also work with a wider variety of doctoral degree types. **STEM participants described team supervision as a long-established model in their disciplines.** They also noted that projects are often linked to externally funded research led by supervisors, and for some specific disciplines, PGRs are required to undertake lab-based training at an early stage. Participants suggested that these disciplinary variations were caused by differences in funding sources and requirements, with many AHSS PGRs self-funding their studies and many in STEM acquiring external funding.

## Team Supervision

Participants' observations resonate with findings reported in [UK Research Supervision Survey 2024](#) that **team supervision is increasingly common and beneficial for both supervisors and PGRs.** Participants emphasised the benefits of interdisciplinarity in team supervision. Many valued the potential for industry collaboration, divisions of labour, and diversified funding and research opportunities while working on supervisory teams.

Challenges to team supervision primarily centred around the potential for conflicting opinions amongst team members, poor communication, and contextual barriers to effective team supervision in AHSS.

## Practice reflection

Across disciplines, participants reflected on good and poor supervision, demonstrating a shared understanding of **effective supervisory practices as candidate-centred, communicative, and adaptive.** Poor practices were often associated with limited engagement, micromanagement, and bullying and harassment. Many participants recognised that their own experiences as doctoral candidates had shaped their supervisory values

and approaches, suggesting a 'generational transmission' of supervision practices.

## Professional development experience

Participants shared a vast range of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities available to them. However, they also noted that **the format, relevance, accessibility, and time commitment were all considerations in their understanding of the efficacy of these programmes.** Tensions with institutional standardisation and compliance-driven modules were often highlighted as lacking disciplinary relevance and challenging individual autonomy. Participants particularly valued **peer observation and mentoring schemes**; these opportunities were considered effective ways for professional skill development. **New supervisors joining a supervision team, composed of more experienced supervisors, was considered as an effective way for their supervision skill development.** Participants identified areas for training and development including:

- management skills,
- mentoring and coaching,
- pedagogy in supervision,
- team supervision,
- supporting disabled and neurodiverse PGRs, and general Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI).

Participants also articulated their need for professional development to gain insights into **local institutional policies**, including understanding institutional procedures and the guidelines.

The research supervisor focus group discussions highlight the complexity and diversity of academic supervision across disciplines, types of doctorate, and institutions. Participants generally agreed that well-developed communication, interpersonal, and academic skills combine to form the basis of good supervision practice. Participants' discussion suggests a strong commitment to continuous improvement and peer learning in their supervisory role. Overall, the consensus is that **participants expect more opportunity to engage in discussion, peer support, and create communities of practice with other supervisors.**

**The research supervisor focus group discussions highlight the complexity and diversity of academic supervision across disciplines, types of doctorate, and institutions [...]  
Overall, the consensus is that participants expect more opportunity to engage in discussion, peer support, and create communities of practice with other supervisors.**

# 2. Introduction

The Next Generation Research SuperVision Project (RSVP) is committed to understanding and exploring four main areas:

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

The voice and experience of the postgraduate researcher (PGR) is well represented in scholarly literature and via national surveys such as the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). In comparison, the voices and experiences of doctoral supervisors remain less explored in relation to how supervision is practiced across different contexts. This focused piece of research aims to shine a light on these influential and important, yet unrepresented, stakeholders in the doctoral experience. It marks the first of a series of publications highlighting the views and experiences of those involved in doctoral education.

The focus groups explored the four main research questions of RSVP that centre on team supervision, disciplinary differences, diverse research degrees, and poor and good supervision. Participants were invited to share their experiences, reflections, and, in some cases, recommendations for improving supervision practice and culture. Participants also explored and shared their opinions about the optimum form and content of continuing professional development (CPD).

**The focus groups explored the four main research questions of RSVP that centre on team supervision, disciplinary differences, diverse research degrees, and poor and good supervision.**

# 3. Methodology

Participants were recruited via opportunistic sampling, dependent on the institution they are based at. The primary modes of recruitment involved targeted university and departmental level newsletter copy, leveraging RSVP management team professional networks, email campaigns, and word-of-mouth. Across the five consortium institutions, 88 participants attended a focus group session:

41 participants associated with subjects within the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS); 43 from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), a further 3 from Medical fields (MED), and 1 professional services (PS) staff member. All participants were supplied with an information sheet about the process making clear their rights to withdraw from the process at any time (Appendix 1).

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of experienced/ less experienced supervisors</b>	<b>Discipline Group</b>
University A	20	F - 11	Experienced - 15	AHSS - 16
		M - 9	Less experienced - 5	STEM - 6
University B	18	F - 6	Experienced - 15	AHSS - 11
		M - 12	Less experienced - 3	STEM - 7
University C	9	F - 6	Experienced - 8	AHSS - 2
		M - 3	Less experienced - 1	MED - 3
				STEM - 4
University D	14	F - 8	Experienced - 8	AHSS - 3
		M - 6	Less experienced - 6	STEM - 11
University E	27	F - 19	Experienced - 18	AHSS - 11
		M - 8	Less experienced - 8	STEM - 15
			Unknown - 1	PS - 1
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>F - 50</b> <b>M - 38</b>	<b>Experienced - 15</b> <b>Less experienced - 5</b> <b>Unknown - 1</b>	<b>AHSS - 41</b> <b>STEM - 43</b> <b>MED - 3</b> <b>PS - 1</b>

**Table 1** | Participant Demographics by University

Twenty-five focus groups were conducted, with the number of participants ranging from one to seven participants in each session in length of approximately ninety minutes. The participants in each focus group were all from the same institution. Each focus group was facilitated by two members of the RSVP consortium’s team who were not from the same institution as the focus group participants. A standardised template, which included the question set, estimated timings, and a note section was provided for each pair of facilitators. This ensured consistency in approach, while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions and natural conversational flow. The participants were asked a series of questions divided into two thematic sections: Section 1 focused on supervision in different contexts, and Section 2 covered skills and professional development (Appendix 2).

The findings presented below reflect the perspectives of a self-selecting group of engaged supervisors with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, roles, and levels of experience. The conversational format encouraged participants to reflect freely on focused aspects most relevant to their contexts, which allowed both common themes and local distinctiveness to be captured. Particularly, participants’ responses to Section 2 provided valuable insights into the needs and priorities for supervisor development.

# 4. Findings

## 4.1 Supervisory experiences in different disciplines

Key differences between PGR supervisory experiences between STEM and AHSS are shown in four key areas: project initiation, supervisory team structure, supervisory contact time and practice, and project funding. These areas are outlined in turn below.

The range of participants in focus groups allowed for discussion around differences in supervision practice between disciplines. Clear differences emerged between STEM and AHSS which spanned the entirety of the PGR journey, although often rooted in the manner in which the PGR project was initiated.

PGR projects in AHSS subjects are often proposed by the PGR, leading to an approach which encourages this ownership and independence at the early stage. As participants described, there is an expectation in AHSS that PGRs define and propose their research project, resulting in less involvement of a supervisor as owner of a project or the source of funding support. AHSS participants identified this as a key difference between AHSS and STEM supervision:

**“... I would say that, you know, we would expect students to be working independently the majority of the time, and that supervision meetings are there to provide a forum for discussion, you know, questions, challenges, but not direction necessarily.” (Participant 83 AHSS)**

In contrast, STEM PGRs often have the aims and goals of the project determined by the funder or the Doctoral Training Entities (DTE) and also commonly require initial training specific to the project. Compared with some AHSS contexts, STEM PGR independence is often expected to develop progressively in the research project,

as supervisors initially provide more guidance at the early stage:

**“So you guide the student initially, and then the idea is they get to a point where they’re independent ... I will start to ask questions in a way that’s very similar to a PhD viva, you know, So why did you do that experiment? Why this particular way? – really getting them to start thinking about the concept of the experiment that they’re doing. Because they may not have necessarily devised the experiment themselves but they still need to know why they’re doing it.” (Participant 47 STEM)**

The type of funding also has a significant impact on supervisory practice. A participant detailed that some funding from DTEs and partnerships may require specific PGR supervisory practice – for example dictating contact time:

**“Particularly when you’re linking into CDTs and DTPs, the expectations of supervisors are very, very different because a lot is mandated. So, for example, for this new one there’s two days a year when I’m expected as a supervisor to go to full day events...”**  
**(Participant 82 AHSS, who worked in interdisciplinary project with STEM PGRs)**

AHSS participants noted that AHSS PGRs engaged in practice and performance based research were more likely to be part-time, mature, and pursuing doctoral research as part of, or following, a career. One participant described challenges where self-funded PGRs were experiencing vulnerabilities and challenges due to limited finance:

**“There are so many things I could say about Arts and Humanities supervision ... there are more of them [PGRs], and they are differently vulnerable. The ones without**

money, without funding, really struggle and we don't always anticipate or work out the best way to support them ... so when they get stuck, everything feels like it's falling on their head.” (Participant 37 AHSS)

These differences have consequential impacts on other elements of supervisory practices. Industry supervisors were more likely to be included in teams from STEM and AHSS practice and performance based research. Multiple supervisors with specific methods or analytical tools are also likely to make up a larger PGR supervisory team compared to AHSS teams. AHSS PGR supervisory teams described their practices to be more dyadic, with a single supervisor, while also noticing a shift to co-supervision in recent years. Participants articulated that they occasionally were required to supervise projects that were beyond their area of expertise when taking on PGR-led projects in small departments, receiving little institutional support in these cases.

