

What do researchers want? Investigating PhD students' perceptions of skills development

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Opening lines

- * Central provision for researcher development
- * Generic versus disciplinary training
- * Thresholds in doctoral education? (*Kiley, M., & Wisker, G. (2009). 'Threshold concepts in research education and evidence of threshold crossing'*)

How far do PGRs consider the difficulties they encounter to be inherent to the nature of the PhD?

Questions

- * What challenges have you encountered during your PhD?
- * Do you think these challenges are specific to your discipline?
- * How have you gone about addressing these challenges?
- * How could the University help you deal with these challenges?
- * How have you gone about learning and developing your skills in order to progress with the PhD and prepare for future employment?
- * How would you prefer to develop skills?

Generic challenges

- * Time management
- * Uncertainty
- * Wellbeing

Time management

- * difficult to adjust to the *'PhD work pace and work life'*
- * *'At the start of the third year I had no idea about how to plan my time leading up to the graduation'*
- * *'I keep volunteering myself for things that I shouldn't [...] for things on my CV'*

Uncertainty

- * *'This is such a long process'*
- * *'I have no idea [how] to develop or progress with my PhD'*
- * *'Sometimes I feel like I don't know what I'm doing and I'll get stuck in my research following a rabbit hole with no apparent end'*
- * *'I often feel the work I produce is not good enough'*

Wellbeing

- * 'disciplines do not discriminate when it comes to angst, writers block, de-motivation and a whole host of self-constructed human fallibilities which seek to hamper progress' – (Mercer et al, 2011)



A word cloud of terms related to wellbeing. The words are arranged in a vertical stack, with 'wellbeing' being the largest and most central. Other words include 'isolation', 'health', 'loneliness', 'impostor', 'anxiety', 'stress', 'frustration', and 'confidence'. The colors range from light blue to dark blue and green.

isolation
health
confidence
wellbeing
anxiety
frustration
stress
loneliness
impostor

Disciplinary challenges

- * Ways of working
- * Thesis writing

Ways of working

- * *'I can't imagine the same kind of [challenges arising] in Philosophy'* – a Physics researcher
- * *'In Geography [presentation style] is quite different [from the sciences]*
- * *'I think that the situation for people who do science subjects is really different [...] A science student who is living with me found the idea of unstructured time really baffling'* – a History researcher

Thesis writing

- * *'Physics has a very well specified kind of writing'*
- * *'Different disciplines have implicit requirements about writing style'*
- * *'Obviously there are difficulties with doing science PhDs but I think that it feels that you've got to figure it out a lot more by yourself [in History]. You're not going to be given a methodology and you're probably not going to be given an exact focus.'*

Attitudes to training

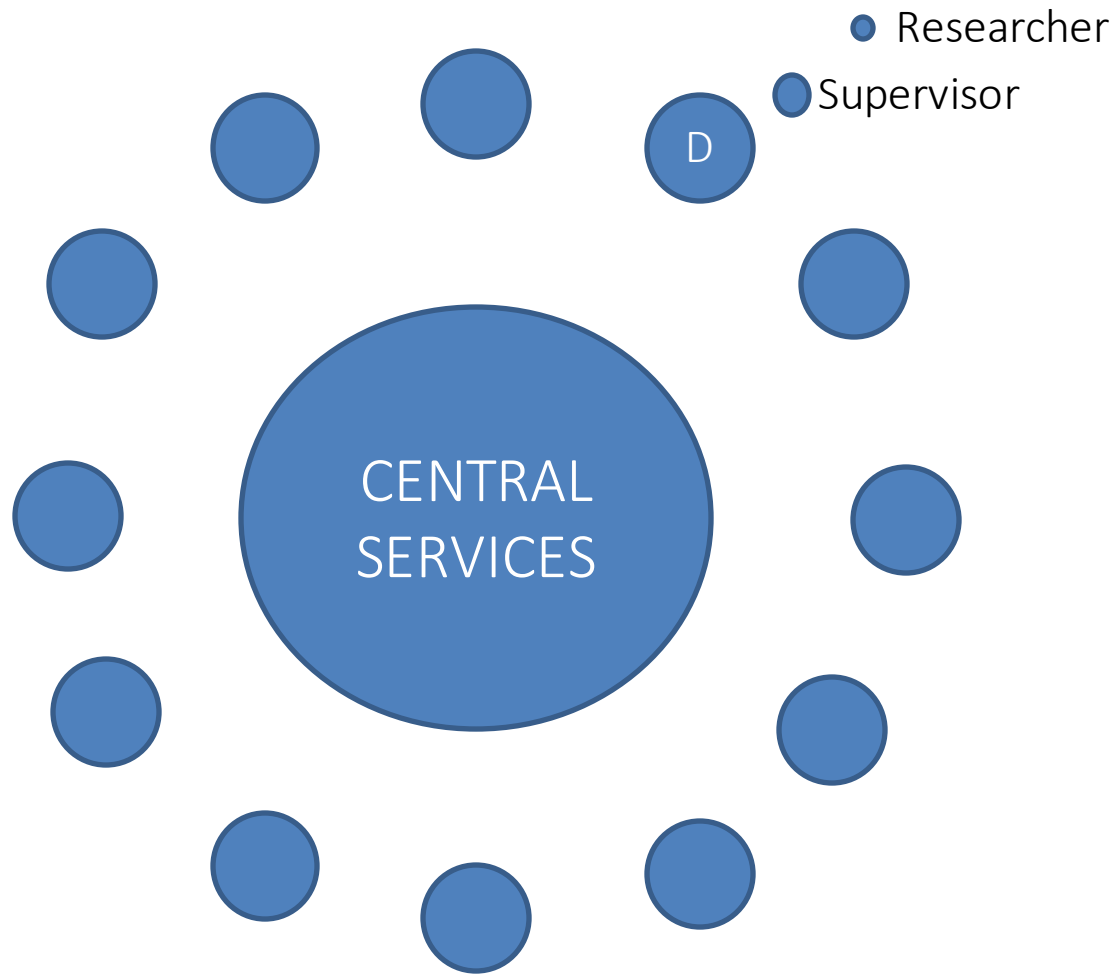
- * *'I feel guilty for taking **time out** during the day'*
- * *'taking **time out** of the actual stuff'*
- * *'Sometimes I'll be in the lab and the experiment's working really well [...] I can't leave at that point'*
- * *A course might be 'so broad-based it becomes irrelevant to the majority of people'*
- * *'I can get by [...] I'd rather do that than take a six-hour course on database management when half of it is not going to be relevant to what I'm doing'*

