



Enhancing Support for Supervisors

Background

The National Academy for Integration of Research and Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL) has funded a major project to develop a national framework to support supervisors of postgraduate research students. The [Project Steering Group](#) carried out a survey of academic and research communities to gather their opinions and inputs regarding key priorities in this area.

The NAIRTL survey was distributed to the five NAIRTL partner institutes on the 13th of February 2009. A total of 402 responses were gathered and the following is an overview of the findings of the survey. The results of the survey will be used in the development of a framework to provide support for supervisors of postgraduate students.

Overview of respondents

The majority (86%) of respondents are supervisors and academic staff members (Figure 1). Almost half of the respondents work in the area of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), while 37% work in the Humanities and Social sciences (HSS) and 15% work in Medicine and Health (Figure 2). 50% of respondents have been involved in academia for more than 11 years and a further third for 5-10 years (Figure 3).

Main findings

1: There was broad agreement with initiatives that provided training or support for supervisors

The majority of respondents were in agreement that there should be defined criteria for supervisor suitability, a mentoring programme for new supervisors, the provision of a supervisory team, and training for inexperienced and experienced supervisors (Figure 5). Respondents who were new to supervision (i.e. less than 3 years experience) were the most in favour of mentoring programmes and training for new supervisors. Respondents with less than eleven years academic experience were more inclined towards attending a supervisor training session when compared with those longer in academia (46% strongly agree versus 26% of staff answering greater than eleven years academic experience). The accreditation of training programmes was neither supported nor rejected (Figures 8 & 9). Respondents working in the area of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) favoured setting defined criteria for the suitability of supervisors and providing mentoring programmes for new supervisors. Respondents from the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) and respondents from medicine and health area (nurses, occupational therapists, doctors, dentists etc) agreed with initiatives similar to the majority (Figures 14, 15 & 16).

2: Respondents varied in what they considered to be high or low priority for training but the majority of training areas were considered moderately important

Respondents considered the following three training areas as high priority: writing the thesis and publications, providing constructive criticism and fostering independence, and managing a research group (Figure 6). Training in managing IP and training in being a member of a supervisory committee were considered the lowest priority. The following were considered medium priority: Establishing Boundaries and Expectations; Student Recruitment; Conceptions of Research; Dispute Resolution; Preparing Students for Examination; Dealing with a Student's Personal Difficulties; Procedures and Policies in Your Institution; Acting as an Internal Examiner for Theses; Acting as an External Examiner for Theses; and Inter-Institutional Graduate Training or Supervision. Staff with more than 11 years of experience in academia prioritized less training on student recruitment and inter-institutional graduate training or supervisor than their less experienced colleagues (Figures 10 & 11). STEM respondents gave highest priority to managing a research group, while HSS respondents and respondents from medicine and health area prioritised the same training as the majority (Figures 17, 18 & 19).

3: Respondents identified the need for both generic and discipline specific workshops

Generic workshops were considered the most suitable delivery method for the majority of suggested training areas. Managing a research group, conceptions of research and writing a thesis and publications were considered to be more suitable for discipline specific workshops. Online courses were considered most suitable for the delivery of courses and training relating to student recruitment, managing intellectual property and an institutions procedures and policies (Figure 7). Respondents with less than 11 years academic experience were more in favour of the use of online course to deliver training modules than their more experienced colleagues. They identified the suitability of modules including student recruitment, conceptions of research, managing intellectual property, managing procedures and policies, acting as an external examiner, and inter-institutional graduate training or supervision for online delivery. Their more experienced colleagues were more in favour of generic workshops and case studies for delivering these training courses (Figures 12 & 13). The respondents showed varying support for particular methods for delivering training according to disciplinary area. STEM respondents showed slightly greater support for mentoring, while HSS respondents showed slightly greater support overall for generic workshops and case studies (Figures 20, 21 & 22).

Comments & Suggestions

Respondents were encouraged to make final comments regarding the formulation of a national framework for the development of supervisors. Almost half of the responses (n=99) were positive about a national framework while a third of respondents indicated that they would be supportive of a national framework provided it was flexible, optional, discipline specific, and was mindful of time pressures so that these were minimised in the delivery of the training (Table 2).

A number of suggestions were posted by respondents including:

- 1: Create a website/forum where advice regarding supervision could be gathered and helpful documents and links provided.
- 2: There should be information packs provided to newly recruited researchers and lecturers

Results

HEI	# responses
Cork Institute of Technology	34
NUI Galway	173
Trinity College Dublin	34
University College Cork	107
Waterford Institute of Technology	43
Other	12 (Teagasc, Tyndall, UL, UCD, TCD & DIT, UCC & CIT)

Table 1: Number of responses from each Higher Education Institute (n=402)

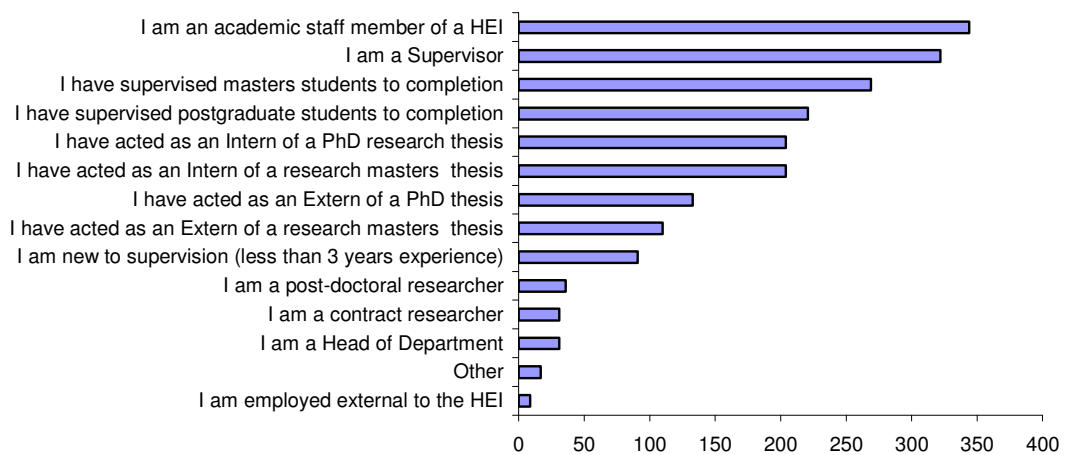


Figure 1: Overview of respondents' roles in relation to work and supervision (n=401)

