> *certainly, the pressure for just getting people through, not just in four years but in three, is pretty intense. Everywhere I have been I have been familiar with that part of the transformation of the PhD. It may be that at some point at one of my institutions somebody said, "and they ought to be getting transferrable skills", but nothing structured has ever emerged from that and it is just not a language that you hear.*
>
> *Supervisor, Art History*

Other participants felt that *'there have been waves of this kind of debate',* but these didn't necessarily influence or change their understanding of what constitutes PhD supervision.

Participants were aware that professional services staff with expertise in skills development, such as researcher developers and doctoral support staff, existed in the university. They presumed that the PGRs they supervised proactively engaged with professional services staff, without them as supervisors needing to know much about it. Participants were reassured by what they imagined to be an intensive training infrastructure, providing PGRs with ample opportunity to professionalise should they desire to, and assumed that PGRs would make rational and informed decisions about whether or not to engage. One supervisor described feeling reassured that it was not her sole responsibility to cover everything:

> *if I had to take care of all the transferrable skills it would be impossible. Because I would need to be trained. But actually, I find that these days there are really good skills programmes which are run by the university [...]. I think overall the transferrable skills are really important. I think the emphasis on transferrable skills is a good one but whether the supervisor is the right one to deliver those skills I am not quite sure.*
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> *Supervisor, Visual Cultures*

Another participant, with reference to the skills described by the RDF, stated:

> *I know a lot about some of this stuff, but not about others. So, if they are relying on me, that's not good enough. But the other side of it is that they have got all of this stuff offered as part of their research training that they get from the graduate school. I wouldn't want to be responsible for working through everything that is on that wheel. But luckily there is someone else giving them that [laugh]. And you need the expertise. I think we should stick to what we know best, so long as there is someone else putting these things in place. And my experience is that students are aware.*
>
> *Supervisor, Education*

A reoccurring theme was that participants valued expertise. They felt that it was appropriate and right that professional services would pick up where they as supervisors left off and imagined that this was happening relatively unproblematically. In this sense, participants were already imagining a team supervision model in which their supervisory practice complemented the work of other experts, who were covering areas in which they as supervisors were not trained. However, most participants had only a vague sense of who individuals in professional services were, their roles and the challenges they face, and did not see themselves and professional services staff as being part of the same community.

Participants were puzzled by the idea that PGRs might not make full use of these services and were surprised to learn that some PGRs neglected professional development if they did not receive encouragement from supervisors. One reflected:

> *it could be possible that students are thinking that they only listen to their supervisors. But I haven't seen evidence of that. It is worrying to think that a student would ignore the training available because a supervisor didn't mention it. That would be awful, wouldn't it?*
>
> *Supervisor, Education*

In general, participants underestimated the level of influence that they as supervisors have over a PGR decision making. They expected that PGRs would decide on training or raise employability issues if and when they saw fit, and the supervisor would follow their lead.

Some participants found it disconcerting to learn that PGRs might perceive that they as supervisors valued academic careers above others. One stated:

> *what I would hope is that a PhD student that I was supervising wouldn't feel that they'd have to tell me that they'd be a professor at a major university. But I can't say whether they do feel the need to do that or feel that my support for them might alter if that is or isn't their plan. I would hope... I don't feel any... I am not aware of being happier when PhD students tell me they want to be academics than if they tell me they are not sure. Neither of those makes me happy or less happy. I can report that. That is true.*
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> *Supervisor, English Literature*

However, drawing on their own experience as supervisees, it was not hard for participants to accept that there might be truth to this finding. One participant, reflecting on the continuing influence of her late supervisor, commented that she still thought of her career in terms of whether her supervisor would be proud of her. She added that she hoped that the PGRs she supervised did not feel that kind of pressure.

Participants felt that a key dimension of their role was to help PGRs to prioritise activities, tailoring this to their career aspirations. Participants spoke of how challenging it was for PGRs to complete the thesis on time with such a wealth of development opportunities available.

