



PGR StudentSurvey.ie: Supervisor Numbers

Introduction

StudentSurvey.ie is co-sponsored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Universities Association (TUA), and Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn (AMLÉ), formerly the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). Development and implementation of PGR StudentSurvey.ie is driven by the intention to inform, support, and encourage enhancement discussions and activities throughout higher education institutions, and to inform national policy.

Higher education institutions have multiple sources of data about their students. The StudentSurvey.ie dataset is a valuable component of these sources, which are used in varying and increasingly sophisticated ways to identify good practice and to inform actions to improve the student experience and promote student success.

PGR StudentSurvey.ie invites responses from postgraduate research students (research masters and doctoral students) on a biennial survey cycle. PGR StudentSurvey.ie asks students directly about their experiences of higher education in Ireland, including their academic, personal, and social development. In 2025, 4,225 students from 17 higher education institutions (HEIs) participated – a response rate of 37%, well above the survey’s figure of 2,721 responses recorded in 2019 fieldwork.

Supervisor Numbers

In the PGR Student Survey, question B1 of Section B, explicitly asks respondents to state if they are being supervised by ‘One Supervisor’, ‘Two Supervisors’, or ‘Three or more Supervisors’.¹

The 2025 national report noted that the number of students with more than one supervisor had increased and that in considering the results of this question, it was particularly interesting to consider trend data for this question: In 2019, 48% of respondents had one supervisor and this has steadily declined to 37% in 2025. In 2019, 42% of respondents had two supervisors (rising to 45% in 2025). Finally in 2019, 10% of respondents had three supervisors, compared with 18% in 2025.

¹ Note it is a limitation of the question that it could be interpreted when answering to mean concurrent supervisor numbers, or number of supervisors over time. This does not invalidate this review but is worth reminding the reader of this fact. It is also worth adding that the data is descriptive and while highlighting correlations it cannot imply causation.

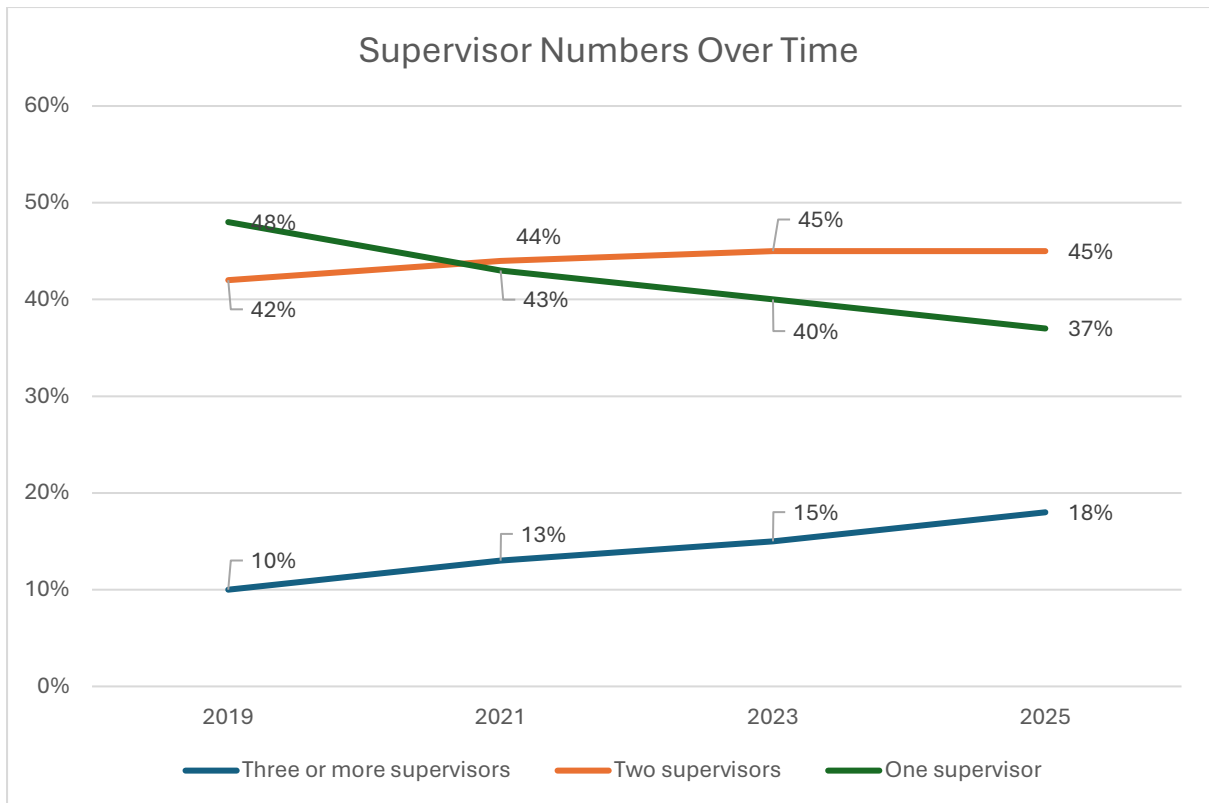


Figure 1. Change in supervision over time.