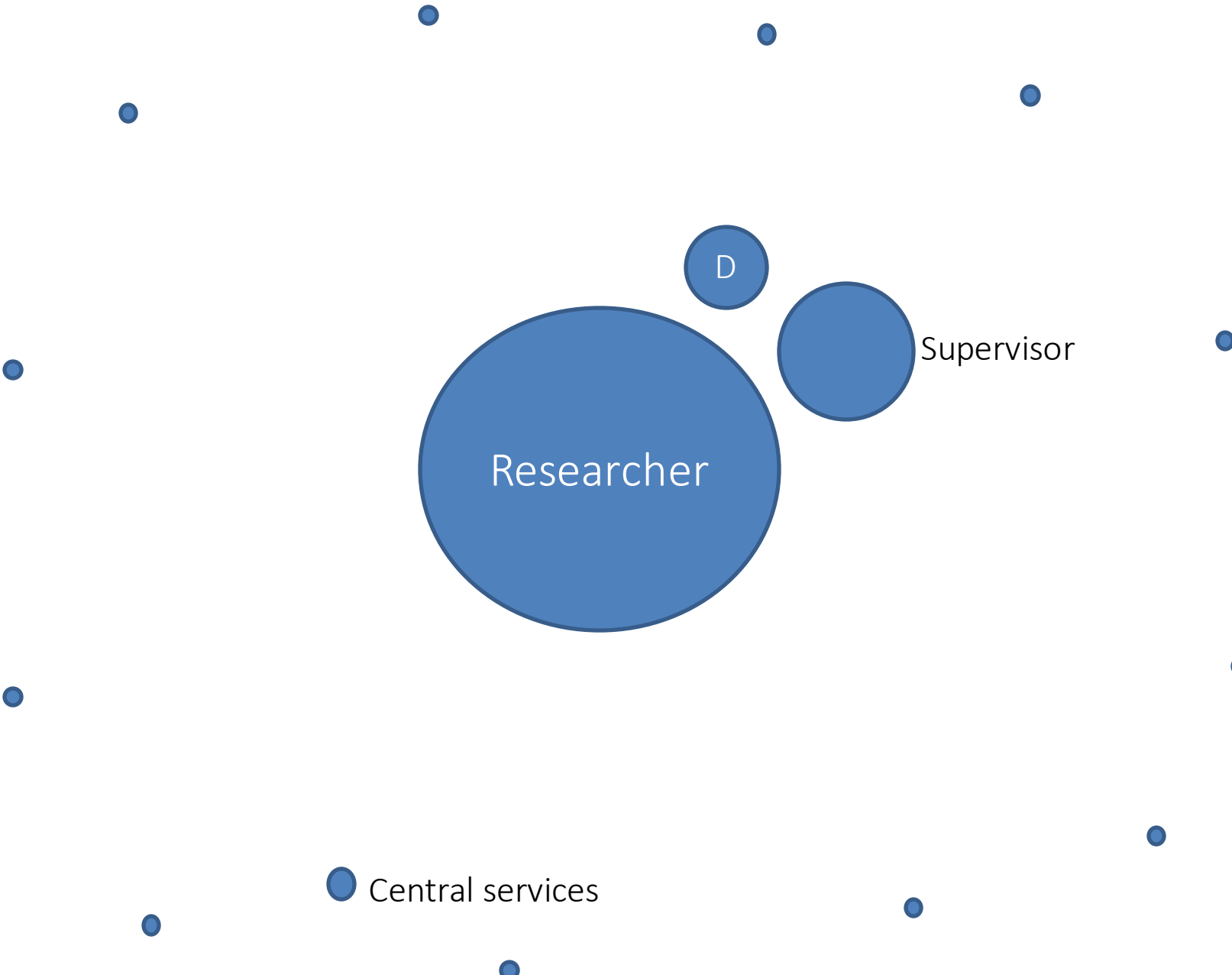
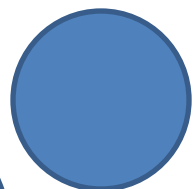
Implications

- * Desire for additional support
- * Disciplinary / cross-disciplinary training?
 - * *'Often I and other PhD students have very specific issues/skills/training that they need help with, and that isn't necessarily available'*
- * Wellbeing and resilience: *'I like to attend sessions that are out of my department. The change of scenery helps me gain perspective'*

Individualising development


- * Voice and empowerment for every student
- * Removing barriers to development
- * Encouraging researchers to take a holistic approach to development





Individualising development

- * Mentoring
- * Peer support / coaching
- * Space for more interaction with other researchers – workshops, writing/support groups
- * One-to-one follow-ups
- * Online interactive learning / resources
- * Signposting
- * Professional development grants
- * Changing attitudes



It's been a long and winding journey, filled with uncertainty, but things are coming together in a way which is better than I could have asked for. In light of that, perhaps better awareness of the expected uncertainty, and support in the earlier stages (through peers?) could help to make it to the end of the research in one piece.