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Distance Learning Doctorates 2026



Background

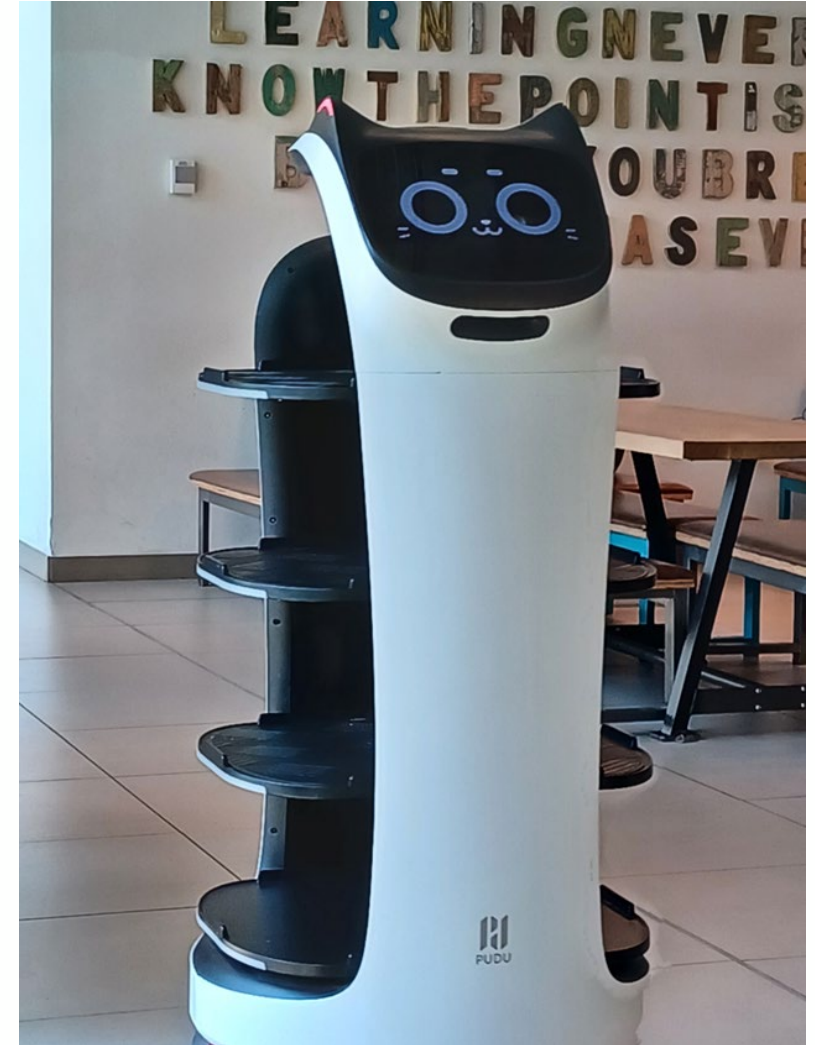
Me: Post-Graduate Research Director since 2016.
Share role with Jen Harris

