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The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES): deep dive into supervision practices and experiences

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1. Executive Summary

This report seeks to leverage data from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) to gain insights into supervision practices and experiences. The analysis examines comments from the open questions in PRES, specifically: comments from the dedicated supervision section of PRES; relevant supervision-related comments from the overall experience questions; and references to supervision within comments about other PRES dimensions (resources, research community, progress and assessment, skills development, and wellbeing). The analysis takes a multi-year approach and draws on a sample of 200 participants from UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for each of the five years 2021-2025 (1000 participants in total).

The 2025 PRES report¹ indicates that overall a positive experience is being provided to postgraduate researchers (PGRs) across the participating institutions, with supervision being the area with the highest satisfaction scores. The UK Research Supervision Survey 2024² of all those involved in supervising doctoral candidates reported that the vast majority of respondents enjoyed being a supervisor and that the experience is rewarding and beneficial to their own research.

This analysis of the responses to the PRES open questions looks to add detail to the quantitative results and understand more fully how supervision impacts on the PGR experience.

The analysis reveals that supervision is often more than the sum of its parts. Comments show how a positive supervisory experience can greatly support progression, enhance wellbeing and mental health, facilitate integration and belonging and contribute to skills and professional development.

My supervisors have provided excellent support beyond my expectations, I would not have gotten this far without them. Their knowledge and support from all three of my supervisors are second to none. I am extremely grateful for my supervision team, they support me whenever I need advice or guidance and always push me to achieve my best work (without pushing me too far!). They are so empathetic and compassionate towards my needs as an individual and have built a really safe space for all of their PhD students, including myself, where we can also support each other. They all genuinely care about my progression and my wellbeing, I am just so grateful because I know not all PhD experiences are like this.

Conversely, a negative experience (including supervisor absence or turnover) exacerbates feelings of isolation, and impacts on researchers' wellbeing and confidence, including the ability to progress and complete.

¹ Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) | Advance HE

² UK Research Supervision Survey 2024 (UKRSS)

Supervisor's feedback was admonishing and rarely constructive. Supervisor has little interest in my development and training, only where this aligned to their own progression, and defined training very narrowly as 'only a formal course' which meant that I was unable to document and celebrate learning through other means. I have had to agree that there was regular contact, but this was not positive or constructive, and was at times a hostile and toxic environment which created a lot of anxiety and it would have been preferable to meet less often.

The supervisor role in supporting wellbeing is highlighted, in some cases filling the gaps of limited or unsuited institutional support in this area. Respondents value a "holistic" approach from supervision that encompasses academic and pastoral aspects, and recognises the PGR as an individual.

I do feel that the support for health and wellbeing meets my needs as I have a very good relationship with my supervisors. However, I feel that if I didn't have this, it would be more challenging. Many of the services offered on campus for mental health and wellbeing support are seemingly targeted towards undergraduate or taught postgraduate students.

Given the importance of the supervisor role, comments make clear that if the relationship breaks down there is a need for independent reporting mechanisms to improve supervisor quality. As one respondent noted "who supervises the supervisor?" The need for ongoing training of supervisors to address wellbeing and academic needs is also raised.

Responses also make reference to other institutional challenges that can affect the PGR experience and supervisor relationship, particularly heavy supervisor workload, and a lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities (between postgraduate researcher and supervisor and within supervisory teams).

I thought I understood supervisor responsibilities regarding frequency of meetings and nature of these. Despite raising my concerns about this with them the status quo has largely continued, so I'm not sure what the situation can or should be. It seems despite guidance in handbook, that one supervisor's desire to work exclusively from home trumps all other dynamics or needs within the supervision arrangement. I've felt alone/unsupported for quite a significant portion of my PhD, only just having had the opportunity to discuss this at my first in person [progress review] some 18 months after beginning. I feel like the safety checks and mechanisms were just not in place when I needed them.

While the analysis reveals areas of variability and inconsistency, the overall picture is one of good supervisory experiences that are valued by respondents.

2. Introduction

This analysis will contribute to the Next Generation Research SuperVision Project (RSVP), which focuses on understanding and improving the doctoral supervision experience. The work seeks to leverage data from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)³ to gain insights into supervision practices and experiences across the sector.

The PRES is a long-established instrument for gathering insight into the postgraduate researcher (PGR) experience, while also providing a key opportunity for PGRs themselves to have a voice. This analysis examines open comments from PRES relating to supervision, specifically:

- Comments from the dedicated supervision section of PRES
- Relevant supervision-related comments from the overall experience questions
- Cross-references to supervision within comments about other PRES dimensions (resources, research community, progress and assessment, skills development, and wellbeing) ([Appendix 3](#)).

2.1 Method and approach

Sample

The PRES is distributed by participating HEIs directly to their PGR population. Prior to 2017 PRES ran on a biennial basis, with an annual cycle introduced in 2018. As a legacy of this biennial history, there is a pattern of high participation every two years. PRES participation for the years covered in this analysis is provided in Table 1.

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Number of Institutions	94	62	105*	61**	93
Number of Responses	39,855	13,922	37,661	12,123	35,475

Table 1 | PRES responses 2021 - 2025⁴

**81 of the institutions from 2023 also took part in 2025*

***33 of the institutions from 2024 also took part in 2025*

³ [Postgraduate Research Experience Survey \(PRES\) | Advance HE](#)

⁴ Adapted from the table on PRES participation: institutions and responses, in the 2025 Advance HE Postgraduate Research Experience Survey referenced above.

This analysis takes a multi-year approach and draws on a sample of 200 participants from UK HEIs for each of the five years 2021-2025 (1000 participants in total). Responses were filtered to draw from those that gave substantive replies to the open question on supervision, “If you have any additional comments about supervision, please write them here”, (i.e. not including blank responses or those who responded “no comment” or a variation on that theme). The number of “substantive” responses to this question by year, from respondents at UK Institutions is shown in Table 2.

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Number of participants giving substantive responses	3,205	2,711	6,750	2,538	2,973

Table 2 | Number of substantive responses to the open question on Supervision

For each year, responses were chosen at random from the filtered data, while ensuring that the demographic make-up closely matched the breakdown of respondents for each year (for example the proportion of respondents studying full or part-time, by gender, or proportion of home and international PGR) ([Appendix 2](#)). Although the data was filtered, the comments are fully anonymised, and no information that could identify individuals is used in this report. Analysis was then undertaken of the responses to all the relevant open questions in the survey.

Project limitations

The data is a sample of the whole PRES data set, and respondents are self-selecting, so may have predominantly positive or negative experiences to share. However, the results are in keeping with the quantitative analysis in the annual PRES reports. This suggests the analysis can be regarded as illustrative of the general opinions of the respondent group.

Approach

Drawing on the main sections of the PRES, the analysis considers how supervision intersects with the six core dimensions of the postgraduate research experience:

- **Supervision:** direct comments on supervisory relationships, feedback quality, accessibility, and guidance
- **Resources:** how supervision relates to access to facilities, equipment, and research materials
- **Research Community:** the supervisor’s role in integrating PGRs into research networks and communities
- **Progress and Assessment:** supervisory support through milestones, feedback on progress, and examination preparation
- **Skills and Professional Development:** the supervisor’s contribution to transferable skills development and career preparation
- **Wellbeing:** impact of supervisory relationships on PGR mental health and work-life balance

Where data permits, the analysis incorporates demographic breakdowns to identify potential variations in supervision experiences across:

- **Discipline/Subject Area:** Identifying discipline-specific supervision patterns and needs
- **Mode of Study:** Comparing full-time and part-time PGR experiences
- **Student Domicile:** Understanding any differences between home and international student perspectives
- **Gender:** Exploring potential gender differences in supervision experiences

The analysis identifies recurring themes, emerging issues, and examples of best practice that can directly inform the RSVP project objectives.

Analysis was carried out using CoLoop tool for qualitative analysis.⁵ This AI software was used to identify common themes across a relatively large and complex data set (5930 individual comments of various length and detail from 1000 participants).

The analysis was directed by a manually created 'discussion guide' which outlined the requirements for the analysis, as outlined above (how supervision intersects with the six core dimensions of the postgraduate research experience, and identifying any potential variations by discipline, mode of study, student domicile and gender). Drawing on the discussion guide and the associated questions, the software then generated key themes. CoLoop creates a summary for each participant, based on their responses across all questions. The theme frequency (number) shows how many participants mentioned that theme in their summary, therefore the theme frequency can then be presented as the percentage of participants who are coded to that theme. Manual cross checking of identified themes was then undertaken to check that the themes seemed in accordance with the data on which they were based.

2.2 The current context

The PGR voice

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2025⁶ report highlights a very positive experience being provided to postgraduate researchers across the participating institutions. In 2025, overall satisfaction levels were the highest in over a decade, and there is evidence of progress being made across many of the aspects covered in the survey. The areas of research culture and community, which perennially score lower, have begun to show consistently higher scores (albeit still with room for improvement). In the analysis of the quantitative data, satisfaction with supervision is the strongest performing area overall, with 89% reporting satisfaction with supervision in 2025.

The 2025 report noted that "correlation analysis has provided a clear and consistent view of the areas of the experience with the strongest link to overall satisfaction and it is again the case that providing a sense of belonging, and valuing and responding to feedback, are two of the strongest correlations. For both aspects, there is clear room for improvement, despite the high scores elsewhere".⁷

⁵ [CoLoop | AI Tool for Qualitative Research & Data Analysis](#)

⁶ [PRES_2025_sector_report_final_1771336208.pdf](#)

⁷ See page 19 of the PRES 2025 sector report for full details of the correlation analysis to identify which (closed) questions in the survey are most closely linked to overall satisfaction.
[PRES_2025_sector_report_final_1771336208.pdf](#)

Supervisor views

In 2021, with support from the Wellcome Trust and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) ran the first UK Research Supervision Survey (UKRSS), a UK-wide survey open to all those involved in supervising doctoral candidates, providing an opportunity to share their experiences. With funding from Research England, through the Next Generation Research SuperVision Project (RSVP), the survey was repeated in 2024. Respondents were involved in the supervision of doctoral candidates in 141 UK institutions.

The report of the 2024 survey⁸ highlighted that 90% of respondents indicated that they enjoyed being a supervisor (consistent with 91% in 2021). The report notes that “supervision is considered valuable, rewarding and enjoyable by those who undertake it, often benefiting them in ways that feed into their own research”. However, workload and capacity are issues, identified as a major challenge in both the 2021 and 2024 surveys. While issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic was a major challenge in 2021, by 2024 one of the main challenges for respondents was fostering a candidate’s confidence, focus and engagement. Allied to this there has been an increase in challenges relating to supporting candidates with mental health issues (also an area where supervisors had least confidence, and where 25% did not consider it part of their role).

3. Main themes arising from the analysis

Comments were analysed in relation to the main PRES dimensions (supervision, resources, research community, progress and assessment, skills development, and wellbeing), and these are presented below. Appendix 1 provides an overview of the themes organised by the percentage of responses coded to each theme (highest to lowest).

3.1 Factors impacting the supervision experience

The analysis looked at factors impacting the supervision experience.

Quality and supportiveness of supervisors

The expertise, commitment, and encouragement provided by supervisors were consistently cited as central to research progress and milestone achievement. The degree to which supervisors are supportive, approachable, and attentive is consistently identified as a central factor shaping doctoral experiences. In addition, supervisors’ supportive, approachable, and encouraging behaviour is identified as a major influence on participants’ sense of guidance and feedback quality. 343 comments were coded to this theme (34.3% of respondents).

- Participants described supervisors as ‘excellent,’ ‘amazing,’ or ‘fantastic,’ ‘attributing significant research progress to their guidance, feedback, and support, and fostered a comfortable environment for discussing research progress, challenges, and ideas.
- Supervisors’ availability, responsiveness, and willingness to provide timely, constructive feedback were highlighted as crucial for maintaining research momentum and meeting milestones.

