Supporting Excellent Supervisory Practice across ESRC and UKRI's Doctoral Training Investments

October 2022

UK Council for
Graduate Education

Contents

Introduction

Background

In April 2022, UKRI commissioned the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) to conduct a series of 6 focus groups involving a variety of different stakeholders involved in doctoral supervision, across all UKRI research disciplines.

The workshops engaged with over 120 people, including research supervisors, doctoral researchers and Directors of Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs).

A principle aim of the workshops was to establish how UKRI could better support research supervision, and in particular whether it would be helpful for UKRI to publish a "statement of expectations for research supervision".

The commission followed ESRC's Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences which recommended that the ESRC:

> *" […] should ensure a comprehensive programme of initial training and [continuing professional development] is developed so supervisors are effectively supported to undertake their role."*
>
> *Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences 2021: p.9*

It is also intended to contribute to UKRI's wider work on the New Deal for Postgraduate Research, and involved participants from across UKRI's research portfolio**.**

Overview

Focus groups lasted between 1 ½ hours to 2 hours, and were facilitated by two or three representatives from the UKCGE. Participants were provided with comprehensive agendas in advance, which variously included provocative statements, quotations from appropriate reports, and case-study style scenarios.

Focus group participants were engaged with the issues, aired views freely, and made suggestions in a constructive manner. All focus groups were recorded to aid notetaking, but participants were assured of confidentiality.

No formal evaluation of the discussions was undertaken, but there was a consensus among the facilitators that participants had valued the discussions. In a focus group with research supervisors, one participant suggested that it would be useful:

> *"…to have more meetings like this…"*

Another participant suggested that this model of holding discussions on the roles and responsibilities of research supervisors could be replicated within DTPs themselves:

> *"My DTP could convene sessions like this and doing it online makes it easier to get people together across a range of institutions and geographies."*

Participants were broadly supportive of UKRI issuing a statement of expectations for supervisory practice. There were, however, two sources of concern regarding this proposal:

- Supervisory relationships are necessarily diverse. A statement of expectations would have to be generic enough to capture such differences.

- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) already set expectations, training and eligibility criteria for research supervisors.

Nevertheless, there was felt to be a role for UKRI to help to nudge 'culture change', rather than issue hard policies which might entail performance measurements.

Key Findings

Support for a statement of expectations from UKRI

— UKRI should lead the sector in championing doctoral education as vital to the future of academic research and the UK's standing as a leading knowledge-based economy.

— UKRI should offer a 'high-level' statement highlighting the importance of research supervision, which could, amongst other things, provide a shared vision for the way in which the values of equity, diversity and inclusion underpin all good supervisory practice.

Recommendations on what the statement of expectations might contain[1]

— The statement should make it clear that supervising doctoral research is central to the vibrancy of the UK's research culture, not only in the pursuit of 'new knowledge' and driving the development of talent, but also in progressing the research and skills of supervisors themselves.

— The expectations and responsibilities between the supervisor/supervisory team and the candidate should be clear from the start. It is therefore recommended that supervisors and doctoral researchers should discuss their expectations of the supervisory relationship, perhaps by using a 'supervisory agreement'. These expectations should be reviewed throughout the doctorate.[2]

— The Quality Assurance Agency already states that "Supervisors should be provided with sufficient time, support and opportunities to develop and maintain their supervisory practice".[3] UKRI's statement should renew this expectation on institutions to provide adequate support

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[1] The *UK Council for Graduate Education* publishes the postgraduate-sector approved *Good Supervisory Practice Framework*, which will be a useful resource in the development of the statement: https://ukcge.ac.uk/resources/research-supervision-recognition-programme

[2] The Kiley & Cadman (1997) matrix on establishing supervisor expectations will be a useful resource in the development of the statement: see Kiley, M. & Cadman, K. (1997) *Supervision Expectations* adapted from work by Brown, G. & Atkins, M. (1988). *Effective teaching in higher education*. Methuen, London. 146-147.

[3] See Quality Assurance Agency: *UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Advice and Guidance: Research Degrees* (2018, p.4): https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/research-degrees

and training for those new to supervision supervisors, as well as ongoing CPD for more senior research supervisors.

