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UKCGE Research Supervisors' Network Webinar

1 May 2025

"PGR supervision supportiveness – what is it, how to bring it about and how can it be measured"

Research Context

1

Metrics-driven measure of student satisfaction

- At UG and PGT levels reliance on simple 'satisfaction' scores as indicator of quality education (NSS, PTES)
- 24% of variance in student satisfaction is accounted for by innate happiness alone - satisfied students are simply happier people in the first place.
- At PGR level - student satisfaction are equally attributable to unalterable personality traits.

2

How is PGR student satisfaction (or student experience) measured?

- UoReading example: Overall satisfaction = *"Overall, how satisfied are you with your supervisory arrangements?"*
- Reference to 2029 REF – PCE indicators of excellent research culture and environment
- role of supervisors in supporting students' progression, success, student experience, and mental wellbeing

3

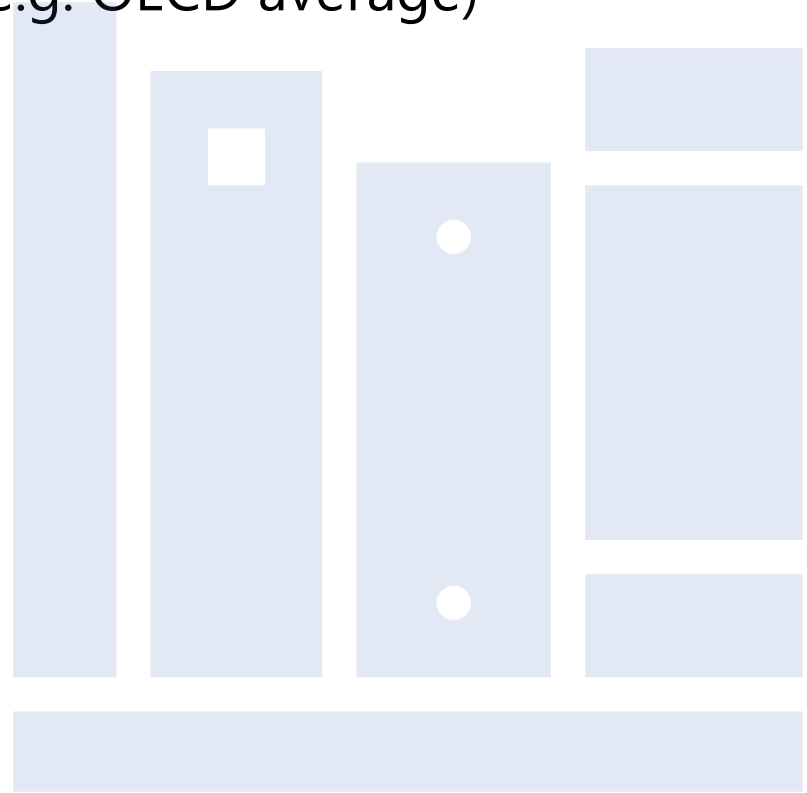
A nuanced perspective on quality of supervision and supervisor supportiveness:

- Zooming in on supervisors themselves
- Zooming out on supportiveness of the wider environment:
 - School/department/University
 - Tangible and intangible supportiveness



The PhD journey and some figures

- Reported attrition (drop-out rate) $\approx$ 30-50%* (e.g. OECD average)
- UK about 20%
 - Acceptance – Yr 1 $\approx$ 10%
 - Yr 1 – Yr 3 $\approx$ 5-6%
 - Yr 3 – Completion $\approx$ 3-4%
- Factors often cited:
 - Mental health issues
 - **Supervisory relationships**
 - Financial constraints
 - **Departmental support**
 - Academic challenges



* *Disciplinary differences – higher in humanities and social sciences*



What kinds of supportiveness matter?

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'Star' academics' PhD students no happier than peers

Supervisors' supportiveness, not their academic ability, found to be key driver of satisfaction in survey

May 29, 2019

[Nick Mayo](#)

Twitter: [@NickjpMayo](#)

Being supervised by a "star" academic does not make PhD students any happier, a study has found.