⁸ [UK-Research-Supervision-Survey-2024-UK-Council-for-Graduate-Education.pdf](#)

- Personalised, empathetic, and human-centred supervision — where supervisors show genuine care for PGRs' wellbeing and development — was seen as especially impactful. Emotional and pastoral support, including understanding personal circumstances and wellbeing, was highly valued and often cited as crucial during challenging periods.
- Supervisor support during personal or challenging periods (e.g., pandemic, mental health struggles) is highly valued and enhances the perception of guidance.
- A positive supervisor-PGR relationship, characterized by trust, respect, and open communication, is central to a strong sense of guidance and feedback quality.

I feel that an important part of the supervisor relationship is pastoral and emotional support throughout the doctoral journey. Although academic support is invaluable, the relationship I have with my supervisors has been particularly supportive, as they have taken the time to understand me as a person and provide reassurance, motivation and targeted skill support where necessary.

Supervisor expertise and research alignment

Supervisors' subject knowledge, research experience, and ability to provide relevant and constructive academic guidance were critical for advancing research and overcoming challenges. A lack of subject-specific expertise or misalignment between supervisor and PGR research areas hindered progress, requiring PGRs to seek external support or self-teach critical skills. 143 comments are coded to this theme on the importance of supervisor expertise and research alignment (14.3% of respondents), with around a third of these related to a lack of expertise or research alignment.

- Access to supervisors with strong expertise in the participant's research area enabled high-quality guidance, skill development, and confidence in research direction.
- Supervisors who introduced PGRs to new techniques, methodologies, and research perspectives contributed positively to research advancement and milestone achievement.
- Constructive feedback and clear direction from supervisors were seen as essential for academic development and successful progression.

I have two excellent supervisors and they both support me with their wealth of knowledge. I feel lucky to have such great supervision. Two different supervisors from two completely different background was a blessing. Conflict in opinions always brought up an area of investigation, which helped me greatly.

My supervisors are not specialized in the specific area of my research, which sometimes limits the guidance they can provide. It would be highly beneficial if there were an opportunity to collaborate with or have a secondary supervisor from another department who has expertise in my research area.

Regularity and structure of supervision

Consistent meetings, clear communication, and structured guidance from supervisors were identified as key enablers of research progress and milestone completion, and were major factors influencing doctoral experiences. 192 comments are coded to this theme (19.2% of respondents).

- Frequent and regular supervisory meetings provided essential support, oversight, and opportunities for feedback, helping participants stay on track with research goals.
- Timely responses to emails, and consistent feedback were highly valued and contributed to a sense of support and progress, and enabled participants to improve, stay motivated, and meet deadlines.
- Clear communication of expectations, assessment criteria, and research milestones by supervisors was valued for reducing confusion and enabling effective planning.
- Proactive supervision, including setting deadlines, providing reminders, and anticipating PGR needs, was seen as more effective than reactive or hands-off approaches.
- Delays, inconsistency, or lack of actionable feedback from supervisors were major barriers for some (again around a third of those making comments coded to this theme), leading to frustration, slower progress, and missed milestones.
- Limited supervisor availability, delayed feedback, and infrequent contact were commonly cited as negative influences, leading to frustration, uncertainty, and feelings of isolation.

I have received excellent supervision and am very happy with how my research has progressed through regular meetings and updates.

Generally my supervisors are very good, but getting feedback on work can take a long time as they have so many other commitments.

Research community, networking, and peer support

Opportunities for networking, peer interaction, and integration into research communities — often facilitated by supervisors — were important for research development and milestone achievement. 80 comments are coded to this theme (8% of respondents).

- Supervisors who encouraged participation in conferences, seminars, and research groups helped PGRs build networks, gain feedback, and access collaborative opportunities.

- A strong sense of community and belonging, fostered by supervisors and institutional structures, contributed to motivation, confidence, and sustained research progress.
- Lack of peer support, isolation, or insufficient opportunities for networking and collaboration were seen as barriers to research progress, especially for part-time students and those who reported working remotely.

I was encouraged and supported to involve myself with other research groups outside the university.

Supervisory team dynamics and continuity

The composition, cohesion, and stability of supervisory teams influenced the quality and consistency of support received by doctoral researchers. Consistency and stability in supervisory teams were identified as important for maintaining research momentum and PGR wellbeing. 66 comments are coded to this theme (6.6% of respondents).

- Having multiple supportive supervisors or a cohesive supervisory team provided broader expertise, diverse perspectives, and more reliable support for research progress.
- Changes in supervisory teams, lack of continuity, or unclear roles among supervisors created uncertainty and could disrupt research momentum.
- Supervisor turnover, prolonged absences, or changes in team composition disrupted research continuity and caused stress or delays, while well-managed transitions and stable supervisory relationships were associated with positive experiences and progress
- Disparities in engagement or expertise among primary, secondary, and tertiary supervisors affected the overall effectiveness of supervision and access to guidance.

This is not the first time to be supervised in a higher institution (one during masters and another during PhD in another institution), and I can honestly and firmly confirm that my current experience is great. Sometimes I feel that I'm working with my colleagues in a team where we discuss the best practices for conducting the research without actually telling me exactly what to do. I have the opportunity to ask, evaluate, reflect on my experience. I'm so lucky to have such a team who can support me to be a skilled researcher.

Barriers due to inadequate or absent supervision

While the supervisory experience is described in positive terms by the majority of respondents, the analysis identified areas where there can be negative effects on the PGR experience. Participants described a wide range of supervisory experiences, from 'fantastic' and 'brilliant' to 'incompetent' or 'detrimental,' highlighting the critical influence of supervisor engagement and competence. Positive supervisory relationships were cited as the main reason for persistence and success in doctoral studies, sometimes outweighing negative institutional factors. Insufficient, disengaged, or unprofessional supervision was reported as a major obstacle to research progress and milestone completion. Significant variability in

supervisory quality and practices was reported, with both exemplary and poor supervision having strong impacts. 90 comments are coded to this theme (9% of respondents).

- Participants described negative impacts from supervisors who were absent, unresponsive, or failed to provide adequate guidance, leading to delays, frustration, and increased reliance on self-directed learning or external support.
- Unclear supervisory roles, inconsistent input, and lack of accountability for supervisors were cited as sources of confusion, inefficiency, and stress for doctoral researchers.
- Inconsistent or poor supervision, including lack of engagement, feedback, or support, was linked to negative outcomes such as withdrawal, mental health challenges, and stalled progress.

Supervisors! There is no consistency on how supervisors work and no clear outline on how to determine this. I do not feel like I have ever been a priority to my supervisors - getting them to reply to emails and attend meetings is hard enough.

Supervision and institutional factors

Effective supervision often compensates for perceived deficiencies in institutional support, research culture, or administrative processes, becoming the primary source of satisfaction for some PGRs. 48 comments are coded to this theme (4.8% of respondents).

- Participants distinguish between positive supervisory relationships and negative experiences with broader institutional structures, attributing their satisfaction primarily to supervision.
- Supervisors are often relied upon for information, guidance, and advocacy in the absence of clear or effective institutional processes.
- Strong supervisory support can mitigate the negative impact of poor induction, lack of research community, or inadequate administrative systems.

However, supervisor workload is perceived by some to have a negative effect on the PGR supervision experience.

- Heavy supervisor workloads and competing commitments limited their availability and responsiveness, impacting the quality of supervision.
- Institutional processes, administrative burdens, and lack of clear delineation of responsibilities between supervisors and the institution affected the supervisory relationship.
- Participants called for better institutional support for both supervisors and PGRs, including clearer guidelines, disability support, and mechanisms for addressing supervision issues.

My supervisors have always been fantastic, however the support given to them from [the university] to enable effective supervision in terms of workload is poor, with them often giving feedback on my work during weekends and evenings because they are so overworked.

3.2 Resources: How supervision relates to access to facilities, equipment, and research materials

The analysis looked at how supervision relates to access to facilities, equipment and research materials.

Supervision as a proactive facilitator of resource access

Supervisors often played a proactive role in enabling or supporting access to research resources, facilities, and materials. Supervision shaped the environment and culture that affected PGRs' ability to seek, identify, and utilise research resources, even when not directly providing access. 105 comments are coded to this theme (10.5% of respondents).

- Supervisors provided direct support in accessing research equipment, fieldwork resources, and academic materials. Some supervisors provide direct support by sharing links to papers, seminars, and external opportunities, or by leveraging their networks to connect PGRs with relevant expertise.
- Supervisors facilitated connections with other academics, research groups, and networks, expanding access to expertise and collaborative opportunities beyond the home institution.
- Supervisors encouraged and enabled participation in conferences, professional development events, and external visits, broadening access to research opportunities and networks.
- Supportive supervisors guided PGRs in navigating institutional processes, understanding available resources, and identifying relevant training or development opportunities.
- Where supervisors are proactive in identifying and supporting resource needs, PGRs report greater ease in accessing facilities, training, and support services.
- In addition, supportive supervisory relationships fostered open communication, enabling PGRs to discuss resource needs and seek guidance, which indirectly facilitated access, and supervisors' encouragement and feedback motivated PGRs to independently seek out resources and make effective use of available materials.

I feel I have been well inducted onto my PhD and my supervisory team have been amazing at signposting me to all the resources available to me.

Barriers, gaps and limitations in supervisory support for resource access

Gaps in supervision, supervisor availability, or lack of expertise sometimes hindered or failed to improve access to necessary research resources and facilities. Insufficient, inconsistent, or disengaged supervision resulted in limited or delayed access to necessary resources, facilities, and research materials. 100 comments are coded to this theme (10% of respondents).

- Inconsistent or infrequent supervision, supervisor turnover, and lack of communication led to reduced support in accessing resources, facilities, or materials and left PGRs without advocacy or guidance, leaving them feeling forced to seek resources independently or rely on informal networks.

- Supervisors' limited knowledge, lack of engagement, or prioritisation of their own advancement over PGR needs negatively impacted PGRs' ability to access appropriate resources.
- Supervisory workload, administrative burdens, and institutional bureaucracy constrained supervisors' capacity to advocate for or facilitate timely access to resources.
- Power imbalances and supervisor control over budgets or decision-making sometimes restricted PGRs' ability to obtain equipment or materials, leading to inefficiencies and frustration.
- Some participants note that supervisors are verbally supportive but do not follow up on practical needs, resulting in limited assistance with securing workspace, equipment, or training.
- Inadequate induction or orientation, often reliant on supervisors, leads to information gaps about resource access, especially for new students or those that reported working remotely.

Overall, I had good supervision experience at the university. But it might be highlighted that sometimes supervisors are not aware or trained to give advice regarding other aspects of a PhD student life in the university besides the core research.

Variability and inequity in supervisory support

A small number of respondents make reference to inequity in supervisory support for resource access. Differences in supervisory practices lead to uneven experiences among doctoral researchers regarding resource access leading to inequitable experiences among PGRs. 59 comments are coded to this theme (5.9% of respondents).

- While some PGRs, as mentioned above, reported excellent supervisory support that ensured comprehensive access to resources, others experienced minimal or no facilitation, resulting in disparities.
- Distance learners, off-site PGRs, and those with niche research areas sometimes faced greater challenges in accessing resources, with supervision inconsistently addressing these needs.
- Access to resources is perceived to be dependent on individual supervisors' engagement, expertise, and willingness to support, resulting in disparities between PGRs. Some supervisors are described as 'hands-off,' leading to limited proactive support for accessing resources.
- Inconsistent or absent supervision can leave PGRs without guidance or advocacy, making it difficult to navigate bureaucratic processes or secure necessary materials.
- Changes in supervision teams, lack of alignment between project topics and departmental expertise, and absence of community support contributed to inconsistent access to research resources.
- Supervisors' administrative burdens or institutional roles sometimes limited their capacity to support PGRs' resource needs.

It is due to my supervisors that I have any understanding of these areas and there is conflicting information across all [university] platforms. The sites are hard to navigate, there is not one clear space to access information or resources if you search for it.

3.3 Research Community: Supervisor's role in integrating PGRs into research networks and communities

The analysis looked at the supervisor's role in integrating PGRs into research networks and communities and fostering a sense of belonging.

