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Supporting Research Supervision Practice:
a review of UK provision

Prof. Stan Taylor, Honorary Professor,
School of Education, University of Durham

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Contents

Introduction

Research supervision has been shown in numerous studies (Celik 2013, Lepp et al 2016, Friedrich-Nel and Mac Kinnon 2017, Sverdlik et al 2018, Coutinho 2019, Makhamreh and Stockley 2020, Corcelles-Sueba et al 2023) to be at least one of, if not the, most important determinant of the quality of the experience of research students and also of their chances of completing and on time.

In order to promote high quality supervision and timely completion, it is important that institutions offer their supervisors appropriate support for undertaking their roles, as well as rewarding them, and providing opportunities for recognition (Taylor 2025).

The aim of the present paper is to look at the ways in which those institutions in the UK which offer research degrees provide for:

1. The initial professional development of new supervisors

2. The continuing professional development of experienced ones

3. Promotion on the basis of supervision

4. Internal awards for outstanding supervision and

5. Opportunities for external recognition.

There is then a discussion and conclusion. Where possible, comparative data is included from an earlier study on eligibility to supervise by the author (Taylor, 2018) to highlight trends over time.

> **Research supervision has been shown ... to be at least one of, if not the, most important determinant of the quality of the experience of research students and also of their chances of completing and on time.**

Method

This study is based on a desk-based review conducted between June and September 2025 of the externally-facing websites of 149 UK institutions which were found to be advertising research degree programmes.

Information about professional development is usually embodied in institutional regulations and/or codes of practice for research degree programmes. As these are important documents for stakeholders, they are usually available in the public domain, and for the vast majority of the 149 institutions the information presented in this report was extracted from those documents. In a number of cases, data was not available from public sources, and further enquiries were made by e-mail or telephone[2].

With regard to promotion criteria, institutions were much less likely to recognise a stakeholder interest in this information beyond that of their own academic staff. For that reason, information tended to be confined to intranets and there was a reluctance to make it more widely available. For these reasons, it was only possible to find data on 70 of the 149 institutions.

In terms of internal awards, evidence was available from all 149 institutions about whether or not they had awards for outstanding supervision and, if so, whether these were student-led, institution-led, or both.

Regarding external recognition, the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) kindly supplied and permitted the use of data on the aggregate numbers of recognised supervisors in institutions for this part of the study.

Data were not available for all aspects, as outlined in the following relevant sections.

Publicly accessible data on promotions criteria was available for just under half of the 149 institutions
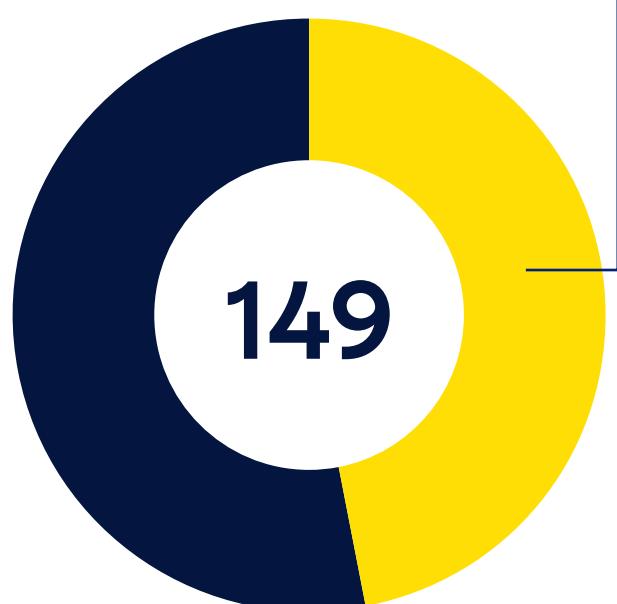
149

Initial professional development

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

Of the 149 UK institutions which were found to be advertising research degree programmes, there were two where no public information was available on their externally-facing websites and where numerous direct email and/or telephone enquiries remained unanswered. But it proved possible to find out at least some information about IPD from 147 institutions, 99% of the total.

Of these, the data suggested that eight (6%) made no provision for the initial professional development of supervisors, 14 (10%) made provision on a voluntary basis, and 125 (84%) had mandatory provision.

Among those with mandatory provision, an attempt was made to establish the duration and content of IPD programmes. In six cases, no information was forthcoming; three were in the midst of restructuring their offers; three had devolved initial professional development to sub-institutional units; and three offered bespoke programmes tailored to the needs of individual supervisors. No contextual detail and rationale for how provision was structured was established. In the end, information was available for 109 institutions.