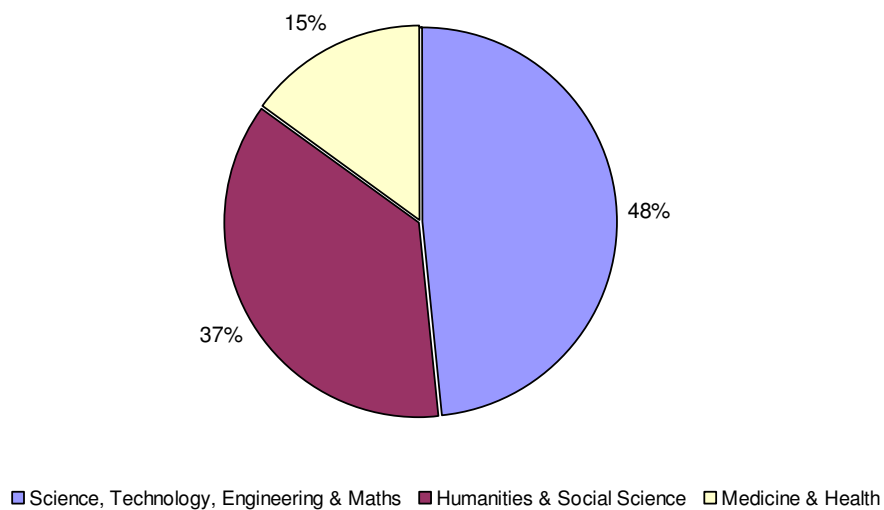


Figure 2: Respondents' discipline area (n=402)

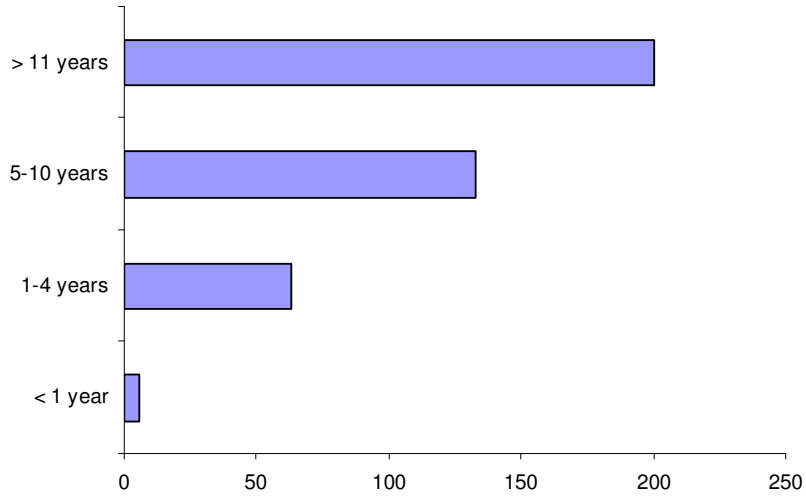


Figure 3: Years of academic experience held by respondents (n=402)

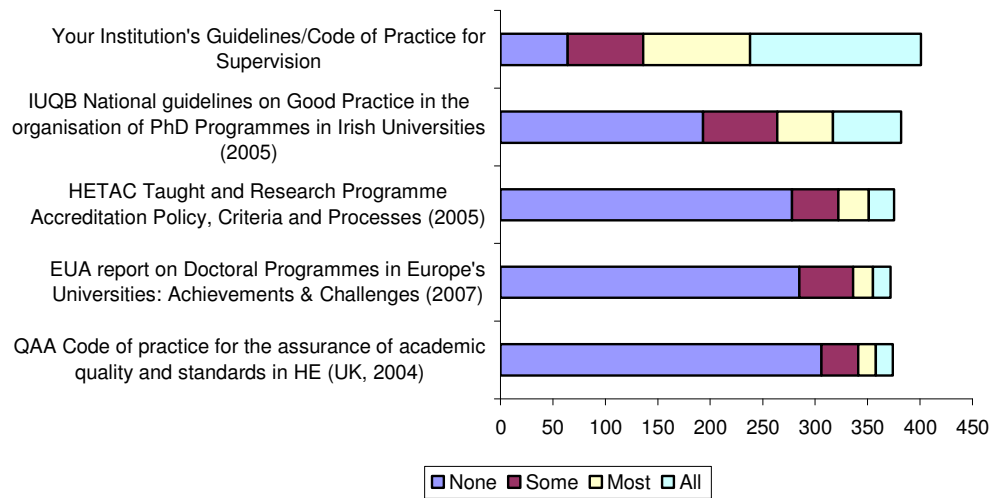


Figure 4: Respondents indicated how much they had read of supervisory guidelines published nationally and internationally (n=402)