Supportive supervisory practices facilitating integration and belonging

341 comments (from the years 2021-2023) are coded to this theme (34.1% of all respondents, 56% of respondents 2021 - 2023) on supervisory practices. Supervisors who provided consistent support, guidance, and encouragement played a key role in helping PGRs integrate into research communities and networks. This is not to say that respondents in the 2024 and 2025 data did not describe feeling part of a research community, but that where comments were made from these years they did not explicitly describe what their supervisor had done to facilitate integration or belonging.

- Supervisors facilitated integration by introducing PGRs to research tools, encouraging participation in seminars, conferences, and collaborative projects, and providing access to professional networks, and professional opportunities. This further strengthened participants' integration into the research community.
- Personalised supervision, including understanding individual needs, encouraging autonomy, providing emotional support, and fostering confidence, contributed to positive integration experiences.
- Supervisors who proactively facilitated access to resources, external networks, and professional development opportunities helped participants feel more integrated and empowered.
- Supervisors fostered inclusive and supportive environments, provided regular feedback, and were approachable, which contributed to participants' confidence and sense of belonging within research communities.
- Mentorship in research skills, publication, and career planning by supervisors contributed to PGRs' confidence and ability to engage with the wider research community.
- Supervisors who support career planning, publishing, and exposure to diverse research environments help participants build networks relevant to both academic and non-academic careers.

My supervisors were very supportive and instrumental in helping me make connections with other academics and institutions related to my research.

Limited or inconsistent support for integration

More recent data (2024 and 2025) did not include responses coded to the theme on supportive supervisory practices. Instead, 187 responses from the 2024 data are coded to this theme of limited, inconsistent, or absent supervisory support in connecting them to the wider research community, often relying on personal initiative or institutional structures instead. In 2025 supervision was experienced as supportive and positive, but not explicit on facilitating integration into broader research communities or networks. Overall (data from 2021-2025) 518 comments are coded to this theme (51.8% of respondents).

- In 2024, participant comments suggested that did not feel supervision played a significant role in helping them connect to research networks, with many reporting that peer support, departmental culture, or institutional events were more influential. Barriers to community integration included supervisor unavailability, lack of field-specific expertise, infrequent meetings, and insufficient communication about networking opportunities. Participants noted that the effectiveness of supervision in fostering research community connections was highly variable and dependent on individual supervisors, with some PGRs experiencing exemplary support and others feeling isolated.
- In 2025, participants described supervisors as helpful, encouraging, and available, yet did not report direct support for engaging with wider research communities. Some participants felt a sense of belonging within their department or research group due to supportive supervision, but lacked integration at the school, institutional, or cross-disciplinary level. Supervisory support often focused on individual academic progress, pastoral care, or skill development, rather than on expanding professional networks or community engagement.
- Supervisors' limited availability, infrequent meetings, or lack of responsiveness left some participants feeling isolated and unsupported in building research networks.
- Supervisors failed to provide guidance on networking, training, or conference opportunities, requiring participants to independently seek out integration avenues.
- Some supervisors were supportive within the immediate research group but did not facilitate broader or interdisciplinary network connections.
- Integration into research communities was described as highly dependent on individual supervisors' attitudes, expertise, and willingness to advocate for PGRs. Some participants observed that assertive supervisors or those with strong reputations provided more opportunities for engagement, while others felt overlooked or excluded.
- Institutional and departmental differences, as well as supervisor workload and expertise, resulted in uneven access to networking, training, and research community engagement. Institutional culture, departmental structures, and lack of organised events or research groups can limit opportunities for networking, regardless of supervisor quality.
- Networking and integration into research communities are in some cases self-initiated by PGRs or facilitated by institutional programmes (e.g., Doctoral Colleges, DTPs), rather than by supervisors.
- Working remotely, pandemic disruptions, and niche research areas can further hinder integration, with supervisors sometimes unable to compensate for these challenges.

I have found a community outwith the university in the form of an early modern studies committee, but I have to say that the university has not exactly provided opportunities to create a support network either.

Institutional and structural factors affecting supervisor influence

As the data spans cohorts affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, this is raised as a factor affecting integration and belonging. Remote study, pandemic-related restrictions, and institutional or disciplinary barriers hindered participants' ability to connect with research communities, with supervision not always compensating for these challenges. In addition, systemic issues within institutions, such as workload, policy constraints, and lack of structured opportunities, were seen to limit supervisors' capacity to facilitate integration into research communities. Other external factors such as working remotely, and personal circumstances also affected integration, sometimes beyond the influence of supervisors. 284 comments are coded to this theme (28.4% of respondents).

- Institutional factors such as poor communication, lack of structured events, or inaccessible resources further hindered integration, with supervision often unable to compensate for these gaps.
- Part-time, interdisciplinary students, or those that reported working remotely faced additional challenges in accessing research communities, exacerbated by insufficient supervisory or institutional support.
- Part-time students and those that reported working remotely, as well as those who started during COVID-19, reported feelings of isolation and limited opportunities for community engagement.
- Supervision was generally not effective in bridging the gap created by remote study or pandemic disruptions, with participants relying on self-initiative or external networks.
- Pandemic-related restrictions, working remotely, and lack of physical proximity limited opportunities for informal networking and community engagement, regardless of supervisor actions.
- Supervisors' heavy workloads, administrative duties, and lack of institutional support restricted their ability to proactively connect PGRs with research networks, and capacity to facilitate networking and community integration.
- Personal factors such as off-campus living, part-time study, or full-time employment reduced PGRs' ability to participate in research community activities, even when supervisors were supportive.

Within the university there are next to no opportunities to engage with others in my specific research area.

Recommendations for improvements in supervisory practice

Participants suggest various ways to enhance inclusion and better support integration into broader research communities and networks, including clearer communication,

structured support, and more inclusive practices. 50 comments are coded to this theme (5% of respondents).

- Participants recommended more structured opportunities for networking, such as group projects, informal gatherings, interdisciplinary events, and mentorship frameworks facilitated by supervisors.
- Participants called for clearer frameworks, standardised expectations, and additional mentorship options to ensure equitable and effective integration into research communities.
- Clearer guidance on supervisor roles, responsibilities, and available resources was requested to help PGRs navigate and access broader research networks.
- Calls for supervisor training and institutional oversight were made to ensure consistent, proactive support for community integration and to address any disparities in supervisory quality.
- Participants also recommend more structured induction, and accessible mentorship beyond the primary supervisor.

3.4 Progress and Assessment: Supervisory support through milestones, feedback on progress, and examination preparation

The analysis looked at the supervisor's role in supporting progress and assessment.

Supportive and effective supervision for progression

Supervision frequently provided essential academic, emotional, and professional support, positively influencing progress, milestone achievement, and exam and assessment preparation. 569 comments are coded to this theme (56.9% of respondents).

- Many participants described their supervisors or supervisory teams as supportive, knowledgeable, and approachable, attributing their academic development and successful progression to this guidance.
- Supervisors often provided timely and constructive feedback, regular meetings, and encouragement, which were instrumental in meeting research milestones and preparing for assessments and exams. Participants frequently attribute their successful progression, skill development, and confidence to supportive supervisors who provide timely feedback, clear guidance, and encouragement.
- Supervision was credited with fostering independence, confidence, and skill development, as well as facilitating access to professional networks and career opportunities.
- Effective supervision is credited with providing both academic and pastoral support, helping PGRs navigate challenges, maintain motivation, and achieve key milestones.
- Supervisors who proactively clarify expectations, structure meetings, and offer constructive feedback are seen as instrumental in preparing PGRs for assessments and ensuring steady progress.
- Supervisors who tailored their approach to individual needs, provided constructive feedback, and fostered autonomy were seen as instrumental in building confidence and research skills necessary for progression and assessment success.
- Supervision that balances autonomy with structured support enables PGRs to develop independence while ensuring they remain on track for progress and assessment readiness.

My supervisor is hugely caring and listens to me when I update him on my wellbeing, and when I am unsure I am meeting deadlines/progressing, he helps me make a clear plan on how to get there/steps to move forward as well as just talking things through.

Inconsistency in supervision and progress and assessment

While comments show a positive picture, there is also some indication of inconsistency and variability in supervision to support progress. Participants described misalignments, including lack of supervisor engagement, unclear expectations, inconsistent feedback, and insufficient support for meeting milestones. 352 comments are coded to this theme (35.2% of respondents).

- Some supervisors were frequently absent, unresponsive, or failed to provide timely feedback, leading to delays, confusion, and hindered progress toward milestones.
- Some participants experienced changes in supervisors, staff turnover, or inconsistent engagement, leading to disrupted progress, lack of continuity, and challenges in achieving milestones and preparing for exams or assessment.
- Limited supervisor availability due to workload, administrative duties, or personal circumstances was cited as a barrier to timely feedback, regular meetings, and effective support for progress and milestone completion.
- Participants reported inconsistent supervision quality, with disparities between main and secondary supervisors, changes in supervisory teams, or lack of relevant expertise affecting alignment with progress and assessment needs. In some cases, participants reported that only one supervisor was actively engaged, while others contributed little or nothing.
- Supervisory teams with conflicting advice or unclear roles create confusion, reduce PGR confidence, and complicate progression through key milestones.
- Supervisors' lack of subject expertise or unfamiliarity with programme requirements can leave PGRs without necessary academic or procedural support, forcing them to rely on peers or self-directed learning.
- Some participants felt that supervisors were not adequately trained or equipped to provide guidance on training needs, administrative procedures, or broader professional development, limiting support for key milestones and assessments.
- Feedback is described in some cases as vague, generic, overly critical, or lacking in actionable advice, which undermines PGR confidence and progress.
- Lack of structured guidance, unclear roles, and insufficient communication about deadlines, assessment criteria, or processes contributed to anxiety, inefficiency, and self-directed problem-solving.
- There were calls for more structured induction, clearer supervisory frameworks, and additional training sessions to better prepare PGRs for deadlines, assessments, and final examinations.
- Supervisory support was sometimes reactive rather than proactive, with PGRs needing to initiate meetings or seek external resources to fill gaps in guidance and training.

- Institutional or administrative processes (e.g., digital systems, induction, funding, and assessment documentation) were often described as confusing, inconsistent, or poorly integrated with supervision, further impeding progress.

My supervision has knocked my confidence somewhat, with often discouraging remarks rather than encouragement.

High satisfaction with supervisory feedback

Many participants reported receiving high-quality, useful, and supportive feedback from their supervisors, contributing positively to their academic and personal development. 188 comments are coded to this theme (18.8% of respondents).

- Supervisors were frequently described as supportive, knowledgeable, approachable, proactive, and providing timely, constructive, and tailored feedback that met PGRs' research and developmental needs.
- Feedback was often credited with boosting confidence, fostering independence, encouraging ambition, and supporting both academic and personal growth.
- Regular meetings and open communication channels (e.g., weekly or monthly check-ins, prompt email responses) are highlighted as effective in maintaining momentum and addressing issues quickly.
- Participants valued supervisors who provided a balance between guidance and autonomy, respected their ideas, and offered feedback that was both challenging and encouraging.

My supervisors are extremely supportive and knowledgeable. We have regular meetings and I get feedback when I need it. They also pass over any relevant articles, learning or training opportunities they see that they believe would be useful to me.

Feedback variability and inconsistency

Conversely, some participants reported delayed, poor-quality, unhelpful, or even detrimental feedback, which hinders their progress and causes frustration. Participants reported variability in the quality, usefulness, and consistency of supervisory feedback, often depending on individual supervisors or changes in supervision teams. Some participants described supervisors as disengaged, unresponsive, lacking competence, or providing feedback that was discouraging, unclear, or not constructive. 108 comments are coded to this theme (10.8% of respondents).

- Institutional issues such as supervisor overload, lack of training, unclear expectations, and insufficient support structures were identified as contributing to poor feedback experiences.
- Participants called for clearer guidelines, more transparency, and better training for supervisors to ensure consistent, high-quality feedback.

