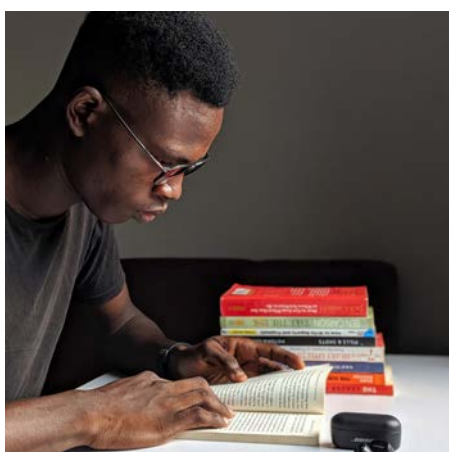


The supervisor's voice:

perspectives on the values and boundaries of the supervisory role



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*The author would like to thank the following people
for their input:*

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- Steven Colburn CHASE
- Shane Dowle University of Surrey
- Kay Guccione Glasgow Caledonian University
- Kate Jones CRAC/Vitae
- Robin Mellors-Bourne CRAC/Vitae
- Rachel Handforth CRAC/Vitae
- Janet Metcalfe Vitae
- Jen Reynolds CRAC/Vitae
- Gregory Toth The Wiener Library
- Clare Viney CRAC/Vitae
- Katie Wheat CRAC/Vitae
- Richard Wragg University of Sussex

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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.

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.’ 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

- Participants felt that, in contrast to STEM, PGRs in AHSS disciplines, especially in arts and humanities, entered doctoral study with their sights firmly set on academic positions.
- 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.²
- **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,³ 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.⁴

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.

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.⁵

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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸

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'.⁹ 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'.

This report aims to inform emerging and developing provision for PGRs and supervisors by offering further clarity on supervisors' perspectives on the boundaries of their role and the kind of support they require. The study investigated the extent to which supervisors feel willing and able to deliver on both their traditional role of shaping future stewards of their discipline and the more recent requirement to deliver timely completions while preparing PGRs for the realities of the job market. Recent developments that mandate supervisors to take more direct responsibility for the professional development and wellbeing of PGRs appear to make sense given supervisors' influence over and direct contact with PGRs. However, research indicates that supervisors may not be finding these requirements easy to meet in practice for a number of reasons.

To take one example, there is good evidence to suggest that PGRs are cautious about actions that might interfere with their supervisor's perceptions of them as a "proper academics". For example, Vitae's 'One size does not fit all' report found that PGRs neglected professional development if they believed that their supervisor would see this as a distraction from research.¹⁰ This was echoed in the findings of Vitae's 2018 report on PGR wellbeing and mental health, which found that PGRs tended to discount institution level messages about wellbeing if they conflicted with the culture that they saw in the department and in the behaviours of their supervisors.¹¹ This evidence suggests that PGRs are both highly aware of how they are perceived by their supervisors and are receiving the message that directing the "research" is within the supervisor's remit of responsibilities but not necessarily developing "the researcher" in the broader sense of the term.

2.2.2 A brief history of doctoral supervision

Doctoral education is shaped by a history of expectations, representations and identities that may place constraints on how PGRs and supervisors see themselves, make decisions and behave. Arguably, PhD supervision has absorbed new agendas without necessarily dislodging older expectations about the purpose of the doctorate. As Barbara Grant argues, supervision can be thought of as a map on which you can see traces of earlier inscriptions under the new. When older and newer layers conflict, their meanings are interrupted and this can cause misunderstandings, ambiguities, and confusions.¹² With this image in mind, the following section briefly sets out some of the key changes to the doctorate which have reconfigured the supervisor's role, in order to situate some of the findings of this report in the context of the broader higher education landscape.

Traditionally, the supervisor's role was not only to help the doctoral candidate to write a good thesis but also to help them develop an academic identity as an independent researcher and academic who could contribute to the discipline. The candidate was paired with an expert in the discipline, to absorb institutional and disciplinary knowledge. Frances Kelly argues that the formation of this academic identity 'occurred not just in the discipline, but in a specific, narrow area of research: producing a Shakespearian scholar, for instance, rather than a scholar of English literature'.¹³ The supervisor was a master of their or sub-discipline and the doctoral candidate was an apprentice. Supervision was not originally considered to be a pedagogy, or even work. Instead, it was thought of as a natural extension of research, which the supervisor engaged in as a labour of love.¹⁴

