

Entry

# Personal Development of Doctoral Students

Deborah M. Riby <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Simon Rees <sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Durham University, Durham DH1 3LE, UK<sup>2</sup> Durham Centre for Academic Development, Durham University, Durham DH1 3LE, UK; simon.rees@durham.ac.uk

\* Correspondence: deborah.riby@durham.ac.uk

**Definition:** Personal development refers to the process of increasing one's self-awareness, associated increases of self-esteem, increasing skills, and fulfilling one's aspirations. The current paper reflects on these elements within the doctoral journey, for PhD students within the UK Higher Education system. The paper makes particular reference to frameworks to encourage and capture personal development needs and supervision or coaching styles that may be used to encourage a continual reflection of personal development throughout the doctorate.

**Keywords:** personal development; PhD; supervision; coaching

## 1. Introduction

Doctoral education can come in many different forms, from Professional Doctorates to the more common PhD (Doctor of Philosophy). It is the latter of these forms of doctoral education that provides the basis for the current paper.

A PhD is more than writing a thesis. Indeed, a PhD is an opportunity to study, train, and develop in many ways, for example, to develop in-depth research expertise in the specific field of study, to complete applied work to have a real-world impact, to begin to develop independence as a researcher, and to also experience a period of intense personal and professional development that opens doors to a plethora of opportunities. Within the UK Higher Education system, every PhD *researcher* is different and has had a different journey pre-doctorate, bringing with them skills, lived experiences, and knowledge. These pre-doctorate skills and experiences will have a direct role in shaping the personal development that the doctoral student engages with throughout their PhD journey. This is especially relevant with recent attempts to attract a more diverse postgraduate community (e.g., [1,2]). Furthermore, every PhD *thesis* is different, involving a range of differing approaches or methodologies, focusing on diverse topics, working under different supervision arrangements, and being written up in a different manner shaped by the student. The *training* and development needs that a student identifies and completes during their PhD are also individualised. The whole PhD *journey* differs on an individual basis and is shaped by the individual, and each success and bump in the road will have an impact, either positive or negative. Finally, PhD graduates will choose a wide range of *career paths*, utilising the breadth of skills developed during the doctoral journey, many of which will translate to their specific career path and allow for further personal and professional growth. Therefore, there is a significant diversity of experiences within doctoral education, and institutional PhD structures provide the flexibility to meet the diverse needs of researchers.

Diversity and flexibility within doctoral education are of significant benefit in shaping the doctoral journey to best suit the personal and professional development needs of each individual postgraduate researcher. It may not be until the end of this doctoral journey that an individual takes the time to reflect upon the personal development that has occurred. However, we should encourage doctoral researchers and their supervisors to embed personal development needs alongside professional development right from the start of the doctoral journey and use a method of continual reflection throughout the PhD.



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## 2. Personal Development

So, what do we really mean by “personal development”? This type of personal growth involves looking inward and focusing on ways to better oneself, developing skills that might increase one’s self-awareness, self-reflection, self-esteem, and skills base, and allow one to fulfil their ambitions [3]. In this sense, personal development is internal to the researcher/individual, but will be shaped by their external experiences and opportunities. Some of this development might link to socio-emotional intelligence, but it will be well beyond this issue (see [4] in this volume). Within the context of the doctoral journey, personal development can take many forms and, of course, will be shaped by the student at the point of entry to the PhD, as well as being continually impacted throughout their doctoral studies. However, what we highlight in this paper is that there are particular methods and approaches that can be used to best support the optimum personal development opportunity for doctoral students.

The importance of personal development is highlighted by the range of potential career paths for graduates post-PhD. Globally, fewer than half of PhD graduates work in higher education (e.g., [5–7]) and this means that doctorates need to be utilised for training researchers for careers in many different areas and enable doctoral students to engage with personal development that will allow them to embark upon “what comes next”. Indeed, doctoral graduates can be well prepared for careers both within and beyond academia (e.g., [7,8]) due to the range of professional and personal skills developed during the PhD, from time management, to critical thinking, to resilience, to emotional intelligence, to data analytics and experimental or methodological design, to name a few.

In this paper, we discuss the fact that personal development is often neglected at the expense of a focus on academic skills within doctoral education. We focus on the available frameworks for shaping personal development opportunities, highlighting the role of supervision practices. Furthermore, we highlight the potential benefits of a coaching approach to enable doctoral students to reach their full potential and achieve significant personal development milestones throughout their PhD journey.