One participant explained that her role was to act as *'a pacemaker, making sure that they are doing things at the right time and in the most time effective way, so that there isn't a sense that they get overwhelmed or stuck'*. Participants felt this supervisory guidance was especially important for funded students, who they saw as having more professional development opportunities than their counterparts. It was also thought to be important for mature PGRs who, participants reported, were sometimes affronted by the need to engage in two weeks of professional development when they saw their doctorate as offering space away from their career.

Professional services staff and researcher developers may be aware of the idea that PGRs need to be helped to "manage" their supervisors and resist supervisory pressure. Interestingly, participants used the same language when describing their role as supervisors. For example, one participant spoke of actively safeguarding PGRs against overwork and competing demands: *'It is a matter of protecting them [...] from those who want them to do more and more, because PhDs are on a stipend and that is not a lot, so they will take on more work. There will be people seeing them as cheap resource'*. Participants saw it as their task as supervisors to keep bringing the PGR back to the thesis, and helping candidates select career development activities that would have some overlap with the thesis. One participant, a supervisor with thirty years' experience, said that she had seen PGRs take on additional activities as a form of procrastination, because writing the thesis is an inherently hard activity:

> *I do encourage my students to go on placements, depending on how I see their talents and their temperaments. Some people, I will think: oh, you are well organised and will get a lot out of that. But other people will want to do it to get out of their research. Sometimes I will say that I don't want you to do that right now because I want you to focus on the real work, which is the research, because it can be that when the research gets hard or you get stuck you can not want to confront that. But then it feels to me like a distraction. Of course, I am not really going to stop them if that is really what they want to do, but there is some conversation and counselling about it. […] Too many conferences are another escape mechanism, a running away phenomenon.*
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> *Supervisor, English*

While this comment supports the finding that the supervisors may discourage engagement in professional development if they believe it represents a distraction from thesis writing, it shows that this is not necessarily because supervisors do not value professional development activities.

3.2.4 Responsibilities for wellbeing

The supervisor's role

Institutional guidelines give clear and succinct instructions that supervisors have a responsibility to signpost, not necessarily provide pastoral care. Participants were asked about their confidence in providing pastoral support or signposting institutional support to PGRs, and where they felt the boundaries were to their responsibilities in these areas. They felt that the doctorate was a time of transition for issues of wellbeing and reported feeling uncertain about where the boundaries of their role were.

It was not uncommon for participants to state that wellbeing was part of their role not only as a supervisor but as a human being relating to another human being. Some, however, felt that they were expected to take on the role of a therapist or counsellor and expressed exasperation about this. On the whole, participants showed interest in how they might provide better pastoral care, but this was accompanied by a wariness about what formalised pastoral responsibilities might mean in terms of an erosion of their identity as experts in their fields. For example, one participant asked: 'The supervisor is an expert in their field. How much more can you add on before you break the original idea?'.

Participants showed a willingness to engage in wellbeing training and many said that mental health workshops should come top of the list for supervisor training. However, they stressed that to be effective this training would need to take account of the specific challenges of the supervisory relationship. Specifically, according to participants, these challenges include PGRs' reticence to discuss personal issues within a hierarchical relationship and the ad hoc nature of supervision. In this context, generic mental health training might be useful but would not suffice. One participant stated that *'the supervisor has such a delicate relationship with [the PGR's] ego and their hopes and inserting that into a mental health framework of conversations about "how are you feeling?" is not at all straightforward'.*

Focus group participants were keen to explore the realities of their role, including some of the structural complexities that came with being both a supportive guide and a first critic. They focused on the extent to which the good parts of supervision were sometimes intertwined with more troubling aspects:

> *[when we supervise] we have to have two hats on. I think that one of the big problems for supervisors in this model is that one of the continuing facets of poor wellbeing are the progress milestones of the PhD which are more and more monitored because completion rates are so important for the institution. So sometimes [by insisting on progress], we as supervisors are contributing to problems of anxiety.*
>
> *Supervisor, English*

Building on this idea, another participant added that it difficult for some PGRs to be forthcoming about mental health with a supervisor. He explained that *'there is this feeling that the student can't lose face with the supervisor. That they might be the keyholder to their careers or something'.* Recognising the power dynamics inherent in the supervisory relationship, this participant's view was that it is best to enhance existing confidential systems, making them more transparently available, because this would mean that the PGRs could access them without having to involve the supervisor and risking losing face in the process.