There is evidence ... that, where new supervisors are supported by initial professional development programmes (IPD), they are more able to be effective in their roles.

	Number of institutions	% of Total
0.5 or less	64	59%
1.0	24	22%
1.5	4	4%
2.0	11	10%
2.5 or more	6	6%
Total	109	100%

Table 1 | Duration of mandatory initial professional development programmes (days)

The modal and median durations were less than half a day, and the duration was a day or less in four out of five institutions.

One institution was willing to give information on the duration of its initial professional development programme but not on the content, so data on the latter was only available for 108 institutions. This was categorised using the author's (Taylor 2018) classification of supervisory practices into following domains: regulatory, pedagogical, diversity, student support, student development, progression and completion, and examination.

The **regulatory** domain was defined to include descriptions in the content of programmes of 'rules', 'regulations', 'regulatory frameworks', 'policies', 'procedures', 'standards', 'codes of practice' and 'quality assurance requirements'. Regulatory matters were covered in 105 (97%) of the 108 institutions.

The **pedagogy** domain was defined to include use of the terms 'supervisor pedagogy', 'approaches to supervision', 'models of supervision', 'supervisory styles', 'challenges and solutions/strategies in supervision', 'supervisory relationships' 'establishing effective supervisory relationships'. 'conceptions of supervision', and 'student supervisor dynamics'. In all, this terminology was used by 100 (93%) of institutions.

The **diversity** domain was defined as including terms such as 'Working with student diversity', 'diversity and equality', 'different learning backgrounds of students', 'supporting students with additional needs', 'supporting students with disabilities', 'cultural awareness' 'potential cultural issues' and 'supporting international students'. These were mentioned explicitly in the course descriptions of 36 (33%) institutions.

The **student support** domain was signified by descriptions such as 'overview of university services relevant to PGR support', 'student support', 'well-being and pastoral support', 'college support services', 'support mechanisms available in the faculty and the university', 'managing student anxiety and emotional issues' and 'managing student isolation'. These were found in the programme descriptions in 56 (52%) institutions.

The **student development** domain included general descriptions such as 'skills training and career development', 'postgraduate skills development and recognition', 'career management for researchers', 'able to describe the skills development needs of PGR over time and know the opportunities available', and 'skills and advice on professional and career development'. These were found in the programme descriptions of 40 (37%) institutions.

The **progression and completion** domain included statements such as 'monitoring progress' 'dealing with limited student progress', 'how to ensure students complete on time', 'students at risk and how to help them complete', 'delivering on-time completions' and 'techniques for ensuring timely completions'. These were found in the programme descriptions of 44 (41%) institutions.

The final domain was **examination**, where descriptors including 'preparing for examination', 'research degree examination', 'preparation for examination and the viva', 'appointment of examiners and the role of the supervisor and the internal examiner in the examination process', 'how to select suitable examiners and prepare your students to survive their viva' and 'good practice with regard to research degree examinations. These and similar were found in the programme descriptors of 40 (37%) institutions.

These findings are summarised in Table 2.

	Number of institutions	% of Total
Regulatory	105	97%
Pedagogical	100	93%
Diversity	36	33%
Student Support	56	52%
Student Development	40	37%
Progression and completion	44	41%
Examination	40	37%

Table 2 | Content domain of mandatory initial professional development programmes (N=108)

It may be noted that, compared to a previous study of initial professional development in institutions in 2017 undertaken by the author (Taylor 2018), the percentages of institutions offering initial professional development as mandatory were broadly comparable. However, in the 2017 study, the duration of initial professional development was a half day or less in only 47% of institutions and higher percentages of initial professional development programme duration was reported in each of categories 1 day, 1.5 days, 2 days and 2.5 or more days, i.e. there has been a decline subsequently. With regard to content, the figures for regulatory matters, pedagogy, progression and monitoring, and examination were very similar, but there were significant increases in 2025 in the explicit representation within programmes of the diversity, student support, and student development domains.

Summary

- 94% of institutions made provision for the initial professional development of supervisors;

- In 84%, this was mandatory;

- In 59% of these mandatory cases, this consisted of a half-day or less, and in 81% a day or less;

- The content of training was predominantly on regulatory matters and pedagogy with over 90% dealing with these areas followed by student support.

Continuing professional development

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

Of the 149 UK institutions which were found to be advertising research degree programmes, no externally-facing website information could be found about CPD for supervisors in eight, leaving at least some information for 141. Of these, 34 (24%) made no provision for the CPD of supervisors, 40 (28%) made provision on a voluntary basis, and 67 (48%) had mandatory provision.