## 3. Frameworks for Personal Development

The Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF; see Figure 1) is an established framework to support the personal and professional development of researchers and is strongly advocated for use within doctoral education. Based on empirical evidence and interviews with researchers, it describes the knowledge, skills, behaviours, and attributes of a successful researcher [9]. Personal and professional development are often put together in the same phrase and the RDF tends to emphasise the professional aspect of development. However, in this section, we will explore how well the RDF can inform and support personal development, focusing on behaviours and attributes.

In terms of personal development, there are several areas that the RDF specifically identifies. For example, sub-domain B1 focuses on the personal qualities of an effective researcher and identifies enthusiasm, perseverance, integrity, self-confidence, self-reflection, and responsibility as key areas. The descriptors elaborate more on the meaning of these in the research context and generally describe an increased sphere of influence through phases 1 to 5 (i.e., moving from developing these qualities in oneself to supporting others). Elsewhere, sub-domain D1 (Figure 1) focuses on working with others and identifies collegiality, collaboration, people management, and mentoring. The descriptors for these areas highlight many important personal qualities such as consideration for others, listening, approachability, understanding one’s own behaviours and those of others, negotiation, and encouraging and empowering others. The RDF, therefore, recognises many important personal qualities for the development of a successful researcher, but there are also significant areas of personal development such as emotional intelligence, empathy, identity, intercultural awareness, personality traits, or vertical development that are not mentioned.

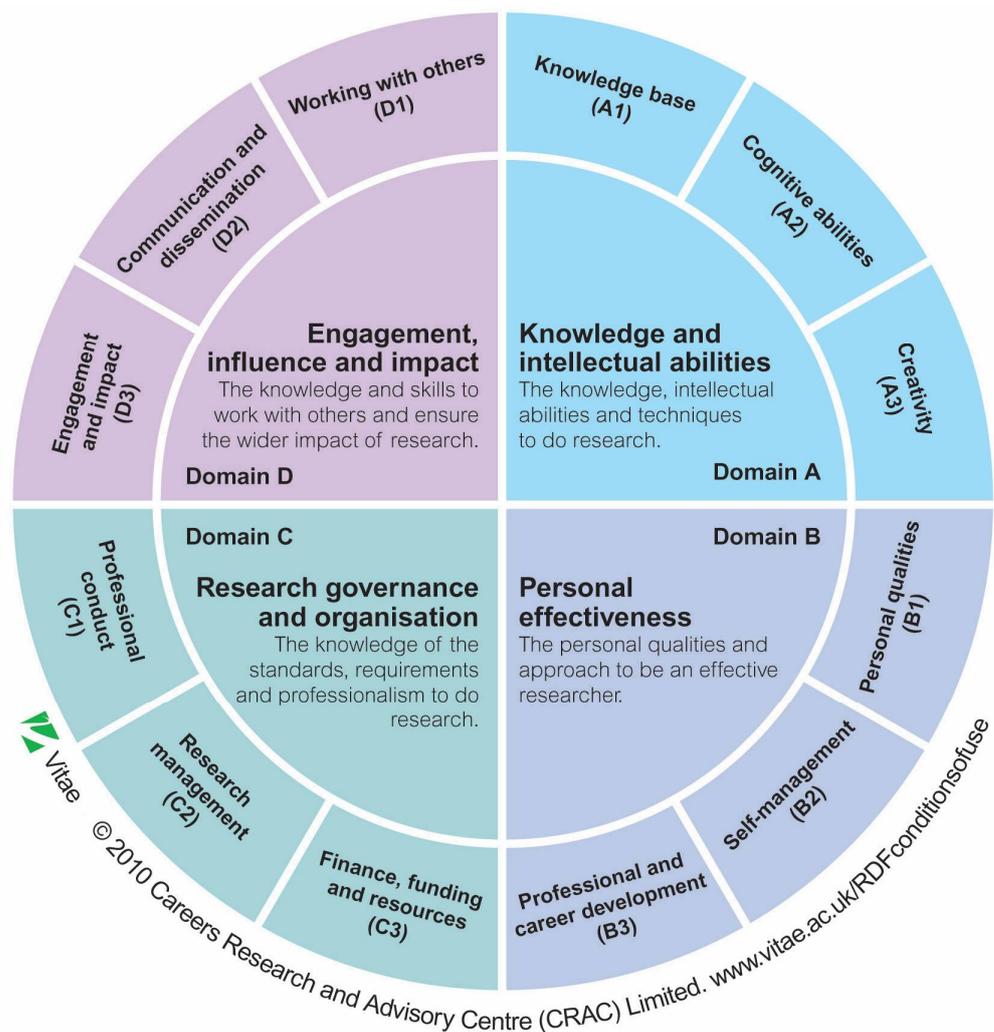
Are there alternative frameworks that may also provide useful insights for personal development during doctoral education? Both the Advance HE Professional Standards

