



On the Same Page?

Expectations of responsibility in PhD supervision at
LSE

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Executive summary

Doctoral supervision works best when student and supervisor share a clear, compatible understanding of who is responsible for what, such as choosing the appropriate method, organizing meetings, and furthering the student's career. If people disagree, it can foster conflict and worsen the experience for all involved. This report asks whether PhD students and supervisors at LSE hold the same expectations about the division of responsibility in supervision, and where those expectations diverge. 104 PhD students and 118 supervisors anonymously rated 19 aspects of the supervisory relationship on a five-point scale running from "entirely the supervisor's responsibility" to "entirely the student's," with the midpoint representing shared responsibility. The worry was that there was significant disagreement between students and supervisors.

Interestingly, the two groups broadly agree on responsibility allocation for most items. However, the experience of being supervised varies widely, and members of the same role often disagree among themselves, so while the survey shows broad agreement, it also points to significant variation. The clearest divergence between students and supervisors concerns conflicting feedback. Supervisors strongly regard resolving it as their job, while students split almost evenly between expecting the supervisor to step in and assuming they should decide themselves. This is the reverse of the intuitive worry, and the only difference robust to statistical correction (with a small number of other items showing differences that are substantively meaningful but do not survive correction). Where the two groups differ elsewhere, students lean slightly more toward self-responsibility than supervisors assume. Among supervisors, methodological tradition matters most. This is chiefly over who owns the choice of research topic. Among students, home and international students differ most, with international students expecting somewhat more supervisory direction on theory and method. Neither supervisory experience nor year of study shifts expectations appreciably. Finally, dissatisfied students hold more supervisor-dependent expectations across nearly every item. It is unclear if they are dissatisfied because they feel their expectations have not been met, or if their expectations increase because they are dissatisfied.

Rather than prescribing how supervision should be done, the study suggests that supervisors and students should make expectations explicit and revisiting them as the relationship develops. That is, a structured but low-stakes conversation at the start of the doctorate, using the 19 items as a prompt and focusing on the points where views differ. In co-supervised PhDs this might include agreeing on who resolves conflicting feedback. More broadly, it can help to notice cross-tradition pairings, to treat induction as a way of calibrating different but equally valid academic and intellectual norms, and to see expectation-setting as a skill worth developing rather than something that simply arrives with experience. In general, the encouragement is for transparency and conversation of expectations to minimise unspoken conflict.

Intellectual and practical motivation

The relationship between a doctoral researcher and their supervisor is one of the most consequential in academic life. It is the principal path through which a student is inducted into a research community, represents access to networks and experience, and is a core determinant of whether a thesis is finished, finished well, or abandoned. Despite this, it is among the least standardised elements of academic life. As Brown and Atkins (1988) observed, it is probably the most complex and subtle form of teaching academics undertake, and, unlike most teaching, it comes with almost no script. A lecture has a syllabus and a seminar has a reading list, but supervision has a relationship that is conducted largely in private, whose terms each pair is left to work out for themselves. While this is a core strength that allows people to develop their own ways to engage with students and reflects the diverse needs that different research disciplines and methods require, it also leaves a lot of experience in the dark.

The open-endedness is in many ways a virtue. It allows supervision to be adapted to the student, the project, the discipline, and the moment, and it reflects the real person-to-person relationship that is built over years. But it carries a potential cost. Because so little is fixed, students, supervisors, and institutions can hold quite different pictures of who is responsible for what (e.g., for choosing the research topic, setting the pace, catching errors, and opening doors), and those pictures are rarely compared, meaning that two students in the same department can have wildly different experiences and outcomes. Phillips and Pugh (2010) argue that the parties to a doctorate often hold different and unexamined aims, and much difficulty follows from never reconciling them. The misalignment is seldom dramatic. Instead, it is quiet, and it tends to reveal itself indirectly through a deadline that slips, feedback that lands badly, an authorship decision that surprises someone. That is, if people are not aligned on their expectations, relationships can quietly erode over time and frustration can build.

Alignment as a core idea

A strand of higher-education research argues the alignment challenge is the central question of supervision. Gurr's (2001) "rackety bridge" articulates this idea. Gurr argues that the goal of supervision is to bring the student to a state of competent autonomy, and that reaching it requires the supervisor continually to realign their style with the student's developing capability. This implies awareness of what can be expected of a student and where they need support during their project. A hands-on approach that may be right for an uncertain beginner becomes constraining for a capable student nearing submission while a hands-off approach that suits an independent researcher can abandon a struggling student. In Gurr's view, alignment is dynamic. The right relationship at the start can be wrong later, and part of the work of supervision is noticing when to change. Gurr operationalised this as a tool used with students at intervals across their candidature, precisely so the two parties could check whether their perceptions still matched.

Gatfield (2005) reaches a compatible conclusion from a managerial angle, locating supervisory styles on two dimensions (the structure a supervisor provides and the support they offer) to yield a typology of supervision styles, from *laissez-faire* to

highly directive. His argument, like Gurr's, is that no style is good or bad in the abstract. A style is effective only when it fits the student's needs and expectations, and it should shift as those change. Finally, Lee (2008) widens the frame to distinguish five concepts of what supervision is for: functional project management, academic enculturation, the development of critical thinking, the student's emancipation, and the cultivation of a quality relationship. This warns against collapsing supervision into ever-longer lists of discrete functions. The frames and contextualises the current study that decomposes the relationship into 19 specific responsibilities. The items in this report can be seen as starting a conversation rather than a complete account of what supervision is or could be. However, these accounts share the assumption that the relationship works when the two people in it hold compatible expectations about their roles and runs into trouble when they do not. This is not because either is at fault, but because the expectation mismatch goes unnoticed and alignment therefore erodes.

The expectations most likely to cause trouble are often the ones that are never made explicit. Sambrook (2016) describes the supervisory relationship as a kind of psychological contract that contains a set of beliefs each party holds about what they owe the other and are owed in return. These are mostly tacit and rarely stated. On this view the danger is not disagreement as such but un-surfaced disagreement. Making the contract explicit is a protective act, as it allows supervisors and students to openly discuss these issues and identify possible disagreements. Similarly, Parker-Jenkins (2018) argues that there is no single right way to supervise, and relationships sour not when roles differ, but when roles, expectations, and boundaries are left to be inferred rather than openly agreed.

This is why a structured instrument that asks both parties, separately, to say where they think responsibility lies is more than a simple audit. It is a way of converting tacit assumptions into something that can be compared and, if necessary, discussed. The instrument we used in the study is a paired-statement responsibility scale where different aspects of supervision is presented as a continuum between an entirely supervisor-led and an entirely student-led position. This originates with Moses (1985) and has been adapted for institutional use across universities, notably by Kiley and Cadman (1997) to prompt the expectation conversation the literature recommends; the version used in this study was adapted from a current institutional descendant of that tradition, the University of Queensland's Supervisory Expectations: Questionnaire (University of Queensland, 2025). It sits alongside a other tradition, such as by Mainhard and colleagues' (2009) questionnaire on the supervisor–doctoral student relationship, which measures interpersonal style rather than the division of labour. The choice to measure responsibility, rather than style or behaviour, is because responsibilities are concrete, negotiable, and actionable in a way that interpersonal dispositions are not. This makes them the natural path for a conversation aimed at heading off avoidable problems.

Why this matters at the LSE

The case for taking expectation alignment seriously rests on more than principle. Following PhD students and their supervisors over three years and interviewing each separately, Ives and Rowley (2005) found that clarity about roles and a strong working

relationship were associated with better progress and higher satisfaction, while a lack of role clarity worsened students' experience of the doctorate. For an institution where co-supervision is common (like the LSE), they recommended that students have two active supervisors and that the team meet together regularly, with written work shared in advance. These are practical measures aimed at keeping expectations aligned across a team, as the project and the student develops and changes with changing expectations.

Team supervision adds an additional challenge, as different supervisors might disagree on the working relationships. Guerin and Green (2015) study how students experience supervisory teams. They found that conflicting feedback from multiple supervisors can leave students uncertain which direction to take, slow their progress, and generate tensions that often go unspoken. They do not argue that multiple voices are bad (indeed, handled well, they can be a fantastic asset), but that the value of a team depends on someone taking responsibility for resolving conflict, and on the team being explicit about who that is. As the findings below show, this is exactly the point on which students and supervisors at LSE diverge most. Finally, at the system level the stakes are higher still. Golde's (2005) study of doctoral attrition suggests that a large share of those who begin a doctorate (on the order of two in five in the US data she examines) never complete it. Golde argues that much of this loss reflects poor fit between the student and the intellectual and social environment of their department rather than any deficit of ability. While the setting is American and we should not just import their findings uncritically, it suggests that mismatches that is never surfaced is expensive, for the individual and the institution alike.

These findings and concerns are important for the LSE. The school's doctoral community is very international, bringing together students and supervisors trained in different national systems, whose default assumptions about how much direction a doctoral researcher should expect may differ considerably and silently. Co-supervision is common, with the attendant risk of conflicting feedback. And the methodological breadth of a social-science institution (from formal quantitative work to interpretive qualitative traditions) spans intellectual approaches that may have different views about what a supervisor is for and who owns the intellectual direction of a project. Each of these features is a plausible source of the quiet, unspoken misalignment the literature identifies as harmful. The current study is a step toward making these unspoken assumptions more visible and hopefully engender conversations between and within supervisory teams and relationships.

Methodology

The study was sent to currently enrolled LSE PhD students and current or recent PhD supervisors and departments were offered an in-person presentation of the project. In total, 222 respondents provided complete data on the 19 responsibility items: 104 PhD students and 118 supervisors. The responses represent about 16 per cent of the roughly 1,400 eligible members of the doctoral community (approximately 923 enrolled PhD students entitled to supervision and 473 active supervisors).