It is difficult to determine whether these expectations persist, when supervisors balance their traditional role with newer expectations for doctoral outcomes. For example, although supervision is now reflected in workload allocations models, it is said that the investment required to support doctoral candidates, not just during the programme but into their careers, is difficult to accurately account for within workload calculations.¹⁵

Arguably, the one-to-one, master/apprentice model of pedagogy continues as the signature feature of doctoral education today, although it is not always expressed in precisely these terms. It is, however, implicitly implied in the apparent indispensability of the viva, where selected representatives judge whether the candidate has met the internal standards of the discipline. It is also suggested in the metaphor of the PhD as “a journey”, where the candidate moves from student to independent researcher and the supervisor’s behaviour shifts in response to this development. Directive at first, the supervisor becomes a mentor during the middle stages of the degree and finally assumes the role of a “cheer-leader” as submission approaches. In this tradition, the supervisor is key to the identity change from student to faculty and the doctorate is less a programme of education than a first faculty position, an experiment in whether the candidate could do this kind of work in this kind of department.¹⁶

This link with identity and community formation may explain an attachment to the one-to-one model of pedagogy, which continues to be the signature feature of doctoral education.¹⁷ It may also “feel right” because it emerged in tandem with the invention of the nineteenth century research university, based on a combination of research and teaching. This idea of the university continues to shape how we think about knowledge production and transmission today.

However, educational policy of the last twenty years has questioned the appropriateness of the PhD as a narrow training in disciplinary subfields. Since the 1990s, the UK has developed an increasingly knowledge-based economy, a model which redefines knowledge as central to the financial health and wellbeing of the nation.

In this context, universities take on new importance for government and industry. Alongside this, there has been an undercurrent of debate over whether the doctorate is fit for the purpose of delivering flexible, mobile and adaptable knowledge workers with a range of interpersonal and technological skills. Reflecting this changing context, opinion has been divided over whether the primary purpose of the doctorate is and should be:

- The production of a thesis, making an original contribution to a discipline
- OR the preparation of skilled and innovative knowledge workers.

While the first position values knowledge for its own sake, the second is concerned that the doctorate is overly focused on disciplinary problems, meaning that doctoral graduates are ill-prepared to tackle wider societal problems.¹⁸ A third position would assume that it is possible and desirable for the doctorate to deliver on both outcomes.

Of these, the third seems to be the dominant guiding assumption of contemporary policy and practice. For example, in response to the findings of the landmark Roberts Report, PGRs are now encouraged to engage in at least two weeks of professional development a year.¹⁹ Furthermore, capturing the expectation that the doctorate can deliver on both of the desired outcomes, the 2004 ‘Joint Statement of The Research Councils Skills Training Requirements for Research Students’ states:

The research councils would also want to emphasise their belief that training in research skills and techniques is the key element in the development of the research student, and that PhD students are expected to make a substantial, original contribution to knowledge in their area, normally leading to published work. The development of wider-employment related skills should not detract from that core objective.²⁰

This statement stresses that the doctorate can have multiple functions, with one objective ‘not detract[ing]’ or interfering with the other. However, we do not yet know the extent to which these shifts have impacted upon more everyday supervision practices, nor do we know how these changes impact on supervisors’ perceptions of their responsibilities for PGR career and professional development and pastoral care.

Finally, as the purpose of the doctorate evolves to encompass training for a variety of different careers within and beyond academia, PGRs are less homogenous in their needs. In recognition of the diverse needs of PGRs, there has been a recent broader sector interest in professionalising supervision. For example, in 2018 HEFCE catalyst funds were granted to tackle PGR wellbeing by implementing evidence-based supervisor workshops, training, online tools and peer support networks. Additionally, UKCGE has piloted a Research Supervision Recognition Programme, which provides a framework that addresses pedagogic criteria in addition to the administrative processes emphasised in government and institutional policy.²¹ This report aims to speak to this context.

2.3 Project methodology

This project was funded by the Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England (CHASE) through a six-month placement at Vitae. It was guided by an advisory group comprising an AHRC representative, PhD supervisor/director of doctoral studies, a researcher developer, a researcher employed in a non-faculty position and two CRAC/Vitae staff members.

Data for this project was derived from document analysis of ten institutional policy documents from a range of UK universities (3.1) and focus groups and one-to-one interviews (3.2).

Document analysis is a systematic procedure of comparing published documents to trace common themes. The documents considered in this report are aimed at either supervisors and/or PGRs and are publicly available on institutional websites. The ten institutions were selected to account for variation in geography, Teaching Excellence Framework level and group status (i.e. Russell group/ pre-1992/ post-1992).