STEM supervisors reported regular contact with their PGRs, especially at the start of projects. While not formally part of the supervisory team, other PGRs and postdocs in a lab setting carried out informal hands-on lab supervision:

“...it's very usual in our discipline to have a lab supervisor in addition to the main, you know, primary supervisor. So there would be either a postdoc or a senior PhD student in the lab who might be doing more hands-on supervision than the actual PI or academic on the project.” (Participant 32 STEM)

In contrast, AHSS participants self-reported their supervisory practice had less contact time for formal supervisory meetings:

“You know, if you're in sciences ... we have these formal supervisory meetings every six to seven weeks, and supervisors in the sciences will say, 'but we meet our supervisees every week, you know, we're sitting with them in the lab' ...

there's a constant kind of engagement. Whereas maybe someone in the arts and humanities, the formal supervisory meeting at that kind of set period is the only point when they are actually maybe seeing their supervisee ... they might still see them, maybe in a corridor somewhere and have a quick chat. But those kinds of set meetings are the only point when they're really having conversations with a supervisee.” (Participant 88 PS)

These differences are summarised in Appendix 3. Appendix 4 outlines participants' discussion about different types of doctorates.

**STEM supervisory teams may have industry partners who are supervisors on the project. Multiple supervisors with specific methods or analytical tools are also likely to make up a larger PGR supervisory team compared to AHSS teams. AHSS PGR supervisory teams described their practices to be more dyadic, with a single supervisor, while also noticing a shift to co-supervision in recent years.**

## 4.2 Team supervision: Benefits and challenges

The [UK Research Supervision Survey 2024](#) defines team supervision arrangements as one in which two or more supervisors share responsibility for supporting a doctoral candidate. Teams are most commonly composed of two supervisors, typically from the same institution, although some also include collaborators from other universities or sectors (e.g. industry). As indicated, these are more likely in STEM and practice and performance based AHSS research. Team supervision can take several forms – often structured by subject or methodological expertise, or by geographic location when external or industry supervisors are involved. The majority of participants reported involvement in a supervisory team in some capacity and they were asked specifically about team supervision.

Many considered the addition of any supervisors beyond themselves, whether formal or informal, to constitute a ‘team’ model of supervision. Participants within STEM and MED reported extensive experience in team supervision, stating that team supervision models were the default. For example, a STEM participant pointed out that having a team supervisory model with a mixture of experience levels was standard in their discipline. By contrast, one-to-one supervision was articulated as the traditional method in AHSS subjects.

**Participants within STEM and MED reported extensive experience in team supervision, stating that team supervision models were the default. [...] By contrast, one-to-one supervision was articulated as the traditional method in AHSS subjects.**

## Benefits of team supervision

The team supervision model was articulated across the cohort as beneficial for both supervisors and PGRs. Some STEM participants commented that this model contributes positively to the effectiveness of research supervision:

**“I find it difficult to identify downsides [to team supervision], because as long as you define the ground rules at the beginning ... then the benefits outweigh the downsides.”**  
(Participant 22 STEM)

**“I think one thing a supervisory team gives you is another pair of eyes, other discussions, and for that to be really effective, they have to be close enough to your subject that they can relate to what you’re seeing and the direction you’re taking the research, but just enough distance so that they can come with... a different disciplinary or different techniques to fill in gaps in your knowledge.”** (Participant 7 STEM)

Participants articulated that they valued the diversity of expertise and supervisory experience that teams allow for. Some participants described having less experienced supervisors introduced to supervision via a team model as a good method of supervisory training:

**“It’s been great to have supervisors on the team who are from different disciplines, where that’s relevant, and also more experienced with supervision.”**  
(Participant 3 AHSS)

**“We all have to have a minimum of two supervisors per PhD project. Often we have three, usually with at least one junior member of staff, just giving more experience to people who who can’t technically lead/supervise a PhD project ... and [this] also actually gives the student a little bit more guidance from someone who’s a little bit closer to them, I guess, in terms of career stage.”**  
(Participant 85 STEM)

Some participants cited the ability to diversify their own research portfolio and interests by working with peers and experts across a wide range of interdisciplinary fields to be a major benefit of team supervision. This positive focus on a team approach is echoed in the UKRSS (2024) data which indicates that 76% of respondents ‘frequently’ or ‘always’ took part in team supervision (up from 71% in the 2021 iteration). Additionally, 70% of respondents working in supervisory teams felt that it offered a better experience for doctoral candidates (p.56). One participant brought up the added value of team supervision in their discipline of History, which has experienced recent increases in interdisciplinary research. The expansiveness of research affiliated with team supervision resonated with observations from AHSS participants across the cohort.

This shift in research types relates to another perceived benefit of team supervision: expanded opportunities for industry collaboration. Such collaborations were noted across both STEM disciplines and the growing field of practice-based PGR studentship in AHSS. Most STEM and MED participants involved in these partnerships reported positive outcomes. A participant who works as a clinical supervisor with academics discussed the benefits of industry collaboration from their perspective:

**“...when you’ve got a number of people [across industry and academia], then it gives you different insights, which is excellent. Because I may be coming from a very clinical point of view, whereas the university people have a better understanding in terms of the research policy, the methodology, those aspects...”**  
(Participant 29 MED)

Several participants articulated the importance of more diversified funding and research opportunities, especially when working with co-supervisors from different fields, industries, and/or countries. In STEM fields, team supervision was noted as a reason for increased funding opportunities or for lower overall costs, with one

participant describing how their PGRs benefited from access to existing industry laboratories run by their other supervisors:

**“...they [industry partners] bring resources. Certainly for the students that are purely based at university, access to laboratories – which are external to the university – the responsibility falls on me to apply for the time for that lab work, and organise the travel for the students and whatnot. Whereas the ones who are industry-based kind of have that already. So organising experiments and sharing, you know, physical laboratory resources with the partner is really useful.”**  
(Participant 46 STEM)

**This shift in research types relates to another perceived benefit of the team supervision: expanded opportunities for industry collaboration. Such collaborations were noted across both STEM disciplines and the growing field of practice-based PGR studentship in AHSS.**

Some participants noted that team supervision also allows for the division of labour and potential reductions of workloads. A participant described the value of having supervisors on a team who can take on leadership roles at different points during the length of a PGRs project, allowing others to step back when their expertise is not most relevant. Similarly, another participant mentioned that being able to divide labour around providing feedback on the PGR’s work according to expertise was a major benefit of working on a team.

Participants also highlighted an increase in interdisciplinary training and research opportunities for PGRs as a key benefit:

“...the students are very lucky in that case [interdisciplinary team supervision], because they are very much trained in multidisciplinary domains, and they are the ones who are doing the work, and they learn both subjects really nicely.”  
(Participant 33 STEM)

Participants also noted that team supervision creates more opportunities for PGRs to access non-academic support, and positively impacts supervisory management of the PGR’s project:

“I think, for the student, the positives are that they have more than one person to, you know, vent to, to approach. So there’s more than one point of contact.”  
(Participant 27 STEM)

## Challenges in team supervision

Challenges of team supervision were primarily related to interpersonal breakdowns (with other supervisors and/or PGRs) and unclear role definition in the supervisory team. This was specifically discussed in relation to team supervision with industry partners by several participants within STEM fields. This issue is discussed in more detail in the report on the focus groups conducted with industry and non-HEI based supervisors.

A participant cited facing difficulties with navigating breakdowns in interpersonal relationships between supervisory team members:

“The biggest difficulties I’ve faced when supervising is when I’m co-supervising with somebody else, where... the student feels comfortable with one of the supervisors and feels absolutely uncomfortable with the other. And that puts a lot of stress on the supervisory dynamic between at least one of the supervisors and the students who don’t get along, and on the other supervisor who is sort of caught in the middle trying to patch up things... [they become] the go-to person for either one to complain

about the other. So the other supervisor starts complaining about the student, and how terrible they are; the student starts complaining about how terrible the supervisor is; and you get caught in between...”  
(Participant 9 STEM)

Some participants identified that conflicts or challenges they have faced with team supervision were directly related to unclear roles within the supervisory team, particularly in supervision teams which were unnecessarily large:

“...this is where I find the challenge to be very, very big... there could be many people who can supervise the student, I’m not denying that, but expertise-based supervision is more important. I would push on that rather than having supervision for the sake of supervision ... So team supervision works when the team knows what their role is and what they should be doing. But if it’s not defined very well then students can get pulled from one place to another, and then are sat in the middle not knowing what to do.” (Participant 55 STEM)

Some participants also noted the resistance to team supervision in some disciplines, mostly within the AHSS. This was often ascribed to a difference in research culture between AHSS and STEM fields, as well as lower numbers of staff, limited workload capacity, and less funding for large interdisciplinary projects.

**So team supervision works when the team knows what their role is and what they should be doing. But if it’s not defined very well then students can get pulled from one place to another, and then are sat in the middle not knowing what to do.” (Participant 55 STEM)**

## 4.3 Practice reflection: Defining good and poor supervision

In order to explore how focus group-participants reflected on good supervisory practices, it is worth first highlighting that participant's practices and expectations were regularly influenced by their own PGR experiences.

**Participants discussed the impact of the supervision that they received as a PGR, and how these experiences inform their current practices and desires to improve their supervision skills:**

“I think for me it's been kind of – I've done it through experience. So, learning from more senior colleagues, seeing how they supervise, reflecting on my own experiences as a PhD, and what I felt worked and what didn't work in that kind of relationship.” (Participant 15 AHSS)

A supervisor of a PhD by Publication (retrospective) also reflected that having personal experience with this route was essential to adequately supervising others on how to do so:

“I'm not 100% convinced that every supervisor can do that if they have gone through a traditional route ... So, in my experience, only certain people are able to have that ability to deal with a PhD by Publication [retrospective] because it's quite a different experience... being able to knit things together that already exist into a coherent whole, conceptually and pragmatically is a really important skill for that supervisor to have.” (Participant 11 AHSS)

Those who had experienced positive supervision as PGRs described drawing on these experiences when developing their own supervisory approaches, seeking to carry forward similar approaches in their practice:

“I think that really equipped me to be a

good supervisor, all of that together. You know, having that best practice experience doing my PhD...” (Participant 30 AHSS)

“...during my PhD I had a team of three supervisors ... And so yes, so I had a very positive experience of my own, and that sort of fed through, I think, to the supervising.” (Participant 52 AHSS)

However, some participants reflected that a good supervisor needs some distance from their own PGR experience in order to be aware of the individual project or needs of the PGR. In some cases, participants reflected that proximity to one's own doctorate led supervisors to attempt to mould the candidate into their own image:

“So in our in our department, part of the employment, the onboarding, is to get a funded PhD student. And I think in these scenarios you often get that the supervisor is still too close to his or her own experience of doing a PhD. Then you get this – they try to find exactly the same in their PhD students, and this can also lead to not perfect or not ideal supervision.” (Participant 27 STEM)

Participants also mentioned the importance of reflecting on one's own experience or those of others' when exploring participation in CPD and supervisory training. **Table 2** illustrates areas of participants' discussion of good and poor supervision.