First, participants were asked to self-identify as a PhD student or a supervisor. PhD students were then asked experiential questions, such as how many years they are into the program, their self-identified primary method, and their preferred frequency of supervision meetings while supervisors were asked similar questions about their supervisory experiences, self-identified primary method, and the number of PhD students they have previously supervised. Following this, participants rated the 19 aspects of the supervisory relationship on who they believed have the primary responsibility for a given issue. The 19 items were adapted for the LSE context from the University of Queensland Graduate School's Supervisory Expectations: Questionnaire (University of Queensland, 2025), an institutional instrument in the paired-statement expectation-scale tradition of Moses (1985) and Kiley and Cadman (1997). Responses were recorded on a five-point scale, where 1 indicates that a responsibility rests entirely with the supervisor, 5 that it rests entirely with the student, and 3 a shared responsibility. A lower average score therefore means a responsibility is seen as resting more with the supervisor while a higher score indicates that responsibility lies more with the student. The aspects deal with different elements of the doctorate experience: selecting the research topic and the theoretical framework, developing the scope and timeline, arranging meetings, ensuring access to facilities and familiarity with relevant policies, giving, correcting, and emotionally framing feedback, monitoring progress, resolving conflicting feedback within a supervisory team, coordinating communication within the team, managing research ethics, and supporting networking, mentoring, career development, and co-authorship. Finally, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the supervisory experience at LSE and were given an optional open text for comments. The survey collected no identifying information and was approved by the LSE Research Ethics Committee (ref: 720028, see full survey in Appendix A).

The school-wide comparison (Section 1) tests, for each item, whether the average ratings of students and supervisors differ, using Welch's t-tests, applying a Holm-Bonferroni correction to control the risk of false positives across 19 simultaneous tests and reporting Cohen's d to convey the practical size of each difference. Sections 2 and 3 examine variation within the supervisor and student populations using the same effect-size logic, treating these subgroup comparisons as exploratory given the smaller cell sizes. Notably, as responses were anonymous and unpaired, students cannot be matched to their supervisor. The report therefore describes how the two populations differ on average across the school, but cannot speak to whether any individual pair is aligned.

Summary core findings (more detail in sections 1-4)

- There is general agreement between students and supervisors. On most of the 19 items, students and supervisors answer in the same range of the scale. The task is therefore to address or consider a small number of misalignments, not to renegotiate the relationship wholesale.
- Students and supervisors diverge most regarding conflicting feedback. When a supervisory team gives contradictory feedback, supervisors see resolving it as their own responsibility, whereas students split almost evenly between expecting the supervisor to step in and assuming they should decide for themselves. Supervisors are generally willing to give direction, but a large minority of students do not expect them to do so. This is the only item to survive correction for multiple testing.
- Generally, students lean slightly more toward self-responsibility. On 15 of the 19 items, students place non-significantly more of the responsibility on the student than supervisors do. This is the opposite of the common worry that students arrive expecting to be carried, and, as mentioned above, the two groups are in broad agreement on responsibilities.
- Average agreement can hide disagreement within each group. On several items the two groups agree on average, but each is internally split. Correcting written work, progress monitoring, and draft-submission timing are the clearest cases, with respondents of the same role distributed right across the scale. These are among the least settled questions in the data and points to heterogeneous practices that need to be resolved in supervision relationships.
- Among supervisors, methodological tradition is the strongest source of variation. The sharpest differences concern who owns the choice of research topic where quantitative supervisors are more likely to treat this as shared or partly their own, while qualitative and mixed-methods supervisors place it more firmly with the student. This seems to reflect different models of how a doctoral project begins.
- Seniority shapes expectations in a layered way. The most senior supervisors are the most willing to own process and relational responsibilities such as team communication and conflict resolution, while junior faculty are more engaged on career support and co-authorship — not always what students expect of senior versus junior supervisors.
- Years of supervisory experience are unrelated to how supervisors divide responsibility, suggesting norms form early and persist, so experience alone is unlikely to correct misalignment over time. Similarly, expectations do not change significantly as the PhD progresses. The move toward independence that supervisors might assume is not reflected in the students' stated beliefs.

- International students place somewhat more responsibility on the supervisor for intellectual direction (mainly on theory and methodology).
- Students who reported being dissatisfied expected more supervisory involvement on almost every item than satisfied students did. It is unclear if they are dissatisfied because their expectations have not been met, or if their expectations increase because they are dissatisfied.

Summary of core recommendations

- In line with existing literature, the data supports the value of a structured but light expectation conversation near the start of every supervision. The 19 items give students and supervisors a prompt to engage in a concrete way to surface and compare responsibility assumptions before they become problems.
- These types of conversations would be most useful on points where a mismatch is most likely, such as conflicting feedback, correcting written work, progress monitoring, and draft-submission timing.
- In co-supervised PhDs, it can help to be explicit about who resolves conflicting feedback. Supervisors seem willing to give a steer, but many students do not expect it, so naming this openly addresses the report's clearest gap.
- Cross-methodological dyads are relevant. A qualitative student with a quantitative supervisor, or the reverse, may hold unspoken and opposite assumptions about who owns the intellectual direction of the project, and an early conversation is the easiest way to align on expectations.
- Because student expectations do not appear to drift toward independence over the PhD, it is worth revisiting these questions briefly each year rather than assuming they evolve on their own. As mentioned, this is limited by the number of respondents and that it is a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal analysis.
- Since experience alone does not seem to change supervisors' assumptions, structured reflection (e.g., through supervisor development, the Eden Centre, or the PhD Academy) may support alignment more than time itself.
- An early, informal route to talk through supervisory difficulties (e.g., a named PhD Academy contact) for confidential advice before a problem becomes a formal case would give both students and supervisors somewhere to turn.
- Induction can be framed as a calibration of different but equally valid academic norms and expectations rather than as remediation and alignment with the supervisors' norms and expectations.
- Both students and supervisors believe that more institutional support and recognition for supervisory duties would be helpful.

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Section 1: A school-wide comparison of expectations

The project explores if PhD students and their supervisors share the same picture of who is responsible for what in their working relationship. The survey asked students and supervisors at LSE to rate 19 aspects of the supervisory relationship on a five-point scale, where 1 means the responsibility sits entirely with the supervisor, 5 means it sits entirely with the student, and 3 represents a genuinely shared middle ground. Thus, a lower average score means a responsibility is seen as resting more with the supervisor, and a higher score means it is seen as resting more with the student. Students and supervisors answered independently and anonymously, so neither group could influence the other. Because responses were anonymous and unpaired, we cannot match any individual student to their own supervisor. We can compare how the two groups answer on average. This is an important distinction, as two groups can share an identical average and still contain many individual pairs who are badly misaligned, or differ on average while most real pairs in fact agree. This section maps where expectations diverge across the general LSE doctoral community, rather than diagnosing any specific relationship.

In total, 222 people completed the survey (104 PhD students and 118 supervisors). The two groups are broadly similar in size, which gives us a reasonable basis for comparison. As reported, students and supervisors broadly agree on responsibility allocation. This is good news, as it suggests that the LSE doctoral community shares a working understanding of supervision that is more common than contested. However, the data do reveal some important points of divergence, which matter for practical action.

How do we know whether a gap is meaningful?

With any survey, some differences between groups will arise by chance. To separate genuine patterns from noise, we use a Welch's t-test, which checks whether the average scores of two groups are far enough apart to be unlikely to have occurred by chance. We ran this test separately for each of the 19 items. Because we ran 19 tests at once, there is an increased risk of stumbling on a false positive purely by coincidence (in the same way that if you toss a coin 19 times, you might get a run of heads even with a fair coin). To mitigate this risk, we applied the Holm-Bonferroni procedure, which raises the bar for what counts as a significant finding when multiple tests are run together. Only items that clear this corrected bar are marked as statistically significant in the results below. We also report effect sizes via Cohen's d , which tells us how large a gap is in practical terms, not just whether it is statistically detectable. By convention, a d around 0.2 is considered a small, 0.5 medium, and 0.8 large effect. We only note items with a $d > 0.3$ as worth attention even where they fall just short of the corrected statistical threshold, because effect sizes in this range are substantively meaningful in an applied setting. Each item asked: who is primarily responsible for this aspect of the PhD?

- 1 — Entirely the supervisor's responsibility
- 2 — Mostly the supervisor's responsibility
- 3 — Genuinely shared between both
- 4 — Mostly the student's responsibility
- 5 — Entirely the student's responsibility

Figure 1 shows the average score for PhD students and supervisors on the 19 items, ordered from the largest gap at the top to the smallest at the bottom. The length of the connecting line shows how far apart the two groups are. Items with a statistically significant gap after correction are highlighted, and items with a notable trend that falls short of the corrected threshold are flagged separately. Finally, items where there is no meaningful difference are shown with a neutral connection.