Interview and focus group participants were selected to include supervisors from a range of AHSS disciplines. This specification was made in recognition that supervision is based on different models within different disciplinary areas. Though either disciplinary model of supervision could have been investigated, policy interventions have tended to take STEM subjects as the norm because these disciplines are deemed particularly relevant and valuable to the knowledge economy. Therefore, it is beneficial to centre the perspectives of AHSS supervisors to explore how they have experienced, the evolution of the doctorate because this has not always been informed by their disciplinary values and perspectives.²²

The research uses a qualitative approach to add depth to some of Vitae's initial findings about supervisor responsibilities, described above, which emerged through numerical data or from the perspective of PGRs. Initially, the project design favoured focus groups because this format encourages group interaction and can capture how ideas are collectively generated and subject to challenge.

Additionally, focus groups have similarities to seminars in the AHSS context in both setting and dynamics. It was therefore hoped that this format would best harness the existing analytical capabilities of supervisors because AHSS academics specialise in generating knowledge in dialogue and interrogating assumptions as they emerge in group interaction. However, respondents' schedules made group sessions difficult to organise in practice. Therefore, one-to-one interviews were offered to those who expressed interest in but were not able to make the original group meetings.

This study is small scale, drawing on data from twenty supervisors with different disciplinary backgrounds and levels of experience. Based on the document analysis of institutional policies (3.1), supervisors were asked to discuss what they enjoyed most about their role, issues of PGR wellbeing, responsibilities for PGR career and professional development and preferences for supervisor training. Anonymised data was processed using thematic coding. The resulting report aims to offer an nuanced picture of participants' beliefs, assessments and decision-making processes as supervisors.

3. Findings

3.1 Document analysis of institutional supervision policies

In the context of concern about doctoral outcomes, supervision has come under increasing scrutiny; findings consistently show that a good supervisory relationship is both the key to timely completion and the biggest factor in PGR satisfaction with their programmes.²³

Once a relatively private affair, supervision practice is now organised with at least some reference to institutional policies and handbooks, with formal mechanics in place to safeguard PGRs and ensure progress.

Using document analysis, this section compares ten institutional policy documents from a range of UK universities to examine how national requirements for supervision have been implemented at institutional level. It also considers the extent of variation between institutions, particularly with regards to career and professional development and wellbeing responsibilities.

The documents considered here are aimed at either supervisors or supervisors and PGRs and are publicly available on institutional websites. It is difficult to determine whether the online documents are exhaustive. Detail may be lost by not being able to account for internal communications and departmental-level handbooks. Nevertheless, these documents were not difficult to locate, which is perhaps because one QAA indicator of research degree quality stipulates that: 'higher education providers ensure that the responsibilities of research student and supervisors are readily available and clearly communicated'.²⁴

Relative uniformity amongst policy documents is to be expected in light of national efforts to introduce quality standards. In 2002, the Metcalfe report was commissioned to report back to the funding councils with recommendations on how to improve standards in research programmes, with supervision key to recommended change.²⁵

The report's suggestions were incorporated into the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and subsequently a circular letter published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in September 2004 established that minimum standards would be linked to funding.²⁶

The current code of practice draws from the Metcalfe report the following recommendations:

- A formal agreement between PGR and university
- PGR engagement with a series of generic skills courses
- A PGR-held log, with records of research supervisions
- Agreed action plans and recording of courses attended

These measures aim to reduce the intensity of the supervisory relationship, increase accountability, and ensure consistency across institutions.

Measures from the Metcalfe report were present across all ten examined documents. Documents itemised PGR and supervisor responsibilities, referenced a PGR-held log with action plans, disclosed complaints procedures and required annual reviews. Six of the ten institutions stipulated a maximum number of supervisees per supervisor, either six or eight at one time. There were, however, some differences between institutions. For example, minimum contact frequency ranged from termly to fortnightly. However, while all institutions required contact to be logged, different levels of formality were required. Some recorded upcoming targets and meeting dates, while other institutions left the detail to the discretion of the individuals.

A number recommended early discussion about roles and expectations; one institution required a personalised but formal contract to be submitted to the department before supervision could commence. All institutions stated the need for the supervisor to be available to contact, with feedback delivered within a “reasonable” timeframe. This wording is taken directly from the QAA recommendations. Two of the ten institutions adapted this to specify what constitutes reasonable in their context.

