

# PRINCIPLES FOR SUPPORTING NEW PhD RESEARCHERS

*Co-designed principles for induction programmes to support mental health and wellbeing in doctoral researchers*

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This document outlines a set of strategies and key practices that can be used to inform the design of induction programmes in doctoral researchers. In line with calls in the higher education sector for the development of prevention strategies to promote mental health and wellbeing in doctoral researchers, we explored how to best support doctoral researchers in the transition to doctoral study. Funded by the Student Mental Health Research Network ([SMaRteN](#)), we worked with 47 doctoral researchers and 13 higher education stakeholders over a 9-month period to co-design principles to inform the design of doctoral researcher induction programmes. Combining the results of a [systematic review \(Jackman et al., 2021a\)](#) with qualitative data, we partnered with the study participants to develop guidelines that set out five key principles for higher education institutes to consider when developing doctoral induction programmes (Figure 1). You can read the full co-design paper online [by clicking this link \(Jackman et al., 2021b\)](#).

**Figure 1: Principles for inductions to support doctoral researchers**



## Using the 5 Principles to Support Doctoral Researchers

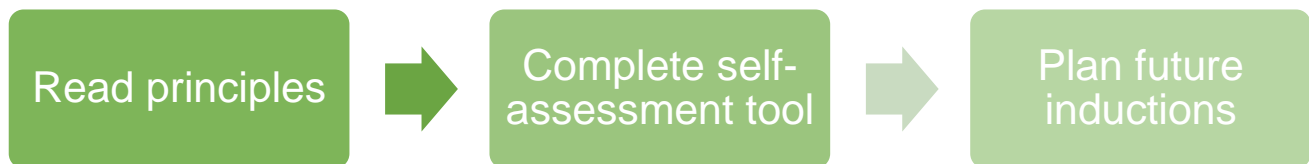
Details on the aim, recommended practice, and strategies for each of the five principles are presented in Table 1. In line with the emphasis placed on engaging stakeholders involved in doctoral support across the institution in our study, we also include a matrix detailing potentially relevant stakeholders for each strategy (Table 2).

### **Self-Assessment Tool**

Based on recommendations from our co-design research (Jackman et al., 2021b), we have created a self-assessment tool to enable universities to review and understand how their current doctoral researcher inductions align with the five principles, identify areas for improvement, and plan for future inductions (Figure 2). The tool has been designed based on the actionable strategies (Table 1) and implementation considerations generated through our research. The tool can be revisited as many times as you like to evaluate progress over time and can be downloaded from our project website page:

<https://lincn.ac/phdinduction>

Figure 2: Step-by-step guide for using the self-assessment tool.



### **Engaging Stakeholders in Planning and Implementation**

We encourage universities to tailor their use of the five principles to account for institutional, programme, and doctoral researcher circumstances. Similar to our co-design study, we recommend that doctoral support teams work in partnership with stakeholders involved in supporting doctoral researchers while planning inductions. Likewise, doctoral researchers possess lived experiences that could contribute greatly to the design and delivery of induction activities. For example, more advanced doctoral researchers could contribute to inductions by sharing stories about their experiences of doctoral study with new entrants, while their reflections on doctoral study at the institution could help to shape the design of various strategies that are implemented. Institutions should also engage with groups that can be under-represented to ensure supports are accessible to all doctoral researchers, placing equality, diversity, and inclusion at the heart of doctoral researcher support. These groups could include doctoral researchers who are international students, disabled, from minority ethnic groups, identify as LGBTQ, study part-time, have caring responsibilities, or are distance learners.

### **Sharing Practice and Understanding Impact**

We are inviting universities to read, consider, and use our findings to inform the design of doctoral researcher inductions. To help us understand how the findings are influencing practice, we want to hear about how the principles are being used, collate this information, and share experiences to benefit future inductions. Details on how you can contribute are available via our project website page <https://lincn.ac/phdinduction>.