For those with mandatory provision, information on the intervals between CPD sessions was not available for two institutions, but was for the remaining 65, as set out in Table 3 below.

The modal interval between mandatory continuing professional development programmes was three years, with a little over a quarter operating within lower and within upper limits, respectively.

With regard to the duration of mandatory continuing professional development programmes, data was available for 47 of the 65 institutions as set out in Table 4.

	Number of institutions	% of Total
Annual	6	9%
2 years	12	18%
3 years	29	45%
4 years	6	9%
5 or more	12	18%
Total	65	99%

Table 3 | Intervals between mandatory continuing professional development programmes (years) (N=65)

	Number of institutions	% of Total
<0.5	39	78%
0.5	3	6%
1.0	4	14%
1.5	1	2%
Total	47	100%

Table 4 | Duration of mandatory continuing professional development programmes (days) (N=47)

Over three-quarters of continuing professional development sessions were less than half a day.

In terms of the content of mandatory continuing professional development programmes, no data was available on four institutions, one was in the midst of re-structuring, in two it was delegated to sub-institutional level, and in 12 supervisors were allowed to choose from a range of options.

This left 48 institutions where the content of the programme could be determined, using the same categorisation domains as for initial professional development programmes.

With regard to continuing professional development, it was notable that a quarter of institutions made no provision at all, which suggests a major gap in updating experienced supervisors.

	Number of institutions	% of Total
Regulatory	47	98%
Pedagogical	34	71%
Diversity	18	38%
Student Support	23	48%
Student Development	16	33%
Progression and completion	17	35%
Examination	18	38%

Table 5 | Content domain of mandatory continuing professional development programmes (N=48)

By far the largest category was updates on rules and regulations, followed by updates on pedagogy and then student support.

Again, it is possible to make comparisons with a previous study of data in 2017 (Taylor, 2018). The percentage of institutions making provision for continuing professional development then and in 2025 were identical, but the percentage with mandatory development has increased (43% in 2017, 48% in 2025). In terms of intervals between continuing professional development sessions, the modal average for both was three years, but in 2017 more institutions mandated CPD at one or two year intervals (33% compared to 27% in 2025).

With regard to duration, in 2017 over 90% of sessions were half a day or less, so there was a slight increase in duration in 2025. In terms of content, programmes in 2025 had much stronger representation across the range of content domains compared to 2017. In 2025, the data suggests that more institutions focus CPD provision on rules and regulations, pedagogy, diversity, and student support.

Summary

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

Promotion criteria

While information about professional development was available on externally-facing websites in many cases, information about academic promotion criteria was confined to institutional intranets. In consequence, of the 149 institutions data was only publicly available for 70. Of these, 66 (94%) had research supervision among the criteria for academic promotion.

In 18 (27%) of these institutions, research supervision was a threshold criterion which could count towards promotion from lecturers to any higher grade, i.e. there were no separate criteria applying to promotion beyond lecturer to senior lecturer, principal lecturer, associate professor, reader, or full professor. In all, there were three criteria employed by these institutions.

	Number of institutions	% of Total
Research supervision	6	33%
Successful/effective research supervision	8	44%
Supervision to completion	4	22%

Table 6 | Threshold promotion criteria from lecturer to higher grades (N=18)

The other 48 institutions had separate criteria which could count towards promotion to senior lecturer/associate professor/reader. In these, 19 different criteria were employed, but only seven were mentioned by more than five institutions.

	Number of institutions	% of Total
Successful/effective supervision	25	52%
Supervision	13	27%
Examination experience	13	27%
Sustained track record of supervision	7	15%

Student Development	6	13%
Creating supportive /inclusive culture	6	13%
High quality supervision	5	10%

Table 7 | Promotion criteria to senior lecturer/associate professor/reader

The same 48 institutions also had criteria which could count towards promotion to full professor. In these, there were 15 criteria but only seven were mentioned by five or more institutions.