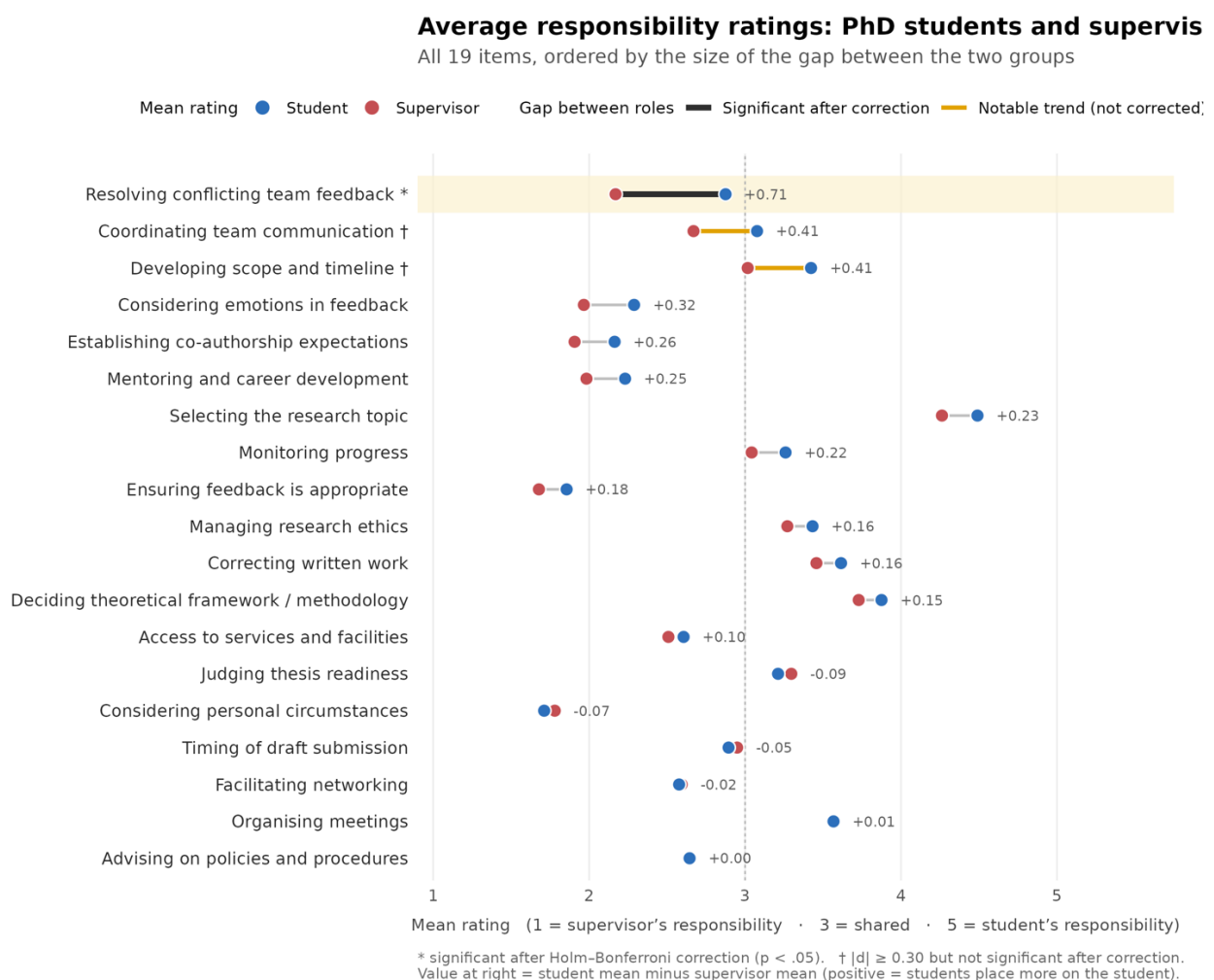


Figure 1. Average ratings for PhD students and supervisors on the 19 items, ordered by gap size. Lower scores indicate the responsibility is seen to be more with the supervisor while higher scores, indicate responsibility is seen to be more with the student.

A few things stand out. First, on most items the gap is small, and the two averages sit close together. This means students and supervisors largely agree on where responsibility lies for the day-to-day aspects of the relationship. Second, where there are gaps, the direction is strikingly consistent, but not in the way one might assume. On 15 of the 19 items, students place slightly more responsibility on the student than supervisors do (the student average sits a little higher up the scale, students overall average 2.94 across the items against the supervisors' 2.76). In plain terms, the typical student enters the relationship expecting to carry marginally more of the load themselves than the typical supervisor assumes. If anything, students are slightly more independence-oriented than their supervisors expect, not less. The individual gaps are usually small and statistically unremarkable, but the direction is rarely reversed.

What happens when supervisory teams disagree?

The most robust difference concerns the “If the supervisory team provides conflicting feedback, who is responsible for giving the student clear direction” item. Students rated this at 2.88 on average, suggesting that they believe the responsibility is even between the student and the supervisors, while the supervisors rated it at 2.17, suggesting they believe it is primarily the supervisors responsibility to give direction in this situation. The gap between them ($d = 0.56$) is the largest in the survey, and it is the only item to survive the corrected statistical threshold ($p = .001$). Indeed, students are deeply divided on this issue, as 43% place this responsibility on the supervisor, 39% on the student, and 17% see it as shared. Supervisors are far more consensual (63% supervisor, 27% shared, 10% student).

Interestingly, the misalignment is not because students want help that their supervisors are unwilling to give. It is the opposite. Supervisors are largely ready to step in and adjudicate, but students have no shared expectation that they will, and a substantial minority assume they must resolve contradictory feedback on their own. A student in that camp — roughly four in ten — may struggle unnecessarily, not realising their supervisor sees this as a supervisory responsibility. Again, this does not necessarily translate to specific working relationships, as some supervisors believe it is the student's responsibility and some students believe it is the supervisor's responsibility. This only reports the average attitude. This is important, as conflicting feedback from multiple supervisors is not a rare case, but a normal feature of co-supervised PhDs. The practical risk is therefore real, but it points in the opposite direction to what a quick glance at the averages might suggest. The remedy is not simply for supervisors to adjudicate every disagreement, as learning to weigh conflicting expert opinion is itself part of becoming an independent researcher. Instead, it is a need to make explicit that the supervisor is willing to give a steer when one is needed, so that students know the option exists rather than assuming they must cope alone. The qualitative responses in Section 4 illustrate this interpretation. Below the conflicting-feedback item, three others show meaningful gaps ($d > 0.3$), even though they fall short of the stricter corrected statistical threshold. As a consequence, they should be interpreted cautiously.

Scope and timeline ($d = 0.41$, $p = .003$ before correction). Students average 3.42 on this item and supervisors 3.02. Students lean a little more toward seeing the

development of the project's scope and timeline as their own responsibility, while supervisors are somewhat more inclined to see themselves as helping to shape it. The open-text responses in Section 4 contain experiences on both sides of this where some students expected more structuring than they received. However, on average it is supervisors, not students, who are more prepared to take an active role here.

Supervisory team communication ($d = 0.33$, $p = .014$ before correction). Supervisors average 2.67 and students 3.08. Supervisors are more inclined than students to see coordinating communication within the supervisory team as the primary supervisor's job while students place it closer to the midpoint of even responsibility. Read alongside the conflicting-feedback finding, a coherent picture emerges where supervisors are more willing to own the management side of supervision than students expect them to be.

Emotions in feedback ($d \approx 0.30$, $p = .030$ before correction). Supervisors average 1.97 and students 2.29. Both groups firmly endorse considering emotions when giving and receiving feedback. Supervisors believe this slightly more than students. The open-text responses suggest that, even with this shared principle, some students experience feedback as harsh or demoralising, which serves as a reminder that endorsing the idea and enacting it might not be the same.

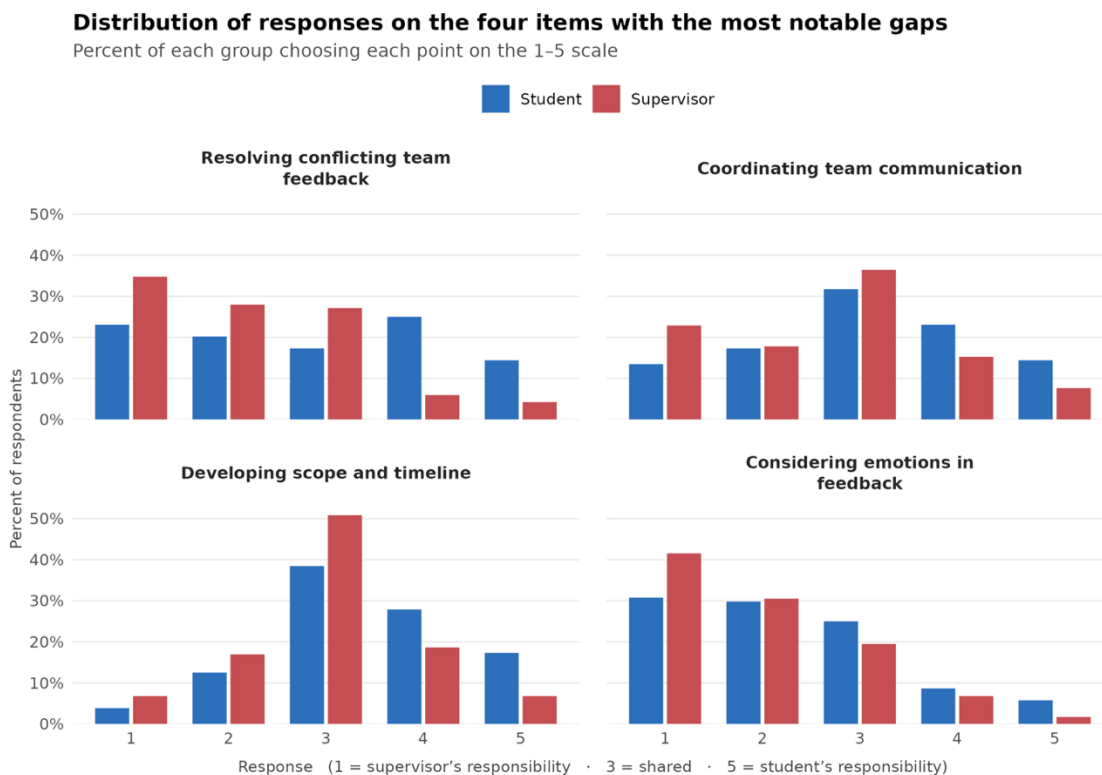


Figure 2. Distribution of responses for PhD students and supervisors on the four items with the most notable gaps. Each bar shows the percentage of respondents choosing each point on the scale.

Spaces of agreement

It is important to note that the survey broadly finds that students and supervisors agree on the responsibilities for different tasks, which is encouraging. On several items the gap between the two averages is essentially zero. Among the items with essentially zero difference are:

- Policies and procedures. Both groups lean mildly toward the supervisor advising the student on policies (gap = 0.00).
- Organising meetings. This is near-identical, with both groups leaning slightly toward the student taking responsibility for setting up meetings (gap = 0.01).
- Draft submission timing. This is close to the midpoint, with both groups marginally inclined toward the supervisor wanting sight of drafts (gap = -0.05).
- Networking opportunities. Both groups lean toward the supervisor having a role in facilitating introductions and building the student's network (gap = -0.02).
- Thesis submission readiness. Both groups place the primary responsibility for being ready to submit on the student, leaning mildly toward the student end (gap = -0.09).

The mean agreement is reassuring and worth stressing to the LSE doctoral community. It means that, on several practical aspects of the relationship, there is a shared understanding that does not need to be rebuilt from scratch. The task is therefore not to fundamentally renegotiate the supervisory relationship, but to bring a small number of specific expectations into the open.

The overall picture

Taken together, the 19 items are not separate negotiations but form a recognisable division of labour that students and supervisors broadly share. The items fall into three groups: the doctorate's intellectual *product* is treated as the student's, the *environment* that makes it possible as the supervisor's, and the *management* of the process as jointly held. The students has primary responsibility for the scholarly work. Selecting the research topic sits furthest toward the student end of any item (4.4), followed by choosing the theoretical framework and methodology (3.8), correcting one's own written work (3.5), and ensuring research ethics are in order (3.4). These are the things a doctorate exists to certify a candidate can do independently, and both supervisors and students place them with the student.

A second cluster, owned by the supervisor, is not about the content of the thesis at all but about the conditions and relationships around it. Both groups lean toward the supervisor on mentoring and career development (2.1), establishing co-authorship expectations (2.0), facilitating networking (2.6), and orienting the student within the institution, such as advising on policies and procedures (2.6) and ensuring access to services and facilities (2.6). Moreover, students and supervisors agree that pastoral duties fall on the supervisor, such as considering the student's personal circumstances

(1.8), ensuring feedback is pitched to help the student progress (1.8), and attending to the emotions involved in giving and receiving it (2.1). On this reading the supervisor is the steward of the working relationship and of the student's professional development, rather than a co-producer of the scholarship.