Framework (PSF) for supporting teaching and learning in HE [10] and the UKCGE Good Supervisory Practice Framework are focused on supervisor competencies and give limited reference to personal development [11]. The PSF, for example, refers to supporting and guiding learners and demonstrating respect for individual and diverse groups of learners. The UKCGE framework refers to personal and professional development and posits that supervisors should “at least be aware of personal issues”. As well as explicitly discussing development needs, one of the most important ways that supervisors can influence the personal development of their students is as role models and exemplifying the behaviours and attributes of a successful academic. It is through this lived experience that the student develops their own approach and is likely to adopt similar attitudes, attributes, and behaviours as those demonstrated by more senior colleagues. Therefore, if we are to effectively support personal development within doctoral education, these frameworks that focus on the supervisor could provide more explicit focus on the personal development of supervisors and the attitudes, attributes, and behaviours they are modelling for their supervisees.

An alternative framework for focusing on personal development is the UNICEF (2019) [12] Global Framework on Transferable Skills. This framework focuses on the skills that enable young people to “become agile, adaptive learners and citizens equipped to navigate personal, academic, social and economic challenges. . . Transferable skills include problem solving, negotiation, managing emotions, empathy and communication”. UNICEF regard these transferable skills as the fundamental underpinning that enables learners to develop other skills essential to support lifelong success in study, work, and life. Informed by stakeholder consultations globally, the framework identifies a wide range of personal qualities, skills, and attributes for individuals to reflect on.

Hawkins and Smith (2013) [13] affirm that at the heart of continuous professional development is personal development. By developing our personal capacities, we develop the effectiveness of our skills and capabilities in a balanced way. Hawkins and Smith (2013, p. 244) describe a model with seven territories of personal development linked with multiple intelligences [14]. Personal development involves reflecting on the seven territories (intellectual, relationship, action, emotional, ethical, body, and core self)—those we avoid, those that we give cursory acknowledgement to, and those that we use regularly.

Many institutions also identify the desirable personal attributes for their students (see *Graduate Attributes* by Durham University, 2023, for example [15]). These approaches are at their most effective when they are developed in consultation with a wide range of members within and outside of the institutional community, and the attributes are embedded within study programmes and are recognised and celebrated. Understanding the attributes that we would expect of a doctoral graduate can be a useful way of enabling institutions to consider areas of personal development need. However, recognising the importance of these personal skills and qualities is just one aspect, and developing them can be more challenging. Specific skills such as time management or research methods can be learned and developed quite explicitly, but personal qualities such as resilience or empathy may be more nuanced, developing over a longer period and through reflective practice. Therefore, to develop these personal qualities, a range of strategies are required for doctoral researchers to reflect on their personal qualities and how to develop them. In the following sections, we discuss different supervision styles and the role of coaching and mentoring to support personal development within doctoral education.



**Figure 1.** The Vitae Researcher Development Framework from Vitae, adapted from [9]. © 2010 Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited, via [www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf) (accessed on 12 February 2024).

#### 4. Supervision and Personal Development

Supervision is about developing people. The product of doctoral education is people who represent our future academics and researchers and those who will take their skills beyond academia. Putting the “person” and the issue of personal development at the centre of PhD supervision is critical for this very reason. This is especially important when considering the diversity of PhD students that a supervisor will work with and when trying to create inclusive supervision practices (e.g., [16]).

In this section, we reflect on different supervision models in the context of supporting personal development, before moving on to consider supervision in a coaching style. It is worth noting here that the supervision styles needed for some specific groups of students might be different; for example, supporting part-time students, supporting distance learners, supporting international students, and supporting minority groups such as neurodivergent PhD researchers will all require modifications to standard supervision approaches and the supervisor should consider personal development within this modified approach.

