



**Video Call Support Groups
for Doctoral Researchers**

An Implementation Guide



This Guide was written by Claire Durrant, doctoral researcher in Social Work at the University of Sussex, with the support of the [U-DOC](#) Project.



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"The thing is with PhDs, as I'm starting to see, is that it can be quite isolating....but if there was something that bound people together more strongly just intrinsically, then my feeling is that I think people would be less stressed about their position and feel like they're less imposters and stuff like that." (Doctoral Researcher, U-DOC Focus Group, Spring 2018)

"When I worked at home a lot with the PhD, I was like completely de-socialised" (Doctoral Researcher, U-DOC Focus Group, Spring 2018)

Background

This initiative is based on the experience of four doctoral researchers in the School of Education and Social Work (ESW) who set up a monthly video call support group in the first year of their PhD. Three years later, they still meet online once a month to discuss issues relating to their PhDs and to support each other through the ups and downs of PhD life. Given its success at supporting the mental wellbeing of the Doctoral Researchers taking part, a second group has been set-up in ESW and, through this guide, it is now being showcased to all Doctoral Researchers at the University of Sussex.

The group initially came together because the four members were unable to attend the formal first year support group meetings held on campus. The reasons for not being able to attend ranged from work and other commitments to the distance that one member lived from the university. Video calls also provided an effective way for ESW Doctoral Researchers to get to know each other, as an alternative to face-to-face. Group members reflected on readings, discussed ideas and research methods and developed confidence in talking about their research. It also provided a space for them to support each other through what can be an isolating, intense and stressful few years. Over time the group has developed into something that is highly valued by its members and has supported them through submitting research proposals, ethics reviews and fieldwork. They intend to continue with the group until the end of their PhDs.

This initiative is suitable for, and could benefit, all Doctoral Researchers in any department. It may be particularly useful for those in Arts and Humanities where the experience of doing a PhD can be more isolating than the natural sciences. It may also be particularly helpful for those who do not spend much time on campus, which tends to be those who are older, part-time, have caring responsibilities or live a long way away from the University. However, for those who do spend time on campus, it may be



possible to set up a support group that meets face-to-face. This guidance can also be used for face-to-face groups.

Group members describe their experience over the last three years of participating in the video call support group as very positive. They say that it has kept them connected, made them feel supported during the highs and lows of PhD life and, most importantly, has improved their mental wellbeing. They now hope that other people can benefit from their initiative.

Potential benefits for Doctoral Researchers

"You're just doing your thing alone, without knowing a lot of things that are happening, and if you are not somebody that actually goes out to meet people, you won't actually meet other PhD students, even in the same department." (Doctoral Researcher, U-DOC Focus Group, Spring 2018)

A key benefit of the video call support group is that it guarantees that, at least once a month, members can talk to other people going through the same specific experience of studying for a PhD – an experience which is difficult for friends and family who have not been through it themselves to understand. Doing a PhD can be a lonely and isolating process and having the certainty of regularly chatting with like-minded people about concerns and worries is extremely reassuring and helpful in terms of maintaining good mental wellbeing.

The group provides a space to discuss each members' research. Members take turns to update each other on what they have been doing and to raise any particular challenges that they have been facing. It is extremely useful to do this with someone other than supervisors. Talking things through with people in a similar position helps to clarify thoughts and increase members' confidence in presenting their ideas.

By sharing experiences and celebrating successes together, members can create a community which has longevity and the potential to support them until the end of their PhD. Such was the commitment of the first group that was set up in ESW that, when one of them had to intermit for a few months due to illness, they continued to meet to discuss their research as usual and to provide support and reassurance for their colleague who was ill.

When Doctoral Researchers are at the beginning of their PhD journey, they may not understand the potential implications that such an undertaking can have on their mental health. Faculty, PhD coordinators and supervisors should recommend this initiative as a way of managing mental wellbeing, by highlighting the benefits and emphasising how



helpful it can be to talk to people who are having a shared and unique experience. It should be part of a bigger discussion on wellbeing and the importance of staying connected with other Doctoral Researchers.