Other participants explained that their attempts to use supervisory meetings as a safe space for these kinds of discussions could bring up problems. One participant recalled:

> *In trying to open up the conversation [about mental health], that really fractured our relationship. [The PGR] opened up to me in ways that they probably regretted. I think they felt embarrassed for a long time and it took a long time for them to get past that. It is really tricky. I think it would be absolutely irresponsible of the supervisor to see that there is something going on with the student and just think "well, it's not my remit, I am just going to ignore it". I think it is your responsibility as a human really, to follow that up. However, the relationship between the student and the supervisor is so delicate that if you don't handle it perfectly it can have quite a negative impact on the relationship. It is really hard.*
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> *Supervisor, Linguistics*

Similarly, other participants spoke of being able to detect from the PGR's behaviour that something was wrong but finding it almost impossible bring this up in discussion. One detailed a difficult experience with a PGR, who was clearly experiencing problems but only willing to discuss them just moments before the viva, when no longer reliant on the supervisor's support. This supervisor explained his frustration at only being able to address the issue at the point when it was too late to help.

Another challenge reported by participants in relation to detecting poor mental health was the ad hoc nature of supervision, where supervisors tend to follow the candidate's lead. Participants explained that it was easier to detect mental health problems in undergraduate students because in this case weekly contact was the norm. By contrast, when a PGR cancelled a meeting, the reason for that decision was not always clear to the supervisor. Participants said that their inclination was to give the PGR the benefit of the doubt. One explained:

> *the ad hoc nature makes it difficult. Supervision is designed around what the student wants. They can be telling you a different narrative to what is actually going on. You kind of have to believe them because the nature of that relationship relies on you believing them; that sense that you have trust in the fact that they know what they are doing.*
>
> *Supervisor, English*

Another participant explained that she too would give the benefit of the doubt to a PGR who cancelled a meeting, reasoning that *'if they did want to cancel a meeting, it is not as if we wouldn't understand that. I mean, once a month is actually an extraordinarily short amount of time for them to write. But this is the broader agency in our lives, this is not what is pedagogically sensible'.* Other participants reported this phenomenon, which they felt made it harder to detect and pre-empt problems.

Participants reported that they sometimes found it difficult to differentiate between the everyday pressures of PhD life and problems of a more serious nature. Many of the participants reported that all of the candidates they supervised experienced periods of difficulty, anger and despair and one participant felt that periods of depression were a natural part of the process of creating original work. If PGRs experiencing down periods during their programme feels common or expected to supervisors, it is worth asking how their familiarity with this phenomenon might impact on their ability to distinguish between routine difficulties and more serious problems that call for external intervention. Participants stressed that much depended on the individuals involved but reported that they did not always find this an easy decision to make. Moments of despair might be momentary lapses, as one supervisor explained:

> *I have certainly had some students who have come to me more informally and said "I just feel like academia is not for me. I feel totally disillusioned by it; I hate it" But I have kind of got to know them well enough that I know that by the next meeting they will have completely changed their mind. They might just be having a blip.*
>
> *Supervisor, Linguistics*

Participants described how, when a candidate's confidence faltered, they would bring them back to the task, reminding them of their progress and affirming their belief that it would be possible to complete the PhD.

