

UK Council for
Graduate Education

Doctoral Distance Learning

30th April 2026



UK Council for
Graduate Education

Welcome & Introduction



Chatham House Rule

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Icebreaker Discussion



Icebreaker Questions

- Introduce yourself, including your job institution & your job title
- What does the term 'Distance Learning Doctorates' mean within your institution?

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Dr Freda Mold

Director of PGR
School of Health Sciences
University of Surrey





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Dr Jen Harris - Jen.harris@surrey.ac.uk

Distance Learning Doctorates 2026



Background



Me: Post-Graduate Research Director since 2016.
Share role with Jen Harris

Motivation for Distance Learning Doctorates (PhD-D)

- Noticed high number of **quality applications** who would be excellent candidates for PhD-D but needed to stay in place due to family/carer, disability or work reasons.
- Coincided with my own prolonged **period of illness**. Made me think of flexibility of working arrangements.
- **Serendipitous chat** at a garden party between PGRDs
- UoS currently provide various PhD modes (by Prior Pub, by Pub, Mono)



Thinking of my future statue



Early Process in PhD-D Development

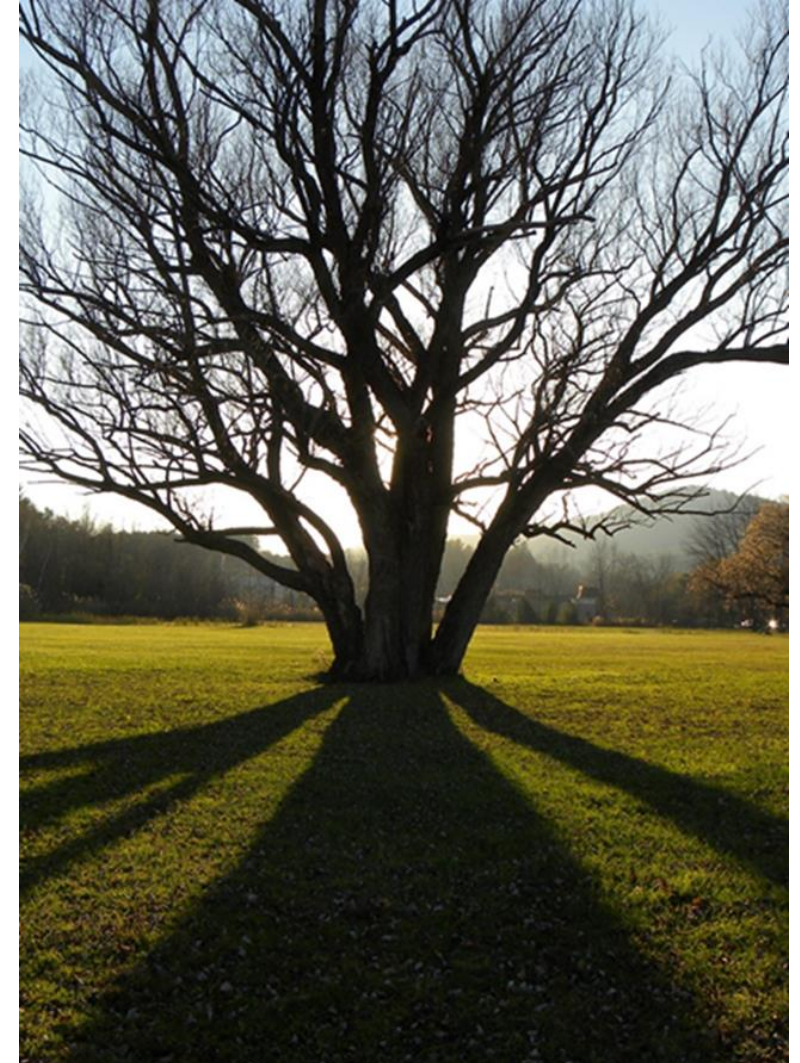


Pitched PhD-D to UoS Dean Doctoral College, HoS, SHS Director of Research & International Lead. Mixed/cautious view. “Why would we want to do that?”

