

Transforming Supervision Practice

14 April 2026

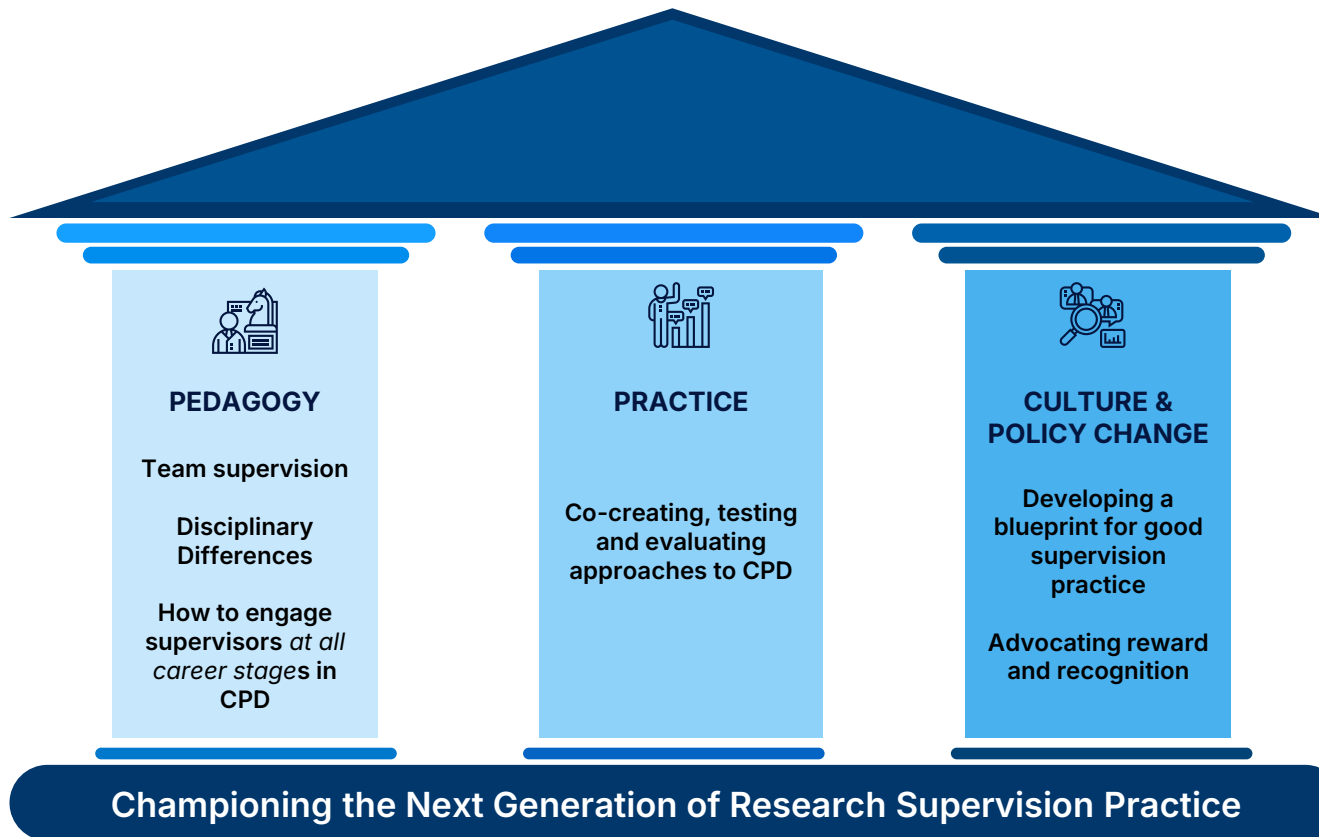
Led by the University of York
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RSVP: seeking to better understand doctoral supervision practice; to create, test and evaluate CPD approaches and to support the transformation of research supervision and culture

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Research SuperVision Project



RSVP will explore:

-  **The role of team supervision**
-  **Supervision practice in different disciplines and contexts**
-  **Supervising different types of research degree**
-  **Understanding and combating poor supervision practice**

We are working with:

HEI doctoral supervisors & doctoral students from 30+ universities, including overseas partners

Researcher Developers at our practitioner partners

Deans and Directors of Doctoral schools (UK) engaged in tackling poor supervision practice