- Some participants experienced excellent feedback from primary supervisors but little or no engagement from secondary supervisors, leading to uneven support.
- Frequent changes in supervision teams, supervisor turnover, or periods without supervision led to inconsistent feedback and support, negatively impacting progress.
- PGRs with multiple supervisors can face contradictory or uncoordinated feedback, leading to confusion and difficulty in progressing effectively.
- Delayed or absent feedback from supervisors leads to feelings of isolation, frustration, and uncertainty, often requiring PGRs to be highly proactive to receive support.
- Poor quality feedback — such as vague, irrelevant, or non-constructive comments — undermines PGRs' confidence, impedes skill development, and can result in missed learning opportunities or mistakes.

Currently my supervisory team are giving contradictory feedback which is making it extremely difficult for me to progress my studies and is resulting in me having to repeat or make significant changes to my work.

Institutional and structural factors affecting supervision

The effectiveness of supervision and its alignment with progress and assessment was influenced by supervisory style, workload, and the broader institutional environment. Institutional processes, administrative support, and departmental culture significantly influence the effectiveness of supervision and PGR progression. 115 comments are coded to this theme (11.5% of respondents).

- High supervisor workloads and lack of accountability mechanisms contributed to inconsistent support and limited time for individual PGRs.
- Institutional reliance on individual supervisors, rather than robust systems, created vulnerabilities; PGRs without proactive supervisors faced greater challenges in navigating progress and assessment.
- Participants distinguished between positive supervisory relationships and inadequate institutional support, citing poor induction, unclear guidelines, and slow administrative processes as barriers to progression and assessment preparation.
- Lack of institutional support, unclear policies, or inadequate mechanisms for addressing supervision problems exacerbated challenges and left some PGRs feeling isolated or unsupported.
- Lack of standardisation in supervisory practices and insufficient oversight can lead to inequitable experiences and missed opportunities for early intervention when problems arise.
- Participants advocated for more holistic, relational, and PGR-centred supervision cultures, as well as better training for supervisors to address both academic and wellbeing needs. Participants also recommend clearer institutional policies and independent reporting mechanisms to improve supervision quality and ensure consistent support for progression and assessment.

My PhD supervision has been a real disappointment. Zoom and email haven't been good collaboration tools. The PhD subject appears to be an area that they aspire to work in rather than one in which they have a good grounding - who supervises the supervisors?!

3.5 Skills and Professional Development: Supervisor's contribution to transferable skills development and career preparation

The analysis looked at the supervisor's contribution to career development and transferable skills development.

Positive outcomes and exemplary practices

Despite challenges, numerous participants reported significant personal and professional growth, attributing this to effective supervision and institutional support. Supervisors who are engaged, approachable, supportive, and proactive play a significant role in fostering transferable skills and preparing PGRs for diverse career paths. Participants report feeling well supported by their supervisors in developing professional and transferable skills, often highlighting proactive guidance, encouragement, and access to relevant opportunities. 243 comments are coded to this theme (24.3% of respondents).

- Supervisors who acted as mentors, role models, and advocates were credited with fostering confidence, independence, and a strong professional identity.
- Supervisors who balance autonomy with guidance help PGRs develop independence, critical thinking, project management, and self-direction — key transferable skills for future careers.
- Exposure to diverse training, interdisciplinary collaboration, and real-world applications (e.g., industrial doctorates, placements) enhanced employability and readiness for varied career paths.
- Supportive supervisors facilitate access to professional networks, research groups, and industry partners, interdisciplinary collaborations, and external opportunities, broadening PGRs' exposure and employability.
- Supervisors provide constructive feedback, guidance on research, and encouragement to participate in conferences, publications, and networking, directly enhancing skills such as academic writing, communication, and professional engagement.
- Supportive environments that combined academic, emotional, and practical guidance were seen as instrumental in enabling doctoral researchers to thrive and prepare for future careers.
- Supervisory teams with complementary skills and diverse expertise broadened participants' exposure to different approaches, enhancing transferable skills and readiness for varied career paths.

I see my supervisor once a month which allows me to make sufficient progress for us to have enough to talk about. They offer me excellent advice, on both the work I send to them but also on conferences, articles, engagement and anything else I choose to ask about. They also push me to make sure I am doing as much as I can in addition to the thesis for my CV. We email far more regularly than our supervisions and see each other in the department most weeks.

Variability and inconsistency in supervisory support for transferable skills and career preparation

Respondents also reported highly variable experiences regarding supervisory support for developing transferable skills and preparing for future careers, although the numbers coded to this theme are lower in the more recent data (32 responses in 2024 and 2025). Some participants report variability in supervisory support, with some supervisors providing minimal or no contribution to skill development and career preparation. 196 comments are coded to this theme (19.6% of respondents).

- While some participants described proactive supervisors who facilitated access, as mentioned above, others experienced minimal or inconsistent supervisory involvement, with some left to manage their own professional development or seek external resources due to lack of structured support.
- Supervisor support is described in some cases as reactive rather than proactive, with PGRs needing to identify and pursue opportunities themselves; for these, supervisors may approve but rarely initiate or facilitate skill development activities.
- Several participants noted that the quality and extent of support depended heavily on individual supervisors, leading to disparities in opportunities for skills acquisition and career guidance.
- Inconsistent engagement and lack of continuity in supervision, especially when supervisors left or were unavailable, hindered progress and limited opportunities for skill acquisition.
- Participants noted disparities in access to practical training, feedback, and opportunities, often depending on individual supervisors rather than institutional structures.
- Some participants feel unsupported or only partially supported, attributing gaps to supervisor workload, lack of expertise, infrequent contact, or a focus on research outputs over skill development.
- Institutional induction, training, and communication are described by some as inadequate, with participants noting unclear expectations, poorly advertised or irrelevant workshops, and limited access to discipline-specific or advanced training.
- Opportunities for teaching, networking, and interdisciplinary engagement are reported as lacking or inaccessible, especially for part-time, self-funded students, or those reporting working remotely, limiting broader skill development.

I have also received very minimal career development support. I am currently writing up my thesis with the uncertainty of not having anything lined up when my stipend payments finish. I have tried to speak to my supervisor about potential grants, fellowships or temporary research assistant roles, but they were unable to provide any support. The most I got was links to jobs that I had already seen.

Recommendations for improving supervisory practice

A small number (31) of participants suggested improvements for supervisory practice in this area. Participants identified persistent gaps and challenges in supervisory and institutional support for transferable skills and career readiness, and suggested ways to enhance supervisory guidance to better support transferable skill development and career preparedness.

- A lack of clarity around supervisory roles and expectations often led to confusion about where to seek guidance for skills development and career planning.
- Some participants reported insufficient support for advanced or non-research-specific skills (e.g., project management, coding, research administration), requiring them to seek external help or rely on prior experience.
- Calls for more structured mentorship frameworks, targeted career development workshops, and oversight of supervisory quality were common, reflecting a desire for more consistent and comprehensive support.
- Calls for supervisor training in leadership, communication, feedback, and awareness of student wellbeing (e.g., Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)) to improve supervisory effectiveness.
- Advocacy for more structured, personalised, and transparent supervisory processes, including clear procedures for addressing issues and ensuring continuity.
- Suggestions to integrate subject-specific and practical skills training into induction and ongoing supervision, ensuring equitable access for all PGRs.

3.6 Wellbeing: Impact of supervisory relationships on PGR mental health and work-life balance

The analysis looked at the impact of supervisory relationships on student mental health and work-life balance. Supervisory approaches that addressed emotional support, accessibility, and inclusion were seen as vital for sustaining research progress, especially for PGRs facing additional challenges.

- Supervisors who provided pastoral care, emotional support, and understanding of personal circumstances (e.g., disability, mental health, work-life balance) enabled PGRs to maintain motivation and overcome barriers.
- Lack of supervisor awareness or institutional support for accessibility and inclusion issues negatively impacted disabled and neurodivergent PGRs' ability to progress and engage fully in research activities.

Supportive and approachable supervisors enhances wellbeing and mental health

The presence of supervisors who are supportive, approachable, and genuinely invested in PGRs' wellbeing and progress was consistently identified as a major positive influence on aspects related to mental health, and a more positive doctoral experience. 503 comments are coded to this theme (50.3% of respondents).

- Participants frequently cited the value of supervisors who provided encouragement, emotional support, and practical guidance, contributing to increased confidence and resilience.
- Consistent, responsive, and caring supervision is widely reported as a key protective factor for wellbeing, fostering confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging.
- Supervisors who were approachable and available for regular meetings or check-ins fostered a sense of security and reduced stress.
- A balance between support and autonomy, where supervisors encouraged independent thinking while remaining accessible, was highly valued and contributed to positive wellbeing.
- Participants value supervisors who balance academic guidance with pastoral support, encourage autonomy, and are flexible in accommodating personal circumstances, which contributes to resilience and motivation.
- Positive supervisory relationships are often described as the main or only source of wellbeing support, especially when institutional services are lacking or insufficient.
- Supervisory support was especially valued during periods of crisis, illness, or external challenges (e.g., COVID-19), helping participants maintain wellbeing and resilience.

My supervisor encourages self as well as scientific progression, in particular, they have prompted me to consider into my working plans attendance at career development courses... Additionally, I feel my supervisor has a clear idea of how important mental and physical wellbeing are for maintaining self-motivation and a healthy work-life balance. They have been approachable and extremely supportive of my well being needs during my PhD journey, whether this through discussions and mentoring or direction to additional resources and support services.

Supportive supervisory relationships enhance wellbeing and work-life balance

A further 200 comments are coded to this theme on wellbeing and work-life balance (20% of respondents). Positive, engaged, and communicative supervisory relationships are again linked to improved wellbeing, motivation, and the ability to manage academic and personal demands. Supervisory practices directly influenced participants' ability to manage academic responsibilities alongside personal and professional commitments.

- Participants with supportive supervisors report increased confidence, reduced stress, and a greater sense of belonging and security during their studies.

- Regular, timely feedback and accessible supervision provide structure, reassurance, and help participants manage workload and expectations, supporting healthier work-life balance.
- Supervisors who show empathy, pastoral care, and interest in PGRs' personal circumstances help buffer against external stressors and foster resilience.
- Supportive supervisors who respected boundaries, provided flexibility, and tailored guidance helped participants maintain a healthier work-life balance.
- For a small number excessive supervisory demands (e.g., frequent meetings, after-hours contact), lack of support for part-time PGRs, and insufficient understanding of personal circumstances negatively affected work-life balance.
- Institutional and departmental shortcomings (e.g., lack of social opportunities, inadequate resources, poor communication) can compound supervisory gaps, further challenging work-life balance.

On the whole supervisors have been extremely supportive and flexible in responding to study needs, and work/life/family/study balance, and give both research and pastoral support with warmth and constructive guidance.

Negative experiences and detrimental effects

404 comments were coded to this theme on the impact of negative experiences (40.4% of respondents) on aspects of mental health. Lack of support, poor communication, and unsupportive, or in a very small number of cases what are perceived as abusive supervisory relationships, are major contributors to stress, isolation, and diminished wellbeing. Poor supervision, including lack of support, communication failures, and power imbalances, was associated with increased stress, isolation, and negative impacts on wellbeing and work-life balance.

- Participants experiencing neglect, inconsistent feedback, or infrequent meetings report increased anxiety, loss of confidence, and feelings of abandonment, often leading to consideration of withdrawal or mental health decline.
- Bullying, harassment, discrimination, micro-aggressions, and power imbalances within supervisory relationships have severe and lasting negative effects on mental health, self-esteem, and work-life balance, erode trust, and create toxic research environments.
- Lack of psychological safety, fear of retaliation, and ineffective or unsafe reporting mechanisms prevent PGRs from seeking help or addressing supervision issues, exacerbating mental health challenges.
- Unclear expectations, contradictory advice, and lack of accountability in supervision create confusion, wasted effort, and increased stress, undermining both wellbeing and the ability to manage academic and personal responsibilities.
- Inconsistent supervision, supervisor turnover, and lack of expertise (especially in interdisciplinary or practice-based research) contribute to uncertainty, frustration, and reduced wellbeing.

Much of the support for wellbeing was in the form of [slide] presentations during induction/student fora, and comms about yoga events and therapy dogs. This is then immediately undermined by supervisors mandating 50-60 hour working weeks, under the premise that research is 'a calling' so we should sacrifice any semblance of work-life balance.