Awarded **Staff Mobility Grant** to explore the feasibility of PhD-D programme in School Health Sciences.

Early Local Prep

- 1-2-1 meetings with **key UoS staff** to capture their views/experiences, questions and any concerns about PhD-D provision
 - Keen to prioritise topics more relevant to Surrey
 - Identify programme development tasks (short, medium, long)
 - Map issues/solutions in provision – pre-empt issues
- Staff: PGR input was later in the process
 - IT/Cyber Security Team (TREs)
 - Library
 - DC Training team
 - Visa and Immigration compliance
 - SHS PhD supervisors (pitched at various meetings – Digital Health)
 - Professional services (FRIO)



Topics discussed



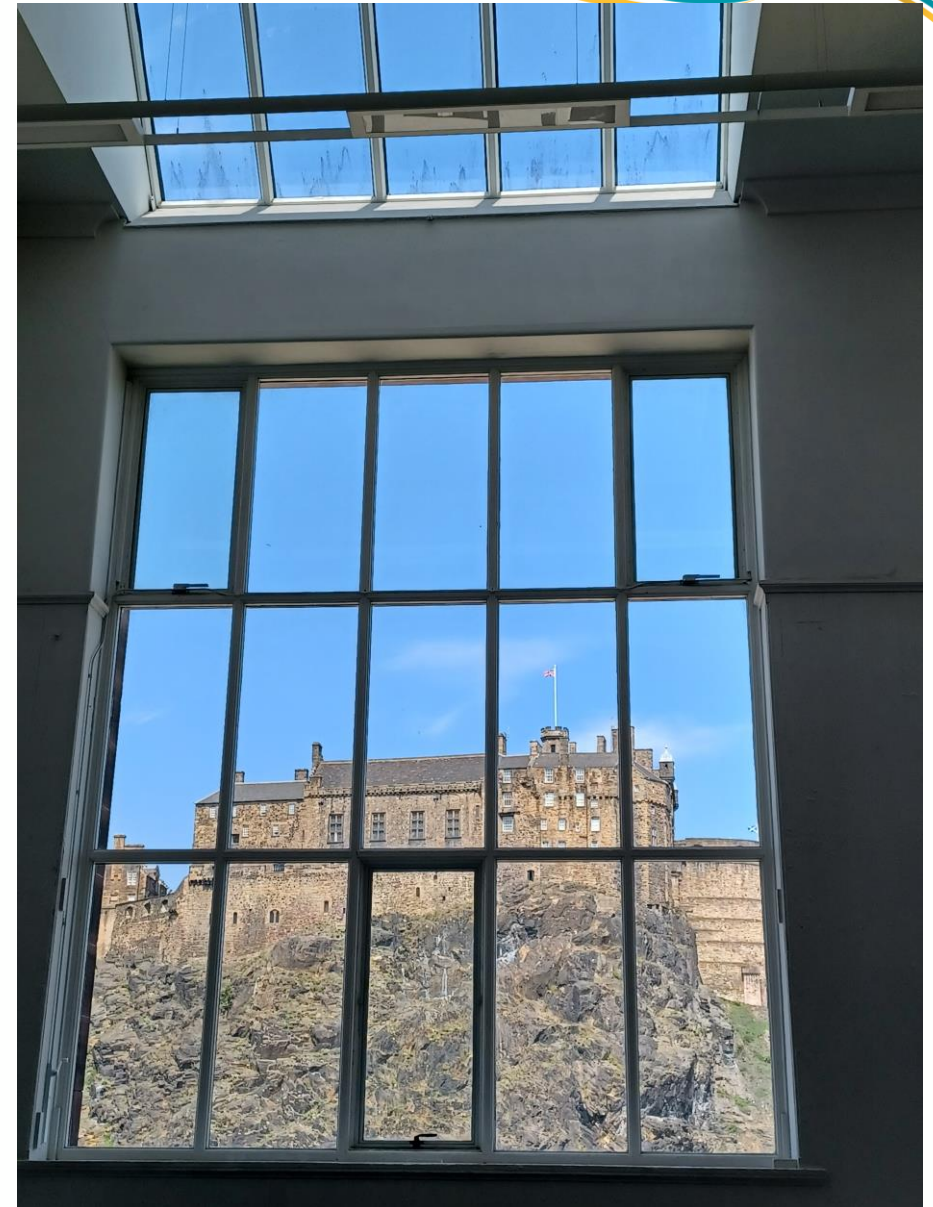
Barriers/facilitators & solutions:



- Programme preparation
- Admissions processes and procedures
- Fee structures
- Programme demand and PGR recruitment/marketing
- Organisational culture change
- Research culture/ community building @ distance (PGR mentoring)
- Supervision models for distance learners, & managing supervision across time zones
- Data management @ distance (IT, Security, TRE)
- Library (Journal and ILL access, database use).
- Progression & monitoring
- PGR training provision
- PGR and supervisor wellbeing
- Confirmation and viva examinations online and reasonable adjustments

Staff Mobilisation Visit

- In June 2025, 5-day visit to the University of Edinburgh (UoE) to meet range of staff re. their experiences when preparing/running a PhD-D programme
- **Staff:** PGRD, Supervisors, DC staff/Training, Library
- The in-person nature of the staff mobility visit provided rich information about staff experiences/ solutions to problems.
- **Once back**
 - Wrote **Concept Paper** synthesised learning
 - We undertook a **Qualtrics UoS SHS Staff Survey**
 - Hosted **PGR feedback session** to captured their views
 - **Revised concept paper!** Based on staff survey and PGR Feedback i.e. initial 4-year trial.



Staff Survey 1



Qualtrics survey link sent to all SHS PhD Supervising staff. Total: 17/36 replied. Sept 2025

Deliberately short. N=11 questions

* Also aligns with UoE Mobility visit

Questions:

Q1. Have you **previously supervised** a postgraduate researcher (PGR) registered as a distance learner?