Industry-based supervisors from private, public and third sector organisations

RSVP Terminology: the language of Super- Vision

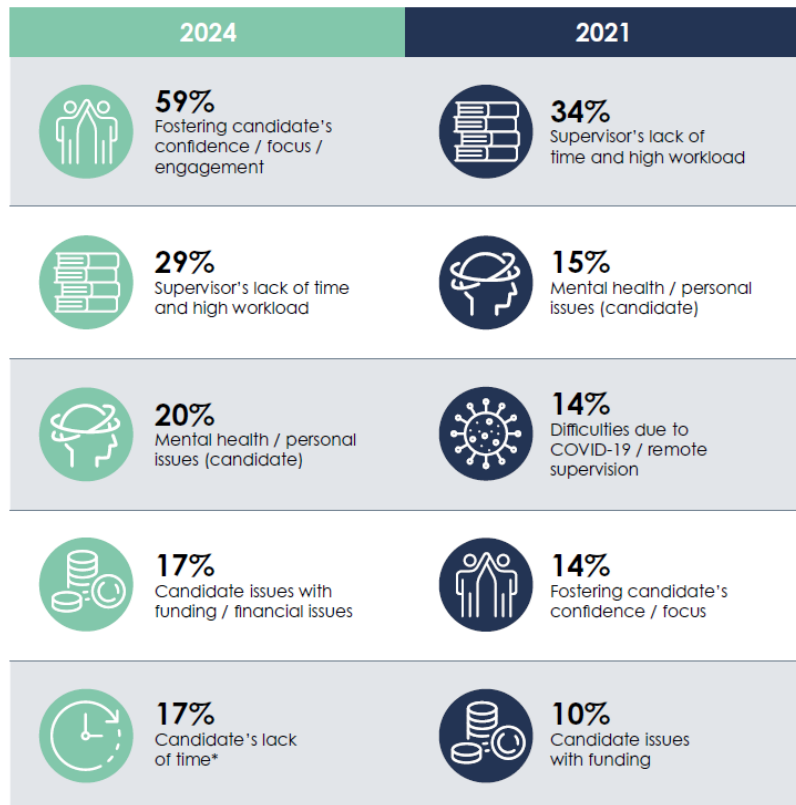
- **Academic Supervisors** - based in HEIs p primary or secondary, with expertise in the discipline(s)
- **Industry Supervisors** - external to the HEI(s) based in an industry - creative, arts and heritage, STEM, clinical and health practitioners.
- **Assistant Supervisors** - postdocs, research associates, technicians
- **Rescue supervisors** - typically an academic but sometimes an industry supervisor who 'takes on a candidate previously supervised by someone else' (UKRSS24)

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Supervisor Perspectives

Top 5 challenges



"...Workload is provided but it is nowhere near adequate, and as expectations placed on supervisors increase, this is increasingly challenging..."

"[We need] Better financial and employment status support for PhD candidates led by norms set by UKRI. Currently candidates are paid at a level where many experience hardship at some point during their studies and usually not classified as employees with the associated rights."

Are these your challenges?

Deep Dive on what PGRs really think about supervision

Positive Outcomes and Exemplary Practices

Despite challenges, numerous participants reported significant personal and professional growth, attributing this to effective supervision and institutional support.

- Supervisors who acted as **mentors, role models, and advocates** were credited with **fostering confidence, independence, and a strong professional identity.**
- Exposure to **diverse training, interdisciplinary collaboration, and real-world applications** (e.g., industrial doctorates, placements) enhanced employability and readiness for varied career paths.
- Supportive environments that combined academic, emotional, and practical guidance were seen as instrumental in enabling doctoral researchers to thrive and prepare for future careers.

Data from forthcoming commissioned report from Advance HE on PRES data 2020-2025)

**How does this work in your
organisation?**

Identified by Academic and Industry Supervisors

Good practice

- Setting expectations and build a framework
- Supporting independence as researchers
- Sensitivity to PGR needs

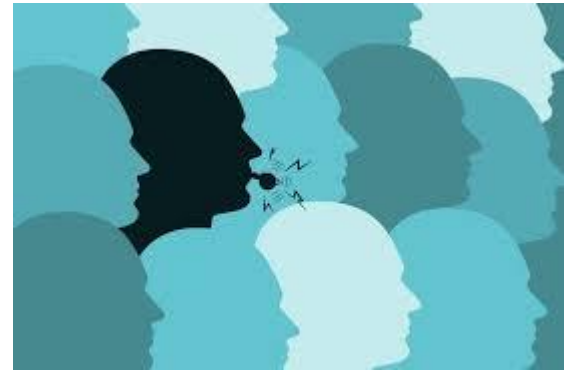
Poor practice

- Limited engagement
- Micromanagement
- Bullying and harassment

Challenges:

- Supervisors' unresponsiveness to PGR contact
- Avoidance of difficult conversations
- Gatekeeping university and wider resources
- Lack of professionalism

Whistleblowing: Candidates are often unaware of what poor supervisory practices are. In addition, they can be fearful of complaining, not wanting to further complicate the challenging situation they are experiencing or anticipate impacts on their future career prospects.