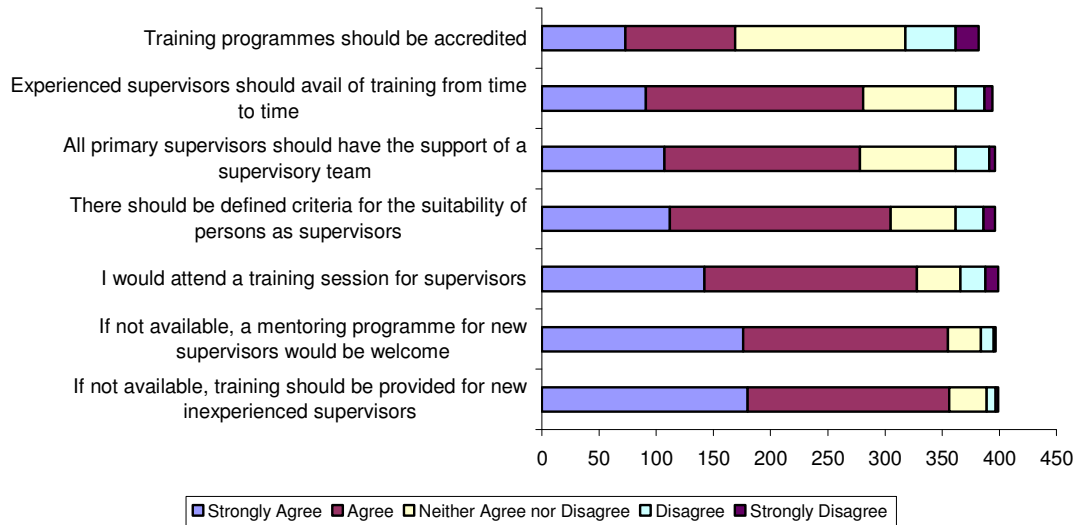


Figure 5: Respondents views on supervision and training (n=402)

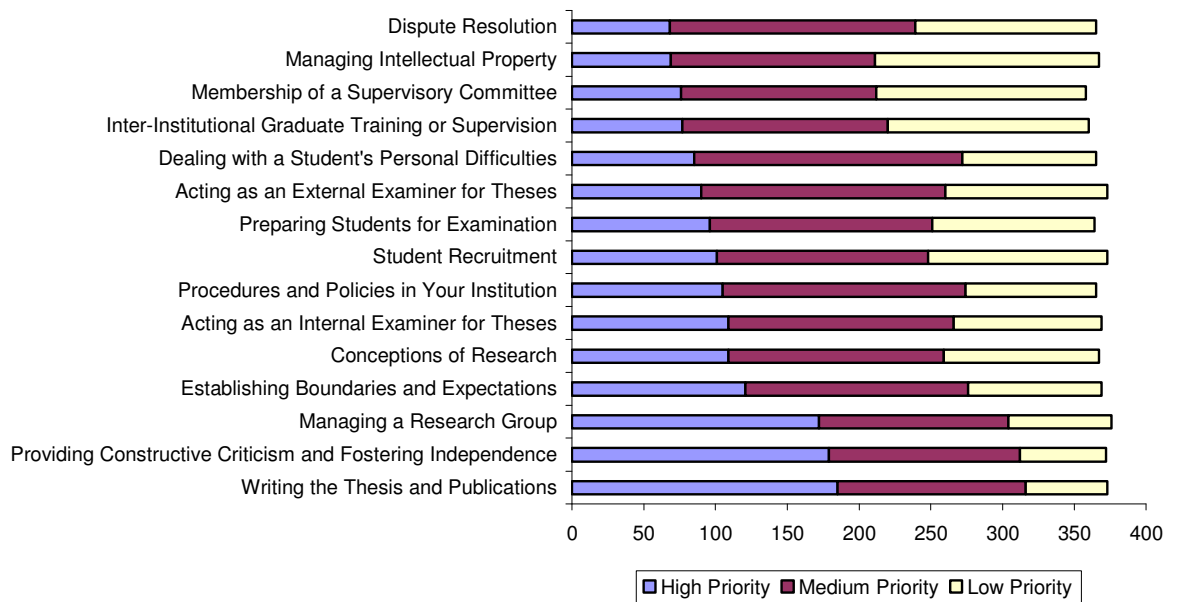


Figure 6: Respondents' ratings on the priority for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=393)

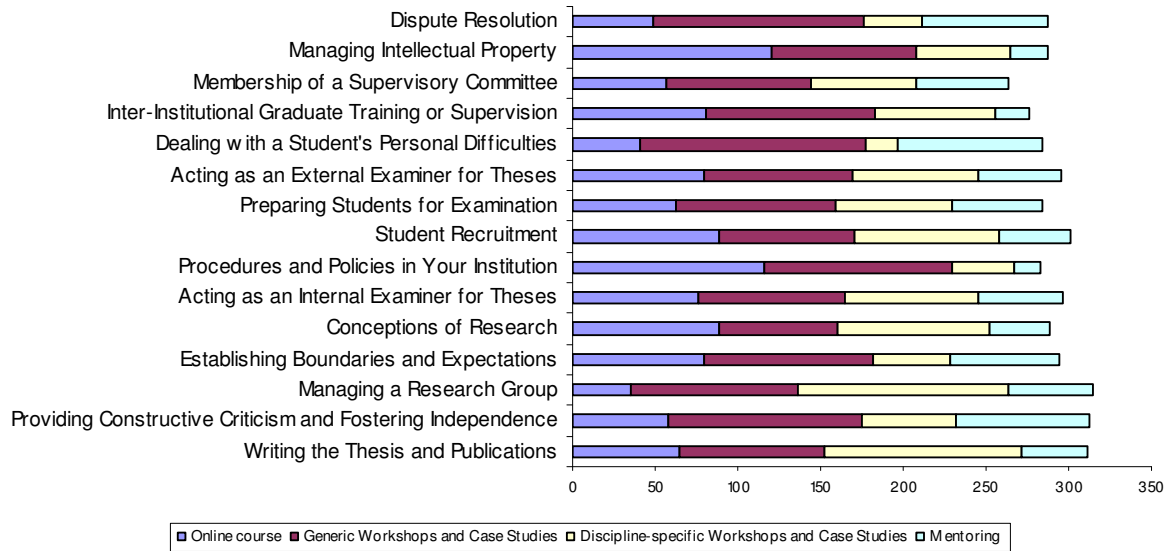


Figure 7: Respondents' choice of delivery method for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=393)

	Positive	Negative	Acceptable if*	Suggestions	Irrelevant
# of comments	43	11	34	8	3

Table 2: Respondents wrote comments relating to a national framework and these fell into 4 main categories (n=99)

* Provides sufficient support, programme is flexible, considerate of time pressures, minimal administration

Appendix A: Comparison of responses from respondents with >11 years academic experience and those with <11 years experience