Doctoral supervision has increasingly been viewed as a relationship between teacher and learner, and a range of supervision styles have been described (see [17–19], for example). Common to these supervisory styles are the two key dimensions of structure and support. Structure refers to the ways in which supervisors perceive their role in the organisation and management of the research project. Some supervisors may play a very active role in organising the project themselves, whilst others may provide far greater autonomy. This might be particularly variable across academic disciplines (e.g., lab-based physical science degrees versus the arts and humanities), but will also vary between supervisors. Case study 1, for example, describes one postgraduate researcher’s experience of autonomy and how this influenced their personal development. In this instance, it is clear that the student enjoyed the autonomy they were afforded, and it benefitted their personal development. With the ultimate goal being that the student will have trained to be an independent researcher, the issue of personal development throughout this training is crucial.

In terms of support, some supervisors may not perceive their role as offering pastoral support, while others may be much more actively engaged in this area. To support personal development, a supervisor would need to pay an active interest in this area and a coaching approach could be appropriate. This would facilitate an exploratory, non-directive conversation that would enable the supervisee to reflect on their experiences and identify ways forward, with the supervisor resisting providing advice and guidance (see Section 5 for more focus on coaching).

Gatfield (2005) [17] identified four supervisory styles based on high or low engagement with structure and support. For example, a “laissez-faire” style is characterised as low structure and low support. In this instance, intervention from the supervisor is low and autonomy is high for the postgraduate researcher. Case study 1 (see Box 1) demonstrates elements of a laissez-faire approach, which the student appreciated in this instance. However, this may not be suitable for a different student, so supervisors, as Bruce and Stroodley (2011) [20] argued, should be adaptable to the needs of the supervisee and be prepared to adopt different styles as appropriate (thus taking an individualised approach). Furthermore, while the experience of the postgraduate researcher in this case study has been successful, there is limited evidence of the opportunity for them to explicitly reflect on their personal development.

A supervision approach that is higher in the support dimension (described as a pastoral style by [17]) could afford the opportunity to engage in conversations that explore the student’s personal development more explicitly. To do this successfully, it would be worth considering alternative co-supervision models where a student has a supervisor who focuses on academic aspects of the project and another supervisor who has more of a focus on personal development. This supervisor could be an experienced coach with appropriate training (many institutions offer training in this area), but need not be knowledgeable of the specific research area. In addition, case study 2 (Box 2), describing mentor circles and peer mentoring, can provide a mechanism to focus on many areas of the postgraduate experience. Such approaches could make a significant positive impact on the doctoral research experience and could support a wider diversity of students to undertake PhD research.

**Box 1. Case Study 1 example.****Case study 1: PhD candidate, School of Education, Durham University, UK**

Originating from Gaza, this PhD candidate is an international student in the UK. With support from the Economic and Social Research Council through the Northern Ireland and North East Doctoral Training Partnership, he is researching the potential contributions of education abroad to peace, focusing on Palestinian recipients of international graduate scholarships and their post-completion engagements vis à vis everyday peace in Palestine. He decided to pursue a PhD because he fundamentally likes learning. For him, learning creates a sense of freedom from ignorance and develops competence to challenge biases.

*How would you describe your supervisory experience?*

My supervisory experience has been extremely positive. I have three supervisors across two different departments. Scheduling meetings and requesting/providing feedback always worked well for us. From the outset, there seemed to be clear division of labour between the different supervisors. For example, one supervisor has recently reviewed my theoretical framework, while two are focusing their review on my empirical findings before I progress to the interdisciplinary theorising part of my research. Also, I have always felt well supported in *leading* my own research. My supervisors have shown flexibility to respond to requests when needed, and I trust that they have my best interests at heart. Our quality teamwork dynamic helps me progress towards my goals, and seeing this quality gives me confidence and makes me feel that I am not alone.

I have really enjoyed a strong sense of autonomy in undertaking my research. I think that my supervisors have felt confident to allow me this degree of autonomy because I have always strived to produce work of as high a standard as I best can, including when sharing plans or outcomes of my progress. This, I think, has established their confidence that I was making good progress in my thesis and my broader academic career. At a recent supervisory meeting, I asked my supervisors for feedback on how I was doing as a supervisee and to review the supervisory relationship dynamics. The discussion gave reassurance to myself and my supervisors. The autonomy I have experienced has been very important for me to thrive and develop. A more rigid experience, with weekly supervisory meetings for example, would have been stressful for me. This feels inefficient to me and would create a lot more expectation and pressure for me. Just knowing that my supervisors are there to provide support if I need it works best for me.