— The statement should express the consensus that supervisors should be aware of the mental health and wellbeing issues that may arise during the course of doctoral study. This should be supported by appropriate training, including signposting to relevant institutional support.

— Understanding that greater diversity in postgraduate research (PGR) provision generates better research, knowledge that is more reflective of current society, and is fundamental to our understanding of universities as public institutions, the statement should enshrine equity, diversity and inclusion principles as a core aspect of research supervision.

— The statement should take the form of general guidance, with examples of how this might be interpreted in different disciplinary contexts.

Recommendations on how UKRI might support the implementation of its statement of expectations

— The purpose of the statement should be clearly articulated: in particular, what impact it is expected to have on institutions; on Doctoral Training Partnerships and Centres for Doctoral Training; on research supervisors; on industry or non-HEI supervisors; on doctoral researchers; and what would happen in the event that its principles were not upheld.

— The statement should strike a tone that supports the development of a positive culture for research supervision, emphasising the importance of coaching and mentoring, and communities of practice.

— All HEIs have their own guidance on supervision, and while UKRI guidance is welcomed, it is strongly recommended that more research be conducted into existing guidelines at institutional level, so that commonalities are echoed and good practices endorsed.

— UKRI should require Doctoral Training Partnership and Centres for Doctoral Training applications to set out how they will meet and promote the statement of expectations for research supervisors.

— Applications for doctoral studentships should include a reflective assessment of:

- ◊ How the supervisory arrangements will work to the benefit of the student and project.

- ◊ The supervisory experience of the supervisory team, and what supervisory training has been undertaken within the team.

— UKRI should lead the sector in providing clear and consistent information, particularly by setting out their own expectations around students with disabilities or caring responsibilities; life events such as pregnancy, and absences due to mental/physical ill health; and other procedures which support equity, diversity and inclusion in doctoral provision.[4]

— Doctoral Training Partnerships and Centres for Doctoral Training should run regular 'expectations for research supervision' workshops, involving doctoral researchers and supervisors, especially when they involve multi-institution co-supervisory arrangements.

Other recommendations for supporting UK research supervision

1. **Admissions and Selection**

— Research supervisors should not have a role in funding decisions.

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[4] Much of the work for this report took place before UKRI's announcement (22 August 2022) that it intends to create a
"UKRI-wide talent programme" that will "...harmonise our activities to reduce bureaucracy" (see: UKRI Corporate Plan 2022 - 2025 (2022), p.7: https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/UKRI-190822-CorporatePlan2022to2025.pdf). It is to be hoped that this corporate re-structure will help to address the anecdotal reports from focus group participants that Research Councils had 'inconsistent' information and guidelines around some of these issues.

— Programme-level oversight of funding decisions should be made accountable to institutional and/or funder audits, particularly in relation to EDI.

— EDI training should be mandatory for all decision-makers involved in admissions and selection, and selection criteria should be made transparent to applicants.

— Some potential candidates benefit from a pre-existing relationship with a supervisor, and 'privileged' access to the doctoral recruitment process, including assistance with the preparation of the application. In order to compensate for these biases, it is recommended that:

- Online information about the value of doctoral study, funding opportunities, and the admissions processes (including practical advice on, for example: 'what to do if your potential supervisor doesn't reply to you'), be clearly articulated.

- Doctoral Training Partnerships could be encouraged to organise pre-application 'mentoring' for potential applicants, particularly those who are not recent graduates from the 'home' institution.

2. **Bullying and Harassment**

— Clear guidance on 'what counts' as bullying and harassment in doctoral supervision should be published. Doctoral researchers should also be given guidance on how to obtain confidential advice or raise a complaint on such matters.

3. **'Communities of Practice' for Research Supervision**

— Doctoral Training Partnerships should be incentivised to create and maintain 'supervisory communities of practice' by extending their role in providing training / networking / mentoring opportunities for and between research supervisors.

— UKRI should invest in the next generation of research supervisors by providing institutions with tools to support CPD and mentoring opportunities specifically for early career and post-doctoral research supervisors.

— The 'informal' role of many post-doctoral researchers in supervising doctoral candidates should be addressed.