A survey of 409 doctoral candidates from 20 countries found that the supportiveness of supervisors was the key driver of satisfaction, rather than their scholarly capabilities.



The academic characteristics of PhD students' departments – as well as the supportiveness of this wider environment – were also found to be more influential than individual supervisors' academic qualities.

The survey was completed by students from across the sciences, social sciences and humanities in 63 universities in North America, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region.

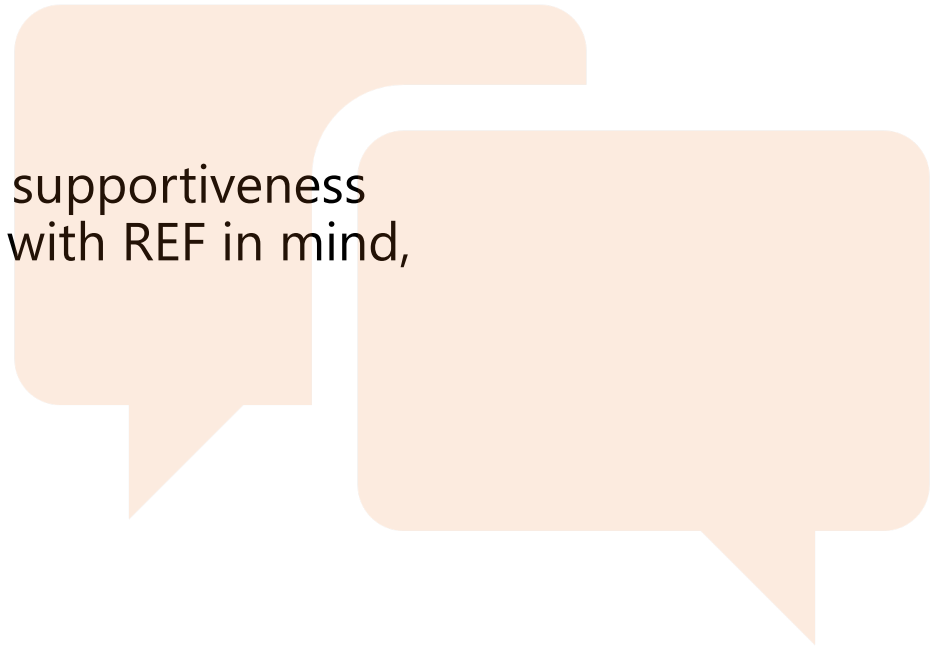
An article outlining the findings, published in [Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education](#), says that "supervisors are the largest contributors to PhD student satisfaction, but this is driven solely through their supportiveness and not academic qualities".

- What constitutes 'supportiveness'?
- Unpacking the broad construct of 'supportiveness'
 - Prescriptive practical actions, behaviours, and relational dynamics to focus on?
 - Reflecting on our own experiences as supervisors, aspects of our unique skills/talents
 - Understanding what our own PGR students do and do not regard as 'meaningful supportiveness'



Question

Think critically about what (i) meaningful [supervision] supportiveness looks like in practice, (ii) how it can be supported, and with REF in mind, (iii) how it can be measured.





Action learning set

- Question raiser – Question in previous slide but only focusing on the first part of the question: *“What does meaningful [supervision] supportiveness look like in practice”*
- **5 mins** – Group members can ask clarifying questions e.g. Who, What, When How, Where, Why (No discussion must take place)
- **20 minutes** - Group members discuss between themselves idea, resources, consider questions raised, propose alternative actions etc (Facilitator facilitates discussion, ensures no dominant speaker, invites others to make suggestions etc). The question raiser turns off their camera but listens to the discussion and takes notes.
- **5 minutes** – Facilitator invites question raiser back into the group. Question raiser reflects on what they have heard, evaluates options and identifies actions to be taken. The group members listen and should not start more conversations/suggestions.
- **10 minutes** – feedback on process and planning for future sessions e.g. discussion documented, shared and referred to at the start of the next action learning set session.
- **Going forward** – we will devote future sessions to the other two parts of the question – details TBC



Thank you

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