Good practice	Poor practice
• Setting expectations and build a framework	• Limited engagement
• Supporting independence as researchers	• Micromanagement
• Sensitivity to PGR needs	• Bullying and harassment

**Table 2** | Participant reflections on good and poor supervisory practice

**In some cases, participants reflected that proximity to one's own doctorate led supervisors to attempt to mould the candidate into their own image.**

## **Good supervisory practice**

### **Setting expectations and building a framework**

Setting expectations as to team and PGR roles and responsibilities was highlighted as being key early on in the doctoral lifecycle. Setting expectations as a team early in the PGR lifecycle allows supervisors to guide their PGRs effectively. Participants emphasised the importance of having adequate time for expectation setting, listening to their PGR, and knowing both when to push them further but also when to pull them back from a research 'rabbit hole':

"I think with excellent supervision, it's obviously setting the parameters of the research there... having regular discussions with... the student about what their aims are, and then setting the framework for that... and setting realistic goals as to what people might wish to achieve."  
(Participant 29 MED)

Participants noted that the absence of expectations, aims, and/or metrics for keeping PGRs on track constituted poor practice:

"What is a poor supervisor is someone who doesn't really listen properly... to try and keeping your students on track at some stages is really one of the aims... the PhD ends up being limited for some because they want to go down that rabbit hole maybe a little bit too much in order to validate or qualify what they're

talking about... So for me a poor supervisor is someone who isn't firm, actually."  
(Participant 10 AHSS)

### **Supporting independence as researchers**

Participants emphasised the importance of developing a PGR's skills and independence as a key factor of the supervisor's role. These sentiments expressed are applicable across disciplinary boundaries:

"Excellent supervision, therefore, by contrast, would be someone who does inspire curiosity for those research goals, but doesn't forget to nurture and cultivate the person that is going to eventually become the leader." (Participant 74 STEM)

"...good supervision will guide them through the reading, hypothesis, development, experimental design, but encourage as much independence as possible..."  
(Participant 72 STEM)

"I would sort of think of it as a traditional humanities approach – often one student, one supervisor, one long research project which is very much directed by the student, and where we encourage the student to be independent from very early on in the research degree." (Participant 83 AHSS)

**Participants emphasised the importance of having adequate time for expectation setting, listening to their PGR, and knowing both when to push them further but also when to pull them back from a research 'rabbit hole'.**

Some participants emphasised the supervisor's role in helping their PGR develop new skills. They also shared the value of supporting their PGR in developing non-research skills, facilitating opportunities for teaching, and guiding them in managing their thesis and work throughout the PGR process:

**“One thing that I’ve sort of learnt over the years is that it’s very easy to supervise somebody if you’re treating them essentially like a research assistant... but that’s not actually good supervision. I think good supervision is when the person actually learns a number of new skills, which they can apply after they finish.”**  
(Participant 48 STEM)

**“...supporting students with having a rounded PhD experience.”**  
(Participant 21 AHSS)

In contrast, poor practice was exemplified as not supporting the development of a well-rounded researcher with a diverse skill-base:

**“I personally think that poor supervision is also not preparing students to apply for big, large bids, and be able to lead a publication that is going to be peer reviewed, or present at a conference where they’re gonna be possibly attacked for their ideas, things like that.”**  
(Participant 62 AHSS)

**“Every good supervisor is aware that they need to look at each student as an individual ...Something you find very easy might be very, very challenging for one student, and again very easy for another.”**  
(Participant 27 STEM)

## Sensitivity to PGR needs

Participants most commonly defined good supervision as being alert and sensitive to the individual needs of the PGR.

Exemplifying the need for individualised supervision, one participant stated:

**“I would just see that as part of being a good supervisor is being alert and sensitive to the particular needs of any student in the same way that you do with teaching. So yeah, it’s not an area where I think that it needs to be sort of pulled out as a separate ‘Oh, we’ve got these sorts of postgraduates.’ ... students are diverse, and we should be sensitive to and aware of all those various diversities as a matter of practice.”** (Participant 50 AHSS)

Others also highlighted this commitment to supporting PGRs as individuals. Another participant emphasised the importance of being adaptable when approaching supervision and identifying particular challenges that each PGR might face:

**“Every good supervisor is aware that they need to look at each student as an individual ...Something you find very easy might be very, very challenging for one student, and again very easy for another.”**  
(Participant 27 STEM)

Individualising the supervisory approach was discussed in a related context by a professional services-based participant. The participant stressed that supervisors must not only consider the variation in PGR identity, experience, and needs, but also realise that there are vastly different supervision practices and expectations across disciplines and universities:

**“I think that the practice is hugely varied, and as I said, I think that is one of the challenges, that is, that people forget that. So when people are talking to each other within the university, even within a faculty sometimes, the expectations are**

potentially different about what is normal, what works and what is good practice.” (Participant 88 PS)

Participants highlighted that notions of good and poor supervision differ between PGRs. **Similarly, notions of good practice and needs will shift throughout an individual PGRs lifecycle, necessitating adaptable supervisors:**

“So what makes good supervision and bad supervision at the start will not be what’s good and bad supervision later on, because you need to give them the space to form as scientists... what might be seen as good and bad depends on context... also individuals, how they respond to that ... it depends, partly, what the student is looking for...” (Participant 7 STEM)

## Poor supervisory practice

### Limited engagement

Participants defined poor supervisory practice as performing the ‘bare minimum’ that was required by the university or department, leaving the majority of the responsibility for the doctorate to the PGR right from the beginning of their project:

“I think having supervisors who are not very engaged in supervision – so whether that be that they’re not very present physically, and they’re not spending a lot of time with their students – can be a problem. Or things like just not providing feedback, you know, regularly or promptly enough, I think that’s the sort of thing that causes problems in biology, particularly.” (Participant 65 STEM)

“...it predominantly comes down to PhD supervisors not prioritising their PhD students, returning work in a timely fashion, not reading it at all.” (Participant 20 STEM)

### Micromangement

Conversely, participants in both STEM and AHSS fields noted micromanagement of PGRs as poor supervisory practice. For example, participants cited supervisors designing and controlling all experiments, pushing their own research agenda, and using PGRs only as a means to collect data and generate papers. Many described this as ‘de-skilling’ a PGR by disempowering them to expand their research experience and constraining their development:

“So I would say poor supervision means using PhD students mostly to collect data that might be useful for the supervisor, but not taking into account the broader requirements, or what it means to do a PhD – which is not just about collecting data, but developing in other areas that go beyond the research projects. And yes, I have seen many students who are just sent in the lab to collect data which will be part of something, but are not involved in other aspects, are not sent to conferences or not encouraged and given the tools to think so much about their research, and not offered the possibility of other professional development opportunities such as teaching, you know, being demonstrators in lab classes, and sort of building up their CV...” (Participant 25 MED)

**“...poor supervision is where the supervisor essentially kind of treats the PhD researcher as kind of like a natural extension of them and their work ... and I think when a supervisor wants to shoehorn too much of their own ideas in ... I think that’s a problem.” (Participant 15 AHSS)**

“...poor supervision is where the supervisor essentially kind of treats the PhD researcher as kind of like a natural extension of them and their work ... and I think when a supervisor wants to shoehorn too much of their own ideas in ... I think that’s a problem.” (Participant 15 AHSS)

## **Bullying and harassment**

Participants detailed poor supervisory practices which included instances of bullying and harassment, where they frequently emphasised power dynamics in supervisory relationships. Many participants emphasised these instances as widespread in their sector:

“I have been involved with a lot of cases of bullying and harassment which often, in academia, involve supervisor-PhD student relationships. So I’m extremely aware of these issues, and I think, unfortunately, they are very, very widespread in academia, despite all the progress that has been made over the years in terms of awareness.” (Participant 26 STEM)

Instances of bullying and harassment were ‘most often related to more senior members of staff’, according to Participant 26 (STEM). The prevalence of this amongst senior academics was echoed across the focus groups:

“I think sometimes... academics have gone on a bit of a power trip where they think they’re right all the time, and actually some authority figures should not be supervising PhD students because they treat them like dogsbodies.” (Participant 20 STEM)

“I think another one for me is just... kind of arrogance from, potentially from supervisors who have been around the block a few more times...” (Participant 84 AHSS)

“I think that there are people who are not good supervisors who’ve been supervising a lot of students and causing issues for a long time ... to be honest, I think that the early career academics are not the problem, I think it’s the people among my generation, I’m afraid.” (Participant 70 STEM)

Participants also described situations where more senior staff drew high-performing PGRs into additional projects, which potentially diverted time from their own doctoral research:

“...sometimes when they show excellence they are hijacked by other colleagues for other projects as well, and they spend a lot of time in development of other projects, and they basically get distracted from their own PhD. So that’s one of the challenges I have, and actually, I’m more junior than some of the professors who can have authority over that and they can hijack good students for other projects.” (Participant 33 STEM)

**“I think sometimes... academics have gone on a bit of a power trip where they think they’re right all the time, and actually some authority figures should not be supervising PhD students because they treat them like dogsbodies.” (Participant 20 STEM)**

## 4.4. Training and development experience

The second part of the focus group questions focused on participants' skills and professional development. Focus group participants were asked to explore how new supervisors should be introduced to their roles and the types of training and development opportunities that participants valued.