— Networks of all UKRI Doctoral Programmes should be created to ensure that effective practices can be shared between different disciplinary areas, and at different levels of seniority.[5]

— Regular cross-UKRI supervisory briefings should be organised to support the wider visibility and development of research supervision across the UK.

4. Institutional Environment

— Workload allocation for research supervision across UK higher education providers should be mandatory, and include an allocation for development opportunities and 'academic citizenship' activities, such as coaching and mentoring of early career research supervisors.

— Institutions should be encouraged to publish their 'eligibility to supervise' criteria and to keep an up to date register of eligible supervisors. Eligibility should consider not only induction and continuing training and development, but also HR records such as an upheld complaint for bullying / harassment.

— Doctoral researchers should have access to independent support, separate from their supervisory team. This support should be appropriately aimed at doctoral researchers, and made clearly available at enrolment.

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[5] The *UK Council for Graduate Education* already runs a professional network for Graduate Education Managers (see: https://ukcge.ac.uk/networks/gsm). This forum may provide a useful model for a UKRI-wide DTP network.

Discussion

This section of the report summarises the key themes of the discussions, which underlie the 'key findings' above.

Recruitment, Selection, and Admission of Doctoral Researchers

All participants agreed that doctoral supervisors are vital to the recruitment of doctoral researchers. Views varied, however, on the exact role that supervisors do or should have in recruitment. Partly this was in recognition of the fact that there are multiple 'points of entry' into doctoral research, including being recruited onto a pre-existing research project or through an industry partnership.

There was some consideration of whether *equity, diversity and inclusion* priorities are best served if a supervisor is the gatekeeper for doctoral study. As one doctoral researcher put it:

> *"I think it's a difficult situation - I wouldn't have gotten onto the PhD without support from my supervisor and that pre-existing relationship. But I'm also part of a group who is usually significantly underrepresented within PhDs, and I am the only black PhD in my department. I needed that support and that knowledge to get here, but it also isn't fair that it's not accessible to everyone (even though not everyone needs it)."*

There was also discussion of the 'social capital' needed to approach a potential supervisor 'cold', and the comparative support mechanisms in place for potential doctoral researchers from different socio-economic backgrounds:

> *"People also need to know what PhDs are and what they involve. Some students like myself who are 1st generation graduates will have less access to knowledge about what PhDs are, why they are useful and what they involve. Students from families who don't have experience of university might need more support to consider PhDs"*

In this context, it was noted that first-generation students may be more likely to consult institutional webpages rather than to approach potential supervisors, and that it is essential that the value of doctoral study, funding opportunities, and the admissions processes (including practical advice on, for example: 'what to do if your potential supervisor doesn't reply to you'), be clearly articulated online.

Despite concerns about differential access to potential supervisors, it was generally agreed that applying for doctoral study usually involved some 'mentoring' or encouragement from potential supervisors, and that this was useful in establishing that the supervisor 'could work with' the applicant. Given the centrality of informal mentoring to the doctoral application process, it was

suggested that DTPs might be in a position to replicate and broaden some of the benefits of this kind of mentoring through a more formal network.

Some DTP directors and research supervisors described a 'central hub' which distributed doctoral applications to relevant departments to pass on to appropriate supervisors, including those received through Doctoral Training Partnerships. This system had some influence over selection, perhaps in relation to funding decisions, but the supervisor was nevertheless critical to the process:

> *"…a student who applies via central system without first having contacted and consulted the department is unlikely to be accepted."*

One participant described how her institution had recently considered a centralised admissions process for doctoral researchers, and that this had been 'vociferously resisted' by supervisors on the grounds that the research supervisor must be the arbiter of whether the supervisory relationship and the research project will be successful. Another said that:

> *"…we used to have a central system for allocating scholarships, and it caused lots of issues and grievances. The devolution of scholarship selection is now welcomed by most departments."*

There was broad agreement with the emphasis on the supervisor's judgement in selection. One participant, however, disputed this on the grounds that a 'programme-level' understanding of recruitment was essential in developing a sense of cohort among doctoral researchers, and that the supervisory relationship cannot be so important that the doctoral researcher would fail if the supervisor moved institution (or 'gets hit by a bus').

An important variation in the recruitment process was provided by one doctoral researcher who pointed out that the 1+3 funding model enabled her to 'shop around' for the right supervisor during her Masters' year.

