

How to nurture socio-emotional intelligence in doctoral students

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Academics are increasingly expected to demonstrate impact from research to solve global challenges and inform practice. This can mean engaging in public policy, sharing our research with others and ensuring that we support students effectively. Now, this is not something that just happens. It requires careful consideration and an understanding of how to translate research into policy, how to communicate well, and how to effectively manage barriers that researchers may face along the way.

To prepare doctoral students to share their work meaningfully, there should be opportunities for them to develop their socio-emotional intelligence whilst completing their PhD studies and early into their research career. As early career researchers (ECRs) grow in confidence, self-esteem, social awareness and resilience, they may feel more confident and willing to engage with public policy. Developing their self-awareness and academic identity will help them to assert how their research can impact public policy.

Of course, doctoral students and ECRs will already have aspects of socio-emotional intelligence – we all do. But developing them further can only be positive and enrich their personal and professional experiences. It can enhance their motivation to actively contribute to policy discussions, to build effective networks, and to assert their academic identity, as they get to know themselves better, whilst making a positive impact in the world.

In my latest paper, I discuss four main interventions that can have a positive impact on the development of socio-emotional intelligence among ECRs. These are based on my research around socio-emotional intelligence in higher education and humanising practice.

1. Provide a positive welcome and early support. This means making sure that everything is ready for a doctoral student's arrival and there is a programme of support for their academic and personal skills, so they develop a sense of belonging early on, and feel secure and confident as they begin this learning journey.

This should be supported by everyone within an institution. Central teams like the doctoral college or student services must make sure that students can register easily and have access to everything they need to succeed in their studies. Things that we might take for granted such as library support or reliable internet access can make a significant difference to a students' sense of belonging. Departments should arrange content specific inductions for doctoral students and key academics should be available early to support doctoral students in settling in. Activities that could be considered are:

- Doctoral inductions where new PhD students can ask questions and get an understanding of who does what within the programme;

- Easily accessible well-being, support and academic resources and access to all relevant online platforms such as electronic learning resources, e-learning systems, interactive apps and the university's own virtual learning environment;
- Welcome activities designed to integrate new doctoral students within the school or programme;
- A programme of academic skills support;
- Clear signposting to academic, study skills and well-being support available at the university;
- Specific support for groups such as international students and those from marginalised communities to support them in integrating more easily.
- A whole university approach where every member of staff feels their job is integral to the doctoral students' settling in. Even those not directly involved in the process should feel able to signpost students to the right place, and always welcome students with kindness, warmth and a positive approach.

2. Encourage and support peer learning. Offer opportunities for doctoral students to learn with and from their peers as this will boost their skills and knowledge while developing empathy, social engagement and confidence. It prevents social isolation, which is often reported as a problem by doctoral students.

One approach is a weekly timetabled space where students from similar or different disciplines can meet and share their experiences throughout their journey. When I was doing my doctorate, I used to meet monthly with six doctoral students and two supervisors to talk about how we were doing and discuss any issues or concerns. Sometimes we would present our work or seek advice. Even though we were all doing very different doctorates in different fields, the journey, the stages and the milestones were similar, and we could learn from each other. I found it extremely useful. It helped us gain confidence in talking about our topic and prevented us feeling alone throughout the PhD journey.

Another way to facilitate peer learning is to have a programme of workshops throughout the year that students attend together. These could cover generic themes such as methodologies, literature reviews, epistemology, and many other things that all doctoral students will have to learn.

3. Develop effective supervisory relationships. Completing a PhD is a long journey and having the right support makes it easier to manage. As social beings, wired to connect, we learn and develop our own socio-emotional intelligence from others. Consequently, doctoral supervisors should role-model the attitudes and behaviours that they expect from their students. They should demonstrate self-awareness, kindness, consideration, compassion, confidence and the ability to manage emotive situations successfully. They should be able to manage conflict and to deliver constructive feedback with tact and a positive outlook.

Supervisors are much more than a font of knowledge, they should also be a source of personal and emotional support. As the relationship between doctoral students and supervisors shifts towards a more informal peer learning experience, it is not necessary or helpful for supervisors to be scary, unapproachable or unkind to command authority. We should aim to be the type of supervisor we had, if we were lucky as I was, or we wish we had.

4. Enable psychological safety in the spaces where doctoral students work and study. This allows them to make mistakes and learn from them, and to reflect on their own academic identity. This, in turn, has a positive impact on their experience and supports them in becoming confident academics who don't have to sacrifice well-being to achieve.

Ensure the physical spaces available to doctoral students are accessible, comfortable places where they feel at ease.

As part of this, provide environments and activities where doctoral students can practice the skills they need safely, without fear of failing. For example, carrying out mock presentations, mock VIVAs and other activities.

Doctoral students must feel able to ask questions and seek feedback without worrying they will be judged. Well delivered formative feedback and constructive criticism can make people feel safe. There is never a reason to be belittling, humiliating or degrading and feedback must always focus on the ECR's work. I know of supervisors who have made their doctoral students cry with nasty comments and who create a culture of fear. This is unacceptable and can do lasting damage to a students' sense of self.

Developing subject specific workshops related to socio-emotional intelligence can also provide psychological safety. Themes such as developing self-awareness, finding your motivation, managing emotions or building resilience can be useful for doctoral students throughout their journey as they build their academic identity.

In more formal activities such as a VIVA or other exams, examiners, whilst being assertive and sometimes challenging in their questions, should approach the process as a learning opportunity for the candidate and therefore be supportive, clear and compassionate. We have all been there and know how it scary it can be. So, what if we changed the culture and made it an energising, inspirational and engaging activity where the doctoral student can shine, even if they don't pass first time and have to make changes. They are more likely to learn from marks that are framed as a development opportunity and not a deficiency.

Socio-emotional intelligence should be considered integral to the development of doctoral students. This would result in more confident, resilient and courageous ECRs who may go on to be excellent supervisors and enable a positive doctoral culture.

This advice is taken from Camila Devis-Rozental's 2023 paper, [Developing the Socio-Emotional Intelligence of Doctoral Students](#).

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