

Case Study

Title: Support for PhD Supervisors at the University of Edinburgh

What was done:

The Institute for Academic Development (IAD) at The University of Edinburgh holds responsibility for running a coordinated series of events and briefings for PhD supervisors. This comprises compulsory briefings at College level for new and existing supervisors complemented by optional events and briefings at University and School levels. All PhD supervisors at the University are expected to attend a supervisor briefing event once every 5 years.

These briefings and events have evolved over the past 8 years and now offer supervisors at all levels of experience a range of relevant support. A major review of the provision was undertaken in 2011 focussing on feedback from participants and presenters. This highlighted areas of good practice and helped clarify potential areas for further development and consolidation.

Links to:

- Approaches to training and support for doctoral candidates and supervisors

Motivation and aims:

Compulsory supervisor support briefings follow a similar format for both new and experienced supervisors. These aim to combine presentation of 'hard' information such as university regulations and developments in external policy with the opportunity for sharing of practice and discussion of how to overcome potential challenges. New supervisor briefings give an overview of university regulations, policies and procedures and support for their role. They also use case studies of potential supervisory challenges to promote interaction and discussion by participants. More experienced supervisors are offered a supervisor update which covers new developments in research supervision and the implication of changes for their role. This is coupled with an opportunity to share and discuss experiences of supervision.

Optional supervisor events build on the compulsory briefings and offer tailored support in themed areas such as supervising international students, recruitment and funding postgraduate students. These events are facilitated by appropriate support services across the university such as the International Office and the Scholarships Office. The IAD also supports individual Schools in running events on specific local topics of relevance. To complement the more practical elements of PhD supervision, the IAD also offers a half day course which focuses on the 'soft' skills required to help supervisors motivate and inspire their students and maintain a productive working relationship.

Some of the benefits of this approach are as follows:

- It offers a coordinated approach to supervisor support which recognises and employs the expertise of stakeholders across the university, at institutional, College and School level.
- It facilitates the sharing of practice and encourages interaction by supervisors in the process.
- It places the supervisor role in the wider context of policy and agendas impacting the research environment.

Lessons learnt:

In 2011 the IAD conducted a full review of the support provision for supervisors. On the basis of feedback from presenters and participants, IAD has since made further enhancements to both compulsory and optional events and tailored them more specifically to the needs of supervisors. This has resulted in the current, more streamlined provision.

Examples of changes made on the basis of feedback

1. The review highlighted that supervisors particularly welcomed the opportunity for discussion and interaction at the compulsory briefings but felt that the case studies used were too long and unrealistic. As a result of this feedback, IAD has since replaced the longer case studies with more focused, shorter vignettes. This has allowed for greater flexibility and discussion of challenges linked to real life examples.
2. Although the opportunity to share practice with colleagues was highlighted as a positive element of supervisor briefings, participants felt that this could be enhanced by differing content in briefings for new and experienced supervisors. This has now been implemented.
3. The review underlined the importance supervisors placed upon exploring other elements of PhD supervision, beyond the day-to-day work of supervision. They were keen to access specific information on themes such as funding and supervising international students. On this basis relevant stakeholders at the University have been engaged in providing this support through a variety of optional events for supervisors. These events are usually very well attended.

Scalability and transferability:

The PhD supervisor support at the University of Edinburgh has potential for expansion within the home institution, particularly through expansion of the portfolio of themed briefings. There is also scope for enhancement of local provision at School level.

This practice would be transferable to a different university, particularly as it has limited cost implications. Examples of good practice, such as the focus on interaction and use of real life case studies could be implemented at another institution.

Further information:

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/institute-academic-development/research-roles/research-managers/development>

Location of practice:

Institute for Academic Development (IAD), University of Edinburgh

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Work package titles and themes:

- International dimensions to examination, supervision and the doctoral experience
- Design and development of a doctoral supplement to cover broader activities, training and experiences with a particular focus on employability & mobility
- Employer engagement, including employers not traditionally associated with the recruitment of doctoral graduates
- Approaches to training and support for doctoral candidates and supervisors
- Dissemination and promotion

Note for authors:

These case studies will be made publically available via the project website and may be included in future project publications and reports (printed and online).

Project website: www.doctoralexcellence.dk

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