### Professional training and development experience

Participants shared a range of priorities regarding professional development and training opportunities to help improve supervisory practice, often framed in response to participants' individual needs. However, many offered broader insights that could inform the development of training provisions for supervisors.

Participants mentioned mandatory introductory/induction modules, workshops and courses, and voluntary CPD. **Communication was a recurring theme across the cohort.** Communication-based skills-building were often included in management training offerings, such as through relevant workshops or modules that were either directly provided by the participant's institution or offered by the institution through external contractors. Some of these communication training initiatives covered topics, such as 'managing difficult conversations', communicating in cross-cultural contexts, providing feedback, and defining expectations with PGRs.

Some participants mentioned CPD offerings focused on mental health. Two participants mentioned the same mental health first aider course, with one stating that it was the most useful training they had received from any CPD initiative, and the other discussing how attending it, and other mental-health specific CPD offerings, had improved their supervision practice as a whole. Another participant stated that mental health training was the most valuable they had received:

**Some participants observed clear differences in the prevalence of resources available to support disabled and neurodiverse PGRs at an undergraduate and doctoral level. Participants noted that most institutional resources surrounding neurodiversity were aimed at lecturers working with undergraduate students.**

"I did the two day Mental Health First Aider training, and that is the most useful training I've ever had at this university, ever in my life. I tell absolutely everyone 'Go and, like, carve out two days to go and do the full course, because it is well worth it'"  
(Participant 82 AHSS)

Another participant also stressed the value of coaching and mentoring training they had taken: while they caution that the coaching training was very time-intensive, and most likely not necessary for most supervisors, they viewed the combination of training in three distinct specialised areas – coaching, mentoring, and mental health – as being hugely beneficial to their supervision:

"Those three things combined – the coaching training taught me how to encourage other people to... reflect on their own experiences and... think about what their goals are, think about how they themselves can overcome their personal barriers to achieving those goals ... which is different from the mentoring training, which was, okay, how do I impart non-biased-but-experienced anecdotes to this person to train them... basically mentoring you're giving your skill and your

expertise to this person, whereas coaching is you're helping that person overcome from internally... and then the mental health training was really good for me to start thinking about how different people experience the same thing and develop some empathy towards the individuals in my group, because then if I could latch onto that for individuals, I could try to get the best out of them, or even delegate and play up to individual strengths which would then make the supervision dynamic easier.” (Participant 74 STEM)

Some participants observed clear differences in the prevalence of resources available to support disabled and neurodiverse PGRs at an undergraduate and doctoral level. Participants noted that most institutional resources surrounding neurodiversity were aimed at lecturers working with undergraduate students.

## Supervision-focused training and CPD

In terms of supervision-specific training, participants' experience varied. Some participants voiced not having any formal induction or introduction training about research supervision. These participants include those based in STEM and AHSS, and most were senior, experienced supervisors who had begun their supervisory careers prior to the normalisation of training or CPD options for supervision. Many late-career participants stated that their only introduction to supervision was through informal peer observation and team supervision as an early-career supervisor. They also mentioned observing and learning from their own PGR experience:

“I'm not sure if I've been trained in how to supervise ... I think I probably did what many people do when they start supervising, start copying and implementing things that they've experienced when they were a student.” (Participant 9 STEM)

“One of the institutions I worked for had no – I mean, I don't know if this is still the case – but they had no training whatsoever for PhD supervisors. You were just expected to get on with it and instinctively know what you were doing. So you could talk to colleagues, certainly, but you learned how to do it by doing it.” (Participant 17 AHSS)

“There isn't much training to become a PhD supervisor. It is ‘Well, you did a PhD, you had supervision. You've second supervised somebody through, you know, some sort of thing, and now yes, you can be a first supervisor’”. (Participant 26 STEM)

Some participants mentioned the positive impact of more specialised CPD offerings, such as those focused on supervising PGRs from historically-underrepresented backgrounds, supporting disability accommodations, developing pastoral care, and supporting PGRs struggling with their mental health/ neurodivergency. These specialised training initiatives were mostly voluntary CPD workshops or modules offered on an irregular basis, and not considered part of the mandatory supervision training that participants reported receiving from their institutions.

Participants commonly viewed their experiences of relevant supervision CPD and training positively. Participants across the focus groups valued the mandatory supervision training and regulatory inductions they attended when beginning their positions at a new institution.

**“I'm not sure if I've been trained in how to supervise ... I think I probably did what many people do when they start supervising, start copying and implementing things that they've experienced when they were a student.”**  
(Participant 9 STEM)

Some participants had attended or taken mandatory training courses/modules at multiple points in their career after switching institutions and valued the introduction to the new rules and regulations for PGR supervision and study at their new university:

“...the most valuable part of that [mandatory training] was just the exposure to rules, regs, and where to get support and what was available – and, of course, that has to be regularly updated because things change.” (Participant 17 AHSS)

“I thought the doctoral supervisory course was absolutely amazing. I couldn’t get enough out of it. I could’ve sat there for a whole year doing... obviously the forms and things is the boring bit, isn’t it? And, gosh! There’s lots of forms to fill out. But once you get your head around that, that’s generally okay.” (Participant 57 AHSS)

Some participants reported that mandatory supervisory training included engaging, practice-oriented methods, while offering useful supplemental resources. Some mentioned actor-led demonstrations they have experienced in relevant training:

“I actually remember undertaking a course at [previous university]... and it was a really good course, actually. I’m personally not a big fan of, like, role-plays or anything like that, but they actually, for that particular course, I remember they did have a trained actor and we observed how to manage difficult conversations, then actually had a practice with that.” (Participant 20 STEM)

“...there is a particular way that [institution] has delivered some of its training, which is with actors running scenarios for you. Which to me has worked really well. They will run a scenario, and something will go horribly wrong, and they will then say, ‘Okay, we’re going to run it again – interrupt us and tell us what to do differently’ and you can run that again, and again, and again until there is a successful outcome.”

#### (Participant 24 STEM)

One of the most commonly highlighted benefits of attending mandatory and voluntary induction and CPD events was the opportunity to discuss supervisory practice and pedagogy with other supervisors. Discussion was mentioned as a key part of formally offered workshops and modules, as well as in institutionally-supported and informal/grassroots discussion networks. Participants mentioned that they valued discussing supervisory manuals and resources, peer-reviewed articles, and case studies about supervision practice. **Participants particularly valued discussion in modules, workshops, and networks with academics from other disciplines. Sharing experiences and learning from peers was central to the perceived benefits of discussion as a supervisory development tool across the cohort:**

“I think the other courses at [institution] I sometimes contribute to are very useful in that they bring supervisors together across the university, and the discussions that we have are sometimes related to the readings, and sometimes not – so I think they’re very worthwhile.” (Participant 16 AHSS)

“...when they did the one-on-one training that was face-to-face – this was pre-Covid – some of their [experienced] supervisors were coming to those training sessions and we, just, you know, had a big discussion group together, and some of that was around, you know, working with our fears as coming in, as you know, new supervisors, and talking about what that experience is like. But then, you know, drawing on their experience and learnings was part of that, you know, training package that was there.” (Participant 30 AHSS)

“...there’s a couple of different, you know, I suppose, formalised CPD training opportunities with regards to supervision. So there’s a [doctoral supervision] initial course, that’s a couple of sessions, a couple of hours long, with some associated tasks

to go along with them where they give you certain scenarios. And then there's one that I've more recently done... which is the '[doctoral supervision for intermediate supervisor] course, which was, I would say, a more retrospective discussion of practice has been the main key feature of that one. You know 'What have you done in all your different disciplines?', which is often interesting to see how it is done in other fields and other disciplines.'

(Participant 45 STEM)

In addition, some participants highlighted the value in being provided with written case studies that they could discuss with peers and a facilitator. They stressed the benefits of having continued access to these case studies and other resources beyond the initial training event. One participant mentioned that it was useful to have access to videos, article summaries, case studies, and manuals on a centralised supervisor's hub. Other participants echoed this, and also noted the importance of having resources available in multiple centralised locations – at institution, faculty, and department level.

## Duration and frequency of CPD

Alongside the discussion of CPD experience, participants also detailed the length and frequency of offerings, which ranged from short workshops to long-term accredited programmes. **Table 3** shows the formats of offerings mentioned by participants.

While some participants valued opportunities for sustained engagement, such as multi-session or longer-term programmes that allowed reflection and skill development, others found shorter, more focused sessions more manageable given their workloads. For some participants, fragmented or brief sessions were seen as impractical or lacking meaningful impact. Several participants highlighted the value of regular, structured refresher courses and peer discussion opportunities, suggesting that a balance between accessibility, duration, and practical relevance is key to effective training.

