

Is it time to take PhD supervisions out of the classroom?

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Doctoral supervisors are often said to “go the extra mile” for their students, but few academics will do this literally.

Sarahjane Jones, research fellow at [Birmingham City University](#)’s Centre for Health and Social Care Research, is, however, one academic who can actually make that claim.

While most [scholars](#) confine one-on-one tutorials to their office, Jones prefers to take her PhD charges on a walk along Birmingham’s canal towpaths to discuss their research, covering three to four miles in a typical “walking supervision”.

“When we have spent a day at a desk looking at data and it’s not telling us what we want, we sometimes need a walking supervision to shake off that annoyance,” explains Jones, a medical scientist who now studies the delivery of health services in the community.

“The walking supervisions give us the freedom to explore the topic in hand with a total lack of inhibition – you can really discuss things deeply and get to the root of problems,” she adds.

Distancing themselves from the traditional academic milieu also allows [PhD](#) students to open up to their supervisors and reveal more of their personality, knowing that they will not be overheard by staff or students, Jones adds.

“Students can genuinely be themselves on the walking supervisions – they can be angry about things or laugh about things as there is just the two of us there,” she says.

“That time is also dedicated to the student as there is no email, no ringing phone or people popping in and out of the office, so I think they prefer it for that reason.”

The walking tutorials did, however, require Jones to defy, to a certain extent, the traditional marker of academic productivity, she admits.

“We can often feel the need to count our [productivity](#) in terms of how long we spend at our desks, but our most creative ideas don’t always arise in this environment.

“My own supervisor suggested I allocate one day a week just to thinking time, which was actually impossible for me to do. But I suppose it was valuable advice, and it’s what I want to encourage,” Jones adds.

Jones’ walking tutorials, which take place come rain or shine, are just one of the unusual PhD supervision practices found in the nearly 200 nominations submitted for *Times Higher Education*’s inaugural Outstanding Research Supervisor of the Year award, whose shortlist will be announced on 1 September.

Other unusual [practices](#) employed by nominees include organising a rendition of the Julie Andrews song *I Have Confidence* from *The Sound of Music* on the eve of all students’ vivas – an annual tradition organised by Enlli Thomas, head of [Bangor University](#)’s School of Education.

Several PhD students also spoke highly of supervisors who would move academic discussions to more informal settings, such as a cafe or a pub, thereby allowing group talks to flow more freely.

“These informal reading and discussion groups are much more part of the PhD culture in the US, where I did my doctoral studies,” explains Peter Hegarty, professor in the [University of Surrey](#)’s department of psychology, who was also nominated for the *THE* award, partly because of his support for [encouraging](#) PhDs to discuss issues among

themselves.

“I’ve always wanted to move away from the one-on-one academic culture, if only because it takes a bit of pressure off me to be the professor up on a pedestal,” he adds.

Taking the debate to the pub is also a good way to build a sense of academic community and to network with academics from different departments, Hegarty says.

“We don’t have a lot of humanities here at Surrey, so these meetings give students the chance to engage with other interdisciplinary studies,” he says.

These discussions among fellow students away from the traditional PhD supervisions are often the most useful for their development as academics, Hegarty argues.

“It doesn’t fit within the standard Quality Assurance Agency model of teaching, but these informal discussions push PhD students to think about why they are interested in a project or in being an intellectual.”

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