*In what ways do you think your PhD experience has affected your personal development?*

The experience has enabled me to become much more self-disciplined. I am able to work on my own but not feel alone. I am very happy spending hours in the library reading and writing, but equally I have ensured that I engage in a variety of activities—from teaching and editorial work for a peer-reviewed journal to researcher development and conference engagements. I have also become more contemplative, taking time before deciding things and doing a lot of reflective journaling. It has also reinforced my sense of lifelong learning as a life purpose, not just for academic and employability purposes. It has further helped me cultivate my sense of curiosity in multiple aspects of everyday life and also to develop the independent skills to find answers and solutions. I am also surrounded by a lot of other very committed PhD students, which helps me find constant inspiration and stimulation to keep doing good work.

**Box 2. Case Study 2 example.****Case Study 2: PGR Mentoring in School of Education, Durham University, UK**

In the School of Education, most Postgraduate Research Students (PGRs) are aspiring academics and we aim to prepare them for that and related roles. For instance, some take on some teaching and we organise them into mentoring circles where they meet as a group and can share successes, concerns, and solutions. One or two members of academic staff are present to encourage and support purposeful conversations, and also give the students items of interest relating to teaching and other transferrable skills. Articles about, for instance, Higher Education teaching tips, writing CVs, applying for jobs, and transferrable skills are appreciated and create an amenable atmosphere. At the same time, we provide them with opportunities for one-to-one sessions with an academic member of staff (who is not also their supervisor) should they want to discuss something more privately. On ethical grounds, we make it clear that specific details of their research project are for their supervisors to discuss, and we explain the importance of ethical conduct and respect.

The students have expressed their appreciation of this mentoring. For instance, one emailed us to say, *"I just wanted to thank you for all you have done with this mentoring circle, and for me personally, the time you have given outside of planned meetings has been invaluable . . . [the] mentoring circle worked really well"*. Another wrote *"I just wanted to express how much I value the mentoring for PGRs"* and added that *"It has really helped me feel more as though I am part of the School of Education and part of a community of Education PhD students at Durham. It felt as though we were all equal and welcome in the warm, relaxed dialogic space you all created. It is good to get together and share experiences and I appreciated you each sharing your own while supporting us all at the same time"*. We felt that the feeling of inclusion generated by the sessions was a valuable bonus.

Encouraged by this, we have added peer mentoring to the provision. Following some enquiries by experienced PGRs who said they would like to be mentors for new and less experienced researchers, we asked for volunteers and prepared them for the role with a short training session and a source of mentoring ideas. We felt it important to emphasise in the training that careful listening underpins mentoring, that there is often more than one way of doing things, and that the mentor is not a manager who tells mentees what to do, but the aim is to develop the mentee's effective and independent way of working.

We feel that providing PGRs with access to mentors in this way is very worthwhile. Other ways of mentoring PGRs are, of course, possible, and we will continue to experiment with them, but, in the meantime, we can recommend it to others.

**5. Coaching and Personal Development**

The value of coaching and mentoring has been widely recognised as an important tool to support an individual's personal development. However, it can be difficult to hold meaningful conversations of this nature within the traditional scope of a supervisory relationship. There has been a great deal written on the differences between coaching and mentoring. For example, a mentor may be a more experienced colleague who has a good understanding of the mentee's context and able to offer appropriate advice and guidance. In contrast, a coach does not require direct experience or knowledge of the coachee's professional context, but rather works with the coachee to explore their challenges, identifying ways forward and learning from the experience.

For the purposes of this section, we will draw on the approach of Guccione and Hutchinson (2021) [21], who recognise the similarities between coaching and mentoring rather than exploring the distinctions. In the context of academic development, they consider coaching and mentoring to involve "a designed conversation to aid the clarification and achievement of an individual's goals and to help them capture the learning obtained" (p. 7). They promote the notion of "mentoring with a coaching style" where coaching is a designed, non-directive learning conversation and mentoring is a coaching conversation with some experience-based contextualisation, advice, or guidance. In the context of personal development, a coaching approach could be a useful mechanism for supervisees to reflect on their experiences and personal development goals. A great deal of learning takes place outside of formal workshops and courses and coaching enables the individual to develop greater self-awareness, explore different possibilities, and develop personal agency. Furthermore, coaching can provide clarity as to what an individual's goals are, why these are important to them, and what is required to achieve these goals. Effective

coaching can provide the thinking space and connection built through empathy and trust and being listened to without judgement.