	Number of institutions	% of Total
Sustained record of successful supervision	12	25%
Examination experience	11	23%
Track record of successful completions	9	19%
Track record of timely completions	9	19%
Leading role in research degree programmes	6	13%
Success in recruiting students	5	10%
Above average successful completions for discipline	5	10%

Table 8 | Promotion criteria to full professor

Summary

- **94% of institutions for which data was available had promotion criteria including ones relating to supervision;**

- **27% of institutions with such criteria adopted a threshold approach with a single set which could count towards promotion from lecturer/assistant professor to higher grades;**

- **73% of such institutions had criteria which could count towards promotion to senior lecturer/associate professor/ reader; in these the modal criterion was 'successful/effective research supervision' followed by 'supervision' and 'examination experience' with much smaller numbers relating to student development, supportive research culture, and high quality supervision;**

- **These institutions also had criteria which could count towards promotion to full professor; the most prominent were a 'sustained record of successful supervision' and 'examination experience' followed by track records variously of 'successful completions', 'timely completions', and 'successful completions above average for the discipline'.**

Awards for outstanding supervision

One way of recognising supervisors is through awards for outstanding supervision, along similar lines to awards for excellence in learning and teaching. Out of the 149 institutions, 84 institutions (56%) of the total had information about institutional outstanding supervision awards on their externally-facing webpages.

Such awards can be divided into three main categories, those led by students, those led by institutions, and those led jointly by both.

Over two-thirds were student-led, a quarter institution-led, and the remainder joint. Here, it is possible to make comparisons with a previous study (Taylor and McCulloch 2017) which looked at the distribution of awards in the UK in 2016. Then, 42% of the institutions surveyed had such awards of which 82% were student-led, 14% institution-led, and 4% both.

	Number of institutions	% of Total
Student-led	57	68%
Institution-led	23	27%
Joint	4	5%
Total	84	100%

Table 9 | Awards for outstanding supervision

One way of recognising supervisors is through awards for outstanding supervision, along similar lines to awards for excellence in learning and teaching ... in all, 84 institutions (56% of the total) had awards.

Summary

- In 2025 over half of institutions had awards for outstanding supervision, compared to two-fifths in 2016;

- While student-led awards remained in the majority in both years, the number of institution-led awards increased significantly over the period.

Opportunities for external recognition

Over the past two decades, as Taylor and Clegg (2021) have shown, there have been several attempt to establish external awards for the recognition of research degree supervisors. These included the Training and Accreditation Programme for Postgraduate Supervisors launched in 2001 which sadly failed to take off; the Staff and Educational Development Association named award for 'Supervising Postgraduate Research' launched in 2003 which, so far as the author is aware, is only currently in use in three institutions.

However, in 2020, the UKCGE introduced a national supervisor recognition programme. This was based on a Framework for Good Supervisory Practice which was developed over 2018-2019 in consultation with the higher education sector. Subsequently, in 2020 a programme was initiated to enable supervisors who were able to demonstrate that their practice was aligned to the framework to be awarded UKCGE recognised supervisor or associate recognised supervisor status. Recent evidence (Golding 2025) suggests that supervisors

who had applied found the process highly beneficial to their practice and viewed recognition as prestigious.

Figures supplied by the UKCGE indicate that, by October 2025, 73 of the 149 institutions with research degree programmes (49%) had sponsored supervisors to apply for recognition, and Table 10 below sets out the frequency of applications.

Summary

- **Nearly half of the institutions advertising research degree programmes had sponsored applicants for the UKCGE recognition programme;**

- **Both the mean and median numbers of recognised supervisors were less than five, and only a handful of institutions had more than 20.**

	Number of institutions	% of Total
<5	44	60%
5-19	23	32%
20 or more	6	8%
Total	73	100%

Table 10 | Frequency of applications by institutions for UKCGE recognised supervisor status

Discussion

With regard to initial professional development, there is evidence (Gower et al 2024, Clegg et al 2025) that supervisors who have been required to engage in mandatory training are significantly more confident about their supervisory practice than those who have engaged in voluntary training or who have received no training at all. From that point of view, the fact that 84% of institutions in the UK have mandatory training for new supervisors implies that the vast majority are given some support at the start of their supervisory careers.

That said, the duration of initial professional development programmes was relatively short; in three-fifths of institutions it was a half day or less and in four-fifths it was a day or less, and on average the time spent was less than it was in 2017. However, by 2025 there had been significant changes in the content of programmes, with more relating to student support, student development, and diversity. But the latter was still only included explicitly in the programmes of one-third of institutions, which seems at odds with the major initiatives of the past few years to diversify the candidate population and enable supervisors to respond effectively to the needs of non-traditional entrants (Taylor and Kiley, forthcoming).