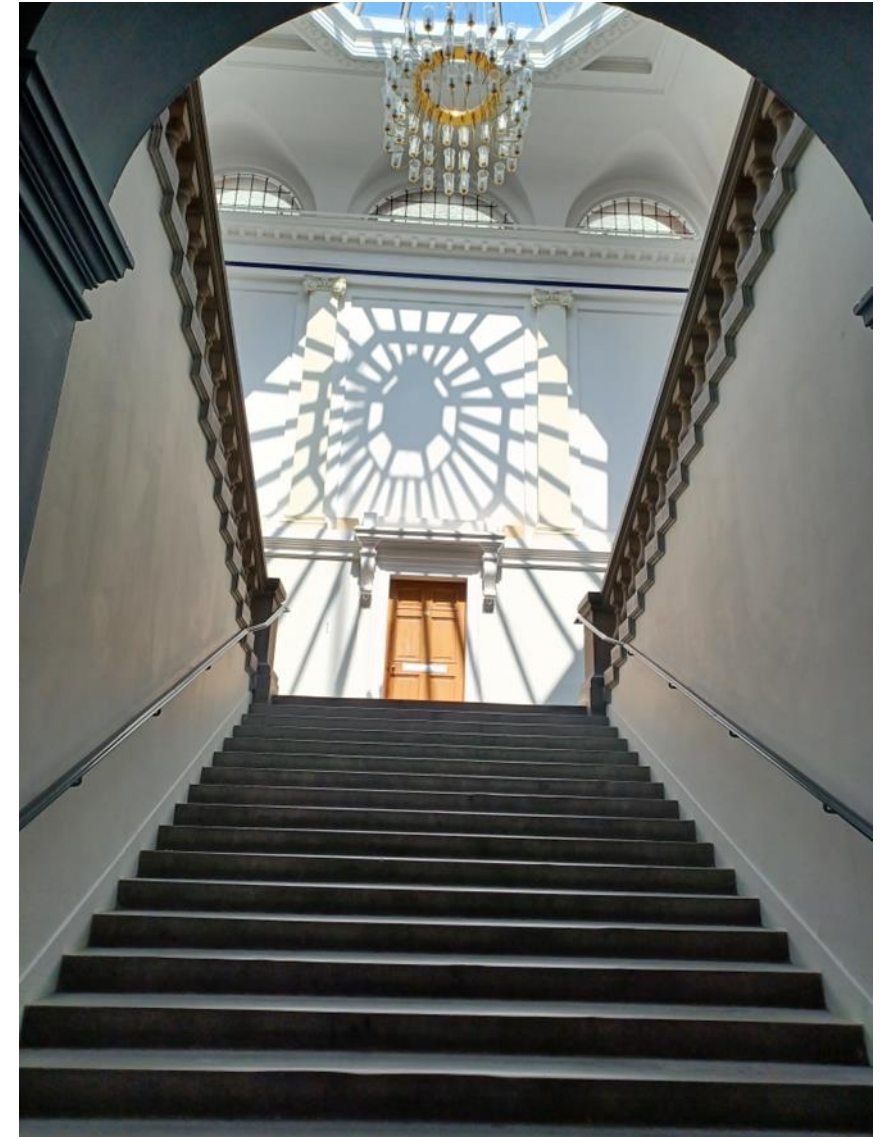
- 100% No

Q2. If yes, mode of study details

Q3. If yes, when, where and location of your distance learner

Q4. Please describe key **positive aspects** of your experience.

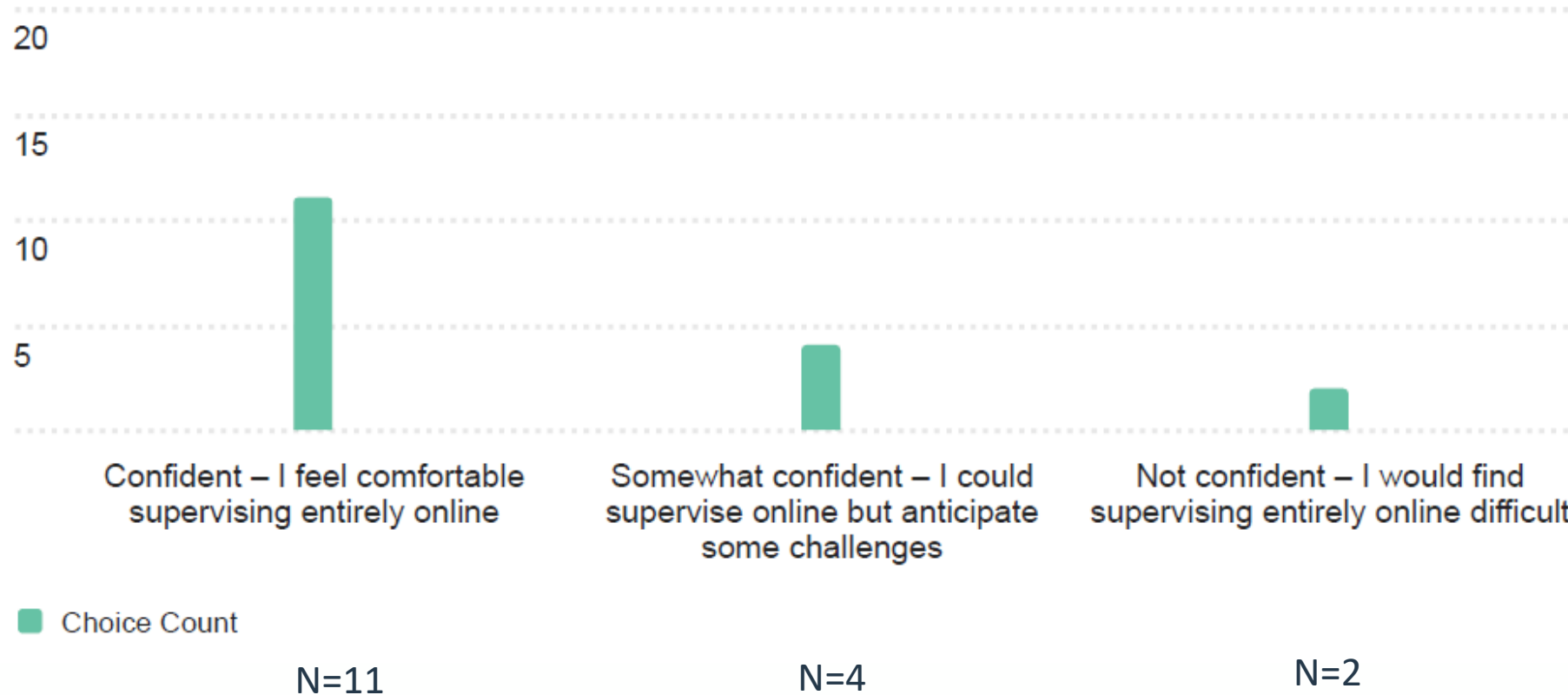
Q5. Please describe **challenges or difficulties** you encountered.