One key theme across documents was a shift away from single supervisors. All required multiple supervisors and eight of the ten documents referred to a “supervision team”. There were some differences, though, regarding the division of tasks between primary and reserve/secondary supervisors. Some institutions required explicit negotiation between members of the team, a smaller number divided the responsibilities along the lines of the academic and non-academic, while some left the division of labour unspecified.

Overall, documents placed emphasis on administrative tasks. Some referred to duties beyond this, but such references tended to be brief and ill-defined. For example, six documents included a line about pastoral support, but these statements were more or less lifted from the QAA recommendation that the supervisor provide ‘effective pastoral support and/or refer the research student to other sources of such support’.²⁷ Only one gave detail on what the “support” might be. An exception to this were those institutions that provided ‘codes of conduct’, advice and guidance in conjunction with the policies informed by QAA.

Within these documents, there was more space given to the relational and pedagogic dimensions of supervision. Two of the guides included prompts and questions, intended to encourage supervisors to reflect on their current practice. These documents referred to the individualised nature of the supervisory relationship and the ways it might change over time. For example, they outlined some of the potential vulnerabilities of international PGRs.

In terms of careers and professional development, all but one of the ten institutions stipulated that it was the supervisor’s role to take a degree of responsibility. Seven referred to and/or integrated the RDF and advised that it be used at the beginning of the doctorate and then revisited at regular intervals. In six institutions, the RDF was formalised as part of the review process. Two documents drew on the Roberts Report by recommending ten days of professional development a year and stated that the supervisor should not interfere with this requirement.

However, there was variation and ambiguity over whether the supervisor’s engagement in PGR professional and career development was compulsory or advisory. This lack of clarity existed across but also within individual documents. The supervisor’s role was described as to *advise, encourage, discuss, personally engage in* and/or *signpost*, with little detail on what these things might mean in practice. The majority of the documents stated that professional development should be discussed by PGRs and supervisors, though it was not clear who was responsible for initiating these discussions. One institution stood out by contrast by making the explicit statement that, ‘it is no longer the case that successful research students necessarily become academics – the majority do not – and even those who do follow an academic career require a wider portfolio of skills. Part of the job of a supervisor is, from the very start of the studentship, to encourage the student to be active in acquiring the key skills necessary to give them an edge in the labour market’.

Overall, the documents provided little evidence of the older model of one-to-one apprenticeship (2.2) and emphasised instead the contractual side of the relationship and a broader network of doctoral pedagogy which operates within networks and teams.

As a rule, those looking for guidance on the specifics of the supervisor's role in pastoral care and career development would find little consistent and concrete guidance as to what is and is not appropriate to the position, although this was less the case for those institutions that provided codes of conduct. One of the handbooks explicitly addressed intimate supervisory relations and advised:

as with any relationship, the supervisor-supervisee one changes, or should change, over time. Ideally, it should start as a master/mistress-apprentice relationship and end up as almost equal colleagues. [...] this does not happen automatically. Students may need to be weaned away from dependence upon their supervisors, while the latter may need to adjust to the idea of the student abandoning the nest and beginning to fly on their own.

This extract comes immediately after the document's introductory statement that the relationship between the PGR and their supervisor is professional, 'both agree to treat supervision in a business-like way with an agenda'. This proximity indicates that the contractual side of the supervisory relationship is not necessarily intended to displace the more personalised dimensions but to run alongside them, providing safety mechanisms.

The document analysis presented in this section is intended to provide some indication of the competing and sometimes conflicting expectations that supervisors navigate in the current doctoral education landscape.

The findings of this analysis were used to develop the prompts used in the interviews and focus groups to invite supervisors to reflect on and discuss the boundaries of their role and their confidence in signposting wellbeing services and discussing career and professional development.

3.2 Interviews and Focus Groups

3.2.1 The values and ethics of supervision

Participants were fairly consistent in their answers to the question of what they value most about supervision. The joys of supervision mentioned by participants broadly aligned with the apprentice model in which the novice is guided in the practice of independent research, though participants did not explicitly refer to this model in their answers. Participants mentioned how rewarding it was to see PGRs respond so directly to their feedback and use it to shape the direction of their academic work. However, participants expressed unease about how to supervise in response to the precarity of the academic job market and felt that the ethics of supervision were changing. They were unsure about whether their routine supervision practices should change in the light of these economic realities.