The third cluster is organisational and is seen as shared in responsibility. Developing the scope and timeline (3.2), monitoring progress (3.2), the timing of draft submission (2.9), coordinating communication within a supervisory team (2.9), and judging when the thesis is ready to submit (3.3) all sit close to the midpoint of the scale. The one organisational task seen as the student's responsibility, though, is the arranging of meetings (3.6). Of course, "shared on average" can mean the two parties genuinely meet in the middle or that they quietly pull in opposite directions: scope and timeline and team communication are shared overall, but supervisors lean a little further toward owning them than students expect. Secondly, resolving conflicting feedback within a team is the exception to the entire pattern, as discussed above. On average it reads as a mild supervisor responsibility (2.5), but supervisors regard it firmly as their job while students are split. This is the one place where the shared understanding described here breaks down. Figure 3 illustrates this overall pattern.

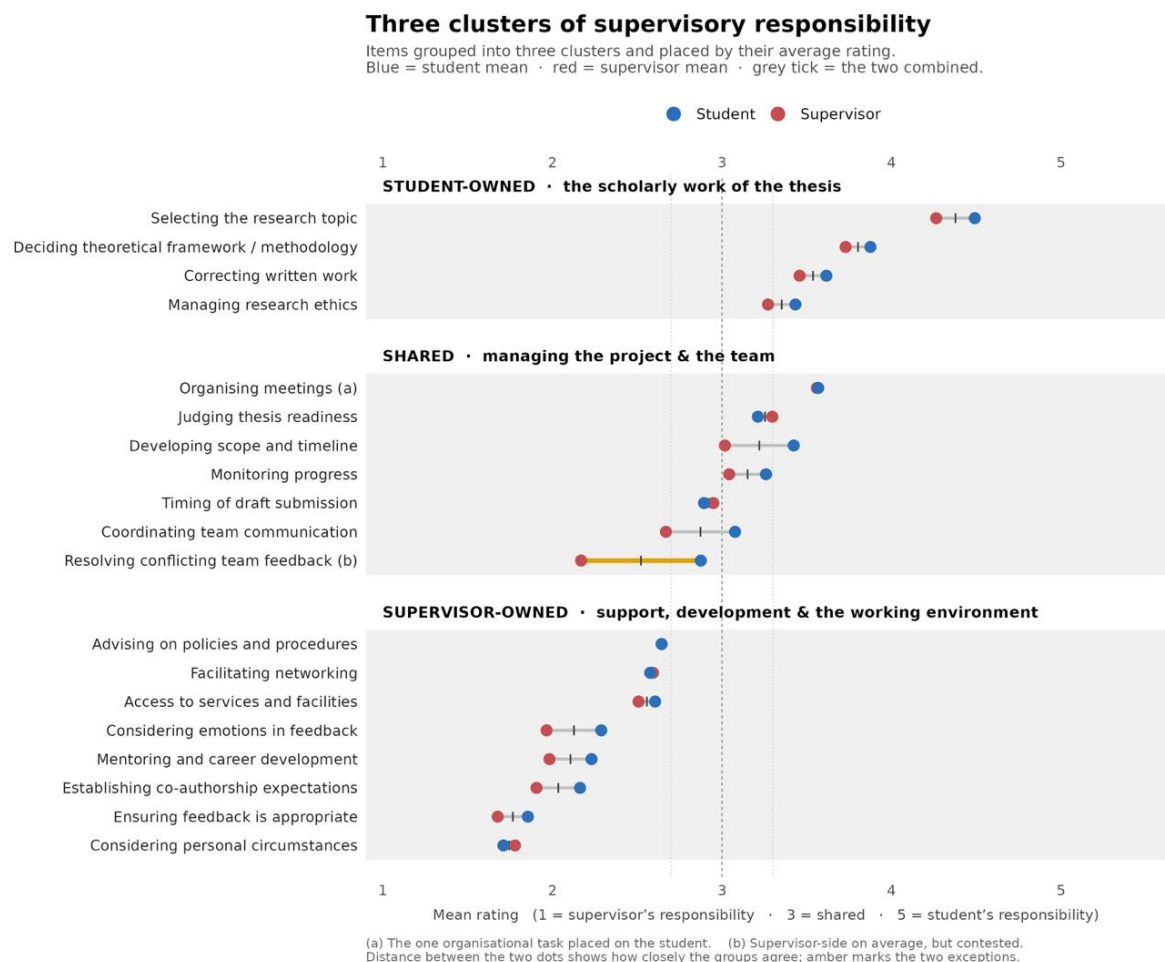


Figure 3. General distribution of the three clusters of responsibilities

Section 2: Not all supervisors are the same

Section 1 treats supervisors as a single group. However, LSE supervisors are an enormously varied population: professors and assistant professors, qualitative and quantitative researchers, those who have supervised dozens of doctoral students and those on their second or third. This section asks whether those differences in background, experience, and disciplinary tradition are associated with meaningfully different views about who is responsible for what. Of course, because we are splitting the supervisor group into smaller subgroups, the statistical tests become less sensitive. To look for genuine differences, we take effect sizes as the main guide and only flag anything with a $d > 0.3$, even where it falls short of the stricter corrected threshold. All comparisons are exploratory and descriptive. Another limitation is the classification of methodology, as this is obviously an enormously diverse space, which in the survey was reduced to qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and theory. Participants were asked as a “choose any that fit” question, so some respondents selected more than one tradition and a number identified as primarily theoretical. The three-way comparison below uses respondents who identified as belonging predominantly to a single tradition (qualitative $n = 27$, quantitative $n = 42$, mixed-methods $n = 22$). Those who selected multiple traditions ($n = 16$) or identified as primarily theoretical ($n = 11$) are not included in it. Different classification choices would shift the exact effect sizes, so the figures here should be seen as indicative (especially given the relatively low comparison numbers).

Methodological tradition

The methodological tradition is the most important difference in how supervisors think about their responsibilities. Figure 1 shows the average ratings for all three groups across the items. The clearest differences appear on the intellectual-direction items, such as who selects the research topic and who decides the theoretical framework or methodology. On topic selection, quantitative supervisors place noticeably more responsibility on themselves, or treat it as more shared, than qualitative or mixed-methods supervisors do. Quantitative supervisors average 4.19 on the topic item, while qualitative supervisors sit further toward the student end at 4.63 and mixed-methods supervisors at 4.68. That is, all believe that this is largely the student’s responsibility, but quantitative researchers are less strict on this. The gap between quantitative and qualitative is $d = 0.52$ ($p = .02$), and between quantitative and mixed-methods is $d = 0.56$ ($p = .01$). On the conflicting-feedback item, mixed-methods supervisors also lean more toward the supervisor stepping in than quantitative supervisors do ($d = 0.52$, $p = .05$). The three groups are closer on the theoretical framework item than on topic selection (non-significant), so the methodological difference seems strongest around who owns the choice of topic, rather than across intellectual direction in general.

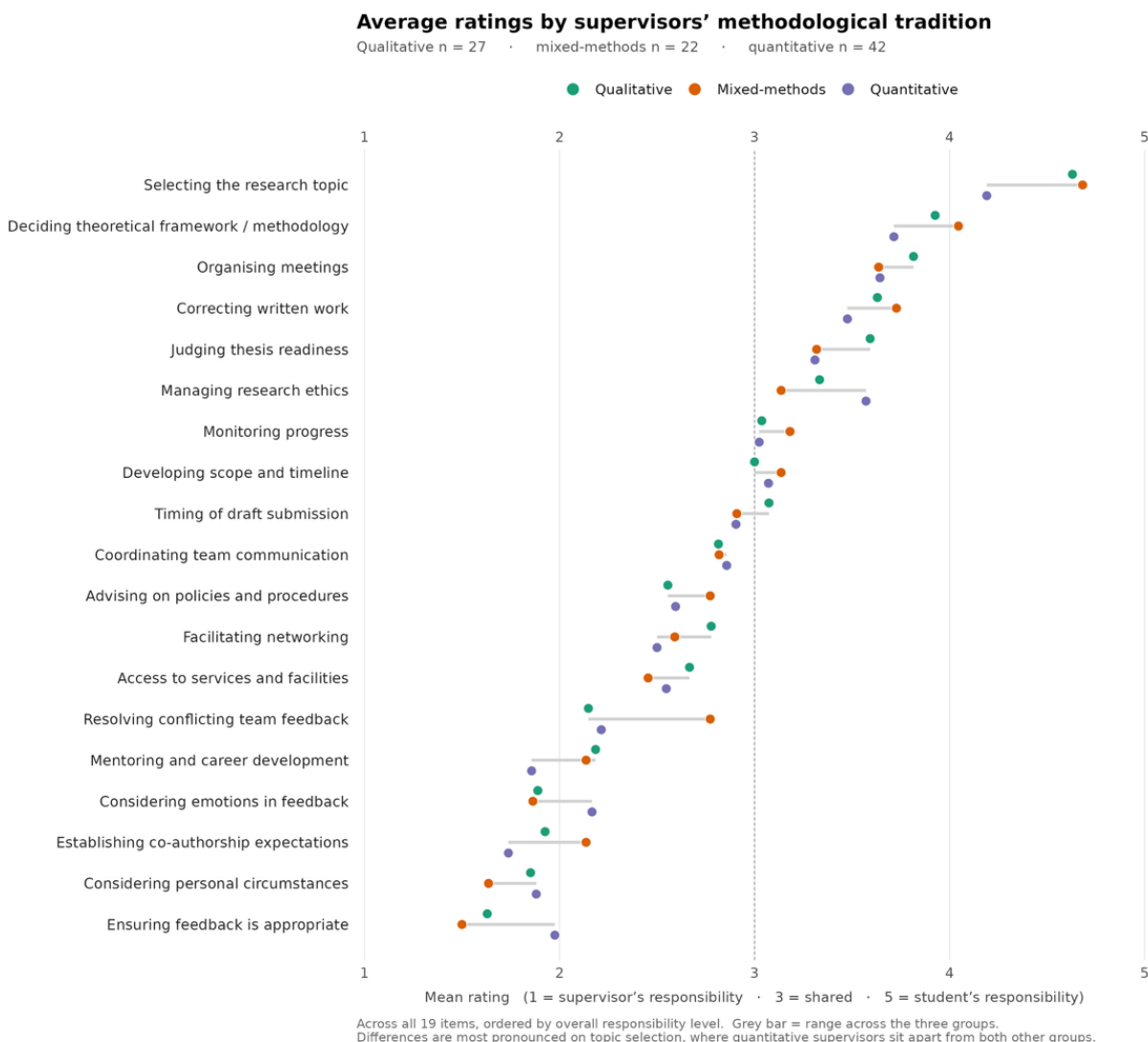


Figure 1. Average ratings for qualitative, mixed-methods, and quantitative supervisors across all 19 items.