Step-by-step guide to setting up groups

This initiative can be set up within a couple of weeks in each School as follows:

- As part of the [Researcher Development Programme](#), the Doctoral School will promote the support groups through its [Doctoral Connections blog](#) and [newsletters](#) to Doctoral Researchers, as well as emails to Directors of Doctoral Studies, Research and Enterprise Coordinators (RECs) and PhD Conveners.
- Doctoral Researchers at any stage of their PhD should set up their group as soon as possible and continue until the end of their studies. Even if you do not feel as though you need it now, you may benefit from one later in your PhD.
- Speak to your PhD Conveners and ask them to match you with three other appropriate people in your School, or approach people you already know who may be interested.
- If you have any problems finding people or you would rather find a group of people who are in a different School, please [fill in this form provided by the Doctoral School](#) and they will match you with suitable people.
- Once you have been matched with three other Doctoral Researchers, one person should take responsibility for emailing everyone to arrange a date and to set the group up, using the guidelines and appropriate software. Instructions for this are provided below.
- Inform the Doctoral School of the date of your first meeting and names of participants. That way they will be able to evaluate how the group is going and help out with any problems.
- After a couple of months check-in with fellow members to ensure that they are happy with how the group is going and discuss any improvements you could make.

Practicalities

We suggest setting up the group on Skype or Zoom, which are both free.

For Skype: each member should download the Skype app and create an account. Full instructions for getting up and running are [available in this online tutorial](#).

For Zoom: refer to the [University ITS Zoom page](#) for instructions on setting up.



Groups should meet at least once a month – more if members want to. The meeting should be scheduled to last around an hour. If you are happy to share your phone number and the group is going well, you could also consider setting up a WhatsApp group so you can message each other between your monthly calls. For some this could be a really helpful additional support, but for others it may be too much. You will need to decide as a group what you prefer.

The video call support group is ideally made up of a maximum of four people but three could also work.

The composition of the group should be flexible but there should be as much homogeneity in terms of circumstances and interests as is realistically possible. It won't always be possible to link up with people who are similar in every way so it is worth thinking about which of the following are most important to you:

- Area of study/discipline
- Year/stage of PhD
- Same School/department or cross-discipline based on research interests (subject or method)
- Other: e.g. full- or part-time status, international student, student parent, BAME, LGBTQ+, student with disabilities...

At the first meeting members should set boundaries for the group, discuss confidentiality, and the importance of listening actively and not interrupting each other. Then make an agreement to be respectful of each other's views and to give everyone space to talk. It is recommended that members decide on one person to moderate the group. This could be rotated monthly or every six months.

At the first meeting members also agree a structure. This can be reasonably flexible, for example, in the first term there may be important readings to discuss. However, it can broadly follow these guidelines:

- Each member has the opportunity to share with the group what they have been doing on their PhD in the preceding month. This is an interactive process, with other members being able to comment and ask questions. Talking about one's PhD in an informal, trusted environment can be very useful for sorting out issues and increasing confidence.
- There is also an opportunity for members to talk about their supervision, anything that they are finding particularly challenging, and to share their worries and concerns.
- At the end of each meeting a date should be agreed for the following month.



Evaluation

The initiative will be evaluated using a short online questionnaire set up by the [Researcher Development team](#) within the Doctoral School.

The Researcher Development team will provide Doctoral Researchers with the link to the questionnaire at the end of each academic year or a year after the group is set up. The Doctoral School will also analyse the findings and make changes as appropriate. The Doctoral School will share and discuss the evaluation results in an annual webinar in which doctoral researchers can participate and ask questions. Following this webinar, it may be decided to make any amendments to these guidelines.

Testimonials

'I have a monthly Skype meeting where we share research ideas and resources as well as discuss problems and challenges we face and offer advice and solutions to one another. My Skype group makes me feel that I am part of a research community and that I am not alone in my PhD journey.' (Imelda, part-time, started in 2017)

'As a part time PHD student who is working offsite, the Skype group has been a vital way of connecting to my fellow postgraduates in a small and supportive group. We meet up monthly to talk about our progress, offer support and advice and to help one another navigate what can be a complicated world of academia. We keep each other going in what can be a very isolating time, very unlike other learning journeys we have been on to date. I highly recommend it to all PHD students to become part of an online group and once established the group can continue to meet while people are away on field work, through analysis and writing up.' (Catherine, part-time, started 2017)

Who to contact

If you have any problems setting up your group or once it is up and running, please contact Katy Stoddard (Doctoral School), using the department email address:

- researcher-development@sussex.ac.uk