Despite this unease, participants described supervision as one of the more enjoyable aspects of their job. They compared supervision to other kinds of pedagogy and stressed how it was *'unlike any other kind of teaching'*. One participant described how her enjoyment was entwined with the idea that the PGR is being socialised into a disciplinary and academic culture:

It also goes beyond the normal boundaries of teaching. For example, taking them to conferences or helping them to develop their networks. It is the socialisation aspect of being an academic and learning what the culture of academia is. That might be helping them understand the things that I have learnt over the eleven years. It feels like something that I have always known, but I haven't always known the etiquette of, for instance, writing an abstract, or publishing. It is rewarding to help people navigate what can otherwise be a very stressful and alienating experience. I had that, and it is rewarding to be able to pass that on.

Supervisor, Linguistics

Echoing the apprentice model of doctoral education, this participant's comment describes the joy of sharing her knowledge and understanding with PGRs who might otherwise be alienated by the rituals of academia. She also stresses that it is rewarding to be able to pass this on to a new cohort, having benefitted from her own supervisor's guidance.

While supervisors were relieved if their supervisees had taken up academic posts after completing the PhD, many suggested that the rewards of supervision were not dependent on this outcome. Participants consistently described how there was a pleasure in simply witnessing the process of change from student to independent scholar. As one participant put it, *'just having that discussion with a young emerging scholar is a really interesting thing to see'*. She described how this change was tangible, often coming all of a sudden:

what I enjoy most is there is this moment with every student when they take ownership and you can really see it happen; it is really tangible. They are finding their way and finding their way. And then they get the data and they get on top of the theory and they just come in one day and talk about it with certainty, I mean there is never complete certainty, but there is ownership.

Supervisor, Education

Supervision was spoken of as one of the most gratifying areas of participants' jobs and they took pleasure in their role in aiding doctoral candidates to develop as independent researchers.

However, despite their enthusiasm, participants described how the ethics of supporting PGRs to become independent researchers was changing because of the lack of permanent academic jobs. Participants reported that the intellectual and practical work had not necessarily shifted in the light of employment statistics; they did the same things but felt more wary and uncertain about whether they were doing the right thing by implicitly or explicitly encouraging PGRs in their pursuit of an academic career. Participants also questioned the ethics of the link between supervision and personal promotion. Others said that they had come to the conclusion that taking on unfunded students was not acceptable in the current climate.

The theme of the ethics of doctoral recruitment came up frequently in the interviews and focus groups. Participants reported that they struggled with how honest and insistent they should be with PGRs about the economic realities of the job market. Participants spoke of actively checking with PGRs to make sure they were realistic about their employment prospects following an arts and humanities doctorate. Almost all supervisors reported that they use the early meetings to have conversations about the statistical unlikelihood of academic employment. For example:

I think that the professional development training that has developed has been a good thing [...] But I still think there is an oversupply of PhDs. And I think it is an ethical question, when you take on a new PhD student, about whether you feel that they know what they are getting into. [...] I think it is ethical to ask, why are you doing it? And if somebody says they want to go into an academic career and I think, yes, I could see you doing that, then that is great. But otherwise I am a bit wary.

Supervisor, Education

It is one of the first things I say to students, even before they apply. It would be remiss if I didn't tell them that it's a competitive field and a field that it would be hard to get into. Certainly, it's something I highlight to them. It would be unethical not to.

Supervisor, Historian

Although most supervisors were keen to impart the statistical realities of academic employment at the beginning, others were taking more proactive steps to advise other, or parallel, career strategies. Two supervisors reasoned that, in light of the prevalence of casual teaching contracts, taking short- or medium-term positions in different sectors could provide the kind of financial stability necessary to maintain a publication record, which would make an academic research career more likely in the longer term. As one participant put it:

I am trying to sell them the idea of teaching in sixth form colleges because there is a bit more breathing space in the timetable and you can still once or twice a year go to conferences or keep up a publication record and at the same time they have got a steady job. Because the alternative sometimes is literally doing incredibly basic work because you are trying to go for these very elusive jobs. I also want to dismantle the myth that as an academic you have time for research because the time is dreadful. It's so squeezed.

Supervisor, Visual Cultures

She stressed that this advice was both for the benefit of PGRs and her own peace of mind, explaining that it could be emotionally difficult to see her PGRs 'wasting up to ten years of their life looking for these highly elusive permanent posts'.