We can speculate on what explains the pattern. The most straightforward interpretation concerns how projects typically begin in and contribute to each tradition. In many quantitative and formal fields, students may be brought into an existing project, dataset, or research programme, and the supervisor is closely involved in defining the question the student will work on. In much qualitative and interpretive work, by contrast, the student is expected to stake out their own field site, case, or question, with the supervisor advising rather than setting the agenda. Neither model is inherently better, but when a supervisor and student come from different traditions, their underlying assumptions about who owns the intellectual direction may differ without either party realising it. Importantly, across most of the 19 items the qualitative and mixed-methods groups lean a little more toward student ownership than the quantitative group.

Does seniority change how supervisors think about their role?

Senior academics who supervised more students over a longer career might change their view on responsibilities, as they get a more settled sense of what supervision involves. We can ask if supervisor expectations change over time. The data present a more complicated, and more interesting, picture. Figure 2 compares full professors, associate professors, and assistant professors on six items where the differences between positions are visible. On the process and relational items (managing communication within the supervisory team, and providing direction when the team gives conflicting feedback), more senior supervisors are the most willing to take responsibility. Full professors sit further toward the supervisor end on the conflicting-feedback item (1.88) than assistant professors (2.37; $d \approx 0.50$), and likewise on supervisory team communication (2.48 versus 3.05; $d \approx 0.48$). Associate professors do not sit neatly between the two on every item. For example, on conflicting feedback they are marginally above assistant professors, at 2.56, so this is a broad tendency rather than a strict ranking by seniority. In other words, senior supervisors are more likely, not less, to see adjudicating team dynamics as their own job. On the career-support items the emphasis shifts. Here, assistant professors are more supervisor-led than their senior colleagues on mentoring and career guidance (1.58 versus associate professors' 2.13; $d \approx 0.58$) and on co-authorship expectations (1.42 versus 2.05; $d \approx 0.68$). That is, junior academics are more inclined to see themselves as actively responsible for their students' career development.

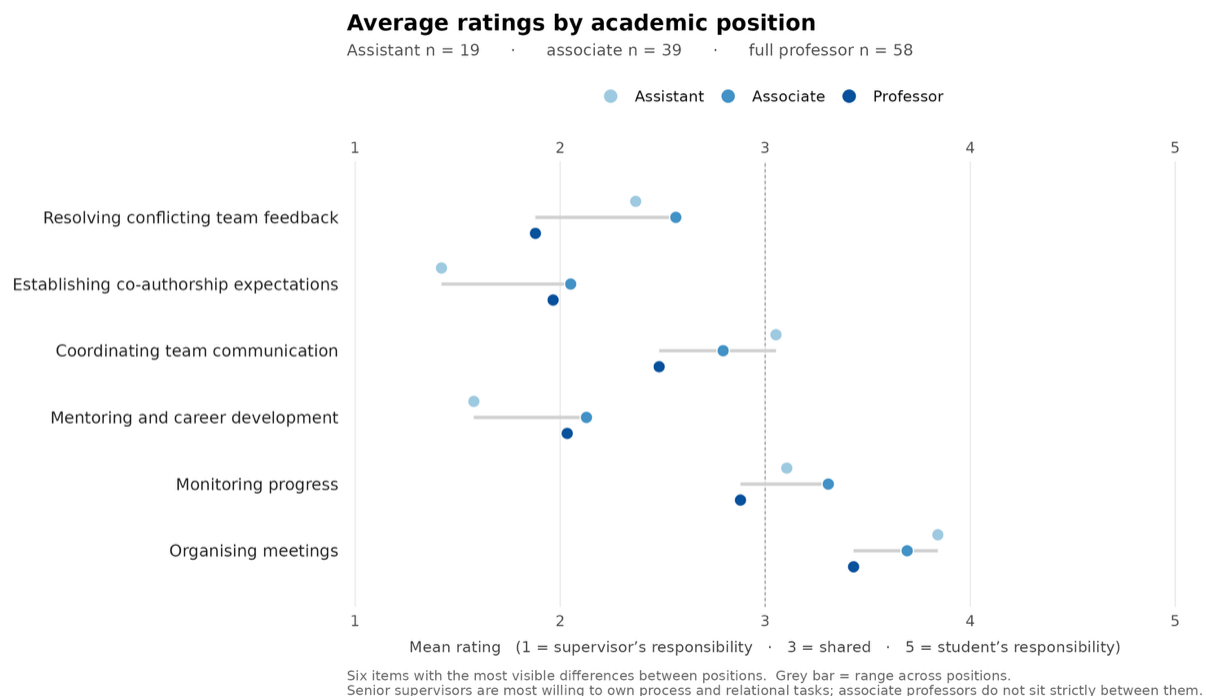


Figure 2. Average ratings by academic position for six items where seniority produces the most visible differences.

None of these comparisons survive correction for multiple testing, so they should be treated lightly, as the results are not as stable as the methodological differences. Further, the sample of assistant professors is small ($n = 19$), which limits confidence.

On experience, we might expect that supervisors who have been supervising for decades would hold systematically different expectations from those new to it. The data suggest otherwise. Across all 19 items, the correlation between years of supervisory experience and responsibility ratings is close to zero. The only item to show even a weak trend is progress monitoring, where more experienced supervisors are slightly more inclined to place responsibility on the supervisor (Spearman $r = -0.21$, $p = .021$ before correction), however, this does not survive multiple-testing correction. Taken together, the results suggests that whatever norms supervisors hold about who is responsible for what are largely formed early and persist through experience. Accumulated years of supervision do not appear to revise those assumptions, as even the above differences did not survive multiple testing (of course, with higher numbers of participants, this might be a different story). If responsibility perceptions form early, it has implications for training and development. Structured reflection on expectations, of the kind that an exercise like this survey might prompt, may be more useful than simply waiting for supervisors to develop their own practice over time.

Does being a native English speaker make a difference?

Another exploratory comparison concerns whether supervisors' native language is associated with different expectations. LSE employs a highly international academic community, and where supervisors trained in very different national systems work alongside each other. It is therefore interesting to see if people with and without English as their native language differ in expectations. Figure 3 shows the four items where native and non-native English-speaking supervisors differ most. On all four (networking opportunities, progress monitoring, research topic, and theory/methodology), native English-speaking supervisors place more responsibility on the student than non-native-speaking supervisors do. The effect sizes range from $d = 0.38$ to $d = 0.53$, with all four reaching uncorrected significance ($p = .006$ to $.046$). However, as with the previous demographic exploration, none survive the more conservative statistical correction.

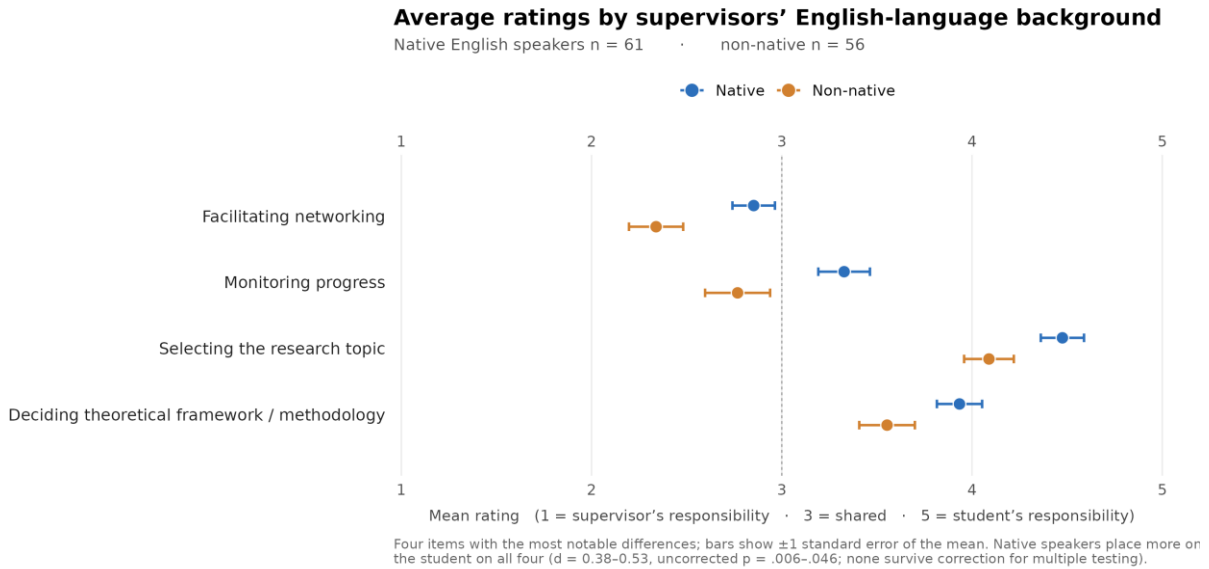


Figure 3. Average ratings for native and non-native English-speaking supervisors on the four items with the most notable differences.

It is unclear if the differences would replicate or strengthen given a larger sample, and it is difficult to speculate why the above differences occur. Overall, the exploration of the differences between supervisors most reliably shows a methodological difference but indicates that some experiential elements may impact attitudes toward responsibility assignment. As it would be idle to speculate too much on why this is, the results generally point to individual differences within the supervisory cohort and reinforces the recommendation that supervisors should reflect on the items and should discuss them with their PhD students to avoid unintentional misalignment. That is, the practical implication that runs across all three findings suggests that the differences in how supervisors think about their role are real, sometimes large, and that this may largely be invisible to students. Making those assumptions explicit, early, is the most direct remedy the school has available.

Section 3: Not all students are the same

Just as supervisors are not a uniform group, neither are PhD students. They arrive at LSE with different experiences, from different national educational systems, at different points in their doctoral journey, working in different disciplinary traditions, and with different funding arrangements. This section explores if any of those differences are associated with meaningfully different views about who is responsible for what in the student-supervisor relationship. As with Section 2, the student group is divided into different subgroups, which reduces the statistical power of our tests. As this section is also exploratory, effect sizes and overall patterns take priority over formal significance thresholds. With 104 students in total, some subgroups are so small that results should be interpreted with caution.