Training types	Duration/frequency/topics mentioned by participants
<b>Mandatory Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three-week module</li> <li>• Four two-hour sessions</li> <li>• Half-day session</li> <li>• Two-hour session</li> </ul>
<b>Workshop</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One-day session</li> <li>• One-hour session</li> </ul>
<b>Peer Reflection Session</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monthly 30-60 minute sessions</li> </ul>
<b>Mentoring</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monthly two to three-hour sessions</li> <li>• Ongoing sessions</li> </ul>
<b>Additional training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended training series</li> <li>• Training topics covered in the PG Cert HE</li> <li>• External leadership programme</li> <li>• AdvanceHE TSLHE course</li> <li>• One Six-month accredited course, offered annually</li> </ul>

**Table 3** | Types, duration, and frequency of training mentioned by participants

## Peer Observation and Mentoring

Participants highlighted the positive impact of peer observation and peer mentoring schemes in providing opportunities for dedicated discussion times with peers. Participants viewed such activities as formative tools in developing their supervisory practice, providing valuable forms of experiential and observational learning. They described participating in formal structured peer observation and mentoring opportunities, as well as informal peer networks:

“I’m actually, with another hat on, organising a session specifically for supervisors within my faculty to get together to do that [peer discussions] because we think discussing essentially – issues, generic issues and or identified case studies is a good way of supervisors learning from each other...”  
(Participant 24 STEM)

“I think I’ve commonly spoken with colleagues... if an issue has come up, just run it by them and then see whether my response is proportionate or if there’s something else they would do.”  
(Participant 21 AHSS)

“...nothing is better than having one single mentor who can support you through your academic career, supervision, promotion processes, and telling you the secrets learned after many years...”  
(Participant 33 STEM)

Some participants had been involved in formalised peer mentoring and peer observation initiatives offered by their institutions, which usually involved institutional or department-specific mentoring with junior supervisors paired with more experienced peers. One example of formalised peer mentoring and observation provided by participants included a scheme that paired ECRs with more experienced colleagues and offered dedicated support for specially funded studentships on a variety of innovative research projects. Many participants highlighted

that such observation-based initiatives encouraged participation in supervision where junior supervisors were officially brought in as co-supervisors and given opportunities to lead aspects of supervision with team support:

“...we are all holders of this [studentship], so we have to have a mentor on the team, and unlike other supervision where you can be alone most of the time, I tend to supervise the [PGR] very closely with the mentor who’s on the team. And she is very supportive, and I found that extremely helpful, because this is my first start-to-end fully responsible [primary supervisor][experience] – she guides all the steps and gives an approval to what we do and the approaches that we take.”  
(Participant 1 AHSS)

“...as a very junior supervisor I was kind of put on training wheels at first, and came in as an associate supervisor. I stayed an associate until I had my first completion. Once I had my first completion, then I could become a senior and so, having those training wheels on was great ... the senior supervisors are more established supervisors in the field ... so for that first supervision, you’re also being mentored by your senior as well. And as you go through, then that mentoring kind of lessens and you’re coming up and playing that much more active role, and getting some admin work.” (Participant 30 AHSS)

The peer mentoring and peer observation initiatives were often discussed in conjunction with the benefits of team supervision, which provides these opportunities for less experienced supervisors to learn from their peers and see good supervisory practices modelled:

“...we try our best to allocate supervisory teams with mixed experience in it. So there will be someone more experienced on the team, so there is someone normally on the team that can be the sounding board for those who are more new to the process, and new to supervising.” (Participant 58 AHSS)

**“...you cannot have [just] one role model when you are a supervisor, and I completely agree with that. I think it’s really important to have as many as possible, and I think it helps you to see that when you are a postdoc. And you spend the years as a postdoc, for example, as I’ve done – you see many role models, and you also help yourself to supervise better.” (Participant 77 STEM)**

Several participants mentioned that having these opportunities as early in their career as possible – at the postdoc and even PhD level – was beneficial. Many suggested that supervision of Masters dissertations was a good venue for these opportunities to occur:

“...you cannot have [just] one role model when you are a supervisor, and I completely agree with that. I think it’s really important to have as many as possible, and I think it helps you to see that when you are a postdoc. And you spend the years as a postdoc, for example, as I’ve done – you see many role models, and you also help yourself to supervise better.” (Participant 77 STEM)

“The thing actually, for me the most useful thing was... [to] supervise masters by research, and I did three of them in quite short succession – actually two in parallel – and that was really useful because you go through a whole project in the condensed Period.” (Participant 82 AHSS)

Participants emphasised the beneficial opportunity to engage with reflective practice when engaging in peer observation, mentorship, and joint supervision with more experienced

colleagues. Reflective practice often began for participants as they considered their own PGR experiences, informing and shaping their own supervisory style. Participants discussed structured reflective exercises that were either built into a professional development initiative or instigated by a more experienced supervisor:

“...it is really this self-development, self-reflection, I think, that really is the most effective training that no one else can really offer...” (Participant 22 STEM)

“...if you have the benefit and the privilege of being surrounded by good mentors – for example, my PhD supervisor, a lot of the best practices that I tried to apply now have been because I’ve seen what works and what I’ve appreciated from my PhD supervisor ... I think it does really say something about being surrounded by people who are really reflective, very proactive and very vocal about their values in the supervision space.” (Participant 74 STEM)

**“...if you have the benefit and the privilege of being surrounded by good mentors – for example, my PhD supervisor, a lot of the best practices that I tried to apply now have been because I’ve seen what works and what I’ve appreciated from my PhD supervisor ... I think it does really say something about being surrounded by people who are really reflective, very proactive and very vocal about their values in the supervision space.” (Participant 74 STEM)**

## Challenges in CPD engagement

While participants highlighted benefits to their practice and to understanding institutional procedures from mandatory introductory and induction training sessions, they articulated challenges around workload and time allocation. Grappling with the tensions between workload allocation and CPD in institutions and departments could help inform designing future training offerings and supervisory time allocation. For example, as presented in the previous section, the timeframe for some CPD schemes were seen as ‘impractical’.

Several participants mentioned an aversion to, what they described as, ‘tick box exercises’, referring primarily to short courses and online modules that prioritised fulfilling institutional requirements over professional learning or development:

“We have to complete the training because we have to. A lot of it was time-consuming, and was very much theoretical, and if I had the choice I wouldn’t go through training in [online learning environment] to supervise ... Some of the discussions were good, but if I was, say, maybe 20% of the training was useful, but 80% was just tick-box exercise.”  
(Participant 1 AHSS)

“I can tell you what I find least useful is required things that we have to do which are these online cartoons, ‘Blah blah blah’, followed by a test... and there’s probably three important messages in those things that are totally lost... because it turns into a tick box exercise.” (Participant 22 STEM)

Some participants’ reservations about mandatory training reflected broader skepticism toward formalised or standardised approaches within HE. Experienced supervisors across the cohort commented on the tension between institutional consistency and individual autonomy in supervisory practice:

“I’m just a bit skeptical about formal processes of training. They’re very good at introducing people to the processes which you need to understand... but they have little-to-zero impact on how people behave in a wide variety of fields, and that’s much more to do with culture and practice in a particular community.”  
(Participant 34 AHSS)

“I feel like the university in many areas like to standardise things, right, and I don’t think that works in a lot of capacities. You know, standardising assessment across vastly different subjects is just a ridiculous idea, but they’ve gone and done it anyway, and I feel like if they were to attempt to standardise supervision then that would be equally disastrous.” (Participant 46 STEM)

“I don’t want to diminish what the University is trying to do with the framework for supervisory practice, I think that it’s important, and it needed to be done to kind of create a baseline on which everyone builds. But that I think everyone who’s involved with that recognises that it is very difficult to create direct and encompassing guidelines for every department, considering every department does things very differently...”  
(Participant 73 STEM)

Other reasons for limited engagement with mandatory training included dislike of online delivery of training, unclear course descriptions, and content perceived as not relevant to individual needs. It is worth noting that these comments did not reflect participants’ resistance to professional development itself, but rather concerns about over-regulation and administrative bureaucracy in training provision:

“I do tend to avoid training sessions because... you can’t tell in advance if it’s going to be interesting or not ... I’m [also] a bit averse to online training.”  
(Participant 8 AHSS)

“I had to do something called [Training programme], but that in no way gave me any training on how to be a good supervisor, I mean, yeah, I’ve read the papers on Kolb’s Cycle of Learning and blah blah blah but that was so remote from what I do that yeah, I did it, and I got my certificate, but it didn’t turn me into a better supervisor.” (Participant 22 STEM)

Some participants noted that the gaps in institutional CPD provision led them to seek external development opportunities. They articulated that courses, modules, and workshops available at their past or current institutions were not always sufficiently engaging, consistently offered, or comprehensive. As a result, these participants described turning to a range of external or informal sources of development, including social media networking groups, CPD programmes offered by funding bodies such as the Royal Society or UKRI, and courses or mentoring schemes provided by third-party consultancies such as Rambutan.

**“I’m just a bit skeptical about formal processes of training. They’re very good at introducing people to the processes which you need to understand... but they have little-to-zero impact on how people behave in a wide variety of fields, and that’s much more to do with culture and practice in a particular community.”**  
**(Participant 34 AHSS)**

## 4.5 Participant CPD requests

### Introducing new supervisors

Participants in just over half of the focus groups were asked about new supervisor training methods and offerings at their institutions. Respondents mostly articulated that there should be formal training, as well as formal mentoring/paired supervision schemes offered early on in a supervisor’s career. Participants most commonly mentioned that new supervisors should be required to attend modules, workshops, or courses specifically covering research supervision that detail the institutional regulations and practical considerations for the PhD, as well as broader supervision-specific topics:

**“I think a discussion about requirements would be great, like something like how to set expectations and how to set requirements for a PhD degree.”**  
**(Participant 35 STEM)**

**“I think you should have formal training. I think that should be a requirement that you do. You know it’s mandatory, really, if you are supervising ... thinking particularly about the EDI component of your work and reasonable adjustments, you should be reflecting on that, and conversant with that, and conversant with the support that’s available to students within the university.”** (Participant 28 MED)

One participant emphasised the value of introducing supervision training early in the research career, suggesting it be integrated into doctoral and postdoctoral development through mentoring, shadowing, and co-supervision opportunities. Early exposure was articulated as one of the most effective ways to prepare new supervisors for research supervision.