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Deans and Directors of Doctoral Schools

*'I'd say that the majority of the issues that I see are about **supervisors' gatekeeping**, really gatekeeping, in relation to their doctoral research. So, **controlling information, controlling access to other information and other sources of ideas, guidance etc, that sort of desire to really micromanage and control their doctoral researcher**. That's particularly poor to the extent that they kind of position them in an imaginary world where the only source of information is the supervisor, i.e. them, and they try and sort of prevent them from accessing additional information, and that includes trying to discourage them from engaging with the all the researcher development and the other expertise that sits in and around, you know, the whole process.'* **RSVP Focus Group Report (forthcoming 2027).**

Mental Health, Well being and Safeguarding

“Over the course of eight months, my great supervisor had become an unrecognisable master of psychological abuse. We were engaged in a war of attrition, a war that took me to the edge of my psychological and physical wellbeing”



The Thesis Whisperer, Professor Inger Mewburn. [When Good sueprvisors go bad 2014](#)

Response Mechanisms

1. Informal 'corridor conversations', discussions with PGR leads, communities of practice meetings with supervisors
2. Formal: annual progress reviews
3. Encouragement to PGRs to use 'support and report' processes for highlighting concerns



The importance of setting expectations

'...most good supervision involves defining the parameters and the boundaries and setting expectations in the first tutorial... That doesn't mean everyone sticks to the sort of contract of expectations, and the expectations change and life happens and all the rest of it, on both sides for me, and for my students.'

I was thinking...I'm such a poor supervisor, partly because the students' expectation of my time is completely unrealistic...Because she sent me a draft on Friday and wanted and expected full detailed feedback by this morning, which I had already explained was impossible. And yet that didn't stop a perception that they're having poor supervision. So I suppose the wider thing about that [is] certainly some of perception of expectations on both sides, the supervisor and the supervisee.

Sharing of Practice



'Less experienced supervisors are more likely to value and engage with formal CPD.

More experienced supervisors want to reflect and share practice.

In the focus groups supervisors said that discussing their practice with other supervisors was really useful (and enjoyable). They valued talking to supervisors from other disciplines and institutions and liked the idea of peer mentorship.

Supervisors from outside HE (industry/practice) commonly said it was the first time they had talked about their role in supervision

Mandatory or not?



'I would also say that engagement can be very difficult, and unless it's compulsory, which we have every five years required to undergo some sort of training. Other sort of voluntary approaches are, yeah, don't get a huge amount of engagement. Usually it's younger staff...who will engage much more openly...' (FG1_003)