Managing Expectations between Supervisors and Doctoral Researchers

Participants recognised that doctoral research, and therefore doctoral supervision, has changed dramatically over the course of their careers, e.g.:

> *"[It's a] completely different landscape from when I was doing my PhD"*

These changes in doctoral supervision were linked, in part, to changes in the expectations of doctoral researchers:

> *"Yes, expectations of students have definitely changed. Some students need a lot of hand holding!"*

We asked how the expectations between doctoral supervisors and researchers were managed, whether clear guidance was offered by HEIs, and what role DTPs played in aligning expectations in the supervisory relationships. There was variation in practices, with some institutions using 'supervision agreements' with the expectation that they be signed by supervisor and doctoral researcher, some had 'tedious' online systems for setting expectations and monitoring progress, while others referred to generic handbooks. It was reported that there were objections from colleagues to the idea of a standardised supervisory agreement:

> *"…some staff are resisting having a written supervisory agreement/contract because what is needed is so different across students and across the 'student journey'."*

DTPs were thought not to play a formal role in aligning expectations, other than by running sessions on 'how to manage your supervisor' for doctoral candidates. The idea that DTPs could assist with or encourage the drawing up of individualised supervisory agreements was cautiously welcomed.

Among doctoral researchers, many felt that their 'research degrees handbook' was where general information about what to expect from supervision was to be found. Some mentioned 'documents across ESRC guidance', others were not able to say where or whether there was any guidance on what to expect (partly due to having been overwhelmed with paperwork during their induction). One doctoral researcher noted that she had a supervisor who was new to supervising, and they were 'both a bit confused sometimes' about institutional and DTP regulations. Another said that it was unclear what the second supervisor's role and responsibilities were (also pointing out that they were new to supervising). Yet another said that the role of the third supervisor was 'unclear to me'.

Some participants said, however, that they regularly discussed supervisory expectations with their supervisors, recognising that the relationship evolved according to the development of the research, and the needs of the doctoral researcher. One participant said that their institution encouraged the use of the Kiley & Cadman (1997) framework for setting supervisory expectations, and that this had been invaluable.

Training and Supporting Independent Researchers

There was a disagreement about whether the aim of doctoral education should be characterised as producing 'independent researchers', with some participants preferring instead the idea that research supervisors are aiming to inculcate 'research leadership' in their doctoral candidates. For some, 'independence' did not sufficiently capture the relational and collaborative aspects of research. Others were concerned, though, that the autonomy and agency of the doctoral researcher were better protected by focussing on 'independence'. One participant pointed out that the goal of doctoral education was, in part, determined by the

doctoral researcher themselves; with those who are not intending to pursue an academic career perhaps less in need of developing 'independence'.

There was a general consensus across all groups that supervisors should be receptive to the training needs of their doctoral candidates, that they should not 'close off opportunities' for professional development, but that the doctoral researcher should be responsible for their own training needs analysis, or at any rate that the responsibility 'should be 50-50'. One participant felt that their DTP had perhaps taken 'too much ownership' over the training needs analysis process, in an effort to satisfy the funder.

The notion that the supervisor was 'central' to the training and professional development of the doctoral candidate was contested. There was agreement with the idea that 'supervisors are not in a vacuum', that different sources of information about available resources are vital, and that the 'supervisor can't possibly know everything'. It was further asserted that:

> *"[The] emphasis on 'the supervisor' can be counter productive when we are working to create supportive lively research communities for our PGRs"*

Doctoral researchers were overwhelmingly in favour of sustained, tailored career support, and wondered whether there might be more opportunities for DTPs to have a role in providing this (beyond the 'panel discussions from alumni' sessions). Some reported the transformational benefits of internships and work experience opportunities, and questioned whether there are 'enough of these opportunities', and whether more could be done to tailor them for different stages of the PhD.

Reflecting on the specific, bespoke training and support needs for doctoral researchers, one doctoral researcher tellingly suggested that:

> *"…Maybe there is a role for a PhD student support officer in universities. This could be a way to take some of the load away from supervisors…"*

Mental Health and Pastoral Support

Among doctoral researchers, there was agreement that not all supervisors are equipped or have a natural aptitude for offering pastoral support. Nevertheless, it was felt that there was 'at least some expectation' on supervisors to consider the pastoral needs and the mental health and wellbeing of the candidate. One participant suggested that, at the least, supervisors could: '…write more emails to simply ask: how are you doing and how is your work going?'.