The duality of the supervisory role was seen as complicating factor. Though participants understood both signposting and offering boosts to morale to be within the supervisor's remit, it was suggested that the former could be riskier. One participant explained that *'suggesting getting help could be seen as a negative reinforcement'.* Drawing on their own experiences as PGRs, other participants described how powerful their supervisor's confidence in them had been. One participant recounted the importance of her supervisors' unwavering faith in her project and spoke of how keen she was to weave this into her own supervisory practice:

> *you go through strange phases in your PhD, when you just think you are not good enough. And if there is any hint that [PGRs] think they are not good enough and not going to finish this then my more nurturing side comes out and its more about propping them up giving them lots of praise. I will never forget my two PhD supervisors, who were two incredibly old fashioned English men in Oxford, but they were actually lovely because I remember in the three months before submitting my thesis and one of them asked me how long I would need to submit and I said that I think I will need time until December and he just looked at me and said: "why?" I said that I don't think I will be able to submit in the three months and he said "well, of course you can". And just the fact that he thought I could do it. I thought, well, if he thinks I can then surely, I can.*
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> *Supervisor, Visual Culture*

Signposting wellbeing and mental health services

The earlier document analysis found that institutional guidelines state that the supervisor should provide pastoral support and/or signpost support services to the PGR. When participants were asked how confident they felt in effective signposting, most agreed that this requirement was unproblematic. After further discussion, however, it emerged that providing signposting was not without its challenges. Though participants knew which department handled health and wellbeing, they lacked a concrete sense of the people and processes involved, as one explained:

> *signposting is a very obscure kind of activity. Even now in my position as [managerial position], I have contacts with student life, from this other side of the job. But before I started, I wouldn't have really known what it means to signpost. It is not quite clear to me and it is not quite clear to colleagues either. It's a case of not knowing what it entails, or how helpful it would be.*
>
> *Supervisor, International Relations*

Another participant pointed out that, though signposting seems simple, to signpost effectively *'you need that deeper institutional knowledge'*. Participants felt that a step-by-step flow chart, showing where to direct PGRs in different circumstances, was a move in the right direction. However, they suggested that *'deeper institutional knowledge'* meant attaching a face to a name and having some familiarity with the inner workings of the available services. Without this, participants felt, signposting could feel unethical and dismissive of the PGR seeking help. One participant explained that she was not confident that a PGR in a fragile state would follow through to seek the help she signposted, especially if neither of them knew in advance about the kinds of processes involved: *'showing up and having to wait for an open session, I am not even sure that many of my students would do that in such an unmediated way'*. Furthermore, participants were not confident that wellbeing services had adequate resources to deal with student demand. One commented: *'the student life centre is really overwhelmed. I have been talking to students who have been waiting around for ages to see someone'*.

A final difficulty with signposting reported by participants was the departmental split between wellbeing and academic work.

Many participants described firmly set boundaries based on these distinctions and were keen to stress that, unlike "other supervisors", they recognised professional boundaries. However, two participants acknowledged that, in practice, there was a large overlap between research and personal life. Therefore, when PGRs described the ways in which research was impacting on their mental health, it was difficult to maintain these boundaries and it often felt inappropriate to signpost the problem on to other departments. Participants felt that the counselling provision in their institution catered to undergraduates and had little understanding of the complexities of conducting original doctoral research. In such cases, participants sometimes felt that the decision over whether to provide pastoral support themselves, or signpost it, was not an easy one to make.

3.2.5 Responses to supervision policy

A key challenge when implementing policies around supervisory practice is how to safeguard PGRs and maximise successful outcomes while demonstrating trust in supervisors' ability to exercise professional judgement. When asked about measures to professionalise supervision, for example by establishing a common set of behaviours and attributes, participants stated that the current terrain could be hard to negotiate. Although their guidance to PGRs was based on a working knowledge of their profession, participants felt that their individualised approaches to research did not always match up with official institutional policy. One supervisor explained:

> *you have to give people their own time to develop their own ways of working. I don't think it is right that everyone should follow a pattern. People work differently, and they will have to find this out about themselves. It seems that we are prohibited from saying that you have to develop your own way of working. We are prohibited from saying that because we are so highly regulated. I would have never gotten a PhD under those circumstances. I am not sure I could recommend what I needed myself to my own student. We would actually not be allowed to say that [...] I do find that we are quite constrained about being honest.*
>
> *Supervisor, International Relations*

Overall, participants were receptive to the regulation of supervision and understood standardisation as an effective mechanism for preventing PGRs from falling through the gaps. Many participants stated that supervision is better and more equitable than it used to be because of these measures. For example, consistent expectations made it easier to set personal boundaries, which was useful because participants felt they would otherwise be inclined to give more time to supervision that they had available given their other professional commitments. Participants also believed that new measures made the distribution of work within departments more even because without consistent expectations some supervisors would do more pastoral work than others, and this may exacerbate gender-based inequalities.

