Implementing Supervising Doctoral Studies as part of a mandatory development programme at the University of Sheffield

Background

In 2019 the University of Sheffield joined the Development Group for the second edition of Supervising Doctoral Studies. Emma Suret, Researcher Development Manager at the university, came to the Development Group workshop on only her second day on the job. Emma is also the Lead for PGR Supervisor Development. Over the past two years, she has developed and coordinated a full programme of workshops and online materials for PGR supervisors, as well as a university-wide recognition scheme for early-career research staff to support their development as supervisors.

The experience of being part of a Development Group was one that Emma enjoyed – despite coming into the workshop late, she found it easy to get involved in and valued being able to help shape the course. As Emma put it, “one of the best parts of the whole process is Epigeum involving us in the design of it” and she valued “giving feedback and helping to see different iterations of [the course]”.

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Implementation

At the University of Sheffield, *Supervising Doctoral Studies* has been introduced alongside other mandatory provisions for supervisors. The university has three routes for different levels or types of experience and *Supervising Doctoral Studies* is part of the ‘new’ supervisor Continuing Professional Development programme. Although supervisors are only required to engage with two mandatory modules from the Epigeum course, *The Doctoral Context* and *Supporting your Candidate*, all ten modules are encouraged, with supervisors often keen to engage with as many modules as possible. The two mandatory modules form part of the same development route as ten hours of workshops, which are delivered through live sessions led by Emma. These two forms of learning are designed to complement each other, and Emma has found the *Supervising Doctoral Studies* course to be a useful component of the wider development programme.

The course comes with an instructor manual complete with all the learning outcomes, which Emma found useful when planning her own live sessions. By ensuring that there was no overlap, she could plan sessions that worked alongside *Supervising Doctoral Studies*.

There are, also, exciting changes happening at the university. *Supervising Doctoral Studies* will soon be advertised more broadly to experienced supervisors on an optional basis, as “it's a really valuable resource to have”. Emma and her team are keen to ensure that experienced supervisors are aware the course is available, as one of the key benefits is how easy it is to select even just one or two relevant modules. Through a combination of staff newsletters and direct email, the Epigeum course will be advertised to all supervisors, expanding the programme’s reach from new to experienced alike. Epigeum also provides a range of materials for universities to use to promote the course, which for *Supervising Doctoral Studies* includes content such as flyers, banner, adverts, and introductory text and information.

At the University of Sheffield, *Supervising Doctoral Studies* is delivered through Epigeum’s platform. Emma and her team found a novel way to add more of their own internal context and information than the Epigeum platform currently allows through a public-facing webpage on their site. With a wide range of resources signposted, organised by modules, this was a unique solution to time restraints when implementing the course.
Feedback and advice

The wider supervisory development programme has been well received across the University of Sheffield. The feedback from new supervisors was largely positive. Emma appreciates that the Supervising Doctoral Studies course specifically tackles a lot of issues that she cannot cover during her own live sessions. In Emma’s words, “everyone understands why it’s so important”, and is glad the training provision is there.

Emma would absolutely recommend the course to other institutions, particularly as it is delivered online and she believes that “academics really appreciate that kind of learning”. Having a mix of her own live sessions and the online Epigeum course has ensured that the course is accessible and suitable for everyone, and gives people the freedom to do it at a time that suits their schedule. As for the course itself, Emma says “it’s fantastic” and that the content is really up to date. Emma describes the course itself as very professional and visually pleasing, but she particularly appreciates the way the modules have been split up. She feels the fact that PGR programmes aren’t linear has been conceptualised very well, and so has the balance for different disciplines, through options such as discipline-specific videos and content throughout the course.

Despite the Epigeum platform delivery route allowing for almost instant access to users upon publication, Emma highlighted the fact that spreading the word took longer than anticipated meaning that widespread uptake was slower than originally estimated. Moving forward into the next phase of advertising Supervising Doctoral Studies to more experienced supervisors, Emma is therefore much more prepared, and here at Epigeum, we’ll be looking forward to seeing how this progresses over the next year.

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To sum up in Emma’s words, “the course is brilliant and the support as well from Epigeum has been great”, and “to any other institutions who want to take it on themselves, it’s been much easier than many other things I’ve done!”.

Outlook

Emma and the University of Sheffield are now looking to focus on engaging more experienced supervisors and advertising the course to them, as well as continuing to carry out their wider professional development for new supervisors. The Supervising Doctoral Studies course will continue to be a key part of that development. Next year, Emma will undertake a substantial review of the new supervisor CPD to see how it’s been received and to assess the programme as a whole. Despite this large upcoming task, Emma is grateful to have Supervising Doctoral Studies, as it’s “an intrinsic part” of the wider programme.

We’ll be checking in again with Emma in 2022 to hear more about the outcomes of her review and the continued implementation of the development programme – we look forward to sharing her findings!

Find out more about Supervising Doctoral Studies 2.0 and how it can support both new and more experienced supervisors at your institution.