Clarity of communication

A smaller number of comments relate specifically to clarity of communication. Clear communication about expectations, milestones, and available support is seen as essential for managing stress and supporting wellbeing. 87 comments are coded to this theme (8.7% of respondents).

- Unclear or inconsistent communication from supervisors regarding research timelines, thesis structure, and assessment criteria leads to confusion, anxiety, and diminished confidence, and uncertainty about progress.
- Participants value supervisors who provide regular, constructive feedback and maintain open channels for discussion, which helps clarify expectations and reduces stress, and helped participants feel supported, guided, and able to progress confidently.
- A lack of proactive check-ins or personal interest from supervisors is perceived as insufficient pastoral care, potentially increasing feelings of isolation or neglect. Participants valued supervisors who were proactive in checking in and maintaining open lines of communication, especially during challenging periods.

Supervision during challenging periods

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the importance of effective supervision for wellbeing, while also exposing vulnerabilities in supervisory practices, with significant consequences for wellbeing, mental health, and work-life balance. 142 comments from 2021 and 2022 data are coded to this theme (14.2% of all respondents, 35.5% of 2021 and 2022 respondents).

- Reduced contact, remote supervision, limited access to research communities, and supervisor unavailability during the pandemic led to increased stress, anxiety, and doubts about PhD completion for some participants regardless of supervisory quality.
- Conversely, supervisors who maintained support and adapted to new challenges during crises were credited with helping PGRs manage stress and maintain wellbeing. Supervisors who maintained regular, proactive communication and adapted to remote challenges were able to buffer some negative effects on wellbeing and work-life balance.
- Those reporting working remotely highlighted gaps in institutional support for both practical needs (e.g., IT equipment) and social connection, further impacting wellbeing and work-life balance.

Isolation, community, and peer support

Feelings of isolation and the presence or absence of community and peer support significantly affect doctoral wellbeing and mental health. Opportunities for peer interaction, community-building, and informal support networks play a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of inadequate supervision and enhancing overall wellbeing. Wellbeing is also

influenced by broader peer networks, research culture, and institutional structures beyond direct supervision. 162 comments are coded to this theme (16.2% of respondents).

- Many participants report loneliness and lack of connection to peers or the wider research community, which increases vulnerability to mental health challenges.
- Supervisors often serve as the primary or sole source of support, making the quality of this relationship even more critical for wellbeing in the absence of broader networks.
- Opportunities for peer interaction, group work, and community-building events are valued and recommended to reduce isolation and support mental health.
- Participants valued connections with other PGR and departmental communities, which provided emotional support, opportunities to share experiences, and reduced feelings of isolation.
- Lack of a facilitated postgraduate community or limited peer engagement exacerbated loneliness and made it harder to balance doctoral demands with personal wellbeing.
- Institutional events, seminars, and informal gatherings were seen as beneficial for fostering a sense of belonging and supporting wellbeing, especially for part-time students, international students, or those reporting working remotely. Participants recommend more structured opportunities for social interaction, peer support, and community-building to buffer against the stresses of doctoral study and variable supervision.
- Institutional support services (e.g., counselling, disability services, wellbeing workshops) are valued when accessible, but long waiting times, lack of tailored provision, and poor signposting are common frustrations.

Supervisor workload and institutional constraints

Supervisor availability and effectiveness were often limited by high workloads, administrative burdens, and lack of institutional support, impacting both PGR and staff wellbeing.

64 comments are coded to this theme (6.4% of respondents).

- Participants noted that supervisors being overburdened with teaching, research, and administration reduced their availability and responsiveness, negatively affecting PGR support.
- Institutional policies, lack of clarity in supervisor roles, and insufficient time allocation for supervision contributed to inconsistent experiences and uncertainty.
- Some participants expressed concern for supervisors' own wellbeing, recognising that staff stress and understaffing could indirectly affect the quality of supervision and student mental health.
- Overworked supervisors, high staff turnover, and competing responsibilities limit the time and attention available for PGR support, sometimes leading to delays, reduced feedback, and less effective supervision.
- Institutional focus on metrics, funding, and undergraduate priorities is perceived by some as detracting from investment in PGR wellbeing and effective supervision. Institutional and structural factors affecting wellbeing.

My supervisors give me the support I need, but I sometimes worry that they are so time-poor that they are having to fit in this core part of their role when they should be off sick/on leave/striking. This seems to be a result of workload rather than anything else. It does sometimes lead to discussions not moving forward, having to be repeated, or putting off decisions, just because the capacity to take in the new information and then reflect and act on it, is not there as much as would be ideal.

Institutional and structural factors affecting wellbeing

Institutional policies, resources, and culture play a significant role in shaping doctoral researchers' experiences of wellbeing and mental health. The broader institutional environment, including departmental culture, peer networks, and access to additional support services, played a significant role in shaping wellbeing. Institutional policies, training, and support structures play a critical role in shaping the supervisory experience and its effect on wellbeing. 313 comments are coded to this theme (31.3% of respondents).

- Gaps in institutional support, such as limited access to mental health services, poor signposting, and lack of tailored resources for doctoral researchers, are cited as barriers to wellbeing.
- Physical environment issues — including inadequate workspace, lack of social spaces, and inaccessible facilities — negatively impacted on wellbeing and limited opportunities for support and community.
- Ineffective reporting mechanisms and lack of accountability for supervisors or departments leave PGRs feeling unsupported and vulnerable when facing problems, exacerbating stress and mental health concerns.
- Effective support systems, such as counselling, learning mentors, and clear signposting to resources, were important for maintaining mental health, especially when supervisory support was lacking.
- Institutional shortcomings — such as underfunded wellbeing services, lack of clear support structures, and inadequate supervisor training — limit the ability of supervisors to support PGR wellbeing effectively. Participants often relied on supervisors as their primary or sole source of support due to gaps in institutional provision, which can place excessive pressure on supervisory relationships and lead to unmet needs.
- Peer networks, research communities, and non-supervisory staff can supplement supervisory support, but their availability and effectiveness are inconsistent, affecting overall wellbeing and work-life balance.
- Rigid programme structures, lack of tailored support for diverse PGR needs (e.g., part-time, parents, international), and insufficient induction or training increase pressure and negatively affect work-life balance.
- A positive research culture, opportunities for peer interaction, and visible wellbeing resources can mitigate negative impacts and foster a sense of community, but their absence intensifies isolation and stress.

- Participants call for better integration between academic supervision and institutional support, including confidential reporting systems, proactive outreach, and more effective training for supervisors in supporting PGR wellbeing.

My supervisory team is supportive, but the complexity and lengthiness of the research management system pose significant challenges. Both students and supervisors find the formal documentation process cumbersome, leading to delays in research progress. The supervisory team needs to be well-versed in the processes to provide better guidance to students and alleviate unnecessary stress.

Holistic and personalised supervision supports wellbeing and balance

Supervisory approaches that address both academic and personal needs, including mental health, flexibility, and individual circumstances, are associated with better wellbeing and work-life balance outcomes. While supervisors are often the primary source of wellbeing support, participants note gaps in addressing mental health, career development, and personal challenges, especially where institutional services are lacking or inaccessible. 128 comments are coded to this theme (12.8% of respondents).

- Supervisors who proactively checked on PGRs' mental health and personal circumstances, and offered flexibility during challenging times, were credited with reducing stress and supporting wellbeing.
- Personalised supervision — treating each PGR's situation uniquely and providing tailored support — was highlighted as essential for maintaining wellbeing and managing work-life demands. Individualised attention, sensitivity to unique challenges (e.g., neurodiversity, disability, personal crises), and flexibility in supervision were highly appreciated. A lack of differentiation between supervisees or failure to accommodate specific needs can negatively affect wellbeing and lead to feelings of being overlooked or unsupported.
- There is a desire amongst some respondents for supervisors to be trained and held accountable for supporting the holistic doctoral journey, including emotional, mental, and career wellbeing, not just academic progress.
- Gaps in pastoral care, lack of awareness of wellbeing resources, or impersonal supervisory practices were linked to increased stress and unmet wellbeing needs.
- Supervisors who avoided undue pressure and allowed PGRs to progress at their own pace supported mental health and reduced anxiety.
- A safe, non-judgmental, and empowering supervisory environment enabled PGRs to discuss difficulties openly and seek help when needed.
- Participants with disabilities or specific health needs can find supervisors lack awareness or training, leading to additional stress and unmet support needs.

My supervisors are readily available. I am helped over and above what others experience with my lead supervisor sending me relevant info in her specialist subject that is the focus of my study to keep me updated. My supervisors have supported me from a holistic stance around work life, health and wellbeing issues.

Variability and inconsistency in supervisory support

There is perceived variability in the quality of supervision and support, leading to unequal experiences of wellbeing and mental health among doctoral researchers. 121 comments are coded to this theme (12.1% of respondents).

- While some PGRs experience exceptional, holistic support from supervisors and institutions, others can face neglect, micromanagement, or even bullying, resulting in profound negative impacts on mental health.
- Supervisor workload, competing responsibilities, and lack of training contribute to inconsistent supervisory practices and support, affecting PGR wellbeing.
- Some participants note that positive supervisory relationships can partially compensate for institutional shortcomings, but systemic issues (e.g., overburdened supervisors, lack of training, poor processes) limit the effectiveness of even the best supervisors.
- Frequent changes in supervisors, supervisor overwork, or lack of institutional oversight exacerbate instability and can disrupt progress, increase stress, and diminish wellbeing.
- The presence of multiple supervisors or a supervisory team often mitigated risks associated with single-supervisor dependency, providing broader support and reducing vulnerability.
- PGRs with disabilities or specific needs can encounter additional barriers due to lack of awareness, accessibility, or tailored support, impacting their wellbeing and progress.
- Participants called for clearer policies, regular quality control, and supervisor training (e.g., in management, feedback, and mental health awareness) to address inconsistencies and improve overall supervision quality.

Recommendations and calls for improvement

Participants suggest actionable changes to enhance wellbeing and mental health support in doctoral education and ways to enhance wellbeing support within supervisory relationships and the wider research environment. 104 comments are coded to this theme (10.4% of respondents).

- Calls for supervisor training in mental health awareness, clearer guidelines on supervisory roles, and more structured, relational approaches to supervision are common. Participants recommend regular, evidence-based supervisor training focused on wellbeing, equality, and effective communication to improve PGR experiences and outcomes
- Participants recommend improved institutional support structures, including impartial contacts for raising concerns, better signposting of wellbeing resources, and more inclusive community-building initiatives.

- Institutions should implement proactive, structured wellbeing checks, independent support channels, and clearer signposting to resources.
- Greater emphasis on building research communities, peer support networks, and inclusive, accessible events would help reduce isolation and foster wellbeing.
- Greater recognition of the unique challenges faced by part-time students, disabled students, those reporting working remotely and working doctoral students is needed, with tailored support and flexible policies to address their specific wellbeing needs.

4. Variations in supervision experience

This section looks at variations in supervision experience by high-level discipline, mode of study (full-time or part-time), domicile (looking at the international PGR experience), gender, and the use of team supervision.

4.1 Mode of study

Mode of Study: access to resources

The mode of study (full-time, part-time, and those reporting working remotely) significantly influenced access to supervision, peer networks, and institutional resources.

- Part-time PGRs often described experiencing isolation, limited interaction with peers, and reduced participation in events, often due to remote study, work commitments, or infrequent campus visits, leading to greater reliance on supervisors and feelings of being left to manage professional development independently.
- Part-time PGRs highlighted the importance of supervisors' understanding and flexibility regarding work, family, and health commitments, and valued supervisors who adapted expectations and support accordingly.
- Some part-time PGRs reported that institutional systems and assessment processes were insufficiently flexible for those with chronic conditions, caring responsibilities, or non-traditional schedules.
- Administrative and procedural barriers, such as delays in supervisor assignment, unclear induction processes, and lack of tailored support for professional doctorates or mature PGRs, were more commonly reported by part-time PGRs.
- Part-time PGRs valued hybrid or flexible seminar formats and requested more out-of-hours, virtual or recorded sessions to accommodate work and life commitments, highlighting a need for greater flexibility in institutional offerings.
- Full-time PGRs generally reported better access to campus resources, peer groups, and regular supervisory engagement, though some still faced challenges with induction, remote access, or supervisor availability.
- Full-time PGRs occasionally mentioned the need for flexibility, but this was less frequently tied to balancing multiple roles outside academia.
- Full-time PGRs often require immediate, holistic, and sustained supervisory support due to the intensity and immersion of their study mode, including guidance on research, wellbeing, and professional development; gaps in supervisor engagement or knowledge are acutely

felt and can impact progress and wellbeing.