Multiple participants agreed that co-supervision or joining a supervisory team as a junior researcher was the best way for new supervisors to develop supervision skills. Many suggested that institutions should require

co-supervision experience before researchers take on the role of lead supervisor. Across the cohort, participants also emphasised the value of peer knowledge-exchange, including through networking, peer review, reflective discussion, and drawing on the collective expertise of supervisory communities within their departments or institutions:

**“The greatest value beyond learning the University regulations and processes is at least being able to share insights with new supervisors, and between new supervisors within our research centre.”**  
(Participant 15 AHSS)

## CPD topics

Many participants in the focus groups articulated the benefit of training related to broadly developing their supervisory practice, while some also requested coverage of specialised topics that were not nominally related to supervision but would be professionally useful, including support around time management. Some participants also expressed concern that supervisors are often encouraged to act as mentors to PGRs but are not provided with specific training in mentoring or coaching.

Several participants stressed the need for development focused on building, maintaining, and troubleshooting interpersonal relationships with their PGRs:

**“...where supervision practice can fail for individuals is not having those interpersonal skills that can then bring out the best science or rigorous study ... there has to be a balance of those things.”**  
(Participant 74 STEM)

Many also highlighted the need for professional development and training around supporting their PGRs in navigating academic life and procedures:

**“I’ve been through some challenging moments with some students not getting grants because of some really not honest/political things happening in the department, or things like that, and it’s very difficult for me to help them through that, not knowing exactly what to do.”**  
(Participant 62 AHSS)

**“There is very little support from [institution] when it comes to difficult situations with PhD studentships.”**  
(Participant 27 STEM)

One participant expressed a desire for more space to have complex discussions with other supervisors about the theory and practice of supervision itself:

**“I think if training wasn’t so much about institutional structures and the way the university does the procedures and the guidelines... but it was a space to talk about ‘How do they [PGRs] centre themselves? How do they find the agency in what they do?’ That is going to be more empowering, I think. And also to be able to critically talk about these, these quite significant paradigm shifts that are happening in research, which is about decolonisation, about protected characteristics, about inclusivity, equity. You know, how and why these people are not in these spaces. That’s a fundamental question that we need to ask.”**  
(Participant 61 AHSS)

Participants requested CPD around understanding departmental processes, guiding PGRs through the peer-review process, and defining supervision roles in teams.

Mental health, wellbeing, and neurodivergency was a key area that came up when discussing training and development opportunities desired by supervisors. Some participants stated that

they have found pastoral care skills particularly important to develop, and made specific requests for expanded mental health training. Other participants pointed out a lack of skills development relating to supporting PGRs with disabilities, long-term health problems, and neurodivergencies, such as ADHD or autism. Multiple participants expressed that they had difficulties accessing resources or institutional support when supervising PGRs experiencing neurodiversity or the intensification of mental illness symptoms, resulting in neither the supervisor nor the PGR receiving adequate aid.

Participants highlighted the need for CPD modules, courses, and workshops covering initial, mandatory supervisory training and connected refresher courses, as well as short workshops covering specific topics. Desired specialised topics including managing expectations, providing feedback, defining quality of good supervision, enacting good leadership, and understanding supervision pedagogy. As presented in the above section, the duration and frequency of the modules, courses, and workshops participants had found useful varied. Most participants appreciated a balance of longer courses that took place over several weeks — allowing for time for reflection and rapport-building with their fellow course participants — and one-off workshops that could be anywhere from a few hours in the afternoon to a concentrated three day event.

**Mental health, wellbeing, and neurodivergency was a key area that came up when discussing training and development opportunities desired by supervisors.**

## Peer Support and Mentoring

Schemes for peer support, discussion, observation, and review were frequently mentioned as the expected mode of CPD. Participants from all institutions expressed desires for more opportunities to read and discuss relevant literature on supervision with peers within their own departments and across the university. One participant mentioned that their research centre's monthly peer discussion meeting provided an opportunity to engage with discussion around literature on supervision, suggesting that all research centres should have similar initiatives. The value of peer discussion of published work, researcher/supervision developer compiled case studies, and personal experiences was not just in the 'practical' value of finding solutions for immediate problems. Several participants voiced that these opportunities allowed them to develop their own supervision practice in more intangible ways, providing the space for reflection and broadening of their perspectives:

**“I think it would be really valuable to have not just training opportunities, but also more forums in which PhD supervisors could come together and kind of share their experience and share their approaches to some of these, some of these challenges, which are perhaps not best tackled through online training or mandatory workshops.”**  
(Participant 83 AHSS)

**“...then there's maybe the more informal [supervision processes] in terms of your own observation and reflexive practice. We don't have any sort of peer review of our supervision. So we do... in our teaching, interestingly, so we have to complete an annual peer review of our teaching. And maybe that would be something that we should be doing as supervisors as well... providing peer review to each other around our supervision.”** (Participant 28 MED)

**Participants from all institutions expressed desires for more opportunities to read and discuss relevant literature on supervision with peers within their own departments and across the university.**

Participants mentioned various formats of mentoring schemes, with several highlighting experiences with formalised mentoring schemes offered institutionally or externally, while others classified more informal peer relationships as mentorship. Regardless of the level of formality, the core takeaway was that some form of peer support from more experienced supervisors was seen as almost essential to good supervision practice, career development, and personal success. One participant pointed out the need for supervisors to be properly introduced to mentoring, offering that supervisors could have 'bite-sized' or 'taster' sessions on what coaching or mentoring is.

While some participants described having different kinds of mentors, ranging from more experienced friends to officially assigned mentors from a different disciplinary background, there were consistent remarks about the need for time to engage in these relationships.

Some participants stressed the importance of having mentoring opportunities properly included in the supervision workload and development expected by an institution:

**"I always think you want a formal way where you might get some hours to actually reflect and do that [mentoring], rather than just [relying on] the goodwill of the mentee or mentor to do it because they know it's a good thing."  
(Participant 52 AHSS)**

**"I just wanted to make that point about that form of mentoring support, it being kind of formalised and built-in and workloaded has been really important, because otherwise you're reliant on goodwill." (Participant 69 AHSS)**

These comments pointed to a shared view that mentoring should be formally supported and embedded within supervisors' development frameworks.

**"I always think you want a formal way where you might get some hours to actually reflect and do that [mentoring], rather than just [relying on] the goodwill of the mentee or mentor to do it because they know it's a good thing."  
(Participant 52 AHSS)**

# 5. Discussion

The focus groups explored the four main RSVP research questions that centre on team supervision, disciplinary differences, diverse research degrees, and poor and good supervision practice. Participants also discussed supervision training, development, and the wide variety of necessary skills to be a good research supervisor.

Participants' observations resonate with findings reported in [UK Research Supervision Survey 2024](#) that team supervision is increasingly common and beneficial for both supervisors and PGRs. Disciplinary breadth, complementary expertise, and shared responsibility were all valued in supervisory teams. Particularly, interdisciplinary supervision teams were seen as enhancing PGRs' doctoral experience by exposing them to a wider range of techniques and perspectives. However, participants also noted challenges relating to role definition, workload allocation, and communication within teams. These reflections highlighted the continuing need for institutions to clarify supervisory roles and recognise the additional coordination involved in team supervision models.

Participants also discussed how disciplinary contexts shape supervisory practice and expectations. AHSS participants described supervision as often following a dyadic model, with PGRs frequently proposing their own research projects and being expected to take responsibility for shaping and directing their work from an early stage. STEM participants highlighted the default team supervision model, the influence of external funders and laboratory-based environments, and the role of supervisors as project leads.

Across disciplines, participants' reflections on good and poor supervision reflected a shared understanding of effective supervisory practices as candidate-centred, communicative, and adaptive, while poor

practices were often associated with limited engagement, micromanagement, and bullying and harassment. Many participants recognised that their own experiences as doctoral candidates had shaped their supervisory values and approaches, suggesting a 'generational transmission' of supervision practices.

Participants also detailed diverse experiences in their training and professional development. They noted that topic relevance, accessibility of the format, and realistic time allocation for participation are central to effective training provision. Several participants also cited tensions between institutional standardisation and individual autonomy, noting that compliance-driven training models sometimes lacked disciplinary relevance. Peer observation and mentoring schemes were particularly valued by participants. New supervisors joining a supervision team, composed of more experienced supervisors, was considered as an effective way for their supervision skill development. Participant requests for future CPD schemes focused on context-sensitive provision, including addressing emerging challenges such as PGR wellbeing and neurodiversity.

**The findings from the research supervisor focus groups highlight the complexity and diversity of academic supervision across disciplines, doctoral programmes, and institutions. Participants' discussion suggests a strong commitment to continuous improvement and peer learning in their supervisory role. Overall, the consensus is that participants expect more opportunity to engage in discussion, peer support, and create communities of practice with other supervisors.**

# RSVP Cohort A Participant Information Sheet



## School of Arts and Creative Technologies

### Participant Information Sheet – Anonymous Research

#### Project background

The University of York would like to invite you to take part in the following project:  
RSVP Focus Groups

Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let us know if anything is unclear or you would like further information.

#### What is the purpose of the project?

This project is being undertaken by Dr. Liz Quinlan ([liz.quinlan@york.ac.uk](mailto:liz.quinlan@york.ac.uk)) and Dr. Karen Clegg ([karen.clegg@york.ac.uk](mailto:karen.clegg@york.ac.uk)), both members of the School of ACT. The work is being conducted according to restrictions that have been subject to approval by the ACT Ethics committee. The Chair of the ACT Ethics committee can be contacted on [ACT-ethics@york.ac.uk](mailto:ACT-ethics@york.ac.uk).

For this research project, we are interested in establishing baselines surrounding research supervision practice and culture across the UK, to inform the development of continuing professional development resources and influence broad research culture change.