However, some participants felt that policies had led to systems being established for preventing bad supervision but done little to enhance good supervision. While participants agreed that safeguarding mechanisms are important, they suggested that institutions could draw on the evidence of what supervisors currently do in their role and provide mechanisms, or at least space, to address ways of enhancing this practice. Participants stated that some of the things that make supervision effective, for example its personalised, tailored nature, were subject to abuse but supervision was not improved by eliminating these elements altogether.

3.2.6 Responses to supervisory training provision

Participants found the idea of generic training off-putting and emphasised that they would respond most keenly to training delivered by those who had expertise in supervision. They felt that generic approaches were inappropriate because supervision was inherently individualised. Asked to describe their experiences of their institutional supervisory training, a number of participants explained that they had not engaged with optional provisions because they had little faith that training could address the realities of the role:

> *the relationship is so individualised. So, when you talk about issues in supervision, as we are now, these specific things might only happen at one point in a person's career. If you do have a working session with experienced colleagues, then at least it is not completely abstract. It is coming from someone you know. I am supportive of sharing, but realistically not every situation will happen in your supervision career. No relationship between two individuals can ever be the same.*
>
> *Supervisor, Education*

Another reason participants gave for not attending optional training was time constraints and the need to prioritise; they had to be strategic with their commitments and did not feel that attending generic training would be a good return on their investment. One supervisor explained:

> *I suppose, I don't go because a lot of the time it seems to be for those that are new at supervision. And I suppose it is addressing things that I have already done; that I have stumbled my way through. It probably would be useful, but it's finding the time. And I suppose that it is actually that, invariably, what I need support with is such specific, idiosyncratic situations, that actually… to be honest…rather than spending two hours in a generic session and hearing people talk about things in a generic way, my time would be better spent specifically responding to that problem that I am having. I suppose that it what it is really.*
>
> *Supervisor, Linguistics*

Most of the supervisors who participated in this study reported that they had previously had little time and space to reflect on their supervisory practice outside of the assessment or promotion process. Participants stated that they had signed up for the focus groups because they believe these would provide space for them to reflect on their work and role as supervisors and hear from others without this necessarily eroding their professional autonomy.

For example, as one participant put it: *'I have no idea about how other people supervise really [...] Normally it is very sealed off. Part of me really likes that because it is one area that we still have autonomy and flexibility but on the other hand that can be abused and sometimes it is too close and that is not good for the supervisor or the student'.* Another participant pointed out that there was space for supervisors and PGRs to reflect on supervision and training needs as part of an end of year upgrade assessment but that this was not necessarily conducive to open discussion: *'as a new supervisor, it is important to build in reflective mechanisms that are not part of an exam'.*

Alongside this, participants said that their involvement in the focus groups and interviews had enabled them to gain insight into the policies shaping their individual practice and helped them to further understand the competing and sometimes conflicting demands on their time. Some spoke of feeling relief at being able to reframe difficulties that were otherwise experienced as private and personal in a policy context.

Others were curious about the factors that influence and shape supervision policy and said that their previous training did not address the policy that shapes their daily practice. One participant summarised the content he would find useful in supervisory training:

> *when it comes to training, it is useful to be able to hear from others with experience, to have an opportunity where your task is to think systematically about the things that you do day-to-day and beyond that you get to share with other supervisors who have had to think about these issues. That said, it is also useful to be told about policy, about what is coming down the tube.*
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> *Supervisor, Art History*