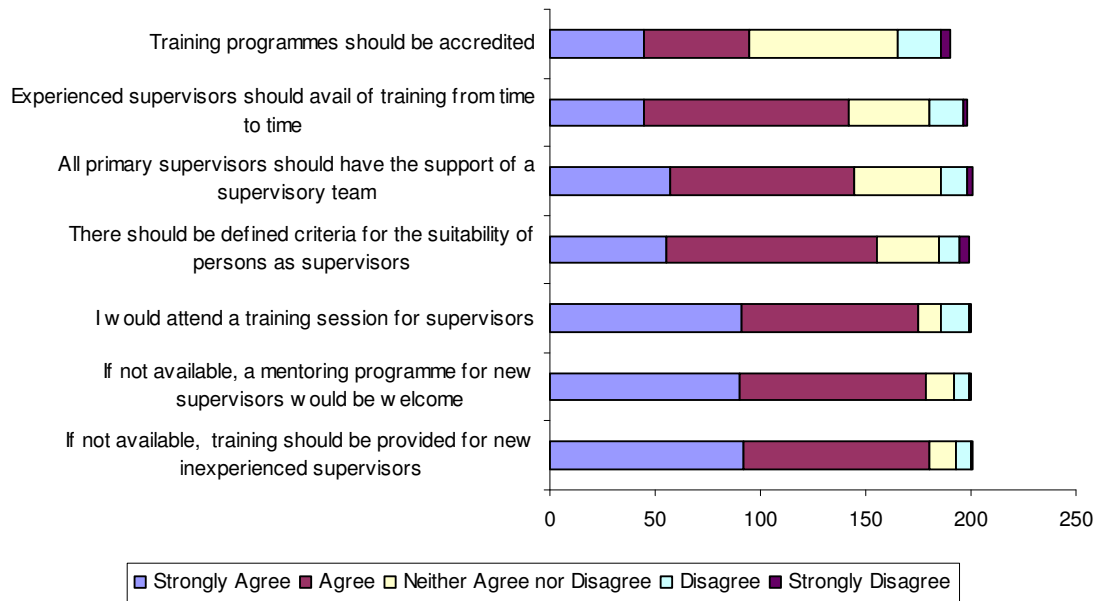


Figure 8: Respondents' views (<11 years experience) on supervision and training (n=202)

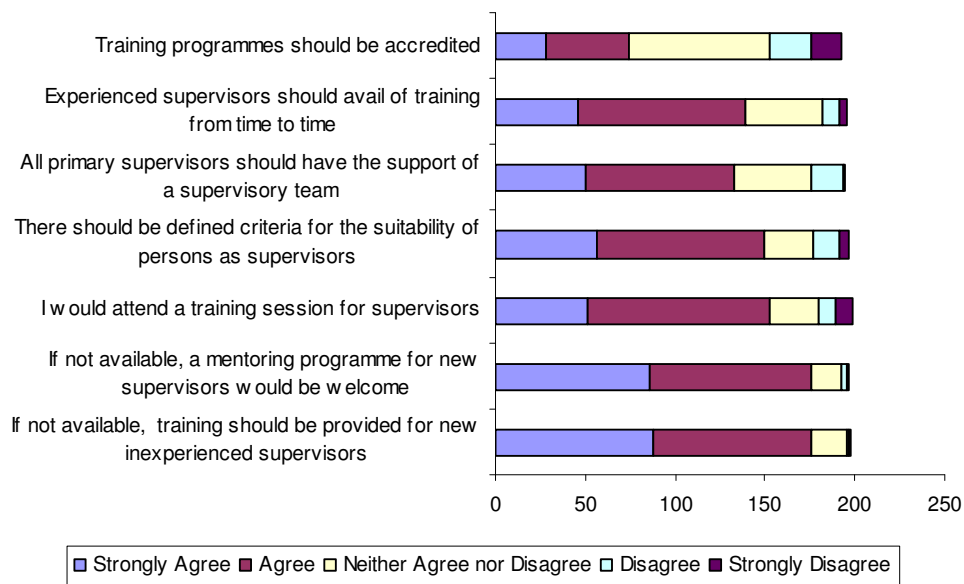


Figure 9: Respondents' views (>11 years experience) on supervision and training (n=200)

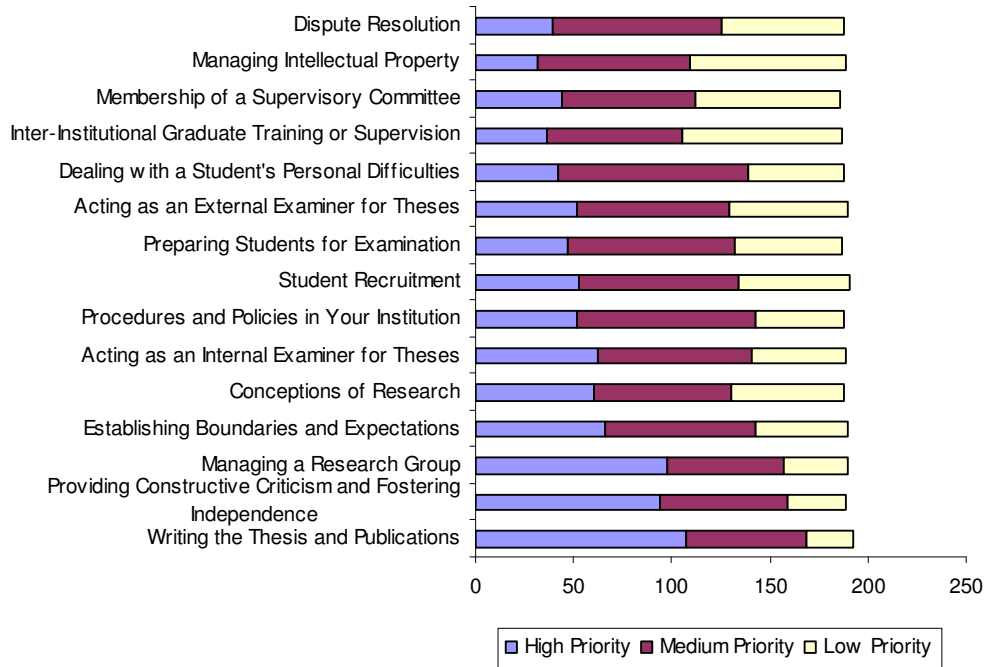


Figure 10: Respondents' ratings (<11 years experience) on the priority for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=202)