Among other participants there were some who expressed the view that supervisors were 'academic mentors only', and some who rejected the notion that supervisors should provide

'pastoral care'. Nevertheless, a consensus formed around the expectation that supervisors supervise 'the person as well as a project'.[6]

One participant made the helpful distinction between 'pastoral care', which may be too much to ask of a supervisor, and a 'pastoral approach' to supervision:

> *"Supervisors are not trained to provide mental health support but being able to deal compassionately with students and being approachable and supportive is often important. Supervisors are a key point of contact, often viewed as a mentor. Supervisors should then be able to direct students to appropriate support - so need to be aware of this."*

The question of whether supervisory teams should contain, or make nominal reference to, professional services staff who had responsibility for non-academic matters was, by and large, rejected. This was either on the grounds that the supervisory team was an 'academic unit', or on the grounds that it would be an unmanageable administrative burden. Once again, participants pointed out that doctoral researchers may have other sources of support outside supervisory structures (such as 'tutors', in a collegiate system).

Mental health training for supervisors was, however, widely accepted as an increasingly important aspect of supervisor training, with all participants accepting that supervisors have a 'monitoring and signposting' role.

Training for Supervisors

There was a consistent expectation that supervisory training was important and should be provided by the 'home HEI'. However, there were various differences about how this should be achieved:

Role of the DTPs

Some DTP directors pointed out that: 'DTPs don't get involved in supervisor performance' / 'DTPs are not line managers' / 'DTPs are thought to have power, when they don't'. It was therefore felt to be unrealistic for DTPs to stipulate a mandatory training programme for supervisors. Nevertheless, there was consensus that initial training and ongoing development opportunities for supervisors should be available, particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing and equity, diversity and inclusion.

It was acknowledged, however, that there is a role for DTPs in trying to bring together research supervisors from across consortia on a voluntary basis, but that this had been challenging

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[6] See also: *UK Research Supervision Survey Report*, UKCGE 2021: p.34 for further support for this consensus.

during the pandemic. There was some discussion of ways in which existing DTP research supervisors might be enticed to deliver training / networking on behalf of the DTP, as an informal condition of supervising a funded doctoral candidate. There was some speculation about whether undertaking this kind of 'academic citizenship' work might be rewarded by the funder, perhaps as a condition for access to additional grants and referenced in Fellowship applications.

Role of UKRI and institutions

There was support for UKRI-sponsored workshops, networking and training opportunities, provided these were on a voluntary basis. A UKRI mandate for such training, as opposed to DTP-specific opportunities, was felt to have more weight, particularly if it were implied that undertaking such training would enhance the likelihood of receiving a funded doctoral candidate. This proposal was not universally welcomed, however, with some participants concerned about duplication of effort and wasting time attending multiple sessions on the same areas of supervisory practice.

Research supervisors felt that the requirement to undertake supervisor training should be 'left at HEI level' and not mandated by funders. This led to a broader discussion about national-level interventions, such as the various Concordats, and it was felt that research supervision was not in need of 'radical shake-up' but that consistency of experience was important. All were agreed, however, that poor supervisory practice can remain hidden due to the power imbalance between supervisor and candidate.

It was reported that some HEIs had mandatory training programmes for supervisors, with one participant pointing out that it is in the institution's interest to provide supervisor training and support 'so that they have the best supervisors!'. However, another participant admitted that mandatory training had only been introduced after 'bitter experiences' with poor PGR outcomes. Yet another said that supervisor training 'had just been removed' from teacher training for new staff.

Doctoral researchers were asked what kind of training and support they would suggest supervisors would most benefit from. Several worried that supervisors already suffered from a heavy workload. One respondent said they simply wished supervisors would have more time for 'informal conversations'. Others suggested: mental health awareness, coaching, and how to give constructive feedback.