Respondents were more likely to have three or more supervisors if studying for a Level 10 degree than a Level 9 degree (18% vs 16%). But more strikingly, respondents were three times more likely to have three or more supervisors if they were in a Technological Higher Education Institution than a University (38% vs 13%).

Further Analysis

Looking at the 2025 data in further detail with weightings it's possible to discern a relationship between the number of supervisors and considerations of withdrawal.

As illustrated in Figure 2 below, when the number of supervisors rises to three, the learner is less likely to have seriously considered withdrawal than for those with one supervisor. Note however, the results for those having two supervisors suggest that they are most likely to have considered withdrawal.

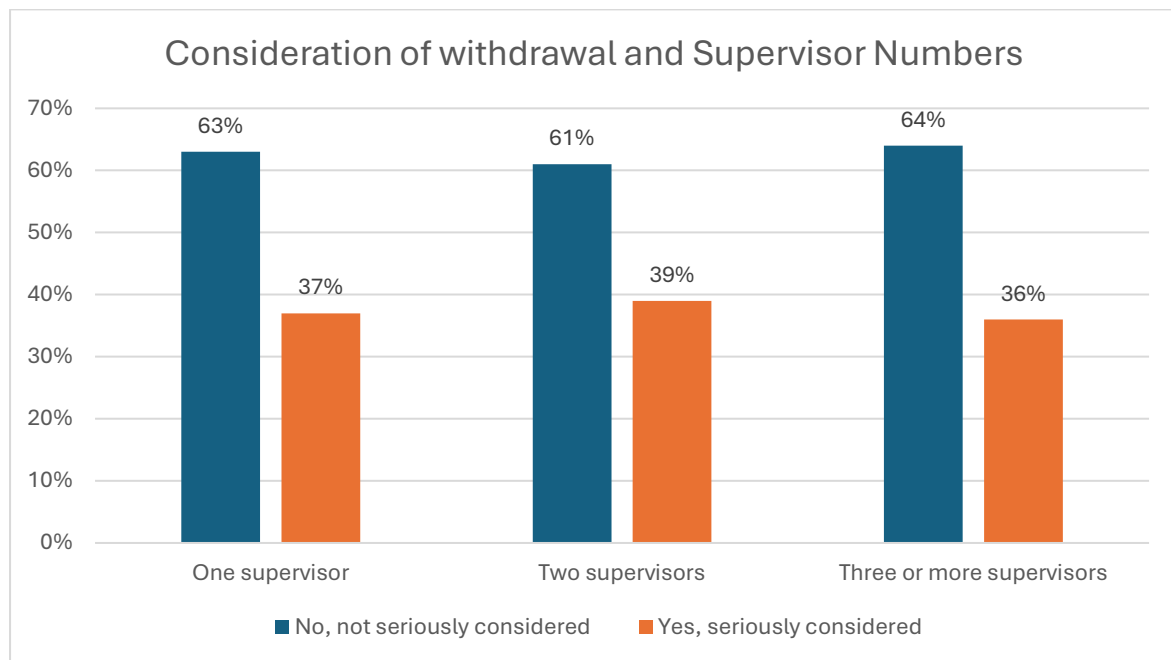


Figure 2. Consideration of withdrawal and Supervisor Numbers

When we look at quality of supervision, we can discern a slightly different trend that now indicates a difference (albeit small again) between the experience of having one supervisor versus multiple.

In Figure 3., for example learners are more likely to rate their supervisors as excellent (28% and 29%) if they have two or more supervisors than if they have only one supervisor (26%). Conversely, they are more likely to rate their supervisor poor (7%) if they have just one supervisor compared to 5% for two or more supervisors.