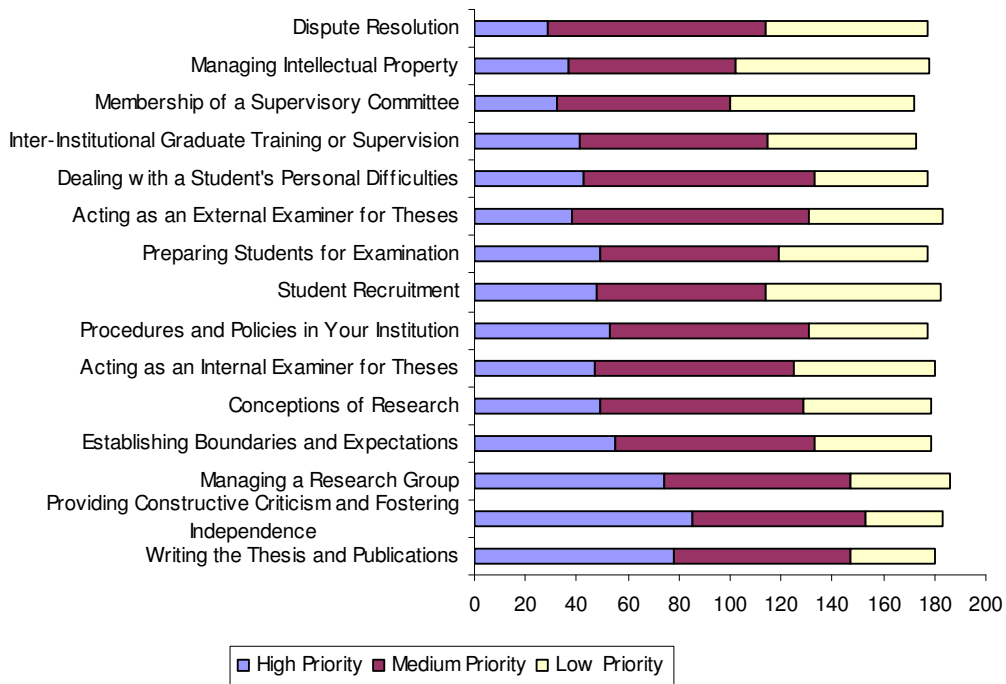


Figure 11: Respondents' ratings (>11 years experience) on the priority for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=200)

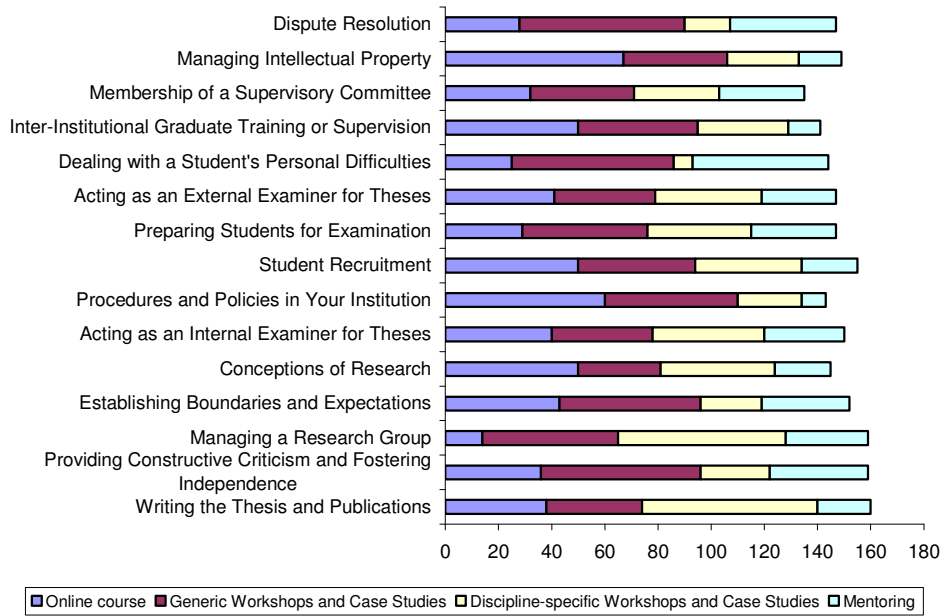


Figure 12: Respondents' choice (<11 years experience) of delivery method for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=202)

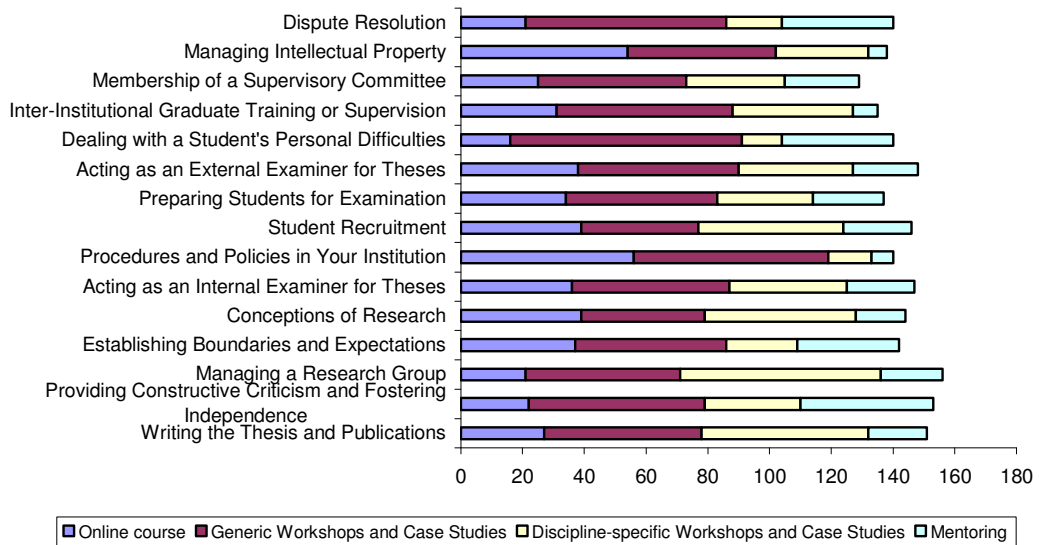


Figure 13: Respondents' choice (>11 years experience) of delivery method for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=200)