Another participant reported that she had reluctantly taken the decision to change her public-facing profile, in order to send a clearer message to prospective PGRs about the challenges of securing academic employment. She explained to the other members of the focus group:

my profile used to say: I am interested in this and this and this. But I have changed it to say that entering into a PhD programme at this point in time always means wanting to do it for its own sake, with the possibility of three years funding to work on something you really love. The job market is such that I can't advise anyone to do it with an expectation of a permanent job in academia at the end of it, even the best students. I am not sure whether this is the right thing to do or not. I just feel like we need to be more honest.

Supervisor, English Literature

She described feeling uncertain about whether this was the right message and sought the advice of other participants. She described how 'difficult it is to get the balance right, between wanting to tell the best students to just go for it and then wanting to be honest with them about the terrible difficulties that the discipline is facing right now'.

Some participants felt that candidates embarking on arts and humanities doctorates are more likely than PGRs in STEM disciplines to have their sights firmly set on becoming academics and are therefore not well-motivated to develop their skills and invest in professional development. One participant explained that either candidates wanted to be academics or were using the PhD as a break from an already established career:

the students I've had fall very squarely into two groups. First group are those who want academic careers so in that sense they are not looking for skills that would allow them to work in something like high level government research or something. So, [academic skills are] discussed because part of my job is to try to prepare them and help place them in the best position they can for academic jobs. The second group are really those that have done the PhD for their own interest, so again they are really not seeing this as a steppingstone to a different career necessarily. So again, they are not after skills for a different sector.

Supervisor, History

This comment has similarities with other participants' views. Some participants wondered whether, with permanent academic jobs less guaranteed, it might make sense to allow the PGR to make the most of the time for pure research while that small window of opportunity still remained. In practical terms, this would mean pulling back from advising PGRs to maximise every developmental opportunity, just in case it would help them secure academic employment in the future. Some participants felt it was important to make the most of the moment, holding off questions about what would come next until later:

it has to be about the experience they have, while they are funded to do something really great. Some of them will get a job afterwards but some of them won't. So, it better be about the experience they have when they are here

Supervisor, English Literature

they are doing it because it is a break from their career, and they are funded to do some writing. They are just really passionate to have the time. [Describes how this was true also when he was a PhD candidate]. The common-sense that was circulating amongst my cohort was that "we are doing this thing, that gives us a chance to think and talk and learn and we are happy for that. And we very well might have to rethink what we are doing when it's through". That doesn't mean that we were all happy about that, but that's the kind of common-sense that was circulating

Supervisor, English Literature

The following section considers the implications of these findings in terms of supervisor support for professional, career and skills development.

3.2.2. Professional development responsibilities

The majority of the policy documents considered above (3.1) require supervisors to take a degree of responsibility for PGR professional development. Most refer to the [Researcher Development Framework \(RDF\)](#), stating that the supervisor should encourage, signpost or help plan activities.

Therefore, participants were asked whether they felt skilled in and/or comfortable with having career development conversations and how familiar they were with the RDF.

Career development conversations

Participants noted that things had changed since they were supervised themselves. They recognised that supervisor responsibilities now needed to span beyond the thesis, if a candidate was to secure future employment. Most reported that they hold conversations about career aspirations at the beginning of the programme and explained that, if the candidate wanted an academic career, a kind of check-list mentality kicked in. Participants were highly aware of what the candidate needed to achieve at each milestone to give them the best chance of an academic career in a highly competitive environment and described a process of working to achieve particular things before the end of the doctorate:

if they want to continue into an academic career, I do my absolute best to make sure that they can tick all the boxes: yes they've done some teaching, yes, they've presented at various conferences and they may have a publication that they have just submitted and they have got a teaching qualification. All of those things were not making or breaking a career before, but I think nowadays they do, and I am very well aware of that.

Supervisor, Visual Cultures

if I know they want an academic job, I try really hard to plug them in to networks. I mean [the PGR] has only just finished her first year. But I am attuned to the fact that she is going to have to network like mad. I would love to just shepherd her into an academic job. But it is tough now. I feel a certain responsibility to make it happen for her. It is probably because I have the legacy of [my own supervisor] and feel it is really important.

