



**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. Two 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 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 too long distance that one member lived from the university. Video calls provided an effective way of getting to know other doctoral researchers in ESW, 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 first year. 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 or have caring responsibilities. However, for those who do spend time on campus, we suggest setting-up a support group that meets face-to-face (see below).

Group members describe their experience over the last two 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, once a month, members can talk to other people going through the same specific experience of studying for a PhD – an experience which is almost impossible 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 chatting with like-minded people about concerns and worries once a month 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 a group can have on their mental health. Faculty and PhD coordinators could recommend such an 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 well-being 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 newsletters to doctoral researchers as well as emails to Directors of Doctoral Studies and Research and Enterprise Coordinators (RECs), starting in the summer.
- Set-up your group as soon as possible in the first year and continue until the end of the PhD, with the help of the Researcher Development Programme officers at the Doctoral School and possibly from more advanced doctoral researchers who have experience of the support groups (as it happened in ESW this year).
- Decide whether your group will be online. For doctoral researchers who are regularly on campus, it may work better for group members to meet face-to-face.
- Researchers can ask for the help of the department PhD coordinators (RECs) to collect names and match people up with similar circumstances and research interests. RECs could ask people who are interested to sign-up by providing their name, subject of their PhD, full or part-time status and preference for meeting on campus or via video call.
- 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.
- 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, which is free. [You could use Zoom but it is only free for 40 minutes, which is not necessarily long enough for the group members to have time to exchange thoughts and feelings.]

Some people have remarked that the application *WhatsApp* maybe a better platform for support groups (video calls only up to four people) as it includes the possibility for members to message each other by texts in between calls.

Each member should download the Skype app and create an account. Full instructions for getting up and running are at: <https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/skype/setting-up-skype/1/>



Groups that have opted to meet in person can meet on campus or at a venue of their choice.

Groups should meet at least once a month – more if members want to. The meeting should be scheduled to last around an hour.

The composition of the group should be flexible but there should be as much homogeneity as is realistically possible. Here are some guidelines:

- The video call support group is ideally made up of a maximum of 4 people from the same department or school
- Groups ideally comprise either part-time or full-time doctoral researchers as these are working at a different pace
- Group members are ideally all at the same stage of their PhD, so there are groups of Year 1 part-time, Year 1 full-time etc.
- Wherever possible groups are made up of people with similar research interests or methods
- In some cases it may not be possible for you to be matched with someone suitable in your department, for example, if you are part-time there may be no other part-time doctoral researchers there. If this is the case, then you could contact the doctoral school who can match you with a group in another department.

At the first meeting members set boundaries for the group, discuss confidentiality, and the importance of listening actively and not interrupting each other. They 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

At the end of each academic year, the initiative can be evaluated using a short online questionnaire set up by the Doctoral School.

The Doctoral School 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)

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