Staff Survey 2



Q6 - How confident do you feel about supervising a PGR entirely online (e.g., via Microsoft Teams or similar platforms)?



Question 7. Please explain your answer so we learn about those who are confident and not so confident



PGR wellbeing

“I would not be comfortable to supervise entire online without any meetings in person, I would have questions about the student's **authenticity**. I think some in-person contact is necessary and indeed beneficial for the student, not least for their **mental wellbeing**.”

“Bit of a wild west. Where is the governance. Where is support for the **student- pastoral support**. Is this just national or international? What is university if all done remotely?”

Relationship building

“I have supervised one PGR and am currently supervising another PGR who I have never met in person. It have not seen this a barrier to good supervision, although it is **probably more difficult to build rapport initially**.”

“I still find it easier to **build relationships with people who I have met in person**”.

“It's hard to provide support to someone you never meet in person. I **wouldn't be able to do it**.”

“Development of effective rapport is so important as is establishing effective communication - both are necessary to prevent misunderstanding or misinterpretation.”

“I'm not sure that supervision will be quite as fun/ spontaneous/ creative. **It could be more transactional**”.

“The experiences are not bad - although it do feel the supervisor and student can **build up a stronger binding** if they can meet in person.”

Question 7. Confident and not so confident ...continued...



PGRs who work & in clinical practice

“Most of my current PhD students are in **practice and online supervision** works best.”

Working collaboratively (labs, community teams & industry partners)

“There is an element to a PhD which requires **integration with a wider team** (e.g. a "lab" or research group) – doing so remotely may be very challenging. Ensuring the student gets support from the wider team, for example with specific methodologies may be difficult if entirely online.”

No anticipated problems – experience & adaptation

- “**I don't anticipate that the challenges will be any different** from those I currently experience”.
- “...don't really foresee any problems”.
- “I have supervised by distance successfully.”
- “It's **never caused any major problems**”.
- “I work remotely, so am currently supervising online. I undertake all of my work meetings / tasks online and **am very comfortable about working in this way.**”
- “**I have lots of experience so would adapt as needed**”.
- “**I don't think the workload balance would necessarily be any different** from supervising a PhD in the usual way.”
- “**Sounds a great idea**, I can see why we would do it, personally don't worry if we see any problems unsupervised substantially online now anyway!”

Question 8. What potential barriers, if any, do you anticipate in supervising a PGR distance-learning



PGR growth & resilience

“Undertaking a PhD is not for the faint-hearted and students need human contact and a lot of support to build resilience and make it through the PhD years. I am concerned a PhD entirely online can leave the students feeling isolated and vulnerable to stress.”

Building rapport

“Trust and connection on interpersonal level perhaps”.

“Building rapport and having informal chats”.

Community, isolation & wellbeing

“If a student is not coming into the office, this limits their engagement with the broader School community and other PGRs ...”

“It can also make it harder to notice or follow up concerns about the student's wellbeing, work-life balance etc. as meetings are more "down to business" and provide less space/opportunity for general conversation.”