Appendix B: Comparison of responses between respondents working in varying disciplines (STEM, HSS or health and medicine)

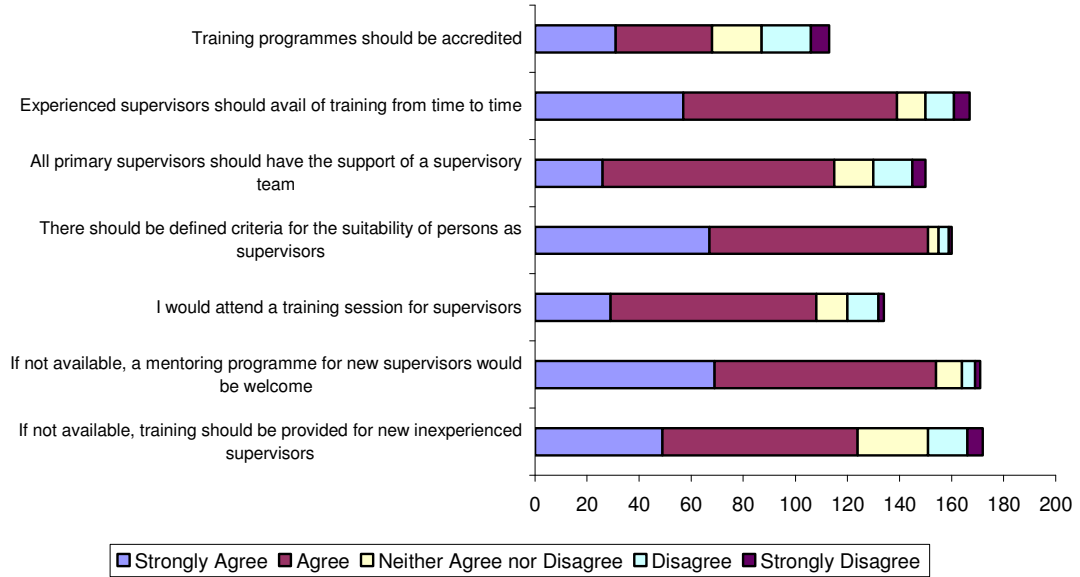


Figure 14: STEM respondents' views (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) on supervision and training (n=194)

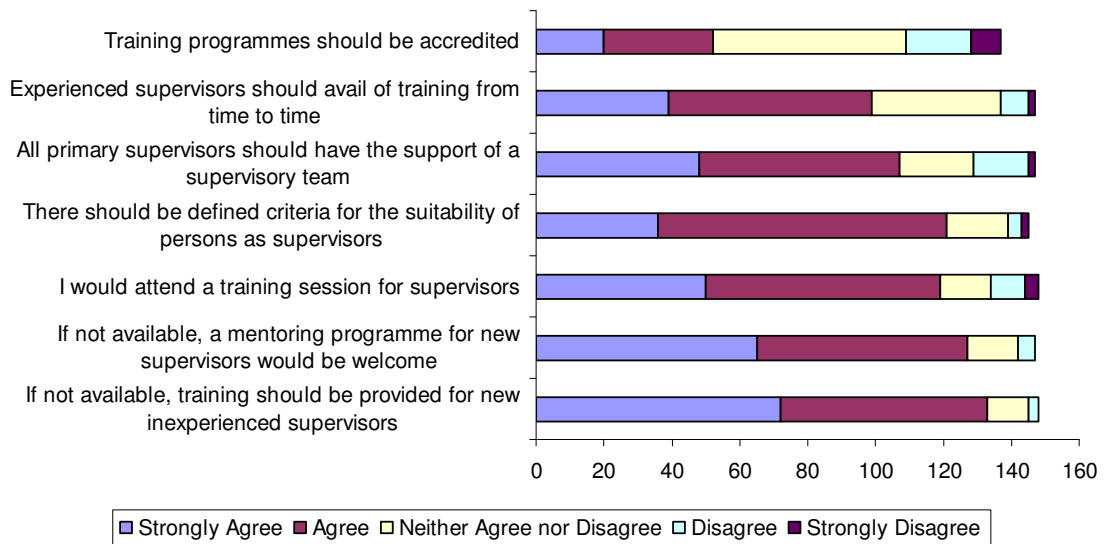


Figure 15: HSS respondents' views (Humanities and Social Science) on supervision and training (n=148)

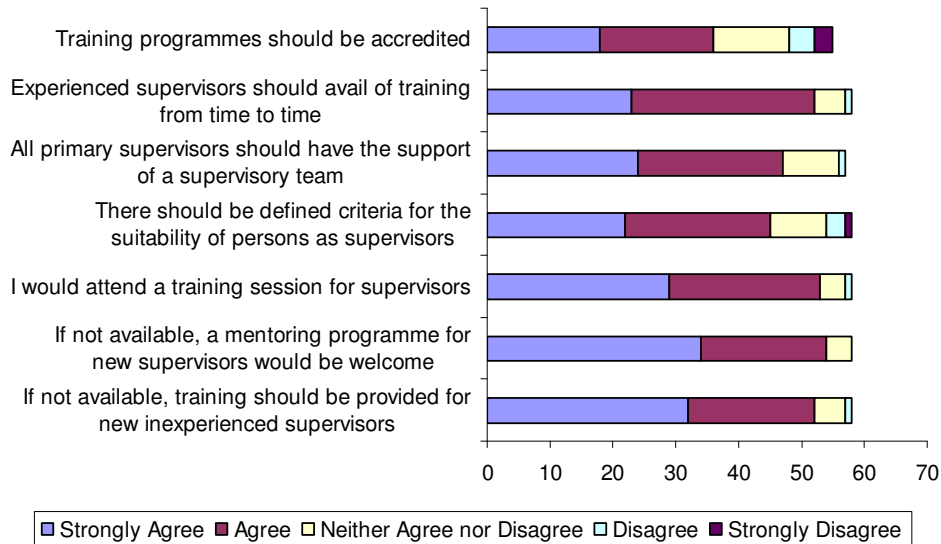


Figure 16: Respondents from medicine and health area's views on supervision and training (n=60) (Respondents include: nurses, doctors, occupational therapists, dentists, & speech therapists)

