

Value co-creation in Social Science PhD Supervision

Authors:
Adina Dudau
Dean Smith
Dely Elliot



Scottish Graduate School of Social Science

Sgoil Cheumnaichean Saidheans
Sòisealta na h-Alba



www.sgsss.ac.uk



team@sgsss.ac.uk

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Defining effective PhD supervision and explore how SGSSS can enable and support excellent social science PhD supervision

PhD supervision is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of doctoral success—and it has become an area of strategic focus for UKRI (2023). While researchers have long understood that effective supervision is critical to the PhD experience, recent shifts in the postgraduate landscape have brought fresh urgency to strengthening supervisory practice. The current regulatory emphasis revolves around enhancing supervisory training and updating supervisors' expectations to align with contemporary challenges—such as the increasing diversity of PhD candidates (including more neurodivergent individuals, first-generation students, and international students), the growing variety of study formats (including part-time and distance learning), an evolving employment landscape with more non-academic career paths, and the widespread mental health crisis across the sector. Higher education institutions are being called upon to invest in targeted supervisor development to meet these demands, while national bodies such as SGSSS are expected to offer coherent, responsive frameworks of support and oversight.

Our approach:

We take the view that a PhD degree is a service co-produced by PhD students and supervisors -a premise which is supported by higher education literature identifying students as co-producers of education (as opposed to passive recipients -see McCulloch 2009) and by doctoral pedagogy literature identifying PhD supervisors as the most important influence on PhD students' progression and wellbeing (Bastola and Hu 2021). Therefore, PhD supervision is a space for value co-creation, rather than value provision by higher education institutions (HEIs). It then follows that effective supervision is bound to emerge from the relationship and the fit between PhD supervisors and their supportive ecosystem. To explore these issues, we conducted focus groups with PhD students and PhD supervisors in both homogenous and mixed groups.

Participants

Our participants were doctoral students and supervisors from 8 SGSSS HEI partners and covered a wide range of social science disciplines: social policy, law, politics, accounting, finance, management, public health, education, sociology, psychology, education, politics and social work.

Insights from our study

Our findings affirm the dialogical view that excellent PhD supervision is best understood as a co-created relationship rather than a product delivered by universities or supervisors and consumed by students. However, we also identified instances where the potential for value co-creation was undermined—what we term value destruction. Certain foundational elements of supervision appear to function as hygiene factors: their presence enables value co-creation between doctoral students and supervisors, while their absence can obstruct it entirely. These conditions are necessary for a high-quality supervisory experience, but insufficient on their own to ensure it. Our data revealed both value-creating and value-destructing elements within the supervisory process, leading us to our first key distinction: the dichotomy between value creation and value destruction in PhD supervision (see Figure 1). Building on this, we analysed forms of value co-creation through a framework drawn from the service marketing literature (Vargo & Lusch, 2016; Grönroos, 2024), which we explain in detail in this report.