“Student loneliness/isolation. Safeguarding issues.”

“when things are not going well it can be hard to offer increased 'soft' support/input.”

Engagement

- “difficulty getting them to engage with PhD related activity offered to Surrey students.”
- “making sure there is engagement...”
- “difficulty for them feeling part of a PhD community.”

Question 8. potential barriers... continued



Language

“Language - not being in the UK means people **don't have the same opportunities to use/practice/improve their English** - this could increase workload.”

“Communication would only be an issue if **English proficiency was poor.**”

Working collaboratively & cultural expectations

“**Cultural expectations** both with student and local supervisor (visit would help).”

“Surrey supervisor may have limited understanding of **what is achievable/ feasible in the students country.**”

Time zone issues *

“time zones were an issue sometimes for arranging **meetings in times that worked for everybody.**”

“Time zone - particularly when there **~12 hour time difference.**”

“Time zones could make arranging convenient meetings difficult.”

Academic integrity

“Academic integrity and the use of AI - **difficult to monitor from afar.**”

Technical issues

“**Technical and connectivity issues** could also impact the process.”

Question 9. What types of support from the University would be most useful to you in supervising a PGR distance-learning?



Mentoring *

Ensure distance learners take up the DC **mentoring scheme** – might be need for tailored version matching in-person and distance learners into mentoring groups/pairs

Visa & costs *

“Given the expense and restrictions on many people in getting visas to the UK **it may be better if the supervisors visit the student** and that these visits are factored into the **cost of the programme.**”

Pastoral support

“it may be useful to have **additional "pastoral" support**, such as a regular (weekly) check in with someone who is not the supervisor.”

“...enhanced pastoral support for the students and support for supervisors to better understand how to do this remotely.”

Relationship building activities

“**annual in-person visit** to meet the student and other supervisor in person.”

“...it would be good for the supervisors and student to **meet once a year in person.**”

“I think **supervision is highly relational** and works best when there are at least some face-to-face meetings”

Question 9. What types of support ... continued



Tighter supervision & monitoring *

“...and **enhanced monitoring** sound sensible.”

“Not sure I'd be in favour of enhanced monitoring of students.”

“I think the **progress reporting system** should still work in this case.”

“**Careful documentation of discussion** and agreed actions will be vital.”

“...guidance on how to monitor the student and **how to raise concerns about authenticity / academic integrity / unethical use of AI/LLMs.**”

Organisational/ supervisor learning

“...**reflection** is needed to ensure quality isn't impacted.”

“**Sharing of best practice** would be welcome”

Staff guidance & training

“**Training-conversation** on what others have learnt- **academic integrity**”.

“Additional training with some identified **pitfalls and strategies...**”

“Training in online supervision”

Staff working arrangements *

“Flexibility in supervision and **work time arrangement.**”

“Flexible working with working late (if hours different).”

Supervisor Support

“**Admin support**”

“...administrative support, **especially when something goes wrong** (e.g., lost of contact with students, very slow progress ...”

Question 9. What types of support ... continued



English language support

“I can see that if English is second language and the student speak their **own language daily could be very problematic.**”

“Ensure we have a robust online **English language training** programme in place”

PGR access to training *

“... and make sure they **have equal and timely access** to training.”

IT infrastructure & access to resources *

“Ensure we have the most **appropriate online meeting system** for the country where the student is situated”

“Also, some practical issue, if we enrol a student who is based in a country like China, who don't have reliable **internet access** to Google Scholar - how can we overcome the issue?”

Community building activities

“...we need to facilitate online PGR communities for **networking and peer support...**”

“Having informal support groups for students **at least once a week to create a community**”

Q10. Feedback or suggestions that could help strengthen the development of the PhD by Distance programme



Inclusivity

“Consideration to **how access to all opportunities** can be made inclusive for remote PhD students. EG. hybrid events/teaching/training; online social spaces; outreach regional meet-ups.”

Supervision expectations

“Setting **clear expectations** and a guide about communication...”

