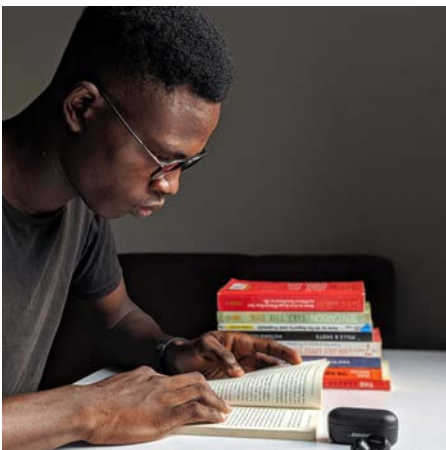


## The supervisor's voice:

# perspectives on the values and boundaries of the supervisory role



# **The supervisor's voice:**

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## **perspectives on the values and boundaries of the supervisory role**

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# 1. Executive summary

*Drawing on data from interviews and focus groups, this report aims to provide a better understanding of how doctoral supervisors in the arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) experience changes to the doctorate and where they see the boundaries of their responsibilities being, particularly regarding the career development and wellbeing of the postgraduate researchers (PGRs) they supervise.*

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*The report draws on the findings of a qualitative research project that included, among other things, interviews and focus groups with AHSS doctoral supervisors.*

Doctoral education has been reconceptualised over the past 15 years as involving the development of a broad variety of competencies in preparation for a wide range of careers in addition to more focused training in disciplinary subfields. In this context, supervisors may find themselves subject to older expectations while also adapting to newer ideas. All supervisors who took part in the research on which this report is based agreed that their responsibilities extended beyond the thesis to include career development and wellbeing. However, in practice they felt that these were some of the most challenging areas to cover. Institutional policies on supervisor responsibilities do not always clarify matters. A document analysis of ten institutional policies (3.1) finds that recommendations for wellbeing tend to rely on the QAA recommendation that supervisors should 'provide pastoral support and/or signpost other services'.<sup>1</sup> In terms of career and professional development, documents may lack clarity and consistency over the supervisor's role in these areas and whether they should be discussing, signposting and/or engaging with PGRs' professional development activities.

- However, they felt compelled to affirm their belief in the PGR's ability to pursue an academic career, especially in the context of broader precarity, which was impacting on PGRs' ability to imagine themselves as future academics.
- A common response to sector precarity was to approach the doctorate as a tick-box activity, helping PGRs to do everything possible to maximise their chances.
- Participants were beginning to feel concerned about the impact this approach was having on the wellbeing of both themselves and PGRs.
- They described feeling uncertain about whether to encourage talented PGRs in their ambitions for academic careers or emphasise the difficulties of pursuing this path.

## *The AHSS supervisor perspective*

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### 1.1 Key findings

#### *The landscape of doctoral education*

- The supervisors interviewed for this project recognised that the employment landscape had changed, and secure academic jobs were no longer the most likely career outcome of the doctorate.
- Participants had limited awareness of career pathways beyond academia; they wanted to know what the career paths are and how they might intersect with the thesis and conducting research.
- Those working in arts and humanities found it more challenging to imagine alternative career paths than social scientists and practice-based supervisors, and subsequently they found their role in careers guidance more difficult to navigate.

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### *The purpose of the doctorate*

- Participants were not necessarily shifting towards the view that the PhD is a professional development opportunity in preparation for many careers within and beyond academia.
- They were unsure about whether to encourage PGRs to enjoy their allocated time as a chance for “pure” research and hold off concerns for the future until a later point. Participants felt ethically conflicted on this point and found their role difficult to navigate.

### *Supporting wellbeing*

- The supervisors interviewed for this project found it difficult to bring wellbeing into the conversation, unless the PGR was willing to take the lead.
- Participants felt that the division between student services and academic departments means that PGRs with such overlapping problems may fall through the gaps.

### *Wellbeing and mental health training*

- Though interested in wellbeing and mental health training, participants felt that the specific challenges they face as supervisors would need to be addressed because these would not necessarily fit into generic mental health frameworks.