**Table 1: Principles for inductions to support mental health and wellbeing in doctoral researchers (DRs)**

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Recommended practices or strategies</b>	<b>Description of recommended practices or strategies</b>
<b>Peer connections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help doctoral researchers to develop connections, feel part of the doctoral researcher community, and get support from peers</li> </ul>	Pre-arrival socialisation activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schedule virtual activity/activities that allows current DRs in a department to connect with new DRs before arrival (e.g., can discuss mutual interests, ask questions about accommodation, societies etc.)</li> </ul>
		Induction socialisation activity (department/lab level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schedule activities that allow new DRs to connect with new and more advanced DRs, and have an opportunity to listen to insights from current DRs about the challenges of doctoral study and advice on overcoming these (e.g., as part of face-to-face or via online sessions)</li> <li>• Encourage / provide platforms for DRs to continue to connect with other new and more advanced DRs after induction (e.g., Microsoft Teams group)</li> </ul>
		Regular peer group activities throughout the first year (and beyond)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Run engaging activities (e.g., in-person and virtual activities) that encourage participation (e.g., writing groups, coffee mornings) and are accessible (e.g., for international students, distance learners)</li> <li>• Continue to encourage the use of “spaces” (e.g., virtual, physical) for doctoral researchers to connect</li> </ul>
		Peer supporter scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pair/group new DRs with more advanced peers (e.g., before arrival, point of contact in the first year) – viewed as especially important in the first six months (e.g., before formal assessment points)</li> </ul>
<b>Supervisor relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop high-quality supervisor-researcher relationships that help DRs to obtain the support needed to address challenges</li> </ul>	Develop relationship with supervisor(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect via regular, weekly/fortnightly meetings at the beginning</li> <li>• Supervisors to provide direction and reassurance in the early stages (e.g., reinforce progress made and identify opportunities to create perceptions of progress)</li> </ul>
		Embed recommended practice into supervisor training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build training for supervisors into existing supervisory training. Such training could aim to help supervisors:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the distinction between mental health/illness and wellbeing, the basics of self-care and academic well-being, their role with regards to mental health and wellbeing</li> <li>• Clarify boundary/expectations regarding mental health and wellbeing concerns</li> <li>• Know how to have conversations around wellbeing and how to respond to concerns</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Develop a toolkit for interactions with DRs (e.g., clarify expectations, working style, build a timeline, clarify what supervisors can/cannot offer, managing supervisory change, strength-based supervisory approach, guidance on feedback, importance of reassurance in the opening stages, working with international DRs, equality, diversity, and inclusion in supervision) and create mechanisms to facilitate continual development of supervisory practice (e.g., resources, guides, FAQs forum, updating of training)</li> </ul>

**Table 1 (continued): Principles for inductions to support mental health and wellbeing in doctoral researchers (DRs)**

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Recommended practices or strategies</b>	<b>Description of recommended practices or strategies</b>
<b>Student services advice and support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise awareness of support available, common concerns for doctoral researchers, and strategies to promote mental health and wellbeing</li> </ul>	Introduction to student support activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform DRs of supports available to them (e.g., wellbeing, finance, career advice, English language centre, learning support) and how to access these</li> <li>• Highlight the importance of protecting mental health and wellbeing during the doctoral journey</li> </ul>
		Website and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include a dedicated area on student support/wellbeing site for DRs</li> <li>• Create resources outlining practical tips on time management, self-care (e.g., exercise, taking time out, engaging in hobbies, learning coping strategies, advice on managing work-life balance).</li> </ul>
		Regular student support activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work in collaboration with other staff to run activities that are proactive, positive, and practical (e.g., managing work-life balance, working with supervisors, time management)</li> <li>• Harness regular “touch point” opportunities to interact with DRs (e.g., through existing peer support or training initiatives, newsletters) to disseminate reminders of support available</li> </ul>
<b>Information &amp; resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get access to relevant information and aid familiarisation with new institution and mode of study</li> </ul>	Pre-arrival and arrival information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide new DRs with a checklist of information needed, details on orientation/induction activities, list of societies, and information on student services (e.g., medical centre registration)</li> </ul>
		Easy-to-navigate website with relevant resources and links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a list of points of contact and a “who’s who?” webpage detailing names of key contacts at the institution and what they should be contacted for</li> <li>• Outline key information on the university (e.g., library, parking, facilities, ethics etc.)</li> <li>• Presents general content regarding processes and regulations, including a timeline (i.e., DR journey map and handbook), links to initiatives for DRs (e.g., societies, training and development opportunities, peer support, career advice), and a section with FAQs</li> </ul>
		Long and thin induction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide an overview of processes and regulations – and access to resources that are immediately important - at the start, in a manner that is easy to understand</li> <li>• Distribute information that DRs need to know over time and at relevant points during the journey</li> </ul>
<b>Training &amp; development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify areas for development and training opportunities</li> </ul>	Development needs analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess development needs based on assessment aligned with researcher development framework, with input from supervisory team (e.g., discipline-specific knowledge)</li> </ul>
		Doctoral development programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create/direct to resources that will help DRs to build relevant skills, knowledge etc. in line with identified development needs, considering both in-person and/or online activities (e.g., research project management, time management, networking, presentations), with group training offering opportunities for peer networking</li> <li>• Offer opportunity for mentoring and highlight career support available</li> </ul>

**Table 2**

Overview of proposed contributors for each strategy.

Personnel	Pre-arrival socialisation activity	Induction socialisation activity (department/lab level)	Regular peer group activities throughout the first year (and beyond)	Peer supporter scheme	Meeting(s) to initiate relationship with supervisor(s)	Develop relationship with supervisor(s)	Embed recommended practice into supervisor training	Introduction to student support activity	Website and resources	Regular student support activities	Pre-arrival and arrival information	Easy-to-navigate website with relevant resources and links	Long and thin induction	Development needs analysis	Doctoral development programme
Doctoral researcher departmental/college leads	X	X	X				X					X	X		X
Student's union			X					X	X		X	X			
Doctoral researcher reps	X	X	X												
Early career researchers		X		X											X
Doctoral school			X	X			X		X	X		X	X	X	X
Department/lab staff		X													
More advanced doctoral researchers	X	X		X											
Supervisors		X			X	X	X							X	X
Student support services							X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Student wellbeing							X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Digital learning/website team							X		X			X			X
Administration staff								X	X		X	X			
Researcher development team							X	X	X		X	X		X	X
Library								X	X		X	X			X
Career's support								X	X		X	X			X

Note: These suggestions are indicative only and should be considered at institutional level.