Home and international students

We find the strongest difference between home (UK) and international students. Figure 1 below shows ratings for the two groups across all items. On most items, international students place somewhat more responsibility on the supervisor than home students do. This gap is largest on theory and methodology, which is the only student-internal comparison to survive our corrected statistical threshold ($d = 0.59$, Holm-corrected $p = .022$). International students average 3.70 on this item (which is closer to the midpoint and more open to the supervisor deciding the framework) while home students average 4.28, well toward the student end. The gap on networking opportunities is also notable ($d = 0.54$, uncorrected $p = .019$), with international students expecting a more active supervisory role, which may reflect a need for additional guidance in a context where international students may have less network before beginning the PhD.

While exploratory, this is worth reflecting on. Part of the difference may be a matter of practical needs. A student still learning the institution, and without a ready-made UK network or experience, may reasonably expect more supervisory help with procedures, resources, and introductions, as the gaps on networking and on services and facilities suggest. Part of it may also be intellectual. The strongest difference concerns the ownership of the theoretical framework and methodology, with home students assuming more ownership than international students. This may indicate that international students may need additional support in navigating what is expected in a UK institution. Regardless, the practical response is the same. Supervisors and students should make the expected degree of independence explicit early on. It is important to frame this as calibration of differing norms rather than as remediation where the student must align with the supervisor. Each student will need different things, and unspoken expectations may be damaging to their development. The expectation gap may reflect different traditions or access to resources, and the home-student expectation of strong intellectual ownership is itself an assumption worth surfacing rather than a default to be taken for granted.

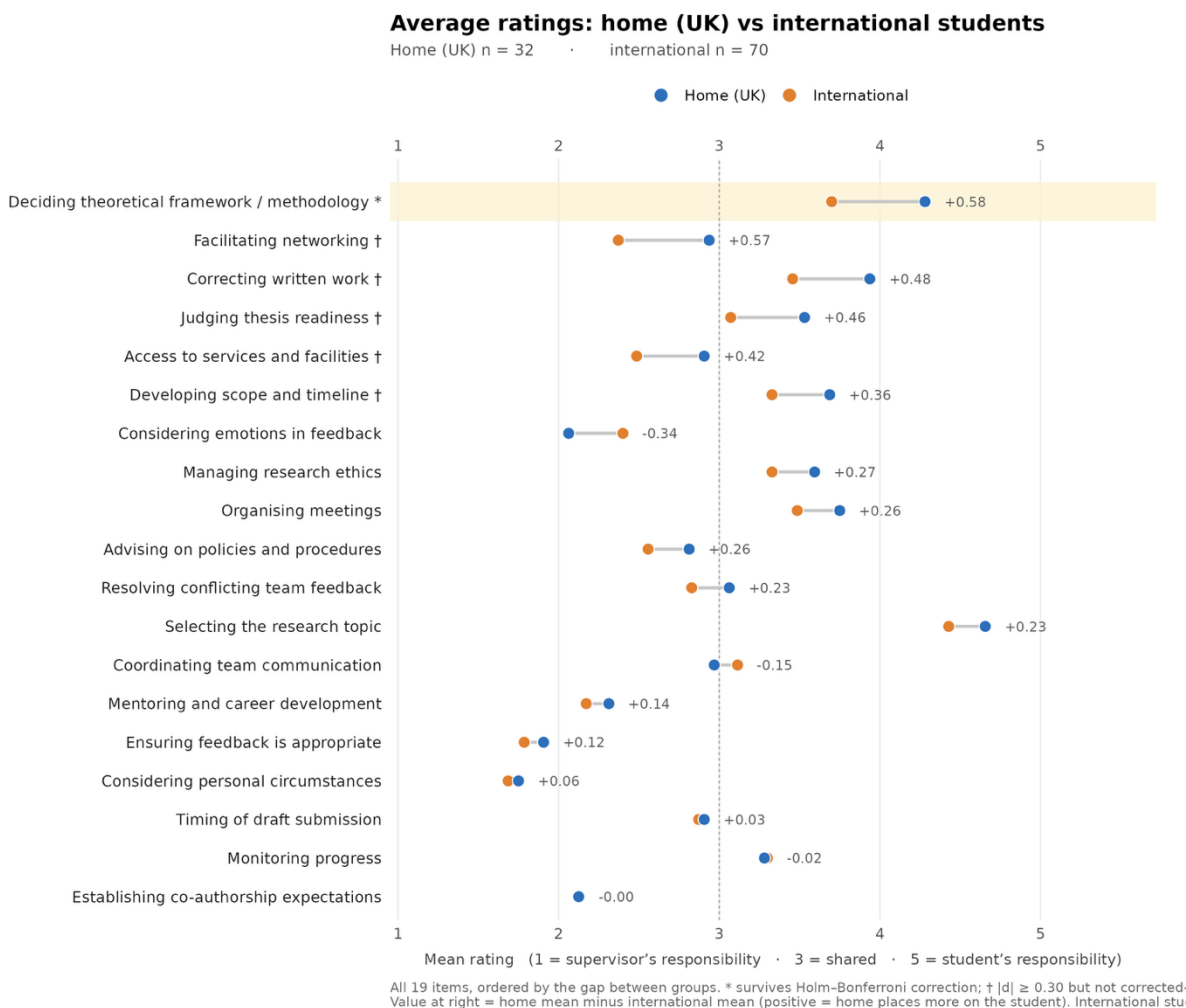


Figure 1. Average ratings for home (UK) and international students across all items, ordered by gap size.

The number of years studied and methodology

Much like supervisors may be thought to change over time (which was not the case in the previous section), a common assumption in doctoral education may be that students' expectations about supervision shift as they progress. That is, a first-year student may want more direction, while a fourth-year student approaching completion may operate more as an independent scholar. One would therefore expect students at different stages to hold systematically different views about who should be responsible for what. However, when looking at the students by years studied, it is strikingly flat. Across all items, the correlation between year of study and responsibility ratings is close to zero, and no item reaches even uncorrected significance. Students in their first year and students in their fourth year or beyond hold broadly similar views about where responsibility lies.

This suggests that the recalibration toward independence that supervisors might assume happens naturally over the course of a PhD is not, in fact, reflected in students'

stated beliefs about who should be responsible for what. Students at year 4 do not believe they should be more self-directed on most aspects of supervision than they did at year 1. This matters because it means supervisors cannot rely on students simply outgrowing early-stage expectations. If students arrive with assumptions that are not going to update on their own, the responsibility for surfacing and discussing those assumptions lies with the supervisor or the institution. Of course, given the low numbers available for analysis, this should be taken with a considerable grain of proverbial salt. Moreover, this is a cross-sectional snapshot rather than a longitudinal record of the same students over time, and the largest single group is year 4 and beyond ($n = 53$), so some survivorship is at work, as the students who struggled most with mismatched expectations may be less likely to remain in the sample.

In Section 2, the most telling difference within the supervisory cohort was methodological tradition. As a consequence, we asked if this orientation was similarly associated with different expectations for students. Broadly speaking, we find the same pattern as supervisors, but it is less strong. Figure 2 shows the items where qualitative and quantitative students differ most. The pattern reflects supervisors, as qualitative students lean a little more toward student ownership of topic selection than quantitative students (4.73 versus 4.42; $d = 0.32$, uncorrected $p = .15$), with theory/methodology and scope/timeline pointing the same way. The effect sizes are smaller than on the supervisor side, and the difference does not reach significance, but the direction is consistent. Interestingly, if we compare supervisors and students within each methodological tradition, they largely share the same expectations. On topic selection and on theory/methodology, quantitative pairs and qualitative pairs each sit close together, with students only marginally more inclined toward self-ownership than their supervisors. The one exception is scope and timeline among qualitative pairs, where students expect considerably more control than their supervisors do (3.73 vs 3.00; $d = 0.88$). The widest gaps are not within traditions but across them. Therefore, we may expect that a quantitative supervisor with a qualitative student (or vice versa) would be a space that diverges the most, as the two tendencies compound.

This suggests that disciplinary socialisation shapes expectations before the PhD. Students trained in qualitative methods, whether through undergraduate or master's-level work, may already carry norms about intellectual ownership that differ from those of students with quantitative backgrounds. When a qualitative student is paired with a quantitative supervisor, or vice versa, those different priors about who frames the project may be a source of quiet misalignment that neither party has a ready vocabulary to articulate.

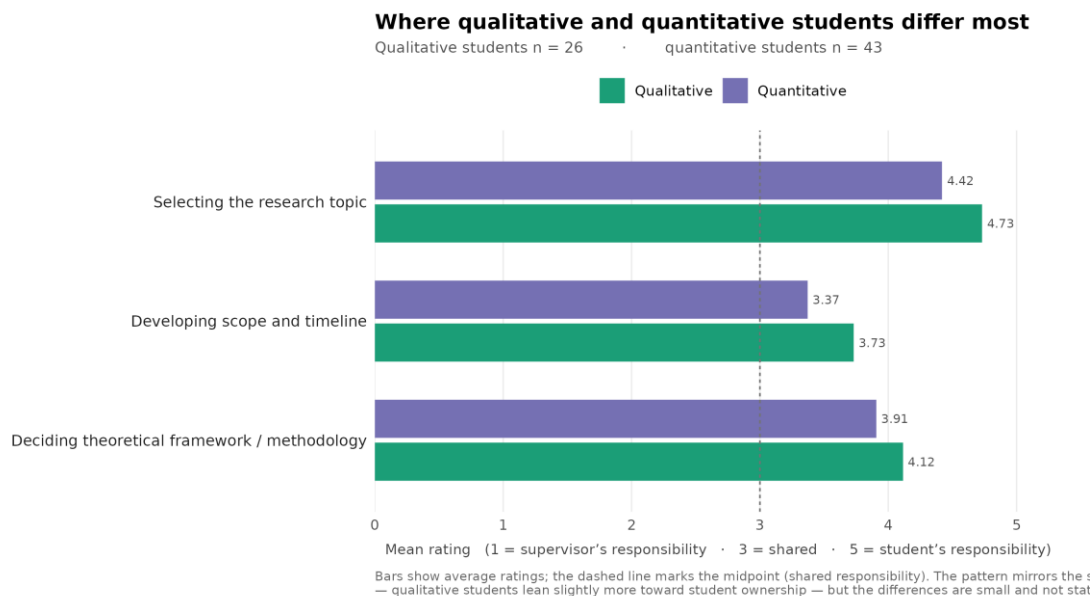


Figure 2. Items where qualitative and quantitative students differ most on expected responsibilities.