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

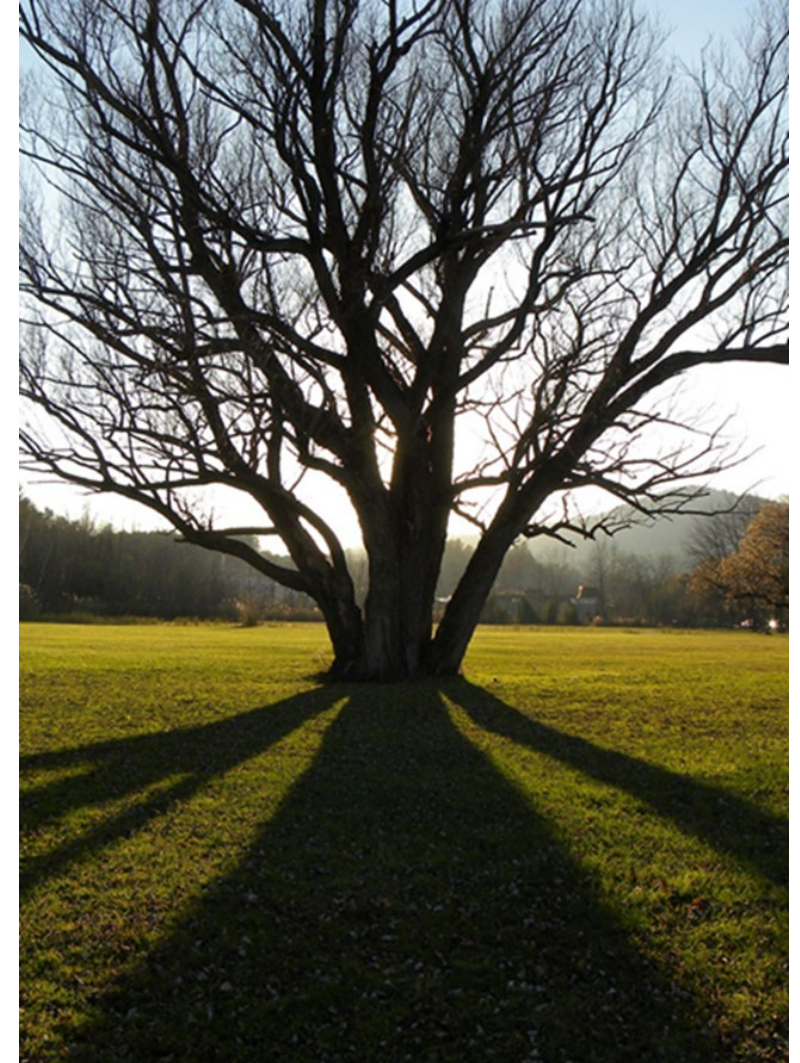


Pitched PhD-D to UoS Dean Doctoral College, HoS, SHS Director of Research & International Lead. Mixed/cautious view. “Why would we want to do that?”

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?

