

A photograph of a modern glass-fronted building at the University of Derby, with several blue flags flying in front. In the foreground, there is a well-maintained garden with various plants, trees, and a small fountain. The scene is set against a clear blue sky.

**Development programmes
for new doctoral supervisors
– do they work?
Dr Sigrid Lipka**

An anecdote

An email exchange with Fred, an academic who recently completed our research supervisor training:

Subject: Research supervisor materials

Hi Sigrid,

On the recent Research Supervisor sessions you alerted us to a list of links to the various documents required through the PhD process.

I've been looking but can't find that resource - can you point me to it please.

I was looking for the current RD7 form - but it wasn't coming up on searches of the intranet. I'm sure it's me being dumb 😊

Kind regards, Fred Bloggs

Hi Fred, this should work: [useful web link]. Best wishes, Sigrid

Thanks Sigrid,

Easy when you know how!

Regards

Fred

What's the point of research supervisor trainings?

- The increasing need to deliver **research development programmes** is widely agreed upon
- What does it take to be a **good doctoral supervisor? WHO DECIDES:**
 - What good supervision looks like?
 - What we need to cover in supervisor trainings?
 - How we can best train new supervisors?
 - How we know that supervisor development trainings have worked?

The above anecdote suggests that the answers to these Q's might be quite different for supervisors as compared to their trainers!



What's the point of research supervisor trainings?



Given the **complex nature** of
doctoral supervision (e.g., Debowski, 2016; Hyatt,
2017; Lee, 2008; Peelo, 2011) &
supervisor trainings (e.g., McCulloch & Loeser, 2016;
Metcalf, (2007):



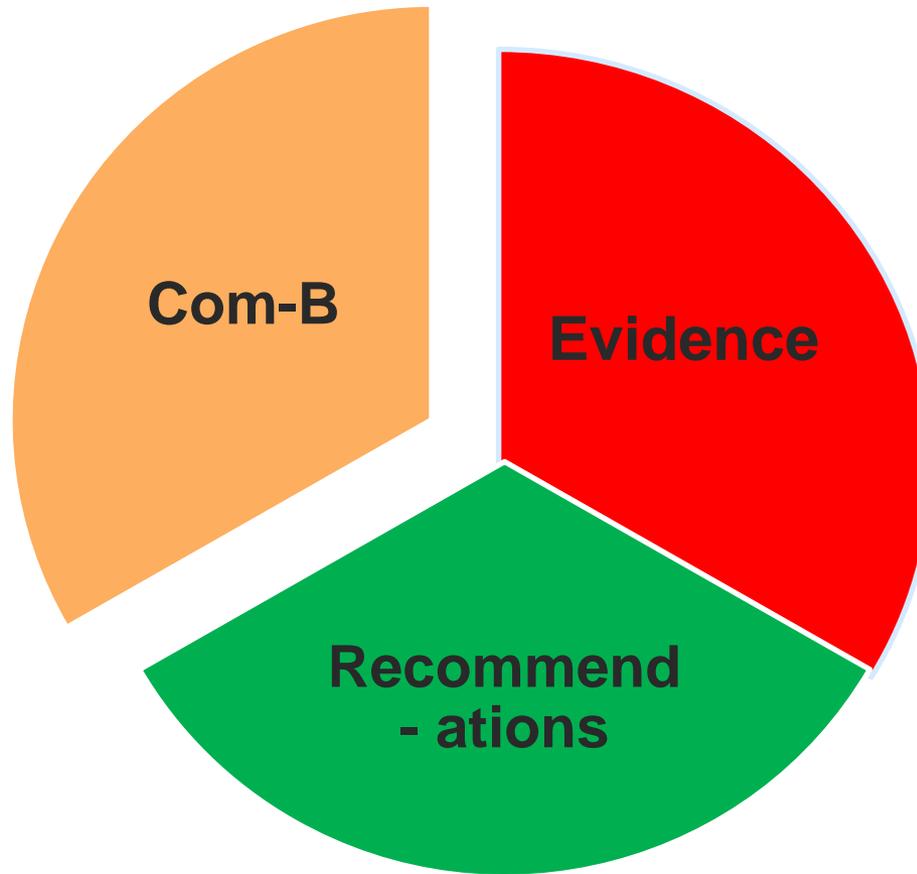
we need a simple framework



A simple framework: COM-B

- Based on psychology of **behaviour change** literature:
see Michie et al. 2011; Thaler, recent winner of Nobel prize for economics: we tend to choose what is easiest over what is wisest (*like Fred!*)
- Here **applied to supervisor trainings** in order to:
 - define the capabilities, opportunities and motivations that underpin supervisors' behaviour
 - design supervisory trainings
 - develop criteria for measuring and evaluating impact and effectiveness of trainings (*unlike Fred – more than just finding the right forms!?!*)