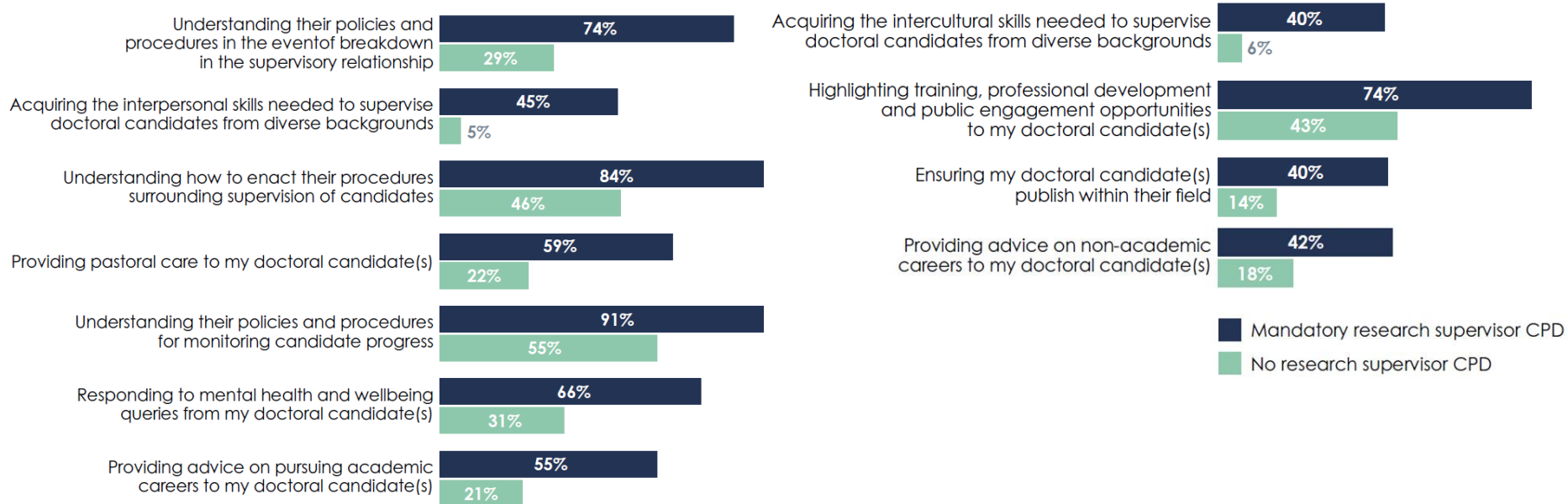
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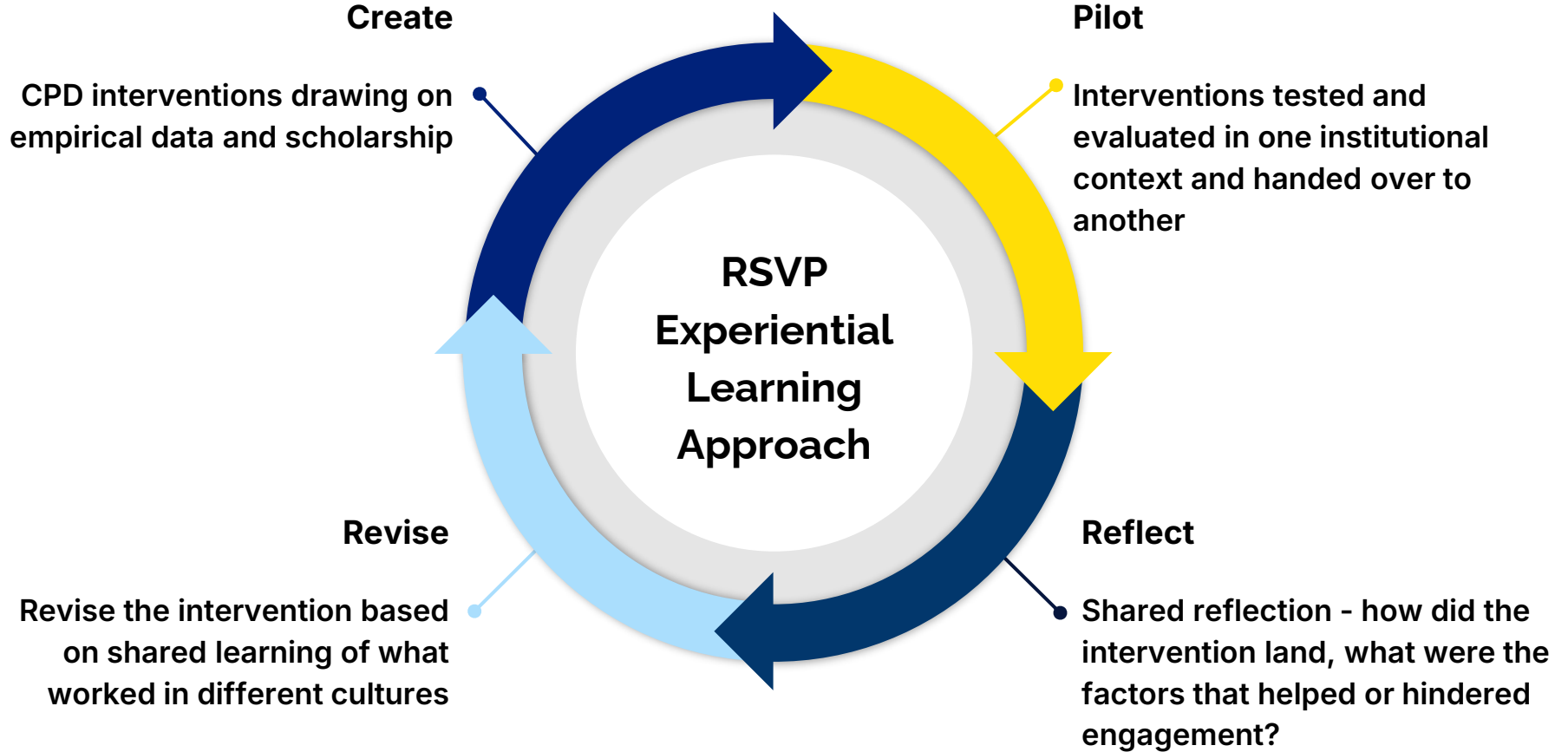
Professional Development

Impact of mandatory supervisor development: UK Research Supervision Survey (UKRSS) 2024 data

My workplace/institution adequately supports me with...