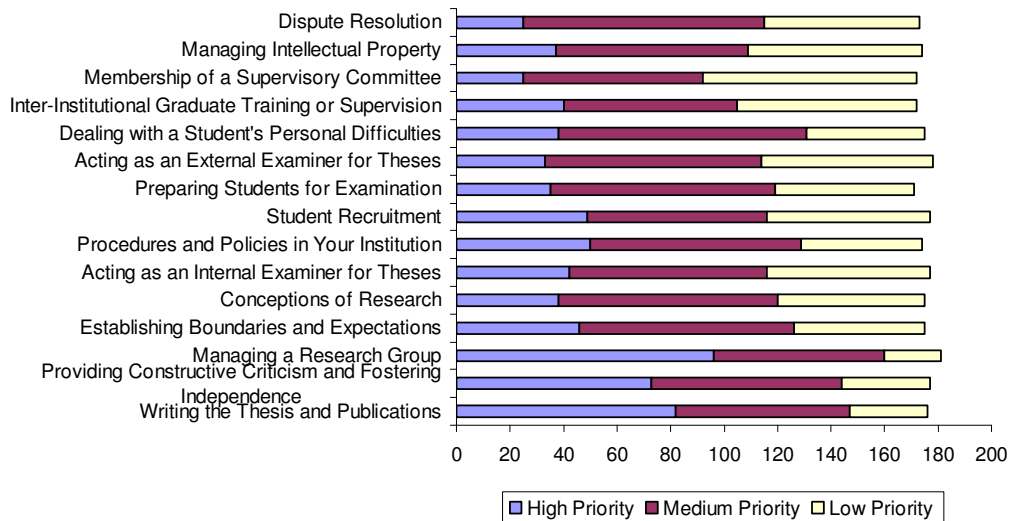


Figure 17: STEM respondents' ratings (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) on the priority for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=194)

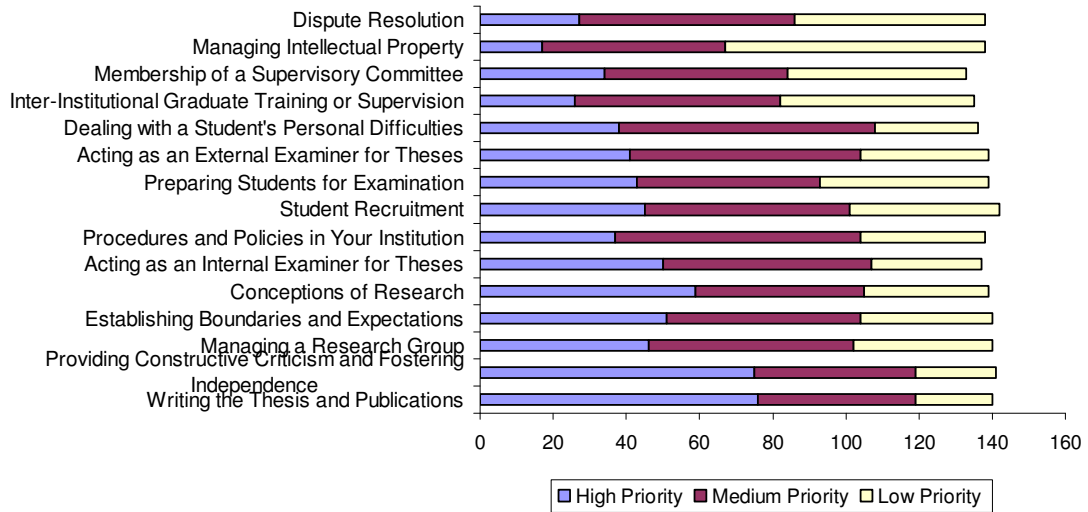


Figure 18: HSS respondents' ratings (Humanities and Social Science) on the priority for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=148)

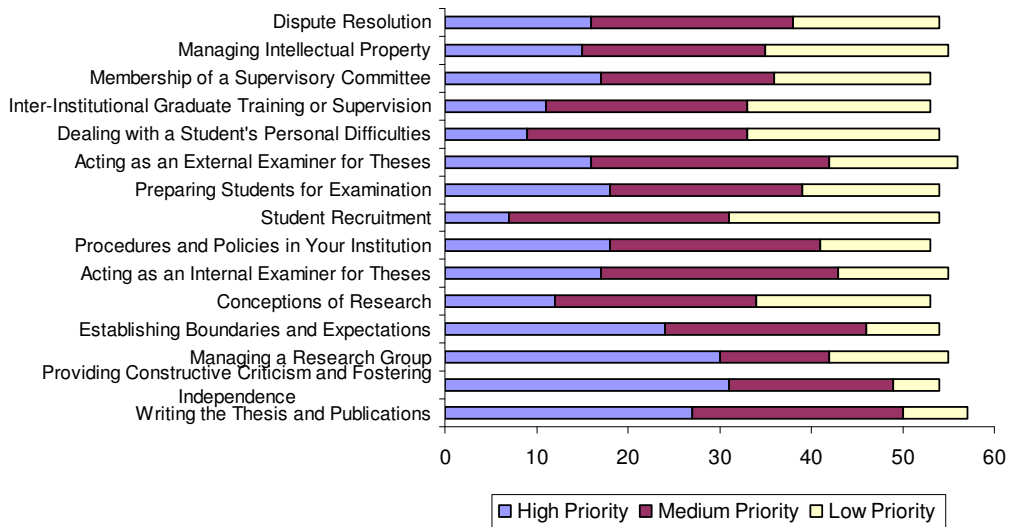


Figure 19: Respondents from medicine and health area's ratings on the priority for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=60)