Among other participants, mental health awareness again ranked highly as a core part of any training and professional development for supervisors. They also broadly agreed with the ESRC's Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences (p.54) that supervisor training should include: equality, diversity and inclusion issues; having difficult conversations; General Data Protection

Regulation (GDPR); coaching skills; providing constructive feedback; key postgraduate researcher destinations and the broad range of career possibilities that social science PhDs open up; understanding power dynamics; and mental health first aid.

Other areas where additional training might help included: understanding the regulatory environment around life events such as pregnancy and absences due to mental/physical ill health; the regulations and requirements around equity, diversity and inclusion (particularly for DTP management boards); and more information about what resources are available through DTPs, including training on the requirements for PGR work placements. On these regulatory issues, it was felt that DTPs, and UKRI more broadly, might helpfully offer further training opportunities.

Communities of Practice

Several participants reported that they benefitted from strong communities of practice in research supervision. One participant commented that they had never had a 'formal supervisor training session in twenty-five years', but had benefitted from extensive mentoring both within her department and also across her disciplinary affiliations.   Asked whether DTPs or UKRI could help develop these communities of practice, one participant replied:

> *"In our department we have a fairly informal supervisory peer support group. But it's hard to think how UKRI can influence that"*

Several research supervisors explained that mentoring within a supervisory team was a core way of developing peer-to-peer support, and that this was a 'better form of training than a two-hour workshop' as it lasted for three years.

Many reported that this kind of mentoring within a co-supervisory team was how early career researchers are inducted into effective research supervision practices. There was widespread consensus, however, that post-docs were not normally allowed to be part of the supervisory team, and could not access this mentoring opportunity, since their contracts usually expired before the end of the registration period for the doctoral researcher (NB: one participant questioned whether this rule was in keeping with the Concordat for Researcher Development).

A participant raised the challenge that, although mentoring is a form of formal and mandated supervisory training, it was also possible 'to pass on bad practice by the experienced supervisor'. In other discussions, there was also the concern that there is sometimes 'complacency' among senior colleagues, and it is junior colleagues who are responsive to working with the DTP to create a 'sense of belonging among the supervisory team'. In response to these kinds of concerns, it was hoped that the mentor/senior colleague might also be

'nudged to improve their practice' through mentoring and participating in a community of practice.

Eligibility to Supervise

Several DTP directors explained that they had 'eligibility to supervise' criteria in their consortia agreements and studentship assessment forms. At the very least this included having a supervisory team in which at least one member had seen a doctoral candidate through to completion. There was some speculation about whether more junior colleagues may be from more diverse backgrounds, and that therefore excluding supervisors due to inexperience may create a bottle-neck in diversifying the supervisory workforce.

Some DTPs required a reflective assessment from the supervisory team on 'how the supervisory arrangements will work to the benefit of the student and project'. Another said that they have 'a box on supervision experience and supervisory training'. Those who required this kind of reflective statement about supervisory experience or the proposed supervisory arrangements said that it was a key component of the assessment of the studentship application. It was unclear, however, whether this was a consistent requirement across all DTPs.

There was a broad consensus that neither the funder nor the DTP should set a maximum number of doctoral researchers per supervisor. This was felt to be a matter for heads of department, and 'funders shouldn't be dictating' on matters of supervisory capacity in their eligibility to supervise criteria.

Workload Allocation

One participant noted that there were 'wildly divergent' workload allocation processes for doctoral supervision between departments in the same university, and also across consortia. Another participant pointed out that there were also disciplinary differences in workload expectations and supervisory practices:

> *"As a Geographer, with half my immediate colleagues physical scientists, I'm constantly aware of STEM vs Soc Sci & Humanities differences. UKRI as a whole needs to be aware of the variation in norms and expectations."*

Some participants said that there was a standard workload allocation model across the institution, with hours shared across the supervision team. For example, one institution allocated 80 hours FTE to be shared across the supervisory team.

Many felt that workload allocation was 'a can of worms' and that a realistic model would reveal widespread overworking. One participant said that their institution had abandoned workload allocation on the grounds that under that system junior colleagues had been delayed in

amassing a sufficient number of doctoral completions to submit under their promotions criteria.