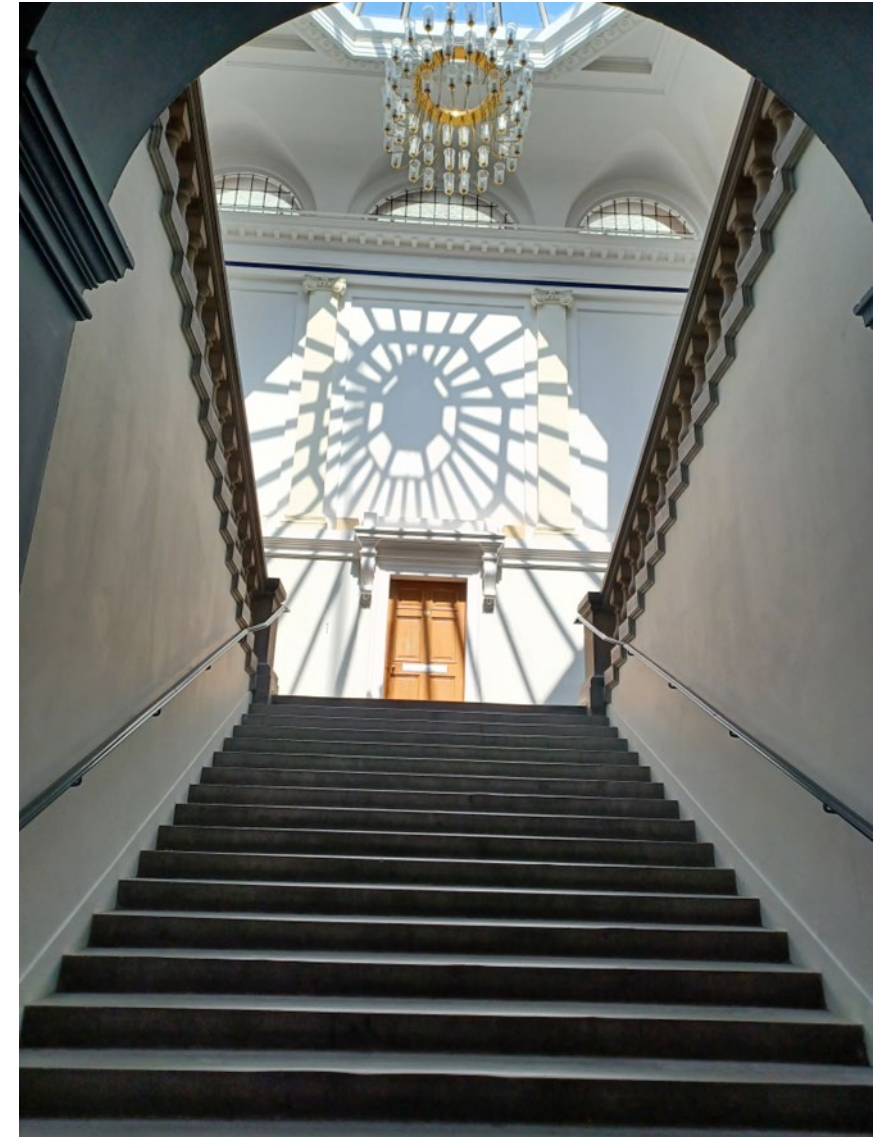
- 100% No

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.

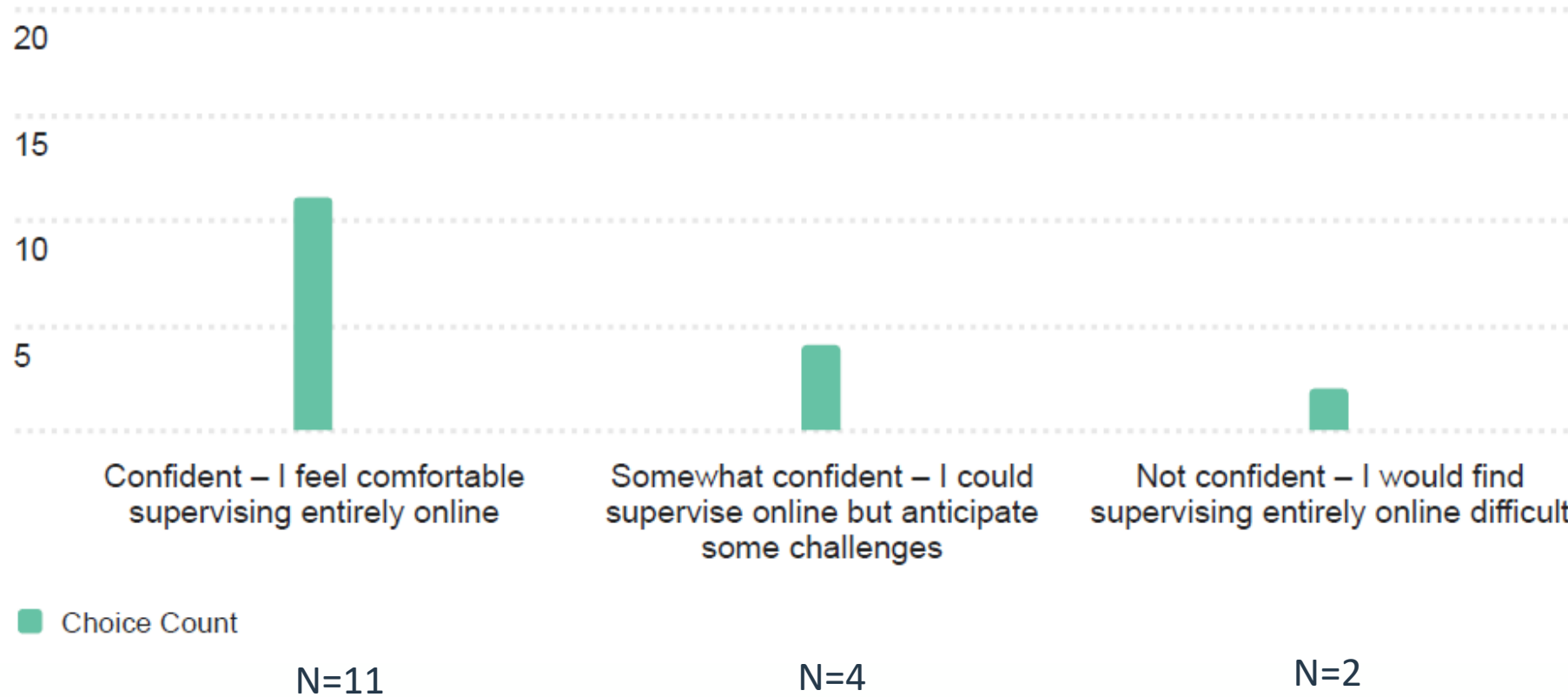
Q5. Please describe **challenges or difficulties** you encountered.



Staff Survey 2



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



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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