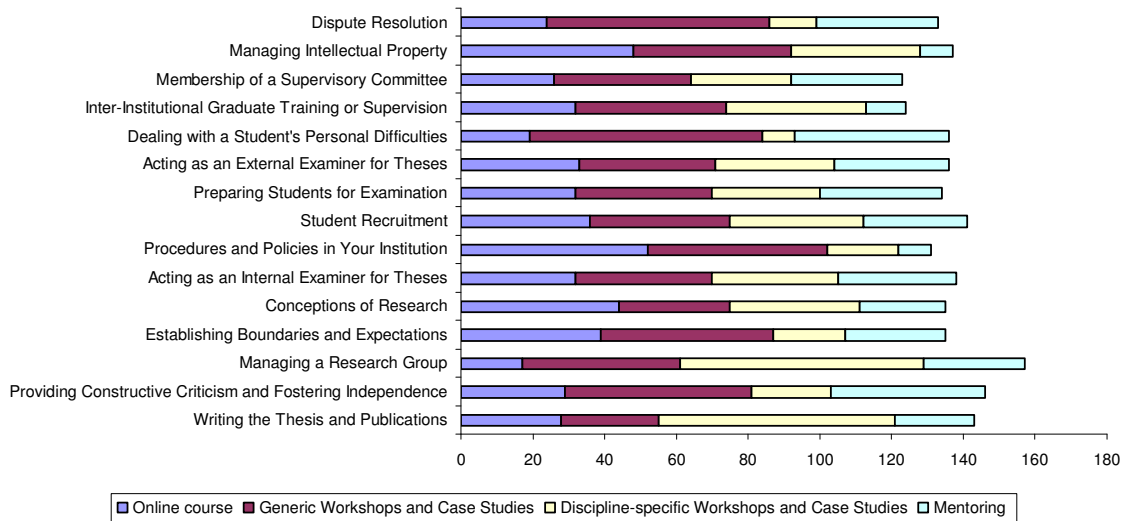


Figure 20: STEM respondents' choice (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) of delivery method for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=194)

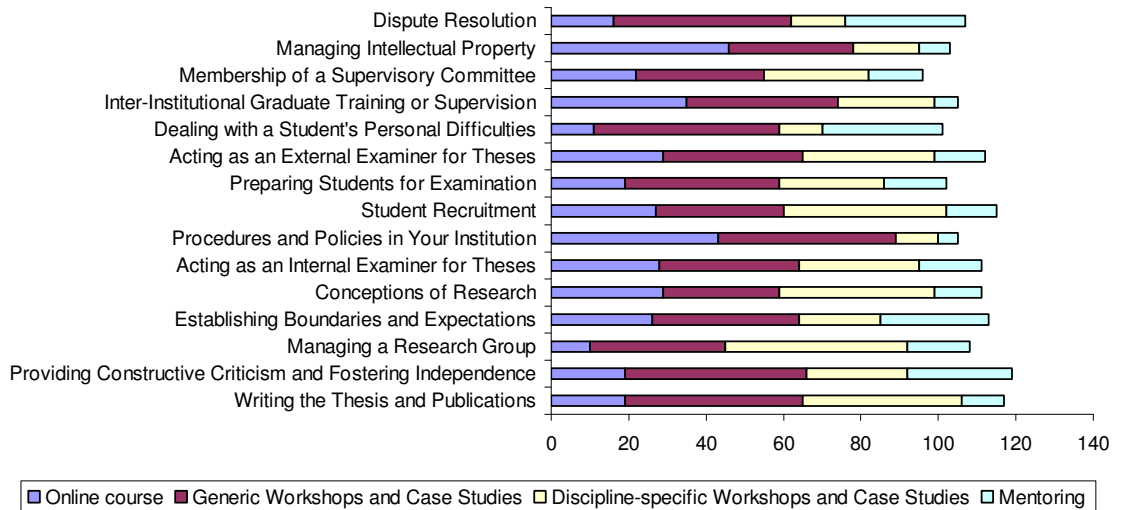


Figure 21: HSS respondents' choice (Humanities and Social Science) of delivery method for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=148)

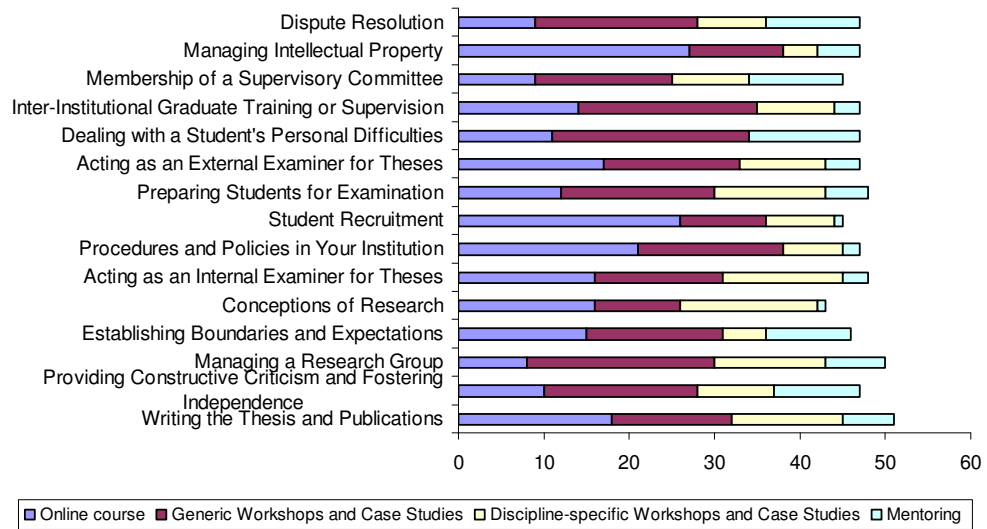


Figure 22: Respondents from medicine and health area's choice of delivery method for training in particular areas to meet their needs (n=60)