One participant requested that research councils 'put pressure on universities to require workload credit for PhD supervision'. This request was echoed by a number of participants who responded that 'lack of time' was their greatest challenge in providing effective doctoral supervision. Doctoral researchers seemed highly aware of the burden their supervisors were under, with one participant asking:

> *"Is there a role for the ESRC/UKRI giving more support to supervisors (not sure what support they currently have)? Because if supervisors feel more supported, that will translate to better support for PhD students."*

Collaboration across Multiple Institutions

There was a concern that doctoral researchers sometimes 'make a tour' of multiple supervisors, particularly when they are based in multiple institutions, and then 'stitch together the advice'. This was felt to be unfair, inefficient and ineffective.

It was recognised that DTPs do not have the authority to harmonise the policies and procedures for research supervision across autonomous HEIs. There was, nevertheless, a request for more guidance on fundamental aspects of research supervision, such as the expected regularity of meetings, so that individual supervisors could use this to align expectations between different institutional partners in a multi-institutional supervisory team.

Statements, Guidelines and Expectations

Protecting the institutional autonomy of HEIs was a pronounced feature of the discussions. For example, one participant said:

> *"If there's an MOU style of document, individual HEIs may not like to have their autonomy trounced by the research councils introducing documentation - and remember that only a minority of PhD candidates are research council funded so what about expectations of other funders?"*

Another participant said:

> *"I am suspicious about having a national level handbook/guideline, because what we include in our PhD students handbook is lots of local information about who to go to for what support and timelines, etc"*

Despite these concerns about institutional autonomy, there was widespread endorsement of the idea that funders should issue 'high-level' guidance on supervision, provided that this was

UKRI-wide, and possibly included other funders, and that it was not read as a requirements document that would create a 'tick-box' culture.

It was broadly felt that some guidance from UKRI would be welcome, particularly as an opportunity to offer a shared vision for the way in which the values of equity, diversity and inclusion underpin all good supervisory practice.

Appendix - Extract from participant briefings

What do Research Councils already expect from research supervision?

The Economic and Social Research Council and other Research Councils already place a number of expectations on Research Organisations (ROs), Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) to ensure that high-quality supervision is provided to Research Council funded doctoral researchers. These expectations include:

— That procedures are in place to ensure consistently effective provision of research supervision

— That there is dual supervision, or supervisory panels, to guide the research

— That expectations of both supervisors and students should be clearly set out in RO or departmental codes of practice and students and supervisors should be made aware of the procedures

— A clear policy on how new or inexperienced supervisors will be trained and developed

— That formal systems are in place for monitoring the performance of supervisors which also include procedures for addressing non-satisfactory supervisory performance.

— Ensuring that supervisors are engaged with the Doctoral Training Partnership or Centre for Doctoral Training by having a clear strategy for communicating with supervisors and ensuring that they are fully engaged with the aims and objectives of the DTP or CDT

ESRC Postgraduate Training and Development Guidelines Second Edition 2015, p.15

The UKRI Training Grants Terms and Conditions (item 2.9, p.7) place further obligations on research supervision, such as abiding by its statement of expectations for postgraduate training, which includes the following stipulations:

— Supervisors should receive the support and training that they individually need to provide the highest-quality supervisory support to their students

— Supervisors should be aware of their responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) to treat all students in a fair, open and non-discriminatory manner.

— Supervisors should recognise doctoral study as a wider training opportunity and encourage and support students in developing their careers.

UKRI Terms and Conditions also insist on compliance with the Quality Assurance Agency: UK

Quality Code for Higher Education Advice and Guidance: Research Degrees. This repeats many of the expectations above, but also states that:

— Supervisors should be provided with sufficient time, support and opportunities to develop and maintain their supervisory practice

References and further resources

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About the UK Council for Graduate Education

Established in 1994, the UKCGE is the national representative body for postgraduate education and research. The UKCGE champions and enhances postgraduate education and research by enabling collective leadership across UK HEIs, research agencies and funding bodies. It has a specific remit to support research supervision: for example, in 2017 it launched the first ever national award for excellence in research supervision; and in 2021 it undertook the *UK Research Supervision Survey*, funded by UKRI and the Wellcome Trust. The UKCGE publishes the *Good Supervisory Practice Framework*, the *Research Supervisor's Bibliography* and runs the UK's *Research Supervision Recognition Programme*.