#### *A Designed and Non-Directive Conversation*

We have described coaching as a “designed conversation” and it is important that careful consideration is given to designing supervision in a coaching style. There are a range of coaching frameworks available that can be used to provide a design for a coaching conversation (see the CLEAR model [22] or GROW [23], for example). These frameworks provide a structure to shape the coaching conversation. For example, the CLEAR model highlights the importance of contracting (the “C” of CLEAR) between coach and coachee to establish the parameters of the coaching conversation, whereas the GROW framework highlights the four key stages of Goal, Reality, Options, and Will within reaching a goal. In the supervision context, it may be inappropriate and frustrating if every supervision session is conducted in a coaching style. Furthermore, coaching is often used in a time-limited fashion and with a specific focus and may not be appropriate for a longer-term relationship. Therefore, at the outset, the coaching approach should be established in terms of when and where coaching style supervision would occur. It is also important to clarify the nature of the coaching conversation and how this may be different to other supervisory conversations (for example, its non-directive nature). The “L” and “E” of the model focus on Listening and Exploring. These phases are important for building rapport and effective coaching relationships that demonstrate empathy through active listening. They also emphasise the non-directive nature of the conversation where questioning and reflecting help the coachee increase their awareness and generate new insights and options to move forward. This contrasts with the coach providing advice and suggestions based on their experience. From this, the coachee arrives at Actions (“A”) to take forward and Reviews (“R”) the coaching experience.

In the context of personal development, such a coaching framework can provide an excellent basis for the supervisee to reflect on their experiences and how they wish to develop in the future. However, becoming a skilled facilitator of coaching conversations requires opportunities to engage in training, to practice, and to reflect, and many supervisors may feel that such conversations are beyond their supervisory role.

Case study 2 (see Box 2) illustrates how mentoring with a coaching style has been applied with mentoring circles and peer mentoring to create a supportive and reflective space focusing on transferable skills.

## **6. Conclusions**

In conclusion, embedding a variety of approaches to personal development within doctoral education will ensure that PhD graduates are best prepared for a diversity of career paths. This paper has focused predominantly on the role of supervisors, supervision, and coaching in guiding personal development opportunities for doctoral researchers. However, it is important to note that the nature of the PhD programme can also have a central role in facilitating personal development opportunities. Where doctoral programmes include core training elements that bring together a cohort of researchers, these training structures can also be used to build a sense of doctoral community, allowing peer support, social networks, and a sense of belonging alongside formal training. It is recognised that peer study groups and peer learning support can enhance the doctoral experience (e.g., [24,25]). Indeed, mentoring from peers (e.g., [26]) may play a role in building social capital and social networks among students, and it has been noted that both student mentors and mentees can gain personal and professional growth from their involvement in a doctoral peer mentoring programme [27]. Crucially, such structures can also assist with protecting against loneliness and support well-being [28], so there are multiple benefits of these types of structures beyond the potential opportunities for personal development.

We have centralised the role of the supervisor in this paper and highlight that supervisors need to be prepared for the different needs of their supervisees, and this is

especially important when creating an inclusive research environment for minority and under-represented groups within our current postgraduate research community. To provide just one example, flexibility in supervision styles and different approaches to supporting personal development may be needed if a PhD researcher is experiencing mental health challenges or a period of crisis (e.g., [29,30]). All of this comes back to the issue that we are developing people, the next generation of researchers, who will make a significant contribution to advancing knowledge. Developing the “person” should, therefore, be at the core of doctoral training, even though this is an area that is frequently neglected within training programmes and supervisory practices. In this paper, we have considered frameworks utilised to evaluate the breadth of training needed by PhD researchers and where personal development sits within those frameworks. It is crucial that, as our frameworks and models of doctoral education and researcher development evolve, we wholly embed personal development needs.

Finally, it is essential to highlight the diversity of personal development needs that will be experienced by the postgraduate research community and that an individualised approach to support and guidance is critical. With this in mind, we encourage all doctoral researchers and their supervisors, as well as the institutions that they are part of, to consider personal development opportunities as critical within a healthy research culture to ensure that all doctoral researchers can flourish.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** The providers of both case studies gave consent for their use in this article in anonymous format.

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