- Full-time PGRs more often described access to peer networks and research communities, though some still experienced loneliness, especially when working remotely or lacking structured social support.
- Remote or infrequent campus attendance created barriers to accessing materials, events, and peer support, highlighting the need for more virtual provision and flexible delivery of seminars and teaching. Those reporting working remotely or online frequently expressed a desire for more community-building and peer interaction, noting that supervisor accessibility was sometimes maintained through structured meetings but broader engagement was lacking.
- Poor or inconsistent supervision affects both groups, but part-time PGRs may lack alternative support channels and have less time to resolve issues, increasing vulnerability to negative outcomes. Inadequate or infrequent supervision is particularly detrimental for both modes, but part-time PGRs may have fewer opportunities to compensate through informal interactions or peer support, intensifying feelings of isolation and hindering progress.
- All groups valued opportunities for peer-led sessions, networking, and community-building, but part-time PGRs expressed a stronger need for institutional facilitation of these connections.

As a part time PhD student living in another city (50 miles away), I am aware of seminars advertised via email but due to clinical commitments for the remainder of my working week, I cannot always attend. It is good to see some are accessible remotely too but it would also be useful if they could be uploaded to [online learning platform] or a recording emailed to students/interested parties for students in my position who are keen to attend, and need to demonstrate engagement with study days/courses at annual review, but are not always available to attend.

Mode of study: wellbeing and pastoral care

Wellbeing support needs are shaped by study mode, with both full-time and part-time PGRs identifying gaps and unique challenges.

- Where full-time PGRs report high levels of stress, anxiety, and isolation it is generally due to the intensity and immersion of their programmes, and express a need for more accessible, tailored, and proactive wellbeing and mental health support; reliance on supervisors for pastoral care is common but not always sufficient.
- Full-time PGRs report both positive and negative experiences with wellbeing and mental health support; while some receive strong pastoral care from supervisors, others find institutional services inadequate, especially during crises or periods of isolation.
- Part-time PGRs can feel overlooked by wellbeing services, with resources and support structures perceived as designed primarily for full-time or on-campus PGRs, exacerbating feelings of isolation and neglect; for them flexible, remotely-accessible wellbeing support is especially important.

- Part-time PGRs can struggle to balance research with employment, family, or health needs, and may feel that institutional support is not sufficiently flexible or responsive to their circumstances, leading to increased stress, isolation, and slower progress.

4.2 Discipline

Disciplinary differences

Some discipline-specific patterns and challenges emerged.

- STEM and interdisciplinary PGRs sometimes struggled to access supervisors with relevant methodological or subject expertise, leading to gaps in guidance for experimental work or advanced analysis.
- STEM and health-related disciplines report issues with supervisor workload, lack of structured support, and insufficient training in specific methodologies.
- Public Health and Medicine highlighted the need for more personal support and structured debriefing when working with marginalised communities, as well as practical challenges like access to literature and equipment.
- Clinical Medicine and Allied Health participants emphasised the importance of integrating clinical placements, quantitative skills, and tailored support for clinicians or those with non-traditional backgrounds.
- Science disciplines often feature structured induction, clear expectations, and strong peer mentoring, but also report variability in supervisor engagement, with some PGRs experiencing isolation, lack of research community, or ethical conflicts.
- Engineering participants generally report positive supervision, with support extending beyond formal supervisors to other staff, suggesting a broader culture of collegiality and informal support within the discipline.
- Science and Engineering PGRs often find generic training and wellbeing resources insufficiently tailored, expressing a need for more discipline-specific workshops, technical skills development, and accessible peer or postdoctoral mentoring.
- Business, Management, and Education PGRs noted the importance of tailored advice, technical support, and proactive community-building, with some experiencing challenges in accessing resources remotely or navigating programme changes.
- Education supervision is described as highly variable, with some PGRs benefiting from responsive supervisors and vibrant research communities, while others face confusion over assessment standards, repetitive assignments, a mismatch between generic training and individual needs, with progression sometimes hindered by discipline-specific advice or administrative barriers and inconsistent module-level expectations.
- Business, Management, and Education disciplines show patterns of supervisor scarcity, unresponsiveness, and inconsistent mentorship, with some participants reporting a lack of proactive engagement and structured community-building.
- Humanities and Social Sciences display a spectrum from highly supportive, proactive supervision to experiences marked by isolation, unclear guidance, and bureaucratic or rigid research cultures. Peer and informal networks are often crucial for support, while departmental and administrative structures may be less responsive.

- Social Sciences and Social Work participants emphasized the value of pastoral support, interdisciplinary connections, and the need for better signposting of social opportunities.
- Humanities and Arts PGRs often highlight gaps in methods training, induction, and feedback mechanisms, as well as challenges related to small programme size, supervisor expertise in niche areas, and limited research community integration.
- Humanities and Social Sciences PGRs occasionally reported transactional or impersonal supervision styles, with calls for more relational and holistic engagement from supervisors.
- Some participants in Humanities and Social Sciences described discipline-specific issues such as lack of research community, limited access to structured peer engagement, particularly in fields with less defined formal structures, a lack of clear methodological training, confusing or vague progression criteria, limited teaching opportunities, or infrastructure challenges.

4.3 Gender

Absence of reported gender-based differences

Across the data, gender alone rarely emerged as a sole determinant of supervision experience, but intersected with other factors such as discipline, status, and international background to shape outcomes. Most participants did not explicitly attribute their perceptions of supervision quality, support, or outcomes to gender, and direct comparisons between genders were rare.

- Participants who identified as women, men, or non-binary, as well as those who preferred not to disclose gender, generally reported similar patterns of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with supervision.
- Positive and negative supervision experiences were attributed to individual supervisor qualities, institutional processes, or structural factors rather than gender.
- Intersectional identities, such as being an international woman or combining part-time study with professional commitments, sometimes heightened challenges in accessing support, resources, or community integration.
- Where intersectional issues such as disability, neurodiversity, or part-time status were raised, they were not explicitly connected to gender-based differences in supervision quality or support.
- A few responses highlighted intersectional challenges (e.g., disability discrimination, lack of pastoral support, or institutional shortcomings), which may intersect with gender but were not explicitly framed as gender-based supervision issues.

Intersectionality and the need for tailored support

Some responses highlighted how gender intersects with other identities (e.g., race, disability, international status, part-time status) to shape supervision experiences and support needs. Some responses suggest that gender may intersect with other factors (e.g., caring responsibilities, mental health, discrimination), potentially influencing perceptions of supervision support and accessibility. 25 comments are coded to this theme (2.5% of respondents).

- Women from ethnically minoritised backgrounds, disabled women, and international PGRs described unique challenges in accessing support, feeling recognised, and navigating institutional structures, suggesting that intersectional identities can exacerbate vulnerabilities in supervision.
- A few women and participants with intersecting identities (e.g., disability, part-time status, caring responsibilities) described challenges in accessing support, feeling isolated, or experiencing inadequate institutional responses, which may reflect gendered or intersectional barriers.
- Issues such as lack of flexibility for PGRs with dependents, insufficient mental health support, and exclusion from research culture were highlighted as potentially having a greater impact on women or those with caregiving roles.
- Participants advocated for more inclusive, accessible, and tailored support systems, including diverse supervisory teams, dedicated wellbeing advisors, and recognition of non-traditional PGR needs.
- Some participants noted that institutional support structures (e.g., counselling, peer mentoring, supervisor training) were inadequate for addressing gender-based harm or discrimination, indicating gaps in accessible, gender-sensitive support.

There are systemic issues of ableism in the academy, starting with supervisors not feeling equipped, or outright refusing, to engage with disability-related issues.

4.4 Domicile

This analysis looks at any specific challenges or impacts related to international status. Across responses, most participants, regardless of domicile, did not attribute their supervision experiences directly to being a home or international PGR, with individual supervisor commitment and institutional factors playing a larger role. For the majority of participants, domicile is not explicitly mentioned as influencing supervision satisfaction or challenges.

Pastoral and wellbeing challenges faced by international PGRs

International PGRs can encounter distinct barriers and needs in comparison to home PGRs, including communication gaps, lack of tailored support, and difficulties navigating unfamiliar academic systems. International PGRs often require additional wellbeing and mental health support, but institutional provision is frequently perceived to be inadequate or not tailored to their circumstances. 76 comments are coded to this theme (26.4% of International respondents).

- Feelings of isolation, loneliness, and lack of community are more pronounced among international PGRs, especially those reporting studying remotely or part-time, with limited access to peer networks and departmental integration.
- Feelings of anxiety, depression, and impostor syndrome are exacerbated by isolation, lack of community, and negative supervisory relationships, with international PGRs sometimes lacking local support networks to mitigate these effects.

- Feelings of isolation and limited access to peer networks were common among international PGRs, especially when working remotely or during the COVID-19 pandemic, intensifying the need for structured support and community-building initiatives.
- International PGRs can experience challenges accessing or understanding support services (e.g., wellbeing, mental health, language support), and may find these services inadequately tailored to their specific needs. International PGRs report insufficient mental health and wellbeing support, with services often understaffed, generic, or not attuned to the unique pressures faced by those far from home.
- Administrative and logistical barriers, such as visa issues, funding constraints, and difficulties with induction or resource allocation, disproportionately affect international PGRs and can impact their experience.

When I started out in 2015, there was a lot of information that could have been included in the research degrees regulations that were not. Most of this information was paramount to my progress, to my staying in the country as an international student, and to my understanding of supervisory responsibilities. However, they were not and still are not included in the research degrees regulations and other university policy documents which is a shame.

Non-research challenges faced by International PGRs in supervision and institutional support

A small subset of international PGRs (15) reported challenges related to supervision and broader institutional processes, including administrative burdens, lack of personalised support, and insufficient understanding of their specific needs.

- Some international PGRs experienced a lack of supervisor awareness or training regarding non-research aspects (e.g., visa requirements, training needs, institutional processes), leading to additional stress and feelings of being unsupported.
- Administrative procedures targeting international PGRs, such as frequent visa checks and mandatory meeting records, were perceived as excessive and undermined feelings of support despite positive direct supervision.
- A few international PGRs reported negative experiences with supervisor engagement, including lack of empathy, insufficient field-specific knowledge, or even discriminatory behaviour, which impacted their sense of support and well-being.

The whole submitting a supervisor meeting online once a month and getting emails about visa is a bit much honestly. I do question this whole process and why visa needs to be brought up so frequently. It is very excessive and threatening. Also I do have meeting with supervisor I just do not understand why we need to record them.

4.5 Team supervision

Positive experiences and benefits of team supervision

In the 2022 data, 97 comments relate to the role of supervisory teams and multiple supervisors, and was often viewed as beneficial, providing diverse expertise, broader support, and continuity. These comments were reflected again in the 2025 data with respondents highlighting the value of collaborative support, diverse expertise, and enhanced academic and personal development.

- Team supervision is frequently described as supportive, knowledgeable, and instrumental in both research progress and personal growth.
- Participants value the complementary skills and perspectives that multiple supervisors bring, which can enhance thesis development, critical thinking, and exposure to new techniques or resources. Participants valued supervisory teams for offering complementary perspectives, and more consistent support across different aspects of research and professional development.
- Regular meetings, accessibility, and proactive engagement from supervisory teams are associated with high satisfaction and a sense of security and progress.
- Team supervision can foster a strong sense of community and belonging within the research environment, especially for distance PGRs or those seeking broader academic engagement.