Satisfaction and expectations

If we split students by how satisfied they reported being with their supervisory experience, the dissatisfied group (n = 20) held systematically more supervisor-dependent expectations than the satisfied group (n = 73). On 17 of the 19 items, the dissatisfied students' average sat further toward the supervisor end of the scale. That is, they generally believed that the supervisor had a greater responsibility than did the more satisfied students. Their overall average across the items was 2.72, against 3.02 for satisfied students. The difference is statistically clear on advising about policies and procedures ($p = .014$) and on progress monitoring ($p = .045$), and points the same way on organising meetings, services and facilities, and draft timing.

We cannot tell from anonymous data whether high expectations of the supervisor cause dissatisfaction, or whether dissatisfaction colours how students recall their expectations. Moreover, the dissatisfied group is small, so it is hard to draw any conclusions. But the fact that a consistent, one-directional difference across nearly every item is hard to attribute to chance, and it fits an unmet-expectations account where the students who expect the most supervisory involvement, and do not receive it, are the least satisfied (and students who are struggling may also expect supervisors to step in more directly). The students most at risk are those whose expectations of supervisor involvement are highest and, on the evidence of the rest of this report, least likely to be voiced without prompting.

The thread across this Section is the same one that runs through Section 2. The differences that matter most in how students think about supervision are largely invisible and largely undiscussed. A home student and an international student supervised by the same person may have very different pictures of what they should be receiving. A

first-year and a fourth-year student in the same department may hold the same expectations even though their supervisors believe the relationship should look very different. The survey items themselves, used as a structured conversation at the start of the PhD, offer a practical way to bring these assumptions into the open before they create problems. Section 5 develops this and other recommendations in full.

Section 4: What participants said

Of the 222 respondents, 99 (50 PhD students and 49 supervisors) left a comment in response to the survey's final, open question inviting anything they wished to share about their experience of PhD supervision at LSE. These comments may provide additional context for the numbers we are considering in Sections 1-3. They indicate what alignment and misalignment feels like from inside the relationship, and they surface concerns that the 19 fixed items did not capture. The responses were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) where each comment was read and coded, recurring codes were grouped into themes, and the themes were then related back to the quantitative findings. Seven themes are reported below. Quotations are lightly edited for length and to remove any identifying detail. Omissions are marked with an ellipsis and clarifications in square brackets, and each quotation is attributed only by the respondent's role and a non-identifying characteristic.

Theme 1: "It depends on the student — and on the stage"

The most common reaction, especially from supervisors, was that a fixed division of responsibility cannot capture a relationship that changes over time and differs from student to student. Many supervisors made essentially the same point, namely that a first-year needs direction while a final-year needs room, and the supervisor's job is to manage that transition.

"[T]he survey assumes the research relationship and its responsibilities are constant over the PhD journey, and that is not the case ... a first-year PhD student relies more on the supervisor's expertise and support; ... at the end of the journey the student assumes more and more responsibility for their own project and trajectory."

— Supervisor, professor

"A lot of the answers ... depend on the candidate. Some are happy to take more initiative themselves; others ask, and may need, more guidance."

— Supervisor, professor

This is an interesting reflection, as narratively most supervisors will have experienced this relationship shift over time, and supervisors clearly believe that responsibility should shift toward the student as the PhD progresses. Yet the survey found that students' stated expectations are essentially flat across years of study. The recalibration toward independence that supervisors describe as natural and expected does not seem reflected in what students believe. The qualitative data thus help explain why the year-of-study finding matters: supervisors are managing to a developmental arc that students may not share, and that neither side has confirmed with the other (with the strong caveats that this was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal and a limited number of student respondents).

Theme 2: The “supervisor lottery” and the absence of a baseline

A second theme was the sheer variability of supervision, and the absence of any institutional floor beneath it. Students described their experience as depending almost entirely on which supervisor they happened to get while supervisors, candidly, described the same variability from the other side.

“[T]he quality of an LSE PhD depends almost entirely on the supervisor lottery. Friends with less engaged supervisors are having a very different experience, and the programme offers no safety net or baseline to fall back on.”

— Self-funded PhD student

“I have had extremely varied experience with PhD supervision ... some excellent PhD students ... I have also had PhD students essentially ‘orphaned’ by ... irresponsible colleagues whose supervision was extremely poor.”

— Supervisor, professor

This is the lived experience behind the variation we described in Sections 2 and 3, and behind the within-group dispersion in Section 1. The data show that supervisors differ systematically by methodological tradition and that even within a single role there is wide disagreement on contested items. The open text shows that students feel this variation directly and read the absence of a shared baseline as a central weakness of the programme. This qualitative insight adds to the argument that it is important to align expectations and revisit roles throughout the PhD journey with each student.

Theme 3: Surfacing the unspoken

Directly following from this, the theme most directly relevant to the study’s purpose was the call to make expectations explicit, and to do so early. Several students described learning the implicit rules of the doctorate far too late. Other students and a number of supervisors identified the first year as the moment when expectations should be set. The latter would be the recommendation of this study.

“There are a lot of unspoken rules or expectations that I understood too late (4th year). Significant time should be dedicated to setting the ... timeline, setting expectations and a ‘co-working’ process at the beginning of the relationship.”

— International PhD student

“PhD students need to establish expectations with supervisors in the first year. I find supervisors are happy to work at your pace and flexible ... but students need to establish what that is for them, and some honestly do not know how.”

— Self-funded PhD student

Where expectations had been set explicitly, students described the difference it made. This adds more weight to the intervention the study recommends:

“What has helped our relationship is the clear articulation of expectations and preferences in my very first supervision meeting ... With all these expectations clearly laid out, I have never once questioned what it is I should be doing.”

— Home PhD student

This theme adds a qualitative backbone to the quantitative analysis, and it aligns closely with the satisfaction analysis in Section 3 where dissatisfied students were those who expected more of their supervisors. The comments suggest that what turns an unmet expectation into dissatisfaction may be that it has never been voiced. As the second quote suggests, supervisors are generally willing and flexible, but the gap is that students often do not know what to ask for, and the conversation that would resolve it does not happen by default. It is possible that students (especially Year 1-2 students) find it hard to initiate these conversations, so if they do not come from the supervisor, it might not happen.

Theme 4: Conflicting feedback and the strain of team supervision

Co-supervision drew more critical comment than any other structural feature, and the comments align with the quantitative finding where the responsibility of resolving conflicting feedback diverged significantly. Moreover, it aligns with the finding that both supervisor and students differ within their groups, meaning that team supervision is more likely to engender clashes of unspoken expectation assumptions. Students described the difficulty of navigating two supervisors with divergent styles and, in particular, conflicting feedback, while supervisors described the coordination burden and called for clearer lines of responsibility.

“I have two supervisors and they are both at extreme ends of how involved they have been. It becomes hard to navigate the two complete opposite styles of supervision, especially in times of conflicting feedback.”

— International PhD student

“My primary supervisor is a great fit, but my secondary supervisor less so, and meetings with all three of us [are] a difficult relationship to manage. I’m not sure what’s appropriate in terms of ... asking to meet individually.”

— International PhD student

“There should be a clear primary supervisor who takes the lead on this.”

— Supervisor, assistant professor

Section 1 identified conflicting feedback as the only item to survive statistical correction, and showed (maybe against intuition) that supervisors regard resolving it as their own job while students are split. The open text supports this finding, as the second student does not know whether she is even permitted to ask for an individual meeting, while a supervisor independently proposes that a clear primary supervisor should take the lead. The missing element is again the student’s knowledge of the responsibility allocation, and an explicit statement of who adjudicates.

Theme 5: Feedback, encouragement, and the emotional register

A cluster of comments concerned not whether feedback was given but how it felt. Students valued rigorous, critical feedback and did not ask to be spared a critical voice, but several described its emotional cost, and asked for it to be paired with encouragement and a clear sense of direction.

“I get very critical feedback all the time. It helps me improve my work, but I am becoming anxious all the time.”

— International PhD student

“Honesty and discouragement are not the same thing: a student should leave that conversation with a clearer sense of direction and not a diminished sense of themselves.”

— PhD student

“The nature of the work is that it is messy, unclear, and difficult, and students expect the supervisor to make it easier and clearer.”

— Supervisor, professor

The management of emotional tone and support is outside the focus of the survey, but it resonates with a few clues from the survey. First, on considering emotions when giving feedback, both groups firmly endorsed the principle, with supervisors slightly more so. Yet these comments show that the principle might not always pan out in practice, as this was a recurrent theme for students. The high within-group dispersion on correcting written work is also relevant here, as students and supervisors hold genuinely different views about how directive and how detailed feedback should be, which makes the tone of feedback a productive item for an explicit early conversation rather than something to be left to assumption. The fact that many students brought this up without it being the central focus of the survey indicates that this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

Theme 6: Career, networking, and what the doctorate prepares students for

Among students, one of the most frequent specific grievance was a lack of support for the academic job market, for networking, and for publication, which is increasingly seen as central to the value of the PhD.

“[M]y supervisors did not do enough ... to prepare me for the job market in academia, nor helped enough with networking ... which ... played an important role in [my decision not to stay in academia].”

— International PhD student

“Most of the supervisors in my department don’t live in London, so it’s difficult to build a network.”

— International PhD student

Section 1 found near-perfect agreement on networking, with both groups leaning toward the supervisor having a role in facilitating introductions. Yet, as with hitting the right emotional tone, the open text shows this is among the responsibilities students feel is least often delivered. It is entirely possible that supervisors and students quantitatively agree on a number, but that they qualitatively have different interpretations of what this entails. For example, a supervisor may believe that networking assistance has been met by introducing the student to relevant people at a conference while a student might believe that networking assistance should go beyond this. This is a general weakness of the survey, as we cannot tell how respondents *interpreted* each item. Section 2 adds some nuance to this issue, as junior faculty saw themselves as more responsible for career support and co-authorship than senior colleagues did, so the support a student receives here may depend heavily on the seniority and circumstances of their supervisor. However, as with the emotional management of feedback, it seems that the agreement on the principle has not translated into consistent practice in the eyes of many of the student respondents.