With regard to continuing professional development, it was notable that a quarter of institutions made no provision at all, which suggests a major gap in updating experienced supervisors. A further quarter had voluntary provision, leaving around half with mandatory programmes. Intervals between mandatory sessions averaged around three years, but in some institutions were significantly longer. In terms of duration, in over three-quarters of institutions, sessions lasted less than half a day, which seems a very limited time within which to cover developments in research degree education across all the realms of changes in rules and regulations, pedagogy, diversity, and student support.

With regard to promotion, the fact that data was only available on 70 of the 149 institutions clearly limits the validity of findings. But of these institutions, nearly all included research supervision in the criteria linked to promotion. Comparing these, it is apparent that the main difference between promotion up to full professor grade was expressed in most cases in terms of numbers of 'successful', 'timely' or 'above average' completions.

Supervisors who have been required to engage in mandatory training are significantly more confident about their supervisory practice than those who have engaged in voluntary training or who have received no training at all.

With regard to continuing professional development, it was notable that a quarter of institutions made no provision at all, which suggests a major gap in updating experienced supervisors.

What is striking about all of these criteria is the relative lack of reference to diversity and to the quality of supervision; these were only mentioned by a handful of institutions in relation to academic promotions and in fact only by one institution in terms of promotion to full professor. From this it would appear that, at least in these institutions, reward was heavily linked to timely completions and not specifically to the quality of supervision either generally or in relation to diverse candidate populations.

With regard to awards for outstanding supervision, there was a significant increase in the proportion of institutions with such awards compared to 2016. Also, there was a change in the organisation of such awards with more in 2025 being institution-led rather than student led. The extent to which institution-led awards are more likely to reward good practice and to encourage supervisors to enhance their performance of their roles remains to be seen. They may however contribute to perceptions of supervision being valued by institutions (as measured by the UK Research Supervision Surveys - Gower and Clegg 2021 and Gower et al 2024).

Finally, in relation to external recognition, it is heartening that nearly half of the institutions advertising research degree programmes had sponsored staff to apply for the UKCGE Research Supervision Recognition Programme. However, in most institutions, numbers of recognised supervisors were thin on the ground, and clearly there is some way to go in terms of such recognition becoming widespread.

Conclusions

Overall, it may be noted that mandatory professional development for supervisors is much more prevalent in institutions in the UK than it is in the rest of Europe; a recent large survey of institutions across the sub-continent by Marti and Peneoasu (2025) found that only 17% had obligatory training for supervisors in all or most of their research degree programmes and that 70% had no obligatory training at all. So it would seem that supervisors in the UK may be better supported systematically than elsewhere, at least in Europe.

However, given the very limited duration of most programmes for either new or experienced supervisors, it seems difficult to accept that the provision in place is adequate to impart the necessary knowledge and skills relating to what Griffiths and Warren (2016: 167) have described as *'...a highly complex set of roles which must be learned quickly and then played out within a multi-featured landscape and moulded by a variety of influential stakeholders'*.

It may be noted that mandatory professional development for supervisors is much more prevalent in institutions in the UK than it is in the rest of Europe.

The evidence that research supervision is included in promotion criteria is welcome, but it it seems to be linked far more to the quantity of supervision than to the quality and that, as Bastalich and McCulloch (2022: 11) have put it, *'Supervisors who give of themselves do so not because the institution will reward them, but because they care...'*

Awards for outstanding or excellent supervision are becoming more common with nearly half of institutions having them, and more of these are institutional awards which have defined criteria and reward demonstrated good practice.

External recognition has at least become an established feature of the supervisory landscape, although there is clearly considerable scope for further development.

Given the very limited duration of most programmes for either new or experienced supervisors, it seems difficult to accept that the provision in place is adequate to impart the necessary knowledge and skills.

On the basis of the above, it can be suggested that institutions consider:

- where appropriate, reviewing the availability of professional development for supervisors and whether or not it should be mandatory;

- reviewing the duration and content of initial and continuing professional development programmes for supervisors in the light of their coverage of the roles, particularly in relation to diversity and student support;

- reviewing promotion criteria to reward the quality as well as the quantity of supervision;

- establishing or reviewing awards for outstanding supervision to ensure criteria reflect demonstrated good practice;

- providing further support for supervisors to achieve external recognition of the quality of their supervision.

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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.

UCKGE

Established in 1994, the UK Council for Graduate Education is the national representative body for postgraduate education and research. An independent charity, it is the third-largest representative body of its kind in the world, representing 92% of all UK postgraduate research provision and 85% of all UK postgraduate taught provision. It champions and enhances postgraduate education and research by enabling collective leadership on the development of postgraduate affairs across UK HEIs, research agencies and funding bodies.

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