Overall, I feel well supported by my supervisors. They all bring different perspective and strengths to the table, and have different approaches of how they support me. It is usually the case where one or two/out of my three supervisors are more active at a time and it has felt that they have all substituted Director of Studies responsibilities when necessary to do so at certain times in the past 3 years (i.e. stepped up).

Structural and organisational aspects of team supervision

18 comments from the 2025 data speak to how the structure, size, and organisation of supervisory teams influence the quality and consistency of doctoral supervision.

A further 22 responses from the 2023 data also relate to this theme.

- Participants express preferences for larger supervisory teams (e.g., three supervisors) to ensure adequate support and distribution of responsibilities, especially when institutional systems are lacking.
- Diverse supervisory teams with complementary expertise and open communication are highly supportive, especially for interdisciplinary or complex projects. Supervisors lacking subject-specific expertise or experience with diverse PGR backgrounds can limit academic development and innovation.
- Effective team supervision requires clear definition of roles, expectations, and contributions from each supervisor; lack of clarity can lead to uncertainty and gaps in support.

Conflicting advice, lack of cohesion, and unclear roles within supervisory teams cause confusion, repeated work, and undermine PGR confidence.

- Departmental culture, frequency of interaction, and opportunities for informal group feedback or writing groups can facilitate stronger team supervision relationships.
- Supervisors' workload and institutional pressures may limit their ability to provide sufficient time and attention to each PGR, potentially weakening the team supervision process.

Challenges and limitations of team supervision

28 comments are coded to this theme from the 2025 data. Some participants identify issues within team supervision, including inconsistent engagement, lack of coordination, and interpersonal conflicts among supervisors.

- Disparities in supervisor engagement and availability can undermine the effectiveness of team supervision, with some team members being less involved or responsive than others.
- Contradictory feedback and poor communication between supervisors can cause confusion and frustration for PGRs, highlighting the need for better coordination and unified guidance.
- Interpersonal conflicts, unclear roles, and lack of accountability among supervisors can negatively impact the doctoral experience and lead to feelings of isolation or neglect.
- Changes in supervisory team composition, such as supervisor turnover or inadequate replacements, can disrupt continuity and support, sometimes with lasting negative effects.
- Some participants had only one active supervisor despite nominally having a team, leading to feelings of isolation and insufficient guidance.
- Lack of team-based oversight or collaboration can result in variable supervision quality, missed opportunities for support, and increased risk when individual supervisors are unavailable or disengaged.

There were changes in my supervisory team, partly due to my own personal circumstances and due to the circumstances of one of my supervisors. I only met with one supervisor once before she then stopped being involved in my project, without explanation. Thankfully, the additional person who was brought in to support instead was extremely helpful and without her I don't think I could have completed the MRes.

Recommendations for improving team supervision

20 participants from the 2025 data suggested ways to enhance the effectiveness, structure, and supportiveness of team supervision.

- Supervisors should receive training to support doctoral researchers holistically, including attention to emotional and mental well-being, not just academic progress.
- Institutions should establish clearer guidelines, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms to ensure all supervisors fulfil their responsibilities and maintain regular contact with PGRs.
- Better coordination and communication among supervisors are needed to avoid contradictory feedback and ensure a unified approach to PGR support.

- PGRs should be consulted about changes in supervisory teams, and processes for supervisor assignment or replacement should prioritise PGR well-being and research needs.
- Expanding access to mentorship frameworks, interdisciplinary supervision, and structured group feedback can further enrich the doctoral experience.

4.6 Supervisors from industry, business or clinical practice

The data was interrogated to discover what relevant respondents say about supervisors from industry, business or clinical practice. This was to include any mention of practitioner supervisors, industry-based supervisors, clinical supervisors or supervisors with non-academic professional backgrounds.

Positive experiences

The data suggests that practitioner, clinical, and industry-based supervisors can be excellent mentors who open professional doors and provide real-world grounding. When supervisor-industry links work well, PGRs see tangible results. One participant noted their research was directly implemented.

- Industry-connected supervisors are valued for opening doors beyond the thesis - helping with career planning, publishing, and conference access. Industry links are associated with expanded opportunities - including funding, conferences, summer schools, and pathways into industrial research careers.
- PGRs appreciate the real-world connections they bring. Such supervisors are also noted for broadening PGRs' professional networks and supporting career development. Industry supervision is seen as offering practical, applied learning. Participants in industrial doctorate arrangements valued the opportunity to work on real-world data and research problems, which they felt added distinct value to their training.
- In Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) and other professional doctorate settings, practitioner supervision can be highly positive and well-structured. One participant praised the consistent, reliable guidance they received.
- Clinical and practitioner supervisors are seen as adding important, context-specific expertise to applied research projects. Participants in health and clinical fields particularly value having a supervisor with real-world practice experience. Applied and practice-oriented supervisors are also linked by respondents to gains in methodological understanding and research skills.
- PGRs with industry-affiliated supervisors generally report positive experiences, particularly where the expertise of an academic and industry supervisor complement each other.

Collaboration with my supervisors and also [name of industry partner] have started to implement my research on their projects. This is great proof of concept and makes the hard work and thinking worthwhile.

Challenges and unmet needs

While the overall picture described by relevant respondents is positive, there are some related challenges and unmet needs described.

- Where supervisors are connected to external organisations or practice partners, PGRs sometimes need their supervisor to advocate on their behalf to protect time for PhD work — in some cases this support isn't always forthcoming.
- While industry and clinical supervisor connections are perceived as a genuine asset — especially for applied outcomes, networking, and career development — their effectiveness depends on expertise alignment and institutional management of external partnerships.
- The data suggests a demand for structured, well-governed industry links rather than ad hoc arrangements.

5. Instances of best supervisory practice

The comments were coded to identify what respondents regarded as instances of best supervisory practice. These closely echo the aspects of supervision that contribute to a positive PGR experience, as outlined in section 3.1.

Supportive, approachable and accessible supervision

Supervisors who are approachable, available, and responsive to PGRs' needs, providing both academic and personal support, and fostering a positive and nurturing environment are regarded as examples of best practice. 527 comments are coded to this theme (52.7% of respondents).

- Participants frequently cited supervisors who were consistently available for meetings, quick to respond to queries, and provided ongoing encouragement as key to their positive experience.
- Best practice supervision was often experienced when supervisors proactively checked in, offered reassurance, and demonstrated genuine care for student wellbeing, especially during challenging periods or transitions.
- Supervisors provided strong emotional and pastoral support during personal challenges, such as bereavement or health issues.
- Participants valued supervisors who were patient, understanding, and treated PGRs as individuals, especially regarding personal circumstances and wellbeing.
- Positive supervisory relationships were particularly valued by part-time, international, disabled, and underrepresented PGRs, who highlighted the importance of tailored support and flexibility.
- Supervisors are proactive in providing guidance, encouragement, and reassurance, help to build PGR confidence and motivation.

I feel that an important part of the supervisor relationship is pastoral and emotional support throughout the doctoral journey. Although academic support is invaluable, the relationship I have with my supervisors has been particularly supportive, as they have taken the time to understand me as a person and provide reassurance, motivation and targeted skill support where necessary.

Expertise, guidance, and constructive feedback

Best practice in this case is described as supervisors who demonstrated subject expertise, provide knowledgeable, clear, and constructive academic guidance, including regular feedback and skill development. 258 comments are coded to this theme (25.8% of respondents).

- Participants valued supervisors with strong subject expertise who offered clear direction, thorough feedback, and set high academic standards, contributing to research progress and confidence.
- Regular, structured meetings and timely, actionable feedback were highlighted as best practice, helping PGRs stay on track and develop critical thinking and research skills. Timely, detailed, and constructive feedback from supervisors is consistently identified as a best practice. Written feedback, including use of track changes and annotated documents, is valued for clarity and effectiveness.
- Supervisors who challenged PGRs academically while remaining supportive were seen as fostering growth, independence, and resilience.
- Participants highlighted the value of supervisors who tailored guidance to individual needs, balancing autonomy and support.
- Supervisory teams with complementary skills and diverse perspectives enhance the quality and breadth of support.
- Alignment between supervisor expertise and PGR research approach or methodology is valued as best practice.
- Feedback is balanced — critical when needed but also encouraging and confidence-building.

I am in regular contact with both of my supervisors. They provide detailed and consistent feedback for any work I've submitted, and they are both highly knowledgeable in my research area and other associated fields.

Regular and effective communication

Frequent meetings, prompt responses, and open and flexible channels of communication between supervisors and researcher is also seen as best practice in supervision. Transparent communication regarding roles, processes, assessment, and progression requirements. Providing clear expectations, structured progression, and effective communication supports doctoral success. 224 comments are coded to this theme (22.4% of respondents).

- Participants valued regular meetings and prompt feedback from supervisors, which facilitated progress and maintained motivation.
- Supervisors were accessible via various modes adapted to PGR needs with flexibility in meeting frequency and format (in-person, email, video calls), ensuring PGRs could seek guidance when needed.
- Supervisors provide clear guidelines, expectations, milestones, and end-goals and information about academic processes, deadlines, and assessment criteria.
- Effective communication was especially appreciated during transitions, crises, or when supervisors changed.
- Effective induction processes led by supervisors or departments are highlighted as best practice for onboarding new PGRs.
- Supervisors and institutions provide comprehensive information about regulations, rights, and available resources from the outset.
- Supervisors are proactive in signposting opportunities, resources, and support, ensuring PGRs are well-informed and empowered.
- Supervisors who are proactive in identifying and addressing challenges, and who adapt their approach to changing circumstances (e.g., remote supervision during COVID-19), are seen as best practice.

I am incredibly grateful for the support my supervisors provide me with. We meet regularly and they keep track of my progress and can refer back to our previous meetings to tell me what we discussed or particular statements I made. They read all pieces of writing I send to them and provide me with thoughtful and constructive feedback. I value this greatly.

Collaborative environments

Also regarded as best practice is a positive research culture fostered by supervisors, peers, and institutional support, promoting collaboration, inclusion, and community. Utilising supervisory teams and collaborative structures to provide comprehensive support and reduce reliance on a single individual. Supervisory teams or multiple supervisors working collaboratively to provide comprehensive support and diverse perspectives. 218 comments are coded to this theme (21.8% of respondents).

- Participants reported that having more than one supervisor, especially with complementary expertise, enhanced the breadth and quality of support, particularly in interdisciplinary or complex research areas.
- Effective team-based supervision was most beneficial when supervisors coordinated feedback, shared responsibilities, and maintained consistent communication, ensuring continuity even during staff changes.
- Transitions to new supervisory teams, when managed smoothly and with clear communication, led to improved experiences and satisfaction for PGRs who previously faced challenges.

- Access to multiple supervisors, mentors, or support staff is valued for providing diverse perspectives and additional guidance. Having more than one supervisor or a supervisory team ensures continuity, diverse input, and reduces vulnerability to supervision gaps.
- Participants valued being part of supportive research communities, including peer groups, interdisciplinary teams, and departmental networks.
- Physical and virtual spaces (e.g., dedicated desks, PGR hubs, online groups) were provided to facilitate collaboration and support.
- Regular group meetings, seminars, and collaborative discussions with supervisors and peers are valued for fostering academic engagement and community.
- Supervisors who facilitate networking, collaboration, and integration into the wider academic community are seen as exemplary.
- Inclusivity, sensitivity to individual needs (e.g., disability, neurodiversity), and promoting a sense of belonging are identified as important supervisory practices.

Interaction with other PGR students outside of this is in part facilitated by workshop/seminar events, but in large part by the dedicated PhD space/s and our peer-to-peer group communication which offers a very supportive community.

Facilitation of professional development

Supervisors who actively support PGRs' career development, networking, and engagement with the wider research community through training, teaching, networking, and conference participation is another major aspect of good practice identified by respondents. Supervisors actively support skill-building, training, and career development beyond core research.

- Best practice supervisors facilitated access to conferences, seminars, training, and professional networks, often sharing opportunities and encouraging participation in academic events.
- Structured support for skill development, such as workshops, writing groups, and formal review processes, was highly valued, especially when tailored to PGRs' research stage and discipline.
- Opportunities for teaching, leadership, and project management were provided, contributing to career development.
- Supervisors helped identify training needs, provide or recommend relevant courses, and support the development of transferable skills.
- Supervisors who actively support career planning, transferable skills, and professional opportunities contribute significantly to positive doctoral experiences.