Supervisor, Education

In such an atmosphere, more explorative conversations about career options seemed difficult to imagine. For some, the structural position of “the supervisor”, whose role is to help the PGR develop as an independent researcher, made it difficult to have ongoing conversations about career aspirations and whether these might be changing over time. One supervisor voiced a common theme of concern that the current environment made it difficult to raise the issue of careers, particularly those beyond academia:

it is difficult in the current climate, where there is so much rhetoric about how bad it is in an academic job: the conditions are terrible, frankly, we are going on strike all the time. And then the job market itself, as many people know, is incredibly competitive. There are very public discussions, particularly on things like Twitter, where people are asking whether we should even be taking PhD students on when we know that they are not going to be guaranteed an academic job at the end of it. And I suppose I don't want to feed into what I see as quite a negative and unhelpful discourse by even raising it. [...] I am not actively encouraging students to think about an alternative to academia. Which, thinking about it, maybe I should be helping students to think about other things that they could be doing during their PhD to safeguard against not getting an academic job, but I don't do that... I suppose because with the students I've got I know that's what they really want, and I know that it could have quite a big influence on them if I started to cast the seed of doubt in that way. I know that I could say something without really thinking about it and that could have an enormous influence.

Supervisor, Linguistics

Other participants spoke in similar terms, noting that once the candidate had expressed their aspiration for an academic career, it was difficult to speak about other options in case this was perceived as a signal that the supervisor lacked faith in their project or abilities. Delamont et. Al describe this aspect of supervision as a kind of ‘confidence trick’; the supervisor does the imaginative work of seeing the candidate as the faculty researcher that they may one day become, especially at times when the candidate fails to see this as a realistic possibility.²⁷

Participants were happy, and sometimes relived, to hear that the PGR was considering other options, but discussion seemed dependent on the candidate bringing up the topic of other career possibilities.

One participant made explicit that the ‘confidence trick’ feels especially necessary when working with segments of the graduate population who are more susceptible to imposter syndrome.²⁹ They stated: ‘I do feel an ethical obligation to be clear about what the situation is, but I am also not interested in damaging the ability of PhD students to do their work by constantly undercutting it’. They described trying to find a balance, in which they were realistic about the challenges while still actively championing non-traditional researchers who he felt were more likely to internalise negative messages:

I am worried if a student says I am going to be a successful academic at a major research university. If they said that with confidence that would worry me. [...] However, if I think that a student has overly internalised the nay-say and are thinking they don't have a chance, when I think that they are being too down on themselves I would try to say that I am not saying that you do have a chance, but there are some basic things you can do if you do want to keep that door open. And you have as good a chance as anybody.

Supervisor, English

They reflected on how difficult this was to negotiate because it felt unethical to suggest that a high-flying academic career was likely but equally unethical not to encourage minority voices, which the profession aims to include.

It is important to note that participants’ experiences varied according to their discipline, with those working in disciplines with more obvious pathways into careers beyond academia and equally appealing alternative careers tending to find it easier to have ongoing careers discussions. For example, social scientists spoke of having in-depth conversations about policy jobs and reported that PGRs found the options before them a genuine dilemma. A supervisor in Information Studies spoke of the variety of career pathways from her subject and reported that she read job advertisements out of curiosity and so she could have more meaningful mentorship discussions. This was not the experience of participants from arts and humanities disciplines who said they felt certain that ‘students coming into literature and history, [...] want to be scholars’.

Broadly speaking, participants' who had little sense of career alternatives tended to have a bleaker outlook and a less positive experience of supervision. One participant stated:

we are precisely the wrong people to do transferrable skills stuff because we have no experience of that being successful for us in moving away from the PhD into something else. So that's one of the things that catches the supervisor in this strange position. We know that it is important and valuable in a sense, but it does not match up with our own experience of PhDs. And we are looking into the dark because we never had to do it.

Supervisor, English

Participants from arts and humanities disciplines in particular wanted someone to shine a light on career alternatives for the candidates they supervised. They wanted to know not just what these careers were but details of how these jobs might have a meaningful connection with the thesis or the skills developed through writing a thesis. Furthermore, they wanted reassurance about working conditions, recognising that some of the alternatives for arts and humanities graduates, for example in the arts and museums sectors, were equally competitive, often short-term and underfunded.

The RDF

When participants were shown the framework, some recalled having seen it before but only one had used the it to scaffold a discussion. On the whole participants had little personal connection with the RDF and took time to process its content. The interviews allowed the necessary space to develop this relationship, whether that be positive, or negative, and more than half asked to keep a copy. Considering the extent to which the RDF is integrated into supervision policies these responses are perhaps surprising. Participants' responses suggest that, in order to take responsibility for using the RDF, supervisors need time to engage with and process it and decide on whether it accords with their supervision practice. Without this, it seems unlikely that it would occur to them to use it.

Some supervisors found the RDF useful because it set out in full what they already try to cover with their PGRs in a more intuitive way. This group anticipated that the tool would prevent them from missing something.

