

Session 4: Enabling progress and independence

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Programme Etiquette

Working with each other

Confidentiality

All discussions are confidential

Commitment

Attendance and punctuality

Care

Listening, inclusive, non-judgemental

General housekeeping

- Mics off unless you are speaking (put your 'hand up' if you would like to contribute)
- Same rules for coming and going as a physical room
- Cameras on, especially for breakout room discussions
- All slides and resources available on the session webpage

Session overview



In this session, we will:

- explore two common supervisory dilemmas through short case studies
- identify what may be happening beneath the surface
- consider practical strategies that support progress, confidence, and autonomy
- introduce tools that make feedback and expectations clearer and more purposeful



By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- recognise how progress and independence are shaped by the balance of guidance, autonomy, and clarity
- identify when candidates may need support not only with the task, but also with confidence, judgement, and ownership
- understand how supervision becomes more effective when expectations and responsibilities are made explicit and discussable

A core tension in supervision

How much freedom and how much framework should you give in supervision?

Dynamic balance

The balance shifts by **stage, individual, discipline, and progress..**

Structure and support

Supervisors and candidates work within a **bounded institutional framework.**

Guided independence

Candidates need **autonomy within clear expectations.**

The Risk of extremes

Too much framework reduces ownership; too little can feel like vagueness or drift.

A lens for today: self-efficacy

Research self-efficacy:

"an individual's belief or confidence in [their] ability to successfully perform tasks associated with conducting research" (Forester et al., 2004)



Task-specific

Not general confidence



Shaped by experience

Developed over time through
active practice



Influenced by supervision

Impacted by the quality of
guidance

Why it matters for progress and independence

When self-efficacy is stronger, doctoral candidates are more likely to:



Persist through difficulty

Staying the course even when research work becomes challenging.



Engage & take initiative

Actively seeking solutions and driving the project forward.



Recover from setbacks

Bouncing back more quickly when experiments or writing fail.



Greater independence

Transitioning from a student to an autonomous researcher.



Photograph by Alex Holland, University of York

Think back to the first 6 months of your own PhD

What did you **assume** would happen that didn't?

What **expectations** were unclear?

What did you only **learn later**?

Case study 1



"I'm in my second year and drafting for confirmation. My supervisor is experienced and very thorough, but every time I send work it comes back heavily marked up with a clear list of changes, so I've stopped proposing ideas because they usually get corrected anyway. Whether the feedback is about the argument, structure, or phrasing, I'm now less sure how to judge whether my work is strong for myself. I'm also becoming less willing to share anything until it looks polished enough."

- **Alex**

Case study 1: Breakout room questions



1. What is the doctoral candidate gaining or losing from their supervisor?
2. What does the supervision look like from the outside?
3. What would a shift towards greater independence look like here?

Case study 1: What may be happening here?

Alex may be experiencing:

Lack of autonomous support

High academic support but low autonomy

Practice deficit

Fewer chances to practise judgement and decision-making

Over-reliance

Growing reliance on supervisor

Internal barriers

Emerging self-doubt and reluctance to share unfinished work

Three kinds of supervisory support



Academic support

Helping with ideas, methods, standards, and intellectual direction



Personal support

Empathy, reassurance, care



Autonomous support

Creating space for the candidate to think, choose, justify, and own decisions

In this case:

Academic Support: High

Autonomy Support: Low

Personal Support: Unclear / Secondary

Overall, et al., 2011

How supervisors can rebuild confidence and independence

Asking before telling

Encourage self-reflection first.

Normalising uncertainty

Guide through doubt without taking over.

Reasoning over revision

Focus on the 'why' behind the work.

Manageable next steps

Set one achievable goal at a time.

Visible progress

Make small wins clear and celebrated.

Specific encouragement

Name what is working and explain why.

Signal belief

Show confidence in their ability.

Temporary scaffolding

Provide support, then step back.

The feedback cover letter

RSVP

Next Generation
Research SuperVision Project

Cover letter template for PhD students

Date:
Draft Title/Section:
Submitted by:

1. Type and purpose of submission

Briefly describe the type of document you are submitting (e.g., literature review, methodology section, draft chapter, article submission).

- What is the purpose of this piece, and how does it fit into the overall structure of your thesis or project? Is it part of a larger project or a standalone piece?