I have developed contacts with all sorts of academics through conferences and the like which are really useful for me professionally. I have also been supported by my supervisor in developing my CV through various additional publications and activities that will help me as a future professional on the job market. I have absolutely learned lessons about time management, and am far better at working to time now than I was at UG or even MA. I have also learned both to teach to UG's as well as to speak to public audiences, both in person and in print which is a real asset.

6. Respondent recommendations

Comments were also analysed to identify the recommendations respondents made to improve the various aspects of the supervisory experience. These are summarised below.

Institutional and administrative support structures and mechanisms

Most suggestions (115 comments) are coded to this theme, with suggestions for strengthening institutional support, monitoring, and independent reporting channels for addressing supervision issues. Including recommendations to improve communication, information provision, and induction processes for doctoral researchers.

- Institutions should provide **independent or alternative channels for reporting and resolving supervision problems**, ensuring PGR concerns are taken seriously and acted upon.
- There should be **better monitoring and oversight of supervisory quality**, with **mechanisms to identify and address inadequate supervision** early. Institutions should implement mechanisms for supervisor accountability, clearer escalation routes for supervision issues, and more robust oversight of supervisory arrangements.
- Institutions should **streamline administrative processes, clarify roles** between supervisors and graduate schools, and provide better support during supervisor transitions or staff changes.
- Institutions should provide **comprehensive, clear, and accessible induction materials and orientation sessions** for all doctoral candidates, regardless of background or prior experience. Induction and ongoing communication should be inclusive and accessible, addressing the needs of part-time, international, mature, and neurodiverse PGRs and those with additional learning requirements or returning from industry. Induction processes should be more precise, department-specific, including practical information, tours, social events, and introductions to staff and resources.
- **Centralised, well-organised resources and communication channels** (e.g., calendars, handbooks, virtual hubs) should be established to publicise deadlines, training, seminars, and key contacts.
- **Policies should ensure consistent, transparent**, and timely communication about programme requirements, thesis standards, and assessment procedures.

- Supervisors and institutions should **proactively inform PGRs about available training**, workshops, and development opportunities, with advice tailored to individual needs and research areas. **Training programmes should be advanced, tailored, and relevant to PGRs' disciplines and career aspirations**, avoiding unnecessary repetition of undergraduate content.
- Institutions should provide more **workshops and resources on research skills, project management, statistics, and other essential competencies**.
- **Career development support should be integrated into supervision**, including guidance on academic and non-academic pathways, publication, and teaching experience.

Supervisor engagement, availability, feedback

Recommendations also focused on increasing supervisor involvement, ensuring timely feedback, and fostering supportive supervisory relationships. Enhancing the consistency, responsiveness, and quality of supervisor-student interactions to support doctoral progress. 97 comments are coded to this theme.

- Supervisors should be more **available and responsive and proactive**, providing timely feedback and regular meetings to support PGR progress and morale.
- **Institutions should address supervisor workload** to ensure supervisors have sufficient time and capacity for effective supervision.
- Supervisors should demonstrate genuine interest in both the research and the researcher, moving beyond transactional relationships to **holistic support**.
- Supervisors should allocate sufficient time to read and **provide substantive feedback** on PGR work, as delays or lack of engagement hinder progress and can create feelings of guilt among PGRs.
- Institutions should **ensure continuity and stability in supervision**, especially during staff changes, to prevent gaps in support and disruptions to research progress.
- **Clear guidelines and expectations for supervision**, progression, and assessment should be established and communicated early and consistently.
- **Supervisory teams should coordinate communication** to avoid contradictory advice and confusion for PGRs.
- **Institutions should improve communication channels for administrative processes**, deadlines, and support services, making information more accessible and transparent.

Supervisor training and professional development

Recommendations for enhanced training and development for supervisors to improve their ability to support doctoral researchers holistically. 79 comments are coded to this theme.

- Supervisors should receive training on supporting PGRs' academic, professional, and personal development, including **mental health and wellbeing**.
- Supervisor training should address **communication skills, constructive feedback, and proactive engagement** to bridge experience gaps and motivate PGRs. Participants recommend regular supervisor training, especially in communication, feedback, and supporting diverse PGR needs.

- **Institutions should implement standardised approaches to supervision** and increase accountability for supervisory quality. Clear feedback mechanisms and accountability structures for supervisors are seen as important for maintaining high standards.
- Supervisors should be **selected and retained based on both research expertise and proven supervisory competence**, not just academic credentials.
- Supervisors should be **evaluated for suitability**, and those exhibiting detrimental behaviours should not be assigned future supervisory roles. Institutions should **implement regular audits, assessments, or reviews of supervisor effectiveness**, with clear metrics and consequences for poor performance.
- Supervisors should be **held accountable for professional conduct**, with mechanisms to address unprofessional, discriminatory, or abusive behaviour.
- Supervisors should **receive comprehensive training in communication, feedback delivery, and supporting neurodiverse and disabled PGRs**, including developing empathy and pastoral care skills.
- Training should ensure supervisors are **knowledgeable in their subject area**, up-to-date with research trends, and able to provide both academic guidance and motivational support.
- Training should include **strategies for managing supervisor workload** and ensuring supervisors have sufficient time for PGRs.

I don't think there is enough accountability for supervisors — some do a great job meeting students' needs, but if yours doesn't, it is really hard to address it.

Supervisor matching, and continuity

Suggestions also included improving how supervisors are assigned, matched, and replaced to ensure expertise alignment and continuity of support, optimising supervisory team composition, roles, and engagement for effective doctoral support. 46 comments are coded to this theme.

- Institutions should guarantee supervisor assignment with relevant expertise before programme acceptance and **improve matching processes** to align with PGRs' research areas.
- Institutions should **ensure continuity and stability in supervisory arrangements** to prevent disruption and uncertainty for PGRs. Continuity and stability in supervision should be prioritised, with mechanisms to address disruptions due to staff turnover or absence. Institutions should plan for supervisor succession and ensure replacement supervisors are available when needed.
- Institutions should **appoint second or assistant supervisors** to enhance support, ensure continuity, and cover expertise gaps, especially during supervisor absences or transitions.

- When supervisors leave, **replacements should be discussed with PGRs** to ensure comfort and suitability, protecting PGR wellbeing.
- Institutions should ensure continuity and ownership in supervision through **named contacts and stable supervisory arrangements**, especially during transitions.
- **Supervisory teams should have clear roles**, active engagement from all members, and mechanisms to address non-contributing or disengaged supervisors. Institutions should establish formal contracts or guidelines outlining mutual expectations, roles, and responsibilities in the supervisory relationship.
- **PGRs should have more input** and consultation in the allocation and matching of supervisors to ensure alignment of research interests and working styles.

Supervisor workload and institutional support

Some respondents (45 comments are coded to this theme), would like to see greater institutional support to address supervisor workload. Recommendations are made to address supervisor workload, institutional structures, and resource allocation for effective supervision.

- Institutions should **review and manage supervisor workloads**, reducing administrative burdens and providing additional support to enable supervisors to meet PGR needs, enabling Supervisors to be more available and responsive.
- Policies should ensure **supervisors have protected time for supervision** and that their contributions are recognised and supported by the institution.
- Institutions should provide **robust administrative and technical support** for both supervisors and PGRs, especially during transitions or staff changes.
- Administrative and bureaucratic burdens on both supervisors and PGRs should be reduced, with **improved systems and processes**.
- Supervisors should be **supported with training, resources, and recognition for their role** in PGR wellbeing and development.

Peer, mentoring, and community support

A similar number of respondents called for increased opportunities for peer interaction, mentoring, and community-building among doctoral researchers. 45 comments are coded to this theme.

- Institutions should **implement mentorship frameworks**, research buddy programmes, and opportunities for informal peer support, especially for part-time students or those working remotely.
- **More events, discussion groups, and communal spaces** should be organized to foster a sense of belonging and facilitate interdisciplinary connections.
- Participants advocated for **increased opportunities for peer support, informal interactions, and community-building** among postgraduate researchers, both on-site and virtually.
- Institutions and supervisors should **facilitate networking beyond immediate research groups**, including interdisciplinary collaboration, seminars, and research-focused events.
- **Improved communication** and organisation of seminars, workshops, and research showcase events were recommended to enhance engagement and knowledge exchange.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 Themes organised by percentage of responses coded to each theme.

The theme frequency (number) is derived from the number of participants who mentioned that theme in their summary of responses to open questions.

Aspect of supervision	Theme	Theme frequency (n)
Progress and Assessment	Supportive and effective supervision for progression	569
Research Community	Limited or inconsistent support for integration	518
Wellbeing	Supportive and approachable supervisors enhances wellbeing and mental health	503
Wellbeing	Negative experiences and detrimental effects	404
Progress and Assessment	Inconsistency in supervision and progress and assessment	352
Factors impacting the supervision experience	Quality and supportiveness of Supervisors	343
Research Community	Supportive supervisory practices facilitating integration and belonging	341
Wellbeing	Institutional and structural factors affecting wellbeing	313
Research Community	Institutional and structural factors affecting supervisor influence	284
Skills and Professional Development	Positive outcomes and exemplary practices	243
Wellbeing	Supportive supervisory relationships enhance wellbeing and work-life balance	200
Skills and Professional Development	Variability and inconsistency in supervisory support for transferable skills and career preparation	196
Factors impacting the supervision experience	Regularity and structure of supervision	192
Progress and Assessment	High satisfaction with supervisory feedback	188

Aspect of supervision	Theme	Theme frequency (n)
Wellbeing	Isolation, community, and peer support	162
Factors impacting the supervision experience	Supervisor expertise and research alignment	143
Wellbeing	Supervision during challenging periods	142
Progress and Assessment	Variability in supervision and professional/personal development	129
Wellbeing	Holistic and personalised supervision supports wellbeing and balance	128
Wellbeing	Variability and inconsistency in supervisory support	121
Progress and Assessment	Institutional and structural factors affecting supervision	115
Progress and Assessment	Feedback variability and inconsistency	108
Resources	Supervision as a proactive facilitator of resource access	105
Resources	Barriers, gaps and limitations in supervisory support for resource access	100
Factors impacting the supervision experience	Barriers due to inadequate or absent supervision	90
Wellbeing	Clarity of communication	87
Factors impacting the supervision experience	Research community, networking, and peer support	80
Factors impacting the supervision experience	Supervisory team dynamics and continuity	66
Wellbeing	Supervisor workload and institutional constraints	64
Resources	Variability and inequity in supervisory support	59
Factors impacting the supervision experience	Supervision and institutional factors	48

Appendix 2 Breakdown of participant type

Breakdown of participant by type used in analysis. 1000 responses were analysed (200 per year for the period 2021-2025 inclusive).

Participant type	Number
Man	408
Woman	563
Non-binary	12
In another way	4
Gender not given/Prefer not to say	13
International	287
Home	713
Full-time*	716
Part-time*	283
Disability	180
No stated disability	820
STEM (including Medicine)	491
Arts & Humanities (including Education)	287
Business and Law	123
Discipline not provided	99

*Data on mode of study (full-time/part-time) not provided for one respondent in the sample.

Appendix 3 Open questions

Responses to the following open questions are included in the analysis.

- If you have any additional comments about supervision, please write them in here
- If you have any additional comments about, please write them in here (In the 2025 survey this is split into two questions to ask separately about on-campus resources and online resources)
- If you have any additional comments about research culture, please write them in here
- If you have any additional comments about community and belonging, please write them in here
- If you have any additional comments about induction, progression arrangements and assessment, please write them in here
- If you have any additional comments about feedback mechanisms and student/staff responsibilities, please write them in here
- If you have any additional comments about support, please write them in here
- If you have any additional comments about research skills development, please write them in here
- If you have any additional comments about professional development, please write them in here
- What has been the one most positive aspect of your research degree programme so far?
- What one thing would most improve your experience of your research degree programme?

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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.

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