Theme 7: The institution, funding, and recognition

A final theme goes beyond the dyadic supervisor-student relationship that is the focus of the survey. A striking number of student comments concerned responsibilities that are not really the supervisor's or the student's at all, but the institution's, and several pointed out that the very division of responsibility depends on the student's status.

“Most of the ‘whose responsibility is it’ [questions] seem to depend on whether the student is funded (an employee) or self-funded (a customer).”

— Self-funded PhD student

“[Supervisors are] materially incentivised to ensure students finish successfully, but not to ensure sufficient supervisory support.”

— PhD student

“PhD supervision continues to be done on a voluntary basis, as academic staff are not recognised for it. This needs to change.”

— Supervisor, associate professor

Several supervisors and students also described situations involving serious wellbeing difficulties, the breakdown of a supervisory relationship, or a supervisor leaving the institution, and a recurring, constructive request was for clearer institutional procedures — and for an early, informal route to seek help before a problem becomes a formal case:

“It might be worth having a mechanism that allows PhD supervisors to consult the PhD Academy when facing a challenge before ‘reporting’ it officially.”

— PhD student

Broadly, these comments are a reminder that the supervisor–student dyad sits inside an institution, and that a number of the responsibilities the survey assigns to one party or the other (e.g., policies, bureaucracy, recognition, and crisis support) are properly shared with the department and the PhD Academy. However, this is obviously well beyond the scope of this report.

In summary

The open-text responses support the report's quantitative finding. They support the notion that misalignment is real, quiet, and highly variable from dyadic pair to pair. They show that the misalignment students experience most acutely (conflicting feedback, the feedback's emotional register, and career support) is rarely one of ill will and almost always one of unspoken assumption. Supervisors are, for the most part, willing, but their willingness goes unstated and students do not know to draw on it. The comments extend the picture beyond the dyad, showing that some of what feels like a supervisory failing may be an institutional gap. They also carry a warning, voiced most bluntly by one supervisor: "stop trying to formalise [supervision] ... [to the point that] it becomes a chore". This strikes me as correct, as supervision cannot and should not be formalised to the point that it loses the flexibility, the humanity, and the dynamic relationship that is built over years of collaboration between the student and the supervisor. Instead, that the remedy must be light enough not to damage the relationship it is meant to protect. Section 5 develops recommendations in that spirit.

Reference

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

Section 5: Recommendations

The survey suggests that the difficulties in doctoral supervision at LSE are, for the most part, not disagreements about who is right but expectations that are never compared. Instead, they are held tacitly, assumed to be shared, and discovered to differ only when something goes wrong. For this reason, it would be useful to surface expectations, align them early, and revisit them as the relationship changes. The recommendation we consider in the following should be seen in the light of several supervisors' warning against over-formalising a relationship whose value lies partly in its flexibility. One put it simply, that the School should stop adding rules until supervision "becomes a chore." As mentioned in Section 4, this strikes me as correct, as supervision cannot and should not be formalised to the point that it loses the flexibility, the humanity, and the dynamic relationship that is built over years of collaboration between the student and the supervisor. The recommendations below are therefore deliberately light. They are prompts and shared norms rather than forms and mandates. However, the recommendations are framed by the caveat that supervision is a markedly unequal relationship. The student voices differing expectations to the person who controls their progression, potential funding and job references, so the onus for opening the conversation, and for making it safe to be candid in, should fall mainly on the supervisor and the institution, not on the student.

Recommendation 1: A structured expectations conversation at the start of supervision

This is the intervention most strongly supported by both the literature and the data from the survey, and it is the one students asked for most often. Where it had happened, students reported never again being confused about what was expected, but where it had not, they described learning the unspoken rules far too late. The suggestion would be to offer the 19 survey items as a one-page discussion prompt (not a form to be filed) for use at the first or second meeting. Ideally each party completes it independently and then compares, which makes genuine differences visible rather than papering over them. The conversation should explicitly cover the items where mismatch is most likely such as conflicting feedback, the correction of written work, progress monitoring, and the timing of drafts. The PhD Academy can provide the template, but ownership should rest with the supervisory dyad. The calibration of norms could be seen as a core part of the induction process for new PhD students

Recommendation 2: Revisiting expectations each year, rather than assuming they evolve on their own

Supervisors consistently expect responsibility to shift toward the student as the PhD progresses, but the survey found that students' expectations might not, in fact, move across the years – at least for the items that were included in the survey. Supervisors cannot rely on a natural increased sense of independence. It might materialise for most students, but if the expectation is not restated, it does not update. The way to do this would be to have a brief repeat of the same conversation of the 19 items into the existing annual progress review. This adds almost no burden and catches the drift

between what supervisors assume and what students believe before it widens. Moreover, it gives a space for the supervisor and the student to have an open discussion about the general working relationship beyond the 19 items.

Recommendation 3: In co-supervised PhDs, clarity about who resolves conflicting feedback and how the team divides its work

Conflicting feedback was the most significant divergence in the study. Supervisors largely regard resolving it as their job, but students are split and often do not know they can ask for a steer. As evident from the qualitative responses, some are even unsure if they may request an individual meeting. A supervisor independently proposed the remedy, which is to have a clear primary supervisor who takes the lead. At the outset of the project, the supervisory team should agree, and tell the student, who adjudicates when feedback conflicts, how the team coordinates, and how responsibilities are split between supervisors. For example, students could be told explicitly that requesting individual as well as joint meetings is legitimate. The aim is not for supervisors to settle every disagreement on the student's behalf (weighing conflicting expert views is itself a doctoral skill), but to scaffold it. In general, the broad recommendation of the survey is to be open about work expectations rather than assume alignment a priori. This is particularly important when supervisors and students come from different methodological backgrounds, as this was the strongest source of variation among supervisors and was also found among students. A qualitatively trained student paired with a quantitative supervisor (or the reverse) may hold opposite and unspoken assumptions about intellectual ownership.

Recommendation 4: Making career and networking support explicit and shared

One of the most frequent specific grievances from students was weak support for the job market, networking, and publication. These are central to the value of the PhD, both in terms of future prospects and in terms of intellectual satisfaction. Both groups agree in principle that supervisors have a role here, but the support delivered is inconsistent, and junior supervisors see themselves as more responsible for it than senior ones do. As mentioned in Section 3, it is possible that supervisors and students may agree numerically on the responsibility assignment, but that they disagree on the level of support that this responsibility entails. Moreover, this is often trickier for younger supervisors, as they may not have the same network to draw upon as more experienced supervisors. Therefore, it might be reasonable to include career, networking, and publication planning in the early expectations conversation and the annual review. Because no single supervisor can carry it alone, departments should share the load through cohort seminars, structured introductions, and visible publication and job-market timelines.

Recommendation 5: Recognising and supporting supervision

Years of experience were essentially unrelated to supervisors' expectations, which means experience alone will not correct misalignment. Instead, structured reflection is needed. At the same time, supervisors repeatedly described supervision as time-consuming, uncredited work, with junior staff under particular pressure. That is, a number of supervisors felt that good supervision is not institutionally incentivised. The

school could provide supervisor development focused on expectation-setting and difficult conversations, encourage an apprenticeship route in which staff act as second supervisor before leading, and recognise supervision in workload terms. The PhD Academy and departments could also own some of the bureaucratic and policy responsibilities that several respondents felt were wrongly left to the supervisor–student pair. In short, both students and supervisors called for greater institutional support and recognition of supervision as work.

A note

These recommendations are intended to work together, but they are not of equal weight. The recommendation of having a short, structured conversation at the start of the relationship, repeated briefly each year, is by some distance the highest-value and lowest-cost step. Most of the other recommendations support or contextualise this idea. It is worth restating the warning that runs through the open text responses. The relationship's flexibility and personal nature is part of what makes it work, and an intervention that hardens into another compliance exercise would undermine the very thing it sets out to protect. The aim should not be to standardise supervision but to make its terms visible. Also, because the power relationship is an unequal one, to ensure the supervisor and the institution take the lead in opening it up, so that whatever a given pair decides, they have decided it together and explicitly. of course, this report only points to where expectations diverge. It has not tested the conversation it recommends. The natural next step for the Eden Centre is to pilot it and evaluate whether it makes the difference the evidence suggests it should.

Conclusion

This project explored if PhD students and supervisors at LSE share the same picture of who is responsible for what in core aspects of the working relationship. On most of the aspects, they answer remarkably alike. But the averages may be the least interesting part of the story. Beneath lie two kinds of divergence that matter more. First, a few responsibilities on which students and supervisors systematically differ. Second, a wide spread of views within each group, so that the experience of being supervised depends heavily on who one is paired with. The aim of this report is therefore not to judge or redesign supervision, but to make expectations visible so that recurring and unspoken assumptions can be surfaced before they harden into problems.

The study challenges a common intuition that students expect more guidance and interventions than supervisors. The most robust finding to survive statistical correction concerns conflicting feedback within a supervisory team. However, it runs opposite to the obvious worry, as supervisors largely regard resolving it as their job, while students are divided and often do not know that help is theirs for the asking. The same pattern recurs across the field. Where the groups differ at all, students lean fractionally more toward self-reliance than their supervisors assume.

Across the quantitative and the qualitative data, people generally remark that the difficulties of supervision overwhelmingly are problems of articulation rather than of goodwill. Supervisors are, for the most part, willing to give direction, support careers, and be mindful of how feedback lands, but students feel that this willingness often goes unstated, and they cannot draw on what they do not know is there. This will not simply resolve itself. Methodological tradition shapes how supervisors see their role, home and international students arrive with different expectations, and neither experience nor time in the programme shifts expectations much (cross-sectionally). Norms seem to form early and persist, so shared understanding is something a pair builds by talking.

Because responses were anonymous and unpaired, the analysis describes how the two populations differ on average. It cannot say if any particular pair is aligned. The subgroup comparisons are entirely exploratory and several rest on small numbers. The year-of-study and supervisory experience findings are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, and the survey captures stated beliefs rather than behaviour. Finally, this is just LSE at one moment, so the findings map where expectations tend to diverge rather than judge any relationship. As such, the report's findings should be seen in this limiting light. On the whole, though, the evidence consistently supports more openness between supervisors and students about responsibility expectations. A short and concrete conversation about expectations at the start of a supervision, revisited as it changes and kept light enough to strengthen the relationship rather than bureaucratise it. The survey items from this report can serve as a basis for that conversation. After all, it can only be positive to be open and aligned on these issues and catch unspoken issues before they materialise into conflict or time-consuming problems.