2. Current state of the draft

- How complete is this draft?
 - Is it an early draft, a revised version, or close to finished?
- Are there specific sections that are more polished than others?
- Have you incorporated any previous feedback, or is this a first submission?

3. Challenges faced in writing

Briefly outline any challenges you encountered while working on this draft, such as difficulties with argument structure, coherence, or sourcing.

- What do you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of this text?

4. Feedback focus areas

Specify the main areas where you would like feedback (e.g., argument clarity, coherence, alignment with research questions, adequacy of sources, logical flow, academic style and tone).

- Are there specific arguments, questions, or sections where you feel uncertain and would like more detailed input?

Or, ask 3 simple questions:

1. What is this piece trying to do?
2. What kind of feedback would be most useful at this stage?
3. Were you stuck or did you find any particular parts of this work difficult?



Comfort Break

See you in 10 minutes

Case study 2



"I'm neurodivergent, and one of the hardest parts of the PhD is how vague and unstructured it can feel. My supervisor says they want me to be more independent, but when I suggest something exploratory in a team meeting or supervision, it can feel as though it is dismissed for not being thought through. If I hold back until it feels more worked through, I'm told I should have shared it earlier. I'm starting to feel that "be more independent" really means "work out the rules on your own", and I'm no longer sure what I'm expected to bring to supervision, what I should try to solve alone, or when it's appropriate to speak up."

- **Maya**

Case study 2: Breakout room questions



1. What is the doctoral candidate gaining or losing from their supervisor?
2. What does the supervision look like from the outside?
3. What would a shift towards greater independence look like here?

Case study 2: What may be happening here?

Maya may be experiencing:

Unclear expectations

Especially around what independence looks like in practice

Mixed messages

Conflicting signals about when and how to share work

Uncertain purpose

Lack of clarity about what supervision is for

Hidden curriculum

Implicit rules creating frustration, confusion, and drift

When rules stay unspoken

The Hidden Curriculum

Supervision often relies on unspoken expectations, norms, and assumptions about "how things work"

When expectations stay implicit:

- Candidates must infer the rules
- Leads to mismatch, drift, or over-dependence
- Those with less access to tacit norms are disproportionately affected

A neuroinclusive lens highlights:

- Ambiguity is interpreted in different ways
- Independence norms are not neutral or universal
- Uncertainty increases cognitive load, anxiety, or avoidance

The Supervisory Expectations Grid

- A structured conversation about responsibility
- Complete the tool separately and discuss in a supervisory meeting
- Revisit the tool regularly

in partnership with **RSVP** | Next Generation
Research SuperVision Project

Supervisory Expectations Grid

[Make a copy of this questionnaire](#)

Establishing expectations with co-supervisors and supervisees early in the doctoral process helps define boundaries, prevents misunderstandings, and builds trust.

The grid below is designed to facilitate reflection and discussion of supervisory expectations regarding roles and responsibilities. It can be used by individual supervisors, supervisory teams, and supervisees.

How to use the grid:

Both the supervisor and the doctoral researcher should fill out the form independently.

Mark the circle on the line that best represents your opinion between the two statements.

Key

- 1 Supervisor's responsibility
- 2 Mainly the supervisor's responsibility
- 3 Equal responsibility
- 4 Mainly the doctoral researcher's responsibility
- 5 Doctoral researcher's responsibility

Doctoral researcher's name:

Supervisor/s names:

Department/School:

Date:

Using the Supervisory Expectations Grid



- Which rows of the grid seem most relevant to this case?
- Where might supervisors and candidates hold different assumptions?
- When in practice might you use this tool?

Strategies for Supervisors



Make the implicit explicit



Set expectations



Notice and name patterns in the relationship



Clarify roles and responsibilities



Take a needs-based approach



Be open to adapting

Bringing it together

Session 1: The purpose and scope of supervision

Navigating the roles, responsibilities and competing demands required for effective doctoral supervision.

Session 2: Developing your supervisory identity

Understanding your own supervisor identity and unique contribution to research supervision and the wider supervisory team.

Session 3: Effective supervisory conversations

Focusing on how active listening and effective questioning can help supervisors hold clearer, more productive conversations.

Session 4: Enabling progress and independence

Exploring practical ways to help doctoral candidates stay motivated, build confidence, and move towards greater independence.