OUTLINE



FRAMEWORK: Behaviour Change

COM-B model: Any change to a desired behaviour can be described by **C, O, M:**

Example:

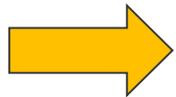
Go to the Zumba classes
to get fit



(Michie et al. 2011)

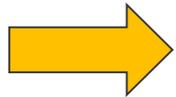
COM-B applied to research supervision training

COM-B often used in interventions to change problematic behaviours in different contexts such as writing appointment slips, paying taxes, prescribing fewer antibiotics, etc. (e.g., Behavioural Insight Team)



WHAT ARE THE **DESIRED BEHAVIOURs**:

- of doctoral students?
- **of research supervisors?**



WHAT ARE THE **DETERMINANTS** OF THESE BEHAVIOURs?

COM-B applied to research supervision training

DESIRED BEHAVIOURs of supervisors: USE COM-B to analyse the **MANY** tasks of supervisors in terms of **SPECIFIC BEHAVIOURS & their C, O, M's**

- teach student to write timely meeting minutes
- monitor progress
- improve institution's timely completion rates
- “ease the transition [of doctoral student] from novice to practitioner” (Pare in Thomson and Walker, 2010, pp. 113); build community of practice?
- enable student to produce original research
- help student connect with other academics
- give clear & timely feedback (but not too much!)
- maintain a good, trusting relationship (e.g., Cuccione)



COM-B applied to research supervision training

EVALUATION of trainings: USE COM-B to support & measure supervisors' new behaviours in terms of **C, O, M's**, in the **short- & long term**

- Has training improved **Capability** (skills) of supervisor & student? Often main focus (see titles of conference talks) – BUT is only ONE of three elements!
- **Opportunity**: Was training delivered at relevant time? Did supervisor have opportunity to apply new skills? What institutional (etc) support for research supervision was offered?
- **Motivation**: Has training (etc!) improved supervisor confidence & motivation?



OVERVIEW



EVIDENCE: SUPERVISOR TRAINING AT DERBY

Test application of COM-B:

➔ Development, implementation and evaluation of supervisor training at University of Derby

- Has run for 7 years: 3 hours on 3 afternoon sessions over 3 months
- Training Team consists of 4 core staff: experienced researchers / supervisors & guest speakers
- I got involved as an experienced researcher
 - *AND* because I had a great PhD supervisor and enjoyed my PhD experience at UCL tremendously!



EVIDENCE: SUPERVISOR TRAINING AT DERBY

Topics:

Supervisor tasks spanning the **full doctoral journey**, from deciding who to accept to post-exam dissemination & ongoing career support

Sources:

- Pedagogic & psychological **research** (e.g., biases in decision-making: Stanovich & West (2008))
- **Regulations:** local university, research councils, external bodies
- **Wider context**, such as stakeholder interests, funding, “global research education market” (McCallin & Nayar, 2012, p. 20)
- **Peer observation, problem-based learning & evaluation of case studies** related to tasks carried out by research supervisors (e.g., Phillips & Pugh, 2002)

EVIDENCE: SUPERVISOR TRAINING AT DERBY

Participation:

Increasing numbers, supervisors are from many different subject areas and types of doctoral degree:

N = 87 staff have completed the training so far

N = 61 filled in our training **feedback questionnaires** (70%)

Background: Derby has approximately 180 **active supervisors** across the university. **N.B.:** About 10 of these supervise more than 10 students!

EVIDENCE: SUPERVISOR TRAINING AT DERBY

CAPABILITY AND CONFIDENCE

- Great majority of supervisors reported that their expectations were met (or exceeded): reported **increased** knowledge of local regulations, skills, processes of supervision, increase in confidence.
- Many candidates mentioned **exchange & discussion** with colleagues from many different subject areas as very useful & motivational.
- Only few concrete suggestions for what else to include in the training – e.g., desire **for more exposure to actual supervisory practice** via videos, inviting doctoral students, inviting supervisors to talk about current supervisions.
- (Only) one candidate explicitly mentioned **research** into supervision processes as particularly interesting / helpful.
- Two participants **repeated** parts of the training once they acted as DoS.