“**more structured supervision**, clear goals and clarifying questions are important”

Mode of study piloting

“**Piloting** of the programme with limited numbers to evaluate and refine iteratively.”

Community building activities

“I hope ...**opportunities To support relationship building** and the embedding of the students in the **PGR community at Surrey**”.

I think it is important that this programme has such **opportunities built in and supported online**, so they are seen as core to their development.”

Organisational expectations

“...also if there is also an international organisation they need to be **alignment in terms of their structure** and organization of the PhD programmes”.

“ I'm generally supportive of this initiative so long as it's not seen as a way of **doing something for less** and staff are allocated **less time on the workload allocation** model etc”

Q10. Feedback or suggestionscontinued



Negative - Erosion of education

“Good luck in further eroding existing models of trust and education, please do leave me out of it.”

“Don’t do it.”

PGRs Views 1

- PGR in-person/online meeting (n=10, 21st September 2025).



Value of the degree

Would a PhD-D have the same value or **feel “real”**.

Cultural lens. In China a degree from outside is seen as being of “lower” value.

Registration Fee. Does it offer value for money – if the same as in-person. A smaller fee would be better. Costs of visits

Sense of belonging

Would this mode of study impact on PGRs sense of “belonging” and **less likely to feel part of the community**.

“**Being visible**” being in the office was part of the PGR experience.

PGR & Supervisor relationship

Could this **relationship be developed as well remotely** as in person.

Building & maintaining relationship **could be harder**.

Concerns about the **supervisor be stretched** and not focusing on them.

PGR Views 2 ... continued



Retain community & disability

Would mean PGR would not need to **move from their community**. "I could have stayed in Manchester".

I would have registered for this route if it was available for when I started. Wouldn't needed to have moved

Would mean **greater access to disabled students**.

Visa

Would a visa be needed?
Visiting visa only.

Uni Community building

Would mean more students and that's good

Costs

Might be at a high cost if regular in-person visits are needed.

Access to university resources

Would remote learners had the **same access to IT systems & software** (i.e. MS Teams, library)

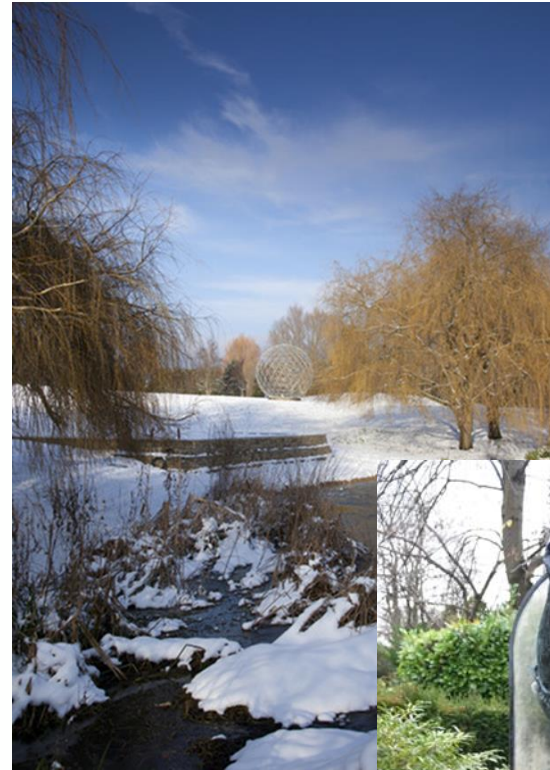
PGR Solutions 1

Mentoring

Matched/group mentoring – established PGR and new starter.