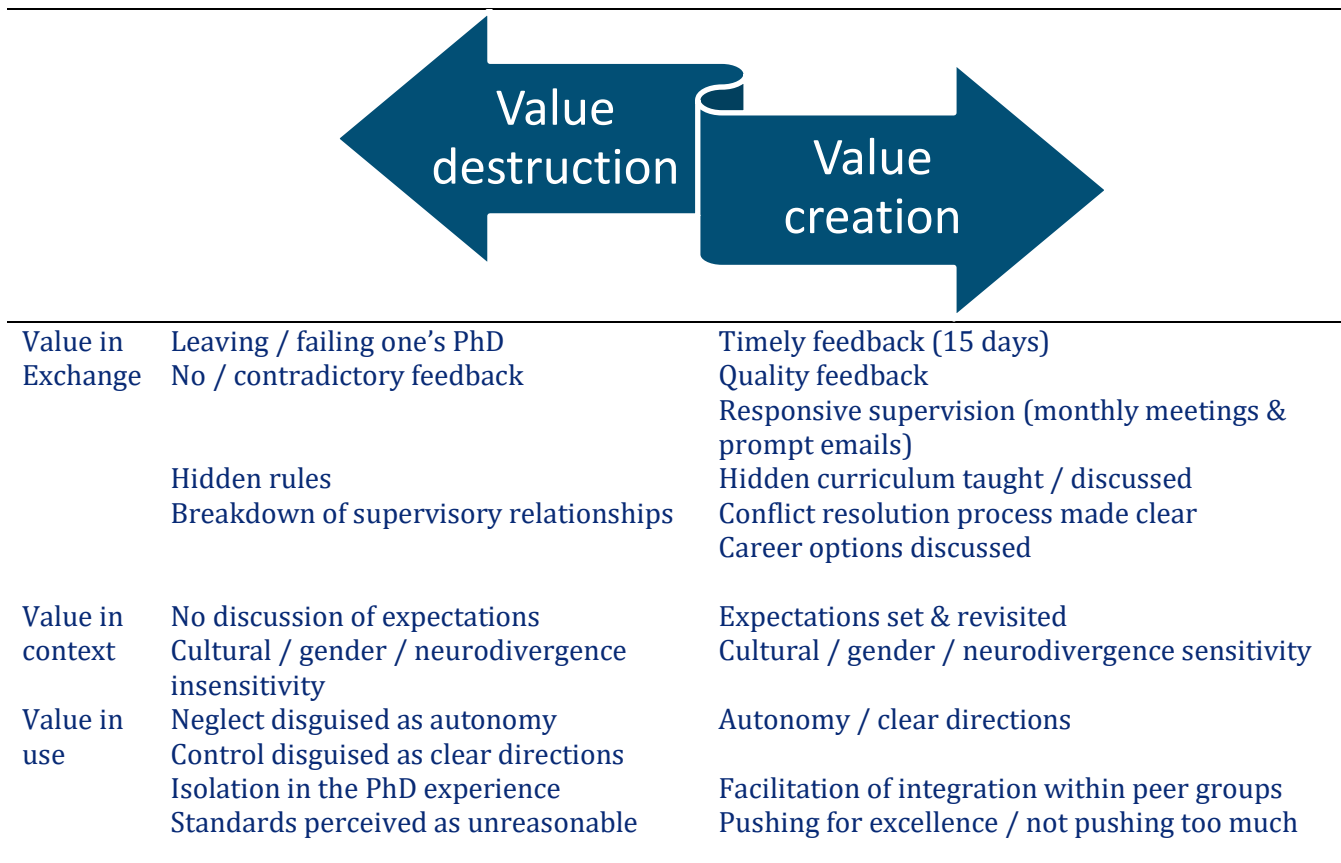


Figure 1: How PhD supervision can destroy or create value in the social science PhD degree

Value co-creation may be just as common as value co-destruction. In our context, it depends on both the PhD supervisor and the PhD student working together to generate value through their relationship—value that is specific to their interaction and may not necessarily extend to others:

“I was lucky that I had a really good relationship with my supervisors and that we were all quite happy with a bit of hands-off approach. I think we would have been miserable if we weren’t matching.” (Recent PhD graduate, Business & management)

“Your own preferences [are about] how you were supervised [but] then you realise that it doesn’t always work for everybody. Supervision is such a fluid thing.” (Experienced supervisor, Politics)

Their collaboration through adaptation to each other is key, but there seems to also be an element of luck involved in getting that good match between supervisors and supervisees.

Value in exchange: establishing basic supervision standards

Getting value in exchange right is crucial to ensuring the baseline quality of the degree. This is typically ensured through careful benchmarking against similar doctoral programmes at other universities, as well as through regulatory oversight. Maintaining such standards is key to an institution’s reputation, as poor quality can undermine value for both PhD students and their supervisors. As a result, it is often monitored through key performance indicators or service level agreements, which are usually formalised in institutional Codes of Practice and mandatory training requirements. The absence of these can make supervisors resort to supervision models that worked or did not work for them in the past:

“The experience I had with my supervisors was very good. But I was a full time PhD student and my first PhD student was part-time distance which is a first [for me]. The kind of relationship, the distance relationship through Zoom or Teams is not the same.” (Inexperienced supervisor, business & management)

Standards like meetings frequency and email response time are unlikely to vary considerably across disciplines. However, quality of feedback standards are more difficult to define, but a system for dialogue could ensure that quality is discussed, essentially co-defined, by supervisors and supervisees:

“It is important to have a mechanism to ensure what quality means for both sides because high quality is really subjective. [It is important] to have some kind of communication channel to discuss high quality. Then (...) you will need realignment all the time because, as we evolve, our needs will be different. I feel like in supervision, everything is assumed to be constant, [but] I agree with [my colleague], in the first year you need to read a lot, but probably that’s not that necessary when you enter your second year [when] you will have a different focus. Perception of high quality is evolving. [We need] a mechanism and a communication channel so we can continuously discuss and make necessary modifications.” (International PhD student, Business & management)

A particularly useful feature which seems less understood by students in conflict resolution pathways, the suggestion being to include them in HEIs’ PhD inductions and any guidelines available to students:

“[in the the PhD handbook there should be] a section about what do you need to do if it goes wrong, like a formal guidance in that handbook. (Conversation between social work and business & management PhD students)

Value in context: the importance of expectations in the social science PhD journey

Students’ expectations of their degree can vary widely. Some variation is inevitable—for example, disciplinary differences mean that students in the same cohort may receive different types of support and be guided towards outcomes valued within their specific fields. However, there are steps that could help reduce additional variation, which might otherwise be seen as unfair or even discriminatory, and which may also overlook relevant prior experience:

“You know, if I don't want to do a verbal presentation, then how do I get around that? Different learnings allowing being more supportive for different learning styles, neurodivergent, you know, skill sets. There's for me, it was to do with just a bit more of a holistic view of the student starting a PhD to take into account there where they've come from and the skills and competence and experience they've brought with them. (PhD student, Psychology)

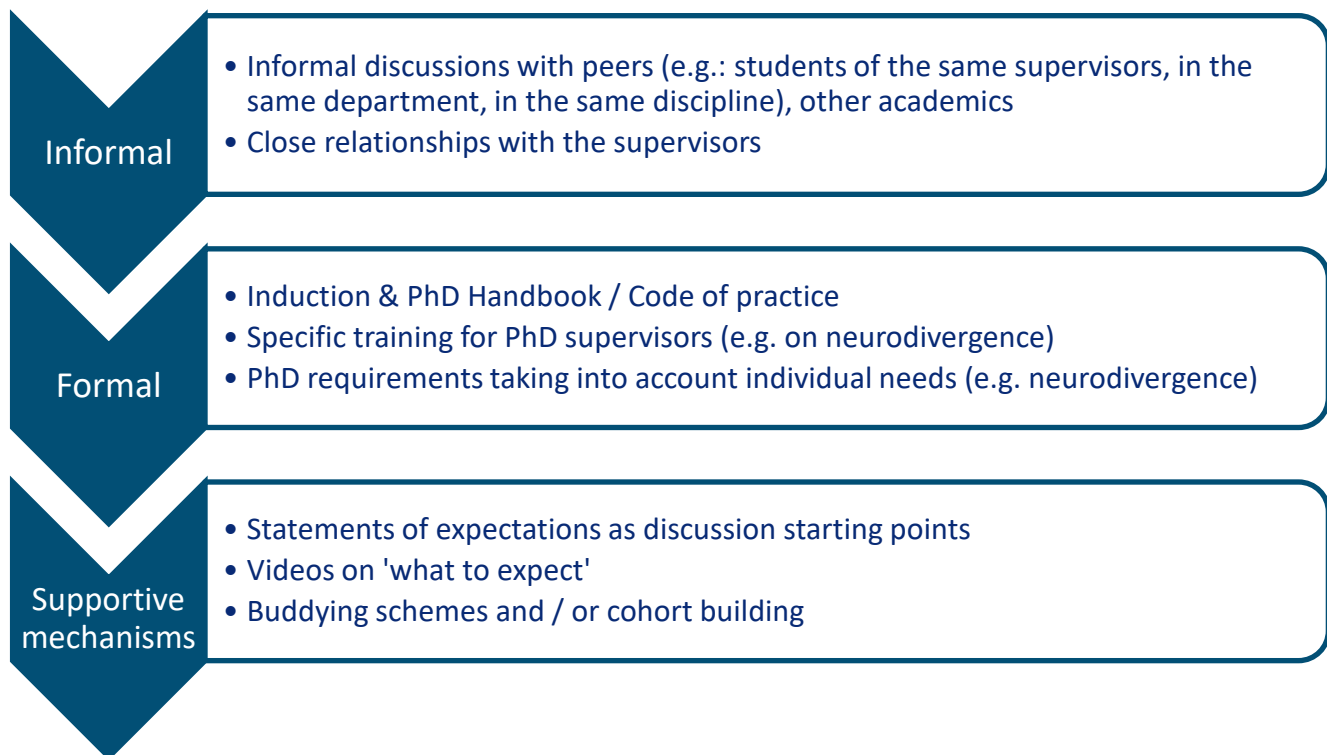


Figure 2: Features building up value in context

Figure 2 brings together the mechanisms highlighted by students and supervisors in our study. Higher education institutions (HEIs) could use this as a checklist: for formal mechanisms they already provide, informal ones they might facilitate, and additional supportive practices that could make a difference where others fall short. SGSSS may also play a valuable role, particularly in the

informal and supportive categories. Establishing value in context is important because it can help level the playing field for atypical student categories such as this first-generation PhD:

“I didn’t know what to expect from a PhD supervisor. I am the first PhD in my entire family. I don’t have PhD friends. I didn’t know what to expect at all.” (PhD student, Social policy)

Value in use: the social science PhD journey as a dyadic and individualised experience

This type of value relates to the perceived usefulness of supervision from the standpoint of an individual and it shapes their satisfaction with their doctoral experience. In organisational settings, this is typically assessed through satisfaction surveys or interviews. In our focus groups, we heard accounts of both high satisfaction and significant dissatisfaction with PhD supervision. The sources of this (dis)satisfaction are often difficult to isolate, as they appear to stem from the inherently dyadic and relational relationship between each supervisor and supervisee. These experiences are also highly individual: what proves effective or rewarding for one student (or supervisor) may resonate with another:

“I feel like there’s been a camaraderie between us. And that we’ve kind of developed our understanding of [our] methodological approach together. So I think (...) that’s maybe balanced out the power imbalance.” (PhD student, social policy)

“Sharing knowledge is intrinsically dialogical in a sense, meaning like you learn with other people.” (Experienced supervisor, accounting)

“High quality [supervision is when] it fits with your interests, your style or even your life stage. (...) I feel those [quality] criteria are really individual. It really depends on your supervisors and their styles” (International PhD student, business & management)

The fit between supervisor and supervisee appears to be key to establishing value in use, but so do the dynamics within the broader supervisory team:

“My second supervisor is (...) actually, to be fair, interested. But she keeps being deferential to the first supervisor [who] is more experienced but does not actually answer my emails” (Professional Doctorate candidate, education)

“I’m actually more worried about [managing] the relationship with [the other supervisor]. I like structure and I’m not entirely convinced he does feel the same. So actually, I think maybe it’s also because and he’s a professor. So I feel like there’s some of these relationships as well that we’ll have to learn how to navigate. I feel like I’m more concerned about fitting and kind of aligning with the with the first supervisor than the student.” (New supervisor, business & management)

This is not to say that agreement between the parties is necessarily always expected, or even desirable, in fact sometimes disagreement reinforces the particularity of academic debate which rests in disagreement and dissonance.

“But if they are at a very early stage, that can bring confusion. Who is right, who is wrong? But I think that if supervisors can say this is normal. Every day I disagree with my fellow researchers, you know, I think it's just to let the students know that this happens.” (Experienced supervisor, business & management)

While individual experiences and perceptions of the PhD journey naturally vary, students across our focus groups consistently identified two prevalent supervisory models within the social sciences: a ‘**colleague-in-training**’ model and what many referred to as ‘**ghost supervision**’. These models represent two ends of a spectrum. The former is characterised by ongoing engagement, mutual respect, and developmental support; the latter is typified by minimal contact and a reactive approach. Some students reported partial or mixed experiences -such as supervisors who were unresponsive over email but highly supportive in person- indicating that supervisory styles are not always consistent across modes of interaction. Notably, not all collegial supervision was uncritically celebrated. One social policy PhD student described their supervisor as “**very good, very empathetic, very supportive, but not someone who can really give you that critical comment**”, suggesting the need to balance emotional support with academic rigour. Overall, the **colleague-in-training** model was strongly endorsed as a foundation for value creation in the doctoral experience. In contrast, the **ghost supervision** model was cited as a source of frustration, anxiety, and disappointment. When viewed through the lens of our value creation versus value destruction framework, **ghost supervision** can be seen as actively eroding the value of the PhD experience. This emphasises the importance of clear expectations and baseline standards which can be supported through targeted training and guidance for supervisors.

Fostering Outstanding Supervision: The Role of SGSSS

As a membership organisation, SGSSS supports HEIs, while at the same time also providing some direct services to PhD students and supervisors which are seen to be more valuable when organised outside host institutions. Our study highlights current and further opportunities for SGSSS to add value to the social science PhD experience in Scotland.

Support for HEIs

In our study, we have identified the following opportunities for specific support to our partner HEIs’ existing policies and activities:

- Statement of expectations, guiding the supervisor-supervisee relationships.
- Curated collection of resources for PhD supervisors.
- Custom advice for partners HEIs on supervisor training.

Direct provision to PhD supervisors and students

SGSSS provides support to PhD students and supervisors directly, through our website, processes, and events. Further support may include:

- PhD handbook for SGSSS / ESRC funded PGRs & induction for PhD supervisors & students
- Cohort building activities including seminars and workshops for students
- DNA (development Needs Assessment)
- Community of practice for supervisors
- Opportunities for supervision certification (e.g. UKCGE Good Supervisory Practice Framework)

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