RSVP: Interventions to support practice



Overview of Phase 1 interventions

GETTING SUPERVISORS STARTED

Designing an impactful induction for doctoral supervisors

BEING A RESEARCH SUPERVISOR

Supervisory roles and approaches: Who are you as a supervisor?

Exploring supervisor approaches: Becoming a flexible supervisor

Delivering engaging CPD on doctoral policies and processes

WRITING AND FEEDBACK

Giving feedback on PGR writing

Supporting PGRs with writing

WORKING WITH CANDIDATES

Supporting international doctoral candidates

Supporting doctoral candidates: How to enhance self-efficacy

Supporting PGR development beyond the project

Establishing boundaries and building rapport with PGRs

Meta-communication in research supervision

Let's talk about preparing candidates for doctoral examination

Enabling conversations: Coaching and mentoring approaches to supervision

WORKING IN TEAM SUPERVISION

Supervising together: Clarifying the co-supervisor role

Enhancing collaboration and aligning expectations in team supervision

Giving consistent feedback in supervisor teams

REFLECTING ON SUPERVISORY PRACTICE

Supervisor Peer Mentoring Circle Programme

Supporting Reflective Practice and Recognition of Research Supervision

Overview of Phase 2 interventions

Starting Strong: A Programme for New Supervisors

Culturally Aware Research Supervision

IPD Programme for Industry based non-HEI supervisors

Neuroinclusive Research Supervision

Learning from each other: Peer observation of supervision

Supervisor Seminar Series

The Next Generation Supervision 'Pathway'



- Local institutional induction - workshops run in house by institutions (or DTEs) focussed on policies, principles and process requirements (released as part of Phase 1 and being piloted)
- [Starting Strong: a programme for new research supervisors](#) (to be piloted April/May with a range of PPs - delivered online by the RSVP team)
- [Peer Observation of Supervision](#) (being piloted by the 5 consortia partners)
- [Peer Mentoring Circles](#) (released as part of Phase 1 and being piloted with a range of PPs & *Cancer Research*)
- Recognition of Practice, reflection and engagement with CPD through UKCGE Research Supervision Recognition Programme (released as part of Phase 1 and being piloted with a range of PPs)
- At York - pilot of an 'Assistant Supervisor' scheme to validate
- And recognise the contribution of ECRs and technicians in supervisory teams (aligned with the RD Concordat and Technician Commitment)

We will ascertain following the piloting of the Industry programme if this is for new or more experienced supervisors or merged.

The Experienced Academic Supervisor 'Pathway'



The offer for more experienced supervisors is based on their preference for conversations and sharing of practice.

- Local institutional induction - workshops run in house by institutions (or DTEs) focussed on policies, principles and process requirements - some experienced supervisors will take this as a refresher
- [Peer Observation of Supervision](#) - experienced supervisors will be encouraged to take part to enhance their own CPD and provide support for the next generation of ECRs
- [Peer Mentoring Circles](#) - as above
- Recognition of Practice, reflection and engagement with CPD through UKCGE Research Supervision Recognition Programme - more experienced supervisors, especially those looking for promotion or to lead DTEs may be encouraged to gain full recognition for their supervision and to apply for institutional or national recognition (for example through the THE Supervisor of the Year award).
- **Questions: would RSVP Next Generation awards supported by UKRI be attractive? These could include Next Generation awards for ECRs/Technicians, Team Award, Industry Supervisor of the Year?**

RSVP: Sustainability, Policy & Culture Change

1. Selling the value of CPD:

Aim to demonstrate that engagement in CPD and reflection benefits consistency of practice, enhances the quality of research

2. Social Norming of Good Supervision Practice

Aim: to build a narrative around what the data and piloting indicates to be good practice such that 'bad practice' is outlawed across the sector.

3. Narrating the RSVP Approach to Culture Change

Aim: To demonstrate that we have created an approach to culture change that can be replicated in other areas.

4. Influencing institutional understanding of Good/High Quality Supervision

Aim: to articulate the potential return on investment for engagement in CPD and to influence the reporting of good supervision.

5. Provision of sector leading CPD for global use

Aim: to showcase the creation of a suite of tried and tested professional development interventions

6. Demonstrating and evidencing the impact of recognition on supervision

Aim: To demonstrate that recognition of research supervision adds value to the supervisor, the PGR and the reputation of the institution.

7. Communication and Dissemination Aim: to ensure the sector and stakeholders know about what we are doing in a timely fashion

What could we do to collectively:

1. Improve consistency of experience
2. Evidence the value of engagement in CPD
3. Promote the value of the PhD as a contribution to society? (or that too big for a Tuesday?)

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