EVIDENCE: SUPERVISOR TRAINING AT DERBY

OPPORTUNITY

- Several staff mentioned **workload / time management** issues.
- Some reported difficulty in accessing **electronic training resources**.
- **Forms** to be filled in by supervisors or students were felt by some to be excessive in number & confusing even after training, e.g., no information given on forms as to where to send them to.
- Engagement with **peer observation task** was fairly poor, despite stated desire for training activities aimed at bridging practice-knowledge gap (see Cuccione, 2016).

EVIDENCE - Summary

We CAN teach supervisors how to build good supervisory relationships by improving staff **capabilities (knowledge, skills)** and **confidence** (also see e.g., Kiley, 2011; McCulloch & Loeser, 2016; Peelo, 2011).

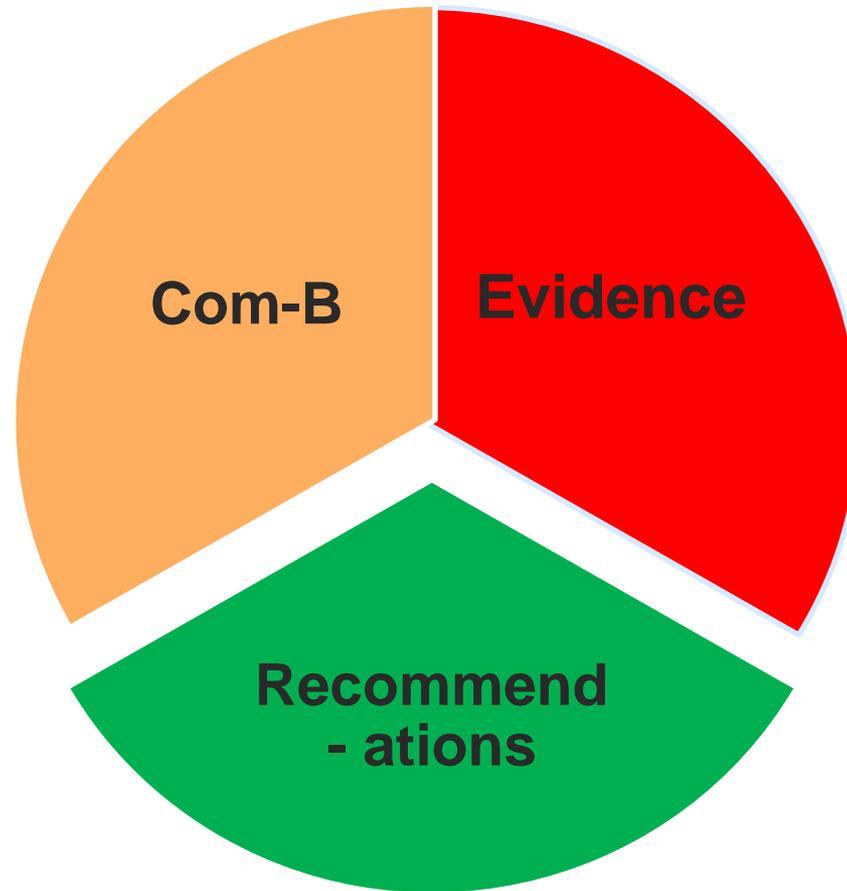
We need to improve **opportunities** for completing trainings:

- i) develop further support by institution / line managers / IT team
- ii) develop further activities to bridge practice-knowledge gap

We need to extend discussion with fuller range of stakeholders to define supervisor **behaviours & tasks** and **motivation**



OVERVIEW



RECOMMENDATIONS

- To design, deliver and evaluate supervisor trainings and support for doctoral students, we need a **theoretical framework** such as **COM-B**, borrowed from the psychology of behaviour change
- **ALL three components** of COM-B framework are important:
Capability, Opportunity, Motivation,
despite the example of Fred at the start &
despite focus on capabilities / skills in the field of researcher
education and development
- **COM-B** suggests that good supervision is not solely the responsibility of individual supervisors: **opportunities** provided by **institutional & wider context** also need to be in place



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