

# LERU's view on holistic doctoral supervision

LERU advice paper  
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## Executive Summary

Supervision of doctoral researchers is a central aspect of doctoral education, which is a core activity of universities and contributes to the prosperity of knowledge-based societies. In order for universities to shape through doctoral education the next generation of leaders in academia and beyond, they need to ensure that the right cultural, structural and behavioural conditions are in place. While it is broadly accepted that doctoral researchers need access to skills training that will prepare them for this ambiguous and uncertain world, universities also need to raise their awareness of the complexity of the supervisory task.

This paper addresses principles regarding mutually productive supervision that LERU member universities already have in place or propose for implementation. Key components of mutually productive supervision are a positive institutional culture, beneficial structural conditions, and training opportunities for supervisors as well as those being supervised. For these structural building blocks to come to life, it is essential that supervision is part of the assessment of academic staff and that suitable support services are visible and valued.

To ensure that a trustworthy and supportive research environment is in place, universities should implement specific, tailor-made supervision courses to help those who are supervising doctoral researchers to develop the right skills. In order to lay a sustainable foundation for this cultural change, we recommend to initially tailor the training predominantly to junior group leaders or junior professors. However, a majority of the LERU universities at large report that they would like to see mandatory training workshops for supervisors at every stage of their career. In any case, universities should honour the time and effort dedicated to supervising junior researchers, including a regular, multidimensional evaluation of the quality of the supervision.

Central elements of good practice in supervision are consistent expectation management – the basis for any trusting and respectful relationship – transparent and considerate communication between supervisors and doctoral researchers, as well as embracing a diversity of role models ensuring that a broader range of experts are involved in the process. Finally, LERU universities recognise that different actors play important roles in supporting doctoral researchers. Thus, all the support staff and service units in place at LERU universities help foster an environment that is beneficial to doctoral education, and should be recognised for this important task.

### Recommendations:

- LERU member institutions propose a holistic view on supervision of doctoral researchers as future leaders in all sectors of societal relevance.
- Universities are expected to provide supervisors with the necessary skills and resources to support doctoral researchers towards successfully completing their degree and treasuring a long-term formative experience.
- LERU institutions embrace the latest initiatives towards mandatory supervisory training and encourage local adaptation according to the needs of each individual university.
- LERU institutions propose leadership and supervisory skill development opportunities for doctoral researchers.
- The core of best-in-class supervision is an *ab initio* consistent and realistic expectation management between all stakeholders of the doctoral process.

- LERU universities encourage professional recruitment starting at the doctoral level, fostering a diversity-friendly and inclusive environment in research and teaching.
- Supervision responsibilities need to be properly recognised and to become part of formal performance assessments, alongside teaching, research, knowledge exchange, and grant acquisition.
- Principles of successful supervision include separating the supervision from the evaluation of the thesis, establishing supervisory teams and encouraging meta-disciplinary skills training.
- All stakeholders in the doctoral process should take responsibility for the well-being of doctoral researchers to enable their professional aspirations; they should recognise the importance of support structures as well as providing resources and advertising them accordingly.
- LERU universities propose the nurturing of an improved institutional culture of appreciation characterised by effective communication and reliable expectation management towards a more impactful and consistent supervision process.

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