Final reflections

What is already working well in my supervision that I should keep doing or do more of?

What is one change I can implement now in my supervisory practice?

What is one longer-term goal for how I want to develop as a supervisor?

Next steps and discussion

Individual reflection (3 mins)

Capture your thoughts on the questions using the document provided.

Small group discussions (10 mins)

Pin down next steps, deadlines, and milestones. Vocalising commitments helps them stick.

Plenary debrief (5 mins)

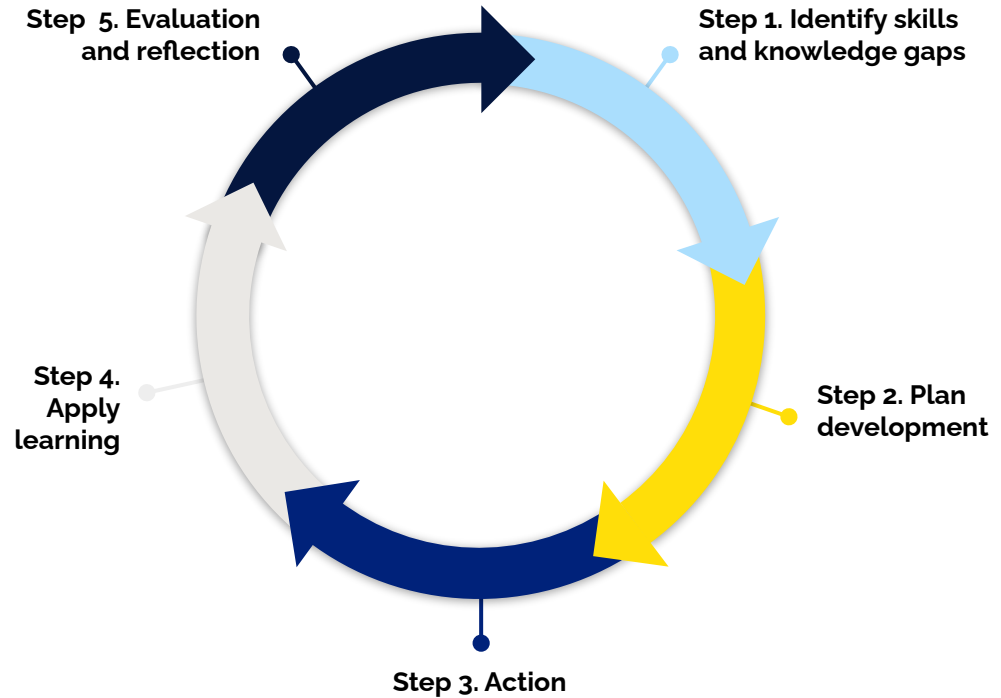
Sharing final thoughts and key takeaways with the whole group.

Supervisory development is ongoing

“

'If supervisors are to improve their practice, they need to evaluate it, reflect upon it, determine their strengths and weaknesses, build upon the former and address the latter.'

- [UK Council for Graduate Education](#)



Looking forward



Professional Development

Local institutional opportunities for continuing professional development



Peer Mentoring

Interested in Peer Mentoring opportunities beyond this programme with us?

[RSVP mailing list](#)



External Networks

- UK Council for Graduate Education [Research Supervisors' Network](#)
- [Northern PGR Network Supervisor Development Programme](#)
- [Supervisor Development Reading Group](#)

Evaluation next steps

1. Session 4 feedback form

Complete this today, after the session.

2. End-of-programme survey

This asks about the programme as a whole, including confidence, usefulness, cohort experience, and intended changes to practice.

3. Follow-up survey

We will send a short survey 4–8 weeks after the programme to ask what you have used or implemented in practice.

Your responses will be anonymised and used to refine the programme



**Questions or
comments?**

**Provide feedback for this
session**



Scan QR code for feedback form or go to:

forms.gle/RaEgYTCQiyi7DmUUA

References and further reading (I)

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Web-based resources

- Guccione, K. *Tools/planners/videos, Supervising PhDs* (blog). Available at: <https://supervisingphds.wordpress.com/tools-planners-videos/>
- UKRI (2024) *Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training*. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/UKRI-300124-StatementExpectationsDoctoralTrainingJanuary2024.pdf>
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