- They felt that this training might address:
  - how to discuss mental health within a hierarchical relationship,
  - how to differentiate between routine anxieties and mental health problems in the context of highly pressurised research cultures,
  - and strategies for providing pastoral care when there is an overlap between the research/thesis and personal problems.
- Participants felt that supervisor training should steer away from the generic language of learning outcomes, as they did not experience supervision in these terms.

### *Responses to supervisory policies*

- Participants understood the need for standardisation and regulation of supervision and noted that doctoral education was better now than it once was. However, they felt that there was an overemphasis on administrative tasks and that sometimes regulations interfered with their confidence to make appropriate, context-based decisions which drew on their own experiences.
- They believed that current policies are tailored towards preventing bad supervision with little to enhance a supervisor’s abilities to do this task well.
- They spoke speculatively about professional services and lacked deeper institutional knowledge about wellbeing services, which made signposting more difficult for them than it might otherwise seem.
- They were alert to the difficulties that PGRs face in the labour market and willing to imagine professional services and counsellors as experts who could contribute much to the PGR experience.

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## 1.2 Recommendations

### *Institutions and policy makers*

- **Create opportunities for connections between supervisors and professional services, valuing the expertise of professional services appropriately.** Supervisors are willing to think of themselves as part of a specialist team, which includes professional services; however, in practice, they have little familiarity with the challenges faced by professional services staff.
- **Actively foster relationships between counselling/wellbeing staff and supervisors.** Effective signposting relies on supervisors having institutional knowledge of services, their staff and their processes. Consider how to assist supervisors in developing this knowledge, recognising that they are time-pressed and will not necessarily be able to take this initiative themselves.
- **Promote career pathways beyond academia using concrete examples and case-studies,** disseminating these not only to PGRs but also to their supervisors. Make these discipline-specific where possible, recognising that AHSS scholars may need particular support in imagining alternatives and how they intersect with skills and attributes acquired during the doctorate.
- **Formally acknowledge the breadth of the supervisory role.** This may mean developing supervisor handbooks to enhance QAA standardisation recommendations or embedding supervisor responsibilities within wider resources about the pedagogy and relational aspects of supervision. Send a clear message that the institution is invested in enhancing good supervision practices, as well as preventing bad. Reach some consensus over supervisor responsibilities for pastoral care and career planning, providing realistic examples.
- **Supervisor training should address the specific challenges supervisors face** rather than relying on generic language and examples. Wellbeing and mental health training for supervisors should focus on how to discuss mental health within a hierarchical relationship and how to differentiate between routine anxieties and mental health problems.
- **Recognise that the wellbeing of PGRs and supervisors is potentially intertwined;** investing in the wellbeing of supervisors may have a knock-on positive impact on PGRs.

### *Professional services including researcher developers and trainers*

- **Supervisor training should give supervisors time and space to reflect with other supervisors, while addressing the broader policy landscape.** Training should explore supervisor “types” and encourage supervisors to recognise their internal working models and consider how they might distribute tasks within a supervisory team. Space for self-reflection should be combined with information on the wider policy landscape impacting supervision.
- **Consider how to frame the RDF and professional development tools.** AHSS researchers are trained to ask questions about the values and ideologies underpinning seemingly neutral positions and statements. Therefore, training should inform supervisors of the context and rationale of the documents they are asked to use as part of their supervisory practice so that they can develop a relationship with these tools.
- **Share some of the challenges that professional services/researcher developers face in engaging PGRs.** Supervisors are respectful of professional services including researcher developers’ expertise but unaware of the challenges of their role and the extent to which their own position as supervisor might contribute to these challenges.
- **Promote career pathways beyond academia using concrete examples and case studies.** Make these discipline-specific where possible, recognising that AHSS scholars may need particular support in imagining alternatives and how they intersect with skills and attributes acquired during the doctorate.
- **Give real life examples of the challenges and benefits of other careers and the experience of those who have transitioned to careers beyond academia.** Supervisors, like PGRs, may over-estimate the transferability of skills like writing and communication which in practice are often highly discipline specific. Share expectations from different employment sectors, drawing on case studies. Help PGRs to tackle potential assumptions about the limitations of their skills.

