

Effective team supervision – a guide for PhD supervisors

Most UK Universities require a supervisory team with a minimum of two supervisors, and this is also SGSSS's expectation for SGSSS-funded studentships. The QAA code of practice states that “the student has an appropriately skilled and knowledgeable supervisory team”. As PhD projects get more interdisciplinary and more policy relevant, supervision tends to involve more than a pair of supervisors, to capture more disciplinary elements and more knowledge engagement opportunities.

A recent survey of PGR supervisors by the UKCGE indicated that only 5% of supervisors disagreed with the statement that “Team supervision offers a better experience for the doctoral candidate”. At the same time, our [experience here at SGSSS](#) suggests that there is a fine line between supportive and overwhelming supervision especially when there are multiple supervisors. The former brings value to the project through interdisciplinary input, while the latter can stifle progress by not allowing bonding between students and their supervisors or by increasing students' [self-doubt](#) when facing compounded power distance in group meetings. This is a resource which can help you reach that virtuous middle ground in your own team supervision practice.

Working as a supervisory team offers benefits for both students and supervisors as it:

- **Brings multiple perspectives** which enhances academic richness and problem-solving.
- **Enables interdisciplinary supervision** combining technical, theoretical, and applied expertise from multiple viewpoints.
- **Supports student development** through varied mentoring styles.
- **Reduces risk** and avoids single points of failure (e.g. staff illness, leave, retirement).
- **Supports development** of supervisory practice by observing other supervisor styles and approaches
- **Enhanced supervisor well-being** with some de-personalisation of the PhD supervisory experience (**my** student is not progressing as we I would expect > **our** student)

Team Supervision Models

There are several [different approaches to team supervision](#) including:

- “De facto Dyad” – This is where the primary supervisor engages throughout the process with there being a loose connection between student/primary supervisor and other supervisors. This approach does not offer the key benefits of the other forms of team supervision and can lead to a student being supervised in practice by a single academic or a lack of clarity in expectations by the student.
- Segmented – where supervisors lead on (clearly defined) separate elements of the project supervision in an episodic way (e.g. Theory, methods, analysis) and the student engages separately with supervisors at different points in the PhD.
- Collaborative – a process of continual engagement between supervisors and student which focuses on not just technical expertise of the supervisors but the value of collaborative conversations to support the student shape their research and development.

In practice the latter two approaches provide effective supervision, and the exact approach will depend upon the nature of the project and size of the supervisory team.

Reflection:

When you undertook your PhD (if you had more than one supervisor) how would you categorise the supervision that you received during your PhD? What were the pros and cons of that supervision approach from your perspective as a student?

Some key approaches to making team supervision effective include:

1. Clarifying roles and responsibilities

Within the supervisory team:

- Agree who leads the team and how other supervisors contribute.
- Identify the power differentials within your supervisory team (e.g. senior colleagues co-supervising with more junior colleagues) and decide how to shield the student from any counter-productive dynamics.
- Define roles across [project phases](#) (e.g. research design, methods, writing) recognising that supervision roles are likely to evolve as the research project develops.
- Be clear on who the student contacts for what, and when.
- Be clear about what decisions/feedback can be made by one supervisor unilaterally and which need to be discussed as a supervision team.

2. Coordinate Meetings and Communication

- Schedule regular full-team meetings with the student – ideally regular supervisions would be with the whole team but with large teams, that may not be feasible or indeed desirable.
- Allow for one-to-one supervisory meetings, but ensure updates are shared with the team and that timelines are updated such that the workload is manageable for the student.
- Use sharing tools (e.g. collaborative documents, TEAMS channel, Teams Planner board) to maintain clarity across the supervision team.

3. Set Up Clear Feedback Processes

- Agree who reviews documents first and the approach to sharing feedback (e.g. Track changes, comments, document with comments).
- Aim for consistency in messages to the student—debate is healthy, contradiction is not.

4. Include and Support External Supervisors

- Clearly define the role of industry, NGO, or government-based supervisors.
- Recognize that external partners may have different goals—balance these with the student's academic development.
- Provide guidance to external supervisors on university processes and expectations.

8. Reflect and Adjust as a Team

- Hold periodic meetings to reflect on what's working and what isn't – both within the supervisory team and in meetings including the student.
- Discuss and resolve any tensions early.