Community building

Use of WhatsApp group to ensure PGR keep in touch with each other



Thinking of my future statue



Alice through the looking glass



Reflections on PhD-D Development 1



Reflections of PhD-D development (staff meetings, mobility visit, staff survey, PGR Feedback)

- **Teams/staff in same Uni may not always have opportunities to talk/work together** on PhD-D development. *Reminded me of Swartz rounds – where staff have a space to share experiences, with the purpose to reflect and learn.*
- Teams/staff were curious about the processes in other Department/Schools. *Foster opportunities for continuous shared learning*
- **Mixed view about quality and support for PGRs/staff** on this programme
- **Experience of supervisors.** *More critical staff were relatively new to PGR supervision.*
- *Development and format dependent on academic discipline (Lab, library/maps) and collaborative partners (shared expectations/quality)*



Reflections on PhD-D Development 2



- **In-person activities** undertaken to **develop this programme was invaluable** – *but still much to do, even when programme begins in Oct 2026.*
- Activities enabled us to **learn from established institutions** (UoE) about specific processes. For example – additional admissions form for PhD-D applicants to assess local support & IT needs.
- The UoS staff meetings, staff mobility visit, staff survey and PGRs feedback **provided honest /authentic reporting of experiences/ solutions to problems.**



Next Steps



- UoS SHS PhD-D programme mode green lighted by Senate (December 2025). To start in Oct 2026
- Next steps
 - **Marketing/Website updates**
 - **Admissions updates** (additional form)
 - **Feedback to DC re. staff survey concerns** – i.e. inexperienced staff and additional training
 - **Update PGR resources.** i.e. Confirmation guide, development of Viva processes including RA for final viva.
 - **Update PGR Supervisor information.** i.e. PGR Supervisors Guide, additional factors for PGR Induction Checklist.



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Doctoral Deans & Directors

Nigel Eady, King's College London
Jane Wellens, University of Staffordshire



Drivers for distance learning

- Changes in demand from prospective students
- Workforce needs / development of practice-based research
- Changes in international perspectives
- Financial pressures
- Technological shift

Other considerations

- Bespoke programmes or cohorts within large programmes?
- Traditional PhD or professional doctorate?
- Evolution of distance learning by 'stealth'

Strategic perspectives

Question to consider at the end:

- What are the meaningful drivers for distance learning in your institution?

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Postgraduate Education Practitioners

Susanna Broom, University of Sussex
Kerri Gardiner, University of Cambridge



Practical considerations and the PGR experience

- *Advantages:*
 - Widening participation (increased flexibility)
 - Improved monitoring of the PGR experience
- *Disadvantages:*
 - Increased isolation
 - Potential challenges around monitoring progress

Practical considerations and the PGR experience

- Limitations to feasibility
- Oversight and quality assurance
- Access to supervision, facilities, resources, and services
- Training and development
- Research culture and community
- Acknowledging differences in experience

Practical considerations and the PGR experience

Questions to consider at the end:

- What do you see as the biggest practical risk to the experience and progress of DL PGRs, and how could this be mitigated?
- Does your institution have a policy or other framework in place to scaffold the experience of PGRs registered on a DL basis?

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Research Supervisors

Craig Martin, University of Edinburgh
Nicola Palmer, Sheffield Hallam University



Practical considerations and the supervisory experience

Advantages from supervision perspective:

- broadening the profile of doctoral candidates; value of cultural differences in terms of research topics and research contexts; relationship boundaries; new challenges.

Disadvantages from supervision perspective:

- development of relationships and trust; communication options / flexibility; loss of embodied learning experience; expectations and working patterns (supervisors); new challenges.

Practical considerations and the supervisory experience

- In-programme experience and creating community
- Profiles and experiences of DL candidates
- Supervising different types of DL doctorates

Practical considerations and the supervisory experience

Questions to consider at the end:

- What is unique about DL doctorates from a supervisor perspective?
- Are there specific training and development requirements for supervising DL doctorates?

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Breakout Discussions



Questions

- What are the meaningful drivers for distance learning in your institution?
- What do you see as the biggest practical risk to the experience and progress of DL PGRs, and how could this be mitigated?
- Does your institution have a policy or other framework in place to scaffold the experience of PGRs registered on a DL basis?
- What is unique about distance learning doctorates from a supervisor perspective?
- Are there specific training and development requirements for supervising distance learning doctorates?

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Closing Discussion



**What is the one thing you are going to do
as a result of this session?**