In order to achieve this, we are interested in a variety of topics and groups found within the UK higher education sector. These include: [choose appropriate cohort group description] the supervision experiences and development needs of tertiary (often industry) co-supervisors; the management experiences and approaches of DTP/CDT directors; and perspectives on supervision practice and institutional factors from Deans and Directors of doctoral schools. Your participation in this project will involve attending a single 90-minute focus group with other participants from [insert cohort demographic]. You will be asked a series of questions, which you will be given access to ahead of the focus group, and asked to provide your reflections and observations about topics including supervision practice, challenges of supervision, and continuing professional development. Prior to taking place in this focus group we will also ask that you fill in a pre-questionnaire to establish some background information about you, your research discipline, and experience.

Please note that to comply with the approved Ethics requirements of this work, we do not intend to discuss sensitive topics with you that could be potentially upsetting or distressing. If you have any concerns about the topics that may be covered in the research study, please raise these concerns with the researcher.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. If you wish, we will provide you with access to any summary reports, publications, or other forms of research dissemination. If you would like to receive access to these, you can indicate as such on the consent form.

### Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you are [select one of the following, depending on cohort]:

- a 'tertiary' co-supervisor with expertise in a particular industry or field, who participates in research supervision in a team environment in the UK
- a manager or director of a CDT or DTP in the UK
- a Dean or Director of a doctoral school in the UK

### Do I have to take part?

No, participation is optional. If you do decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records and will be asked to complete a participant consent form. If you change your mind at any point during the research activity, you will be able to withdraw your participation without having to provide a reason. To withdraw your participation, you need to inform project lead Liz Quinlan within 7 days of participating in a focus group, and your data and information will be disregarded during analysis and deleted.

### Will I be identified in any outputs?

No. Your participation in this research activity will be treated anonymously and you will not be identified in any outputs.

### Privacy Notice

This section explains how personal data will be used by RSVP at the University of York.

For this project, the University of York is the **Data Controller**. We are registered with the Information Commissioner's Office. **Our registration number** is Z4855807.

### What is our legal basis for processing your data?

Privacy law (the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018) requires us to have a legal reason to process your personal data. Our reason is we need it to perform a public task.<sup>1</sup>

This is because the University has a public function, defined in **our charter and statutes**, which includes carrying out research projects. We need to use personal data in order to carry out this research project.<sup>2</sup>

Information about your health, ethnicity, sexual identity and other sensitive information is called **"special category" data**. We have to have an additional legal reason to use this data, because it is sensitive. Our reason is that it is needed for research purposes.<sup>3</sup> All research projects at the University follow our **research ethics policies**.

### How do we use your data?

The data collected in this research will be used to help us understand the experiences and professional development needs of research supervisors in the UK, and project outputs will be used to inform the development of new resources and UK higher education policy recommendations from organisations like the UKCGE.

---

<sup>1</sup> This refers to **UK GDPR Article 6 (1) (e)**: processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller

<sup>2</sup> **Our charter and statutes** states: 4.f. To provide instruction in such branches of learning as the University may think fit and to make provision for research and for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge in such manner as the University may determine.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to **UK GDPR Article 9 (2) (j)**: processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes in accordance with Article 89(1) based on Union or Member State law which shall be proportionate to the aim pursued, respect the essence of the right to data protection and provide for suitable and specific measures to safeguard the fundamental rights and the interests of the data subject.

## Who do we share your data with?

The raw data from this project (audio and video recordings, transcriptions of your focus group discussion, and pre-questionnaire responses) will not be shared with anyone beyond the RSVP core analysis team (Liz Quinlan and Karen Clegg). Anonymised and pseudonymised data will be shared in various project output forms (including reports, summaries, and publications) with not only our wider RSVP research network, but interested parties across the global higher education sector.

As well as this, we use computer software or systems to hold and manage data. Other companies only provide the software, system or storage. They are not allowed to use your data for their own reasons.

We have agreements in place when we share data. These agreements meet legal requirements to ensure your data is protected.

## How do we keep your data secure?

The University is serious about keeping your data secure and protecting your rights to privacy. We don't ask you for data we don't need, and only give access to people who need to know. We think about security when planning projects, to make sure they work well. Our IT security team checks regularly to make sure we're taking the right steps. For more details see [our security webpages](#).

## How do we transfer your data safely internationally?

If your data is stored or processed outside the UK, we follow legal requirements to make sure that the same level of privacy rules still apply.

## How long will we keep your data?

The University has rules in place [for how long research data can be kept](#) when the research project is finished. Your information will be kept for a maximum of one year, and after this time an anonymised version will be kept. As this will be fully anonymous, it will not be possible to identify you in any way from this data.

## What rights do you have in relation to your data?

[You have rights over your data](#). This sheet explains how you can stop participating in the study, and what will happen to your data if you do. This information is in the section 'Do I have to take part?'

If you want to get a copy of your data, or talk to us about any other rights, please contact us using the details below.

## Questions or concerns

If you have any questions or concerns about how your data is being processed, please contact Liz Quinlan ([liz.quinlan@york.ac.uk](mailto:liz.quinlan@york.ac.uk)) or Karen Clegg ([karen.clegg@york.ac.uk](mailto:karen.clegg@york.ac.uk)).

If you have further questions, the University's Data Protection Officer can be contacted at [dataprotection@york.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@york.ac.uk) or by writing to: Data Protection Officer, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD.

## Right to complain

If you are unhappy with how the University has handled your personal data, please contact our Data Protection Officer using the details above, so that we can try to put things right.

If you are unhappy with our response, you have a right to [complain to the Information Commissioner's Office](#). You can also contact the Information Commissioner's Office by post to **Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF** or by phone on **0303 123 1113**.

# RSVP Cohort A Question set

## Section 1: Supervision in different contexts

1. How do you think supervision in your discipline differs from other disciplines you are familiar with?
  - a. What unique challenges or strategies are involved in supervising in your academic field?
  - b. How would you contrast poor and excellent supervision in your discipline?
2. What challenges have you faced when supervising, and how have you addressed them?
  - a. Do you think specific training in a specific area would have helped you to better negotiate that challenge? If so, what would have been beneficial?
3. Are you, or have you ever, been part of a team supervision (we are defining team as 3 or more supervisors)?
  - a. What are the pros and cons of a team approach?
  - b. Have you ever worked with a non-HE/ university supervisor?
  - c. How do you effectively manage and coordinate co-supervision with other supervisors?
4. Here are some examples of different PGR experiences and identities (eg. part-time, full-time; remote; home, international; funded, self-funded; LGBTQI+; disabled; minoritised ethnicities), do you have any experience supervising such PGRs?
  - a. Can you share experiences when working with any of these PGR types impacted the supervisory relationship?

5. Considering the diverse forms of research degrees (eg. co-tutelle, part-time, distance/ hybrid, by publication, portfolio, and professional practice doctorates) can you discuss any unique challenges and strategies you have employed in supervising these types of degrees?
  - a. How do you adapt your supervision approach to meet the specific needs of these different research degrees?

## Section 2: Skills and professional development

1. What skills have you needed to develop at different stages of your supervisory career, and where have you gone to develop them?
  - a. Do you discuss supervisory experiences and practices with your peers, and in what contexts? [Prompts: formally, in PDR/probation meetings? Informally, in chats with colleagues? Structured, in workshops?]
2. How do you think new supervisors should be introduced to their roles?
  - a. How well did your onboarding and induction training prepare you for the challenges of supervision?
  - b. If you had to give a new supervisor one piece of advice what would it be?
3. Are there any training or development opportunities that have directly addressed your needs as a supervisor, and which have been lacking?
  - a. What motivates you to undertake development opportunities? [thinking more broadly than supervisor development alone - e.g. teaching skills development etc]

- b.** Which types of development activities do you find most engaging, and why do they resonate with you?
  - c.** What additional training formats or topics would motivate you to participate more actively? And what types of training would encourage you to engage more frequently with these opportunities?
- 4.** Does your institution/faculty/department give you opportunities to enhance your supervisory practice? [Prompts: Time, encouragement, resources, receiving recognition for training?]

# Points of difference between AHSS and STEM

Points of Difference	Art & Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS)	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)
<b>Project development and initiation</b>	<p>Projects often proposed by the PGR, leading to great independence and less involvement from supervisor as project owner</p> <p>Supervisors described it as more 'hands-off', in order to encourage the PGRs' critical thinking and ownership of a project from the beginning.</p>	<p>There were several observations made that, within STEM fields, the typical model is PGRs coming to a pre-funded project or seeking funding with the aid of a PI, and that the projects they work on are developed and designed mostly by supervisors.</p> <p>This funding model results in PGR independence coming later in a project, partially because there is lab training and work early on.</p>
<b>Areas of expertise and interdisciplinary teams</b>	<p>Supervisors may be expected to supervise PGR projects far outside their area of expertise, with little to no support in the form of a supervision team or even informal advisory collaborations.</p> <p>This was described as being related to both the general smaller department sizes in AHSS fields, as well as the emphasis on PGR-led projects.</p>	<p>Both clinical and STEM participants emphasized the values of team supervision, mostly focused on the ability to have secondary and tertiary supervisors with particular expertise advise PGRs on methods or analytical skills.</p>
<b>Epistemological Grounding</b>	<p>Supervisors detailed that subject types lead to different skill development and routes to developing knowledge for the PGR.</p>	<p>This supervisor identified a key difference in assumptions about theory and practice between the disciplines.</p>