For this group, the RDF was not perceived to offer anything different from what they would already be doing by preparing PGRs for academic careers, but they appreciated the visual way it set everything out for them. Others found the RDF alienating because it was not framed in the language of their discipline. This group felt that for this reason it was inappropriate to the supervision setting. As one noted, 'we are not a big corporation where people come in for management appraisal'. Another tried to pinpoint her reason for not using it despite being aware of its existence, explaining that she felt it sat more naturally at the doctoral school level: 'when you meet your student there is so many exciting things to talk about', she reasoned, 'there is enough of this when you get a job'.

The key drawback of the tool for participants in the latter group was the universalism of the language. Some participants saw this as a barrier to use rather than recognising it as an advantage of the RDF, which was designed to enable PGRs to understand their skills as a researcher in a universal rather than disciplinary language. As described above (2.2) the literature on supervision argues that part of the role of the supervisor is to socialise the PGR in a discipline, helping them gain proficiency in a specialised research area. Therefore, there are perhaps good reasons why taking up the purposefully universal language of the RDF in supervisory discussions might feel jarring and inappropriate to the setting. Whether or not this ultimately presents an insurmountable barrier to supervisor use of the RDF remains open to question. If responsibilities for the RDF continue to be part of the supervisor's role, further thought should be given to the complexity of the supervisor's position with regards to universal vs. disciplinary language. Otherwise the RDF may be dismissed too quickly, and this dismissal could prevent more informed decisions. The fact the RDF feels counter-intuitive and uncomfortable to some may be precisely the reason that it is worth engaging in, when working with PGRs whose career pathways may lead them beyond academia.

3.2.3. Attitudes towards professional services

Participants were aware of debates surrounding the professionalisation of the doctorate, but these changes were not felt to directly impact on the more everyday practicalities of supervision. One participant reflected on how little their practice had been influenced by debates about transferrable skills in comparison with debates about timely completion:

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Supervisor, Art History

4. Conclusion

This study sought to include the supervisor's voice in discussions around changes to the doctorate and the purpose of doctoral education. It is important to understand supervisors' perspectives, especially if we accept that there is a link between PGR wellbeing and supervisor wellbeing.

The study found that supervisors are negotiating the structures and expectations of the older apprentice model of doctoral supervision and at the same time are accountable to newer agendas. The supervisors we interviewed were aware of the difficulties PGRs face in securing employment whether in academia or beyond, and some were taking proactive steps to promote other career pathways.

However, many felt ethically conflicted and uncertain over whether this was the right approach. Most were approaching supervision in the same way, while feeling increasingly conflicted in a context where academic jobs were far from guaranteed.

Institutional supervision policies analysed in 3.1 are vague on the topic of the supervisor's role in professional and career development and pastoral care, areas that were especially difficult to negotiate for the supervisors who participated in this project. Taking the supervisor's perspective into consideration, this report has added detail to Vitae's findings that PGRs are cautious about managing supervisor perceptions. Participants were surprised that PGRs might neglect professional development if not overly supported by the supervisor and had limited knowledge of the challenges faced by professional services including researcher developers. In general, supervisors appeared to overestimate the autonomy of PGRs and understood their supervisory practice to be responsive to PGR needs as and when they arise, with the implicit expectation that PGRs could take the lead on initiating discussions.

The current literature on higher education recommends a move away from one-to-one supervision as the primary vehicle for doctoral education towards a model in which PGRs can draw on a wider community to support them in pursuing diverse career pathways.

This requires strong collaboration between the groups involved which, at present, based on the evidence presented in this report, is far from a reality. Participants tended to imagine professional services including researcher developers as experts who provide guidance that is beyond the supervisor's expertise. However, they did not possess 'deeper institutional knowledge' of the inner workings of professional services. In general, participants cared deeply about expertise and felt that the realities of their professional role were poorly understood by their institution. Though they recognised the benefits of standardisation measures, they found that tight regulations could interfere with their ability to exercise appropriate judgements, leaving them second-guessing their intuition.

The supervisors interviewed for this project were deeply concerned about the future place and value of their profession and, related to this, the career prospects and wellbeing of PGRs. They were keen to reflect on their role but uncertain of how to deal with a variety of ethical and practical concerns in the context of changes to the higher education landscape. Finally, they were curious about, but cut off from, the wider pool of professionals in their institutions and the broader policy landscape. This impacts on how they feel about their work without necessarily reorganising its fundamental structures and changing routine practices, and the structures which underpin them.

5. Endnotes

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