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### Supervisors

- **Gain familiarity with career pathways beyond academia, through case studies.** This may go some way to alleviate the pressures of supervising in the current economic climate. AHSS careers are addressed specifically in the forthcoming PGR Pathways case studies to be published by the British Academy. Vitae's 'What do research staff do next?' and 'What do researchers do? Early career progression of doctoral graduates' will help you gain broader familiarity with the available postdoctoral career pathways.<sup>2</sup>
- **Make use of newly available institutional funding provisions to tackle PGR wellbeing.** For example, some supervisors have used funds to assist PGRs in setting up peer-led support groups. Gain inspiration and further details about how Catalyst Funds are being deployed across institutions,<sup>3</sup> or seek advice from your director of doctoral studies.
- **Consider how to distribute roles and tasks in your supervisory team,** recognising that it is unlikely that every supervisor will individually be able to cover everything. Discuss what supervision workload splits amount to in practice, and address any overlaps in responsibility, considering whether this will be advantageous to the PGR. Discuss who is best placed to address the career and professional development and pastoral aspects of supervision based on personality, values and priorities. Consider whether and how you might extend your supervisory team to include members of professional services.
- **Discuss personal values regarding career pathways and wellbeing, addressing this directly with PGRs.** Recognise that, in absence of these discussions, PGRs may make false assumptions. Keep in mind the extent to which PGRs are cautious about managing their supervisor's perceptions and counteract this tendency where possible and appropriate.
- **Consider ear-marking some supervision sessions to address non-thesis related topics.** Recognise that these elements are likely to fall by the wayside, if supervision discussions are primarily mediated through writing feedback.
- **Find ways to build self-reflection into the supervision process,** outside of formal assessments. Alternatively, if this feels inappropriate to your style of supervision, encourage another member of the supervisory team to take responsibility for reflective discussions.
- **Training may provide a space for reflection.** Training sessions can provide time and space for reflection, discussing experiences with other supervisors, and (ideally) gaining information and insight on areas of HE policy that affect institutional policies around supervision.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1 Overview

*This report outlines the findings and recommendations of a six-month qualitative study that explored the extent to which UK based AHSS supervisors feel able and willing to support PGRs with matters not directly related to academic research, such as wellbeing and career development.*

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*It includes supervisors' perspectives on the boundaries of their role and what they believe would help them to navigate their responsibilities as supervisors in the higher education landscape.*

Doctoral education is valued as a means of improving financial and societal health. It does, however, come with some challenges including a lack of consensus about the purpose of the doctorate and evidence of poor levels of PGR wellbeing in comparison to the rest of the population.<sup>5</sup>

*The report draws on interviews and focus groups with supervisors to investigate the following questions:*

- What do supervisors most value and prioritise in their practice and how well does this map onto their institutional policies?
- Where do supervisors see their responsibilities beginning and ending when it comes to the professional/career development and wellbeing of their PGRs?
- What structures could be put in place to help supervisors negotiate the multiple roles they are required to fulfil in the contemporary higher education landscape?

The supervisor's voice has not been entirely absent in debates about the future of the doctorate but stereotypes about supervisors may lead to assumptions being made about the values and priorities of this varied group of individuals. In addition, supervisors are subject to some of the same stressors as PGRs and trying to help PGRs with mental health problems can symbiotically impact on supervisors' own wellbeing.<sup>6</sup>

As identified in a review of the literature on PGR wellbeing, we do not yet know the effects of supervisors taking on responsibility for more PGRs and how this is impacting on researcher identities.<sup>7</sup> If the wellbeing of PGRs and supervisors are linked or related, it would be appropriate for any new approach to be informed by how supervisors currently understand their role and its limits, even if the approach aims to challenge these perceptions. Evidence for the importance of such a collaborative approach may be found in research conducted by Vitae, which found that supervisors have a strong influence on the behaviour of PGRs and will therefore play an important role in implementing any policy changes.<sup>8</sup>

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### 2.2 Context

#### 2.2.1 The role of the supervisor

The landmark 2003 Roberts Report, which saw the introduction of transferrable skills provision, supposes intrinsic motivation for professional development on the part of both PGRs and supervisors. With regards to PGRs it argues that the 'increasing need for people to take charge of their own learning throughout their lifetime' means that 'there would be value in placing more control of training in the hands of the student rather than the institution'.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, it states that 'good supervisors play a role in helping students identify suitable training, and in encouraging them to make the most of such opportunities'.