Points of Difference	Art & Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS)	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)
<b>PGR supervisory team size and function</b>	<p>Supervisors mentioned the concept that the traditional model of supervision in AHSS subjects like literature, history, and even psychology were based on one-to-one or 'dyadic' supervision, where the PGR has a single supervisor.</p> <p>Though this was described as the 'traditional' model by some supervisors, they made it clear that there has been a clear shift towards co-supervision in recent years.</p>	<p>Already often working in interdisciplinary team and with industry shared the value of technicians and postdocs as parts of PGR supervisory teams in STEM fields, but it was clear that they are rarely seen as formal supervisors.</p>
<b>Contact time</b>	<p>Supervisors meetings with PGRs were reported to be less regular than STEM disciplines</p>	<p>Participants described more frequent contact with their PGRs, especially earlier in the PGR process</p>
<b>PGR contexts</b>	<p>Supervisors from AHSS disciplines who were involved in practice-based or professional doctorates also cited having more mature and part-time PGRs. PGRs who pursue such degrees are usually mid-career or have even had a full career prior to pursuing a higher research degree.</p>	
<b>Impact of Funding</b>	<p>Supervisors shared potential supervisory challenges when self-funded PGRs are unable to support themselves.</p>	<p>Supervisors described how funders of doctoral training partnerships, centres for doctoral training, innovative training networks, and individual PGR fellowships often have requirements relating to PGR development and performance which can affect supervisory practice.</p>

# Types of Doctorate

Doctorate types mentioned by participants	Definition	Supervisory practice reflections	Quote(s)
PhD by Publication	<p><b>PhD by publication (prospective):</b> a PhD made up of between 3-4 peer-reviewed journal articles (some may be preprints or under review at time of PhD submission), often with connecting introduction and discussion chapters.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘High-level’ writing facilitation from the beginning of the PGR process</li> <li>• More writing support in general</li> <li>• Guidance through the peer review process</li> </ul>	<p><i>“I think for the students it’s really good training for them that they have the opportunity to have publications across their thesis. I think at the viva it does tend to put them in a slightly more secure position because clearly their work is publishable because they’ve published... it strengthens their position at viva, and I think it also really strengthens their transition to postdoc... particularly for those wanting to pursue a career as an independent researcher...”</i></p> <p>(Participant 28 MED)</p>
	<p><b>PhD by publication (retrospective):</b> a PhD built around existing publications that may be journal articles, books, or other forms of reports, and may be in a portfolio format depending on the field of study.</p>		<p><i>“I’m not 100% convinced that every supervisor can do that if they have gone through a traditional route ... So, in my experience, only certain people are able to have that ability to deal with a PhD by Publication because it’s quite a different experience... being able to knit things together that already exist into a coherent whole, conceptually and pragmatically is a really important skill for that supervisor to have.”</i></p> <p>(Participant 11 AHSS)</p>
Practice-based/led PhD	<p>Practiced-based or practice-led PhDs were most often discussed in an arts and humanities or clinical medical context, and it was clear that participants across the cohort defined whether a PhD was ‘practice-based’, ‘practice-</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjustment in supervisory practice to optimise clinical integration and recruiting PGRs for clinical practice-based PhDs</li> <li>• Coping with potential intra-disciplinary conflicts in supervision between the applied and</li> </ul>	<p><i>“So I think the problem in orthopaedics is that we can certainly get keen students and junior doctors involved in research, but it’s much harder to get people into doctoral schemes... because obviously, unlike, say, some aspects of medicine, the incentive is not quite there. The need for a thesis is not the same for career progression, because obviously, you know, being honest, that’s what drives most people.”</i></p> <p>(Participant 29 MED)</p>

led' or 'embedded' in different ways, with some further confusion when participants would talk about traditional PhDs with practical components. Some of the medical field participants had experience supervising clinical research PGRs, who undertake what some may consider as clinical practice-based PhDs.

- theoretical sides of computer science research
- Different composition of PGR supervisory team than traditional PhDs
  - PGRs' needs for learning new skills outside of their speciality in order to document and capture the creative process in a way that allows them to engage critically with their work, and the traditional structure of a PhD doesn't allow adequate time for this process

*"...the fact that they're in work practicing rather than being full time students, it does create quite a difference. One is that their focus is not about becoming academics... it's not so focused on publishing, for example... it's very much more practice based, which I think is really nice for very good conversations, and really interesting work. That creates some different challenges around the completion, the conflicting work between work and and study."*

(Participant 56 AHSS)

*"...very different outputs, because dance is always collaborative."*

(Participant 10 AHSS)

*"I think because of the nature of the practice-led PhD of methodological approaches seem to be forefronted. So artists are obsessed with how a thing is made, and... in the making of a research process that doesn't necessarily come in the order that is expected of them, you know, to kind of set out a research question and understand the context. But they do know how to make a thing. So it's how to reconfigure that structure, that research structure, in such a fashion that enables the practice-led researcher to kind of discover through methodological inquiry in some way."*

(Participant 61 AHSS)

*"So I've done projects which are civic-facing, so they're consultations with city councils, or they're a kind of a commissioning process, or they're an interesting testing ground where you learn this kind of more expansive context for how research in a university context has an impact. It's really, really fascinating. And I think I've built my research profile through those types of processes and inadvertently developed a set of skills that do begin to feed back into the [supervision] process. So I do think something to do with the kind of mechanics of that level of PhD supervisory research goes absolutely hand in hand with a space for your own critical research to happen."*

(Participant 61 AHSS)

## Professional Doctorates

Discussions of professional doctorates mostly centered on either the concept of professional doctorates in general or three specific types of professional doctorate that participants had experience supervising, named the Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA), Doctorate in Clinical Psychology (DClinPsy) and Engineering doctorate (EngD).

- Increased amount of practical work that can make up the final degree outputs
- Guidance for many professional doctorate PGRs through an adjustment to an academic environment after years in industry.
- Different skills needed for supervision, specifically because the academic requirements must be met while also satisfying the business application needs
- PGRs might be required to take additional modules, international collaborations, adjusted doctoral milestones

*"I was an examiner of a professional doctorate in business administration. I think that for that I did kind of adjust the ways in which I reviewed the thesis because it was a particular practical project that was meant to provide practical recommendations in the end."*

(Participant 21 STEM)

*"...that [supervising DBAs], I find, is a very poor experience compared to the PhD experience. Especially when the DBA candidates are there for the title – and I have to be clear that some of them are – they're not so fond of, you know, solving the world's problems, but they want to add to their credentials, this title, or this degree, from a UK-based university. So I find the DBA in particular challenging because of these issues."*

(Participant 1 AHSS)

*"It's something called the DClinPsy – doctorate in clinical psychology – which is quite a different format of degree. A lot more training, a shorter degree, but it's still considered a doctoral level degree. I haven't supervised it directly, but I do know that supervisors find that quite different, because they're supervising a student for a much shorter period of time. The project is much more constrained, but the student is hugely more stressed because they are doing a huge amount of professional work, and often very stressful professional work as well."*

(Participant 24 STEM)

*"So the cohort systems are sponsored by industry, the cohort's coming from industry, so we have a very set sort of criteria that we need to look at, and we work with industrial partners... But you also have very targeted things, and there's always a lot of avenues to explore ... It's very methodical, so there's set readings, set experiments. So if you do get stuck down one alley, there's always another experiment you can try. I think that gives more flexibility and more adaptability in the project. So if somebody is struggling with some of the more theoretical or difficult concepts, we can change track completely. Somebody might start experimental – doesn't get on with it. We could go*

to a modeling one or vice versa, so that we have a lot more flexibility in adapting the projects as we go... and we generally have very mixed supervision teams, so it won't just be one discipline of engineering. We tend to bring in quite a few different disciplines – chemical, and mechanical, and electrical ... they [co-supervisors] tend to focus on the specific areas of the project that's their specialism, so that they [PGRs] get the support they need... quite a few of the PhDs I've sponsored are actually engineering doctorates, not PhDs, and they tend to be in these cohorts, and they're all doing similar projects or similar themes.”

(Participant 38 STEM)

**Co-Tutelle arrangements**

A PGR is dual-enrolled in a doctoral degree programme at two universities, usually one based in the UK and one abroad.

- Good management skills in order to navigate the different institutional approaches to PGR training, research culture conflicts, and practical issues relating to milestones and requirements
- Specific publication requirements for PhD completion
- PGRs' mixed experiences with the programme
- Explicit dedication and definition of roles and outputs

“In terms of the co-tutelle... there are cultural differences, and luckily, in my case I've done it with friends... so it worked well because the friend had a different set of skills. I think in the team supervision if everybody's got the same skills... it's chaos.”

(Participant 19 AHSS)

“...my style in [this case] had to change, because you have to support the student to publish no matter what, as fast as possible. So the output is a requirement of the PhD, and that changes the style of the supervision quite significantly, because there's less time to play, dream and explore, because the output is needed ... I didn't realize how critical it was until sort of halfway into the PhD, until they told me that is a requirement. And then suddenly, I panicked more than the foreign supervisor and student, because I thought, ‘Wow, there's a long way to go!’”

(Participant 22 STEM)

“The biggest problem that we've had is trying to align the two institutions in terms of the milestones and the paperwork, because, essentially what we found is that with the co-supervision in two different institutions there has essentially been a double-up of paperwork...”

(Participant 48 STEM)

*“...the University B-[institution] collaboration, I think, requires at the beginning, from the very outset, a co-creation culture. We need to – whatever we do – co-design, co-create, co-develop, and co-utilize the findings. Otherwise there is an opportunity there could be a risk of us going into different directions...”*

(Participant 49 AHSS)

---

## RSVP

The Next Generation Research SuperVision Project (RSVP) is a £4.6million, Research England funded project designed to transform the culture and practice of research supervision. Working with over 50 universities, industry, funders and researchers, the RSVP is exploring what constitutes consistent, high quality supervision practice, the role of team supervision, and the impact of engagement in professional development on practice, as well as making recommendations about recognition and support.

### How to cite this publication:

Quinlan, E., Li, H., Atkinson, L., and Clegg, K. (2026) Focus Groups Report: Academic Research Supervisors. Next Generation Research SuperVision Project.  
<https://doi.org/10.15124/yao-apcd-kp03>

Funded by



Led by

