

Cohort based supervision – a guide for PhD supervisors

What is cohort-based supervision?

Cohort-based approaches organise PhD students into groups (cohorts) that begin, progress, and often complete their degrees together – in the UK, this approach is common in CDTs Centre's for Doctoral Training and within some larger research groups within natural science disciplines and is becoming increasingly used in the social sciences. As our [Value co-creation in PhD supervision](#) research suggests, this practice could contribute to value in context for a social science PhD – emphasising the importance of supportive mechanisms such as buddying schemes and cohort building HEIs and PhD supervisors can set up for their students. In SGSSS, we organise cohort-development activities ranging from training opportunities to social and mixed (training and social) events, for all social science PhD students in Scotland, regardless of the funder. Encourage participation to these and early sign-up to our [Friday Digest newsletter](#) to learn about these as soon as they are announced.

Within cohort-supervision (sometimes referred to as **cohort mentoring**), cohorts meet regularly for academic and social activities which enables fostering of peer learning, collaboration, and mutual support alongside traditional supervision.

What are the benefits of cohort-based supervision?

From a student perspective, some of the benefits of being involved in a cohort-based approach include:

- Reduced isolation -with the associated benefits of improved mental health.
- Opportunities for peer learning and feedback.
- An enhanced sense of belonging to the discipline.
- Development of transferable skills (e.g. collaboration and communication).

There is also evidence suggesting that cohort-based supervision and peer-support open opportunities to tap into [hidden curriculum](#) learning acquired via shared experiences with others who have something meaningful in common (e.g. being at the same PhD stage, using the same methodology, or sharing characteristics such as being international students / part-time students, etc.).

From a supervisor perspective, a cohort approach enables the students that you supervise to work together to solve common issues, navigate university processes and provide peer support to each other. It can also support supervisors to undertake group supervision for common research tasks (e.g. ethics, methods) and share some supervision tasks with other supervisors (e.g. transferable skills development).

Implementing a cohort-based approach to PhD supervision

- Where students are starting their PhDs at traditional entry points, e.g. autumn/ spring start, consider who might form a cohort. For example, are there students starting with other PhD supervisors who share common methods, contexts, participant cohorts, or where there would be value in students spending time as a cohort?
- For students who enter at other points, integrate them into a cohort as soon as possible if your other students are part of a cohort.
- Where possible, support peer learning and mentoring by pairing new students with peers in more advanced cohorts for informal mentoring.
- Schedule regular cohort meetings. The sessions could happen at different frequencies (e.g. monthly / quarterly) and be structured around:
 - Exploration of potential research methods.

- Presentations where students share their progress to date and get peer feedback from the cohort.
- Training in specific research skills and transferable skills.
- Problem solving sessions focussed on specific research challenges the students are facing.
- Combine the academic sessions with social activities, ensuring that these are designed to be inclusive for all the students in the cohort –e.g. bear in mind timing, venues and types of events.
- Establish some student-led initiatives. Good examples include student-led reading groups, writing sessions, or peer led training on methods or process elements of the PhD -e.g. writing your fieldwork risk assessment.
- Maintain individual supervision to focus on the specific project while adding regular group supervision meetings. The cohort supervision model often is most effective in the early stages of the doctorate and as students develop their work, the focus on individual supervision becomes more important.
- Facilitate peer feedback of work-in-progress. This could include regular meetings where students discuss each other's projects, ask questions, or exchange feedback on draft materials—such as through writing pairs focused on dissertation sections, draft papers, and related outputs. Such initiatives can support students' mental health by helping them develop realistic expectations in the early stages of the PhD, while also building a key skill set for their future careers.
- Set clear expectations for participation and conduct and ask for feedback from the students on what could make the cohort approach work more effectively.
 - [Doctoral Supervision Expectations \(Year 1\)](#)
 - [Doctoral Supervision Expectations \(Year 2\)](#)
 - [Doctoral Supervision Expectations \(Year 3 and onwards\)](#)
- Recognize and celebrate [milestones](#) e.g. papers at conferences, ethics approvals, etc, as a group.