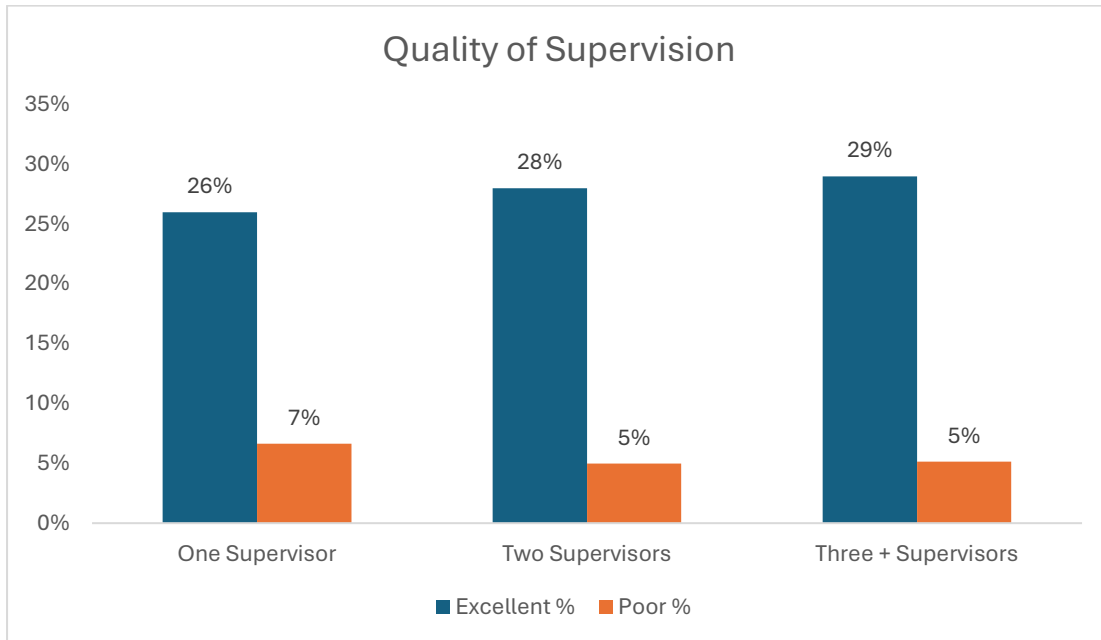


Figure 3. Quality of Supervision and Supervisor Numbers

The data varies by sector. As Figure 4. shows, in comparison to one supervisor, three supervisors appear to benefit learners in Universities; only 33.7% of learners with three or more supervisors considered withdrawal compared to 37.4% of learners with just one supervisor (or a roughly similar 37.9% for two). We see a similar pattern for Technological Higher Education Institutions, with improvements for three supervisors over one (37.7% vs 40.6%), but a much higher detriment for two (44.1%). (Note the numbers for ‘Other institutions’ are very small so we will set aside their analysis).

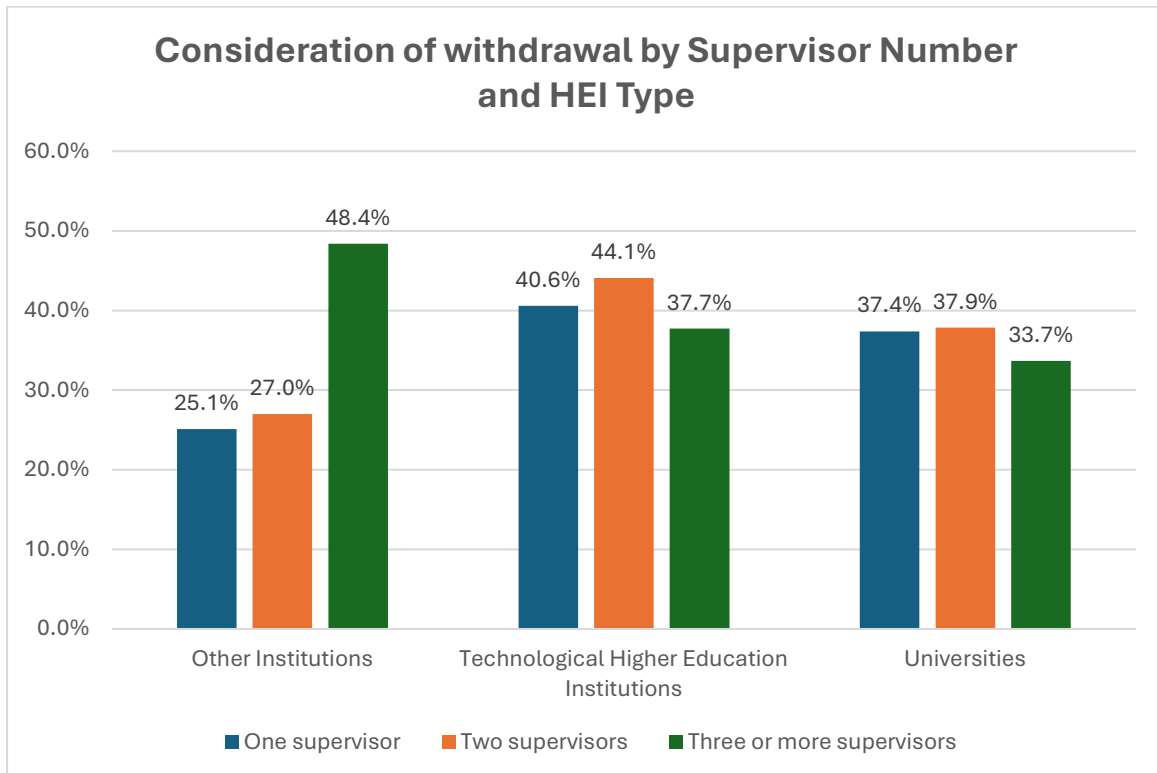


Figure 4. Consideration of withdrawal by Supervisor number and HEI Type

Again, when we look at NFQ level in Figure 5 we can see that three supervisors seem to reduce considerations of withdrawal at Level 10 (35% vs 38%), but not Level 9, which shows that Level 9 students with one supervisor have the *lowest* level of withdrawal consideration – though we can read this Level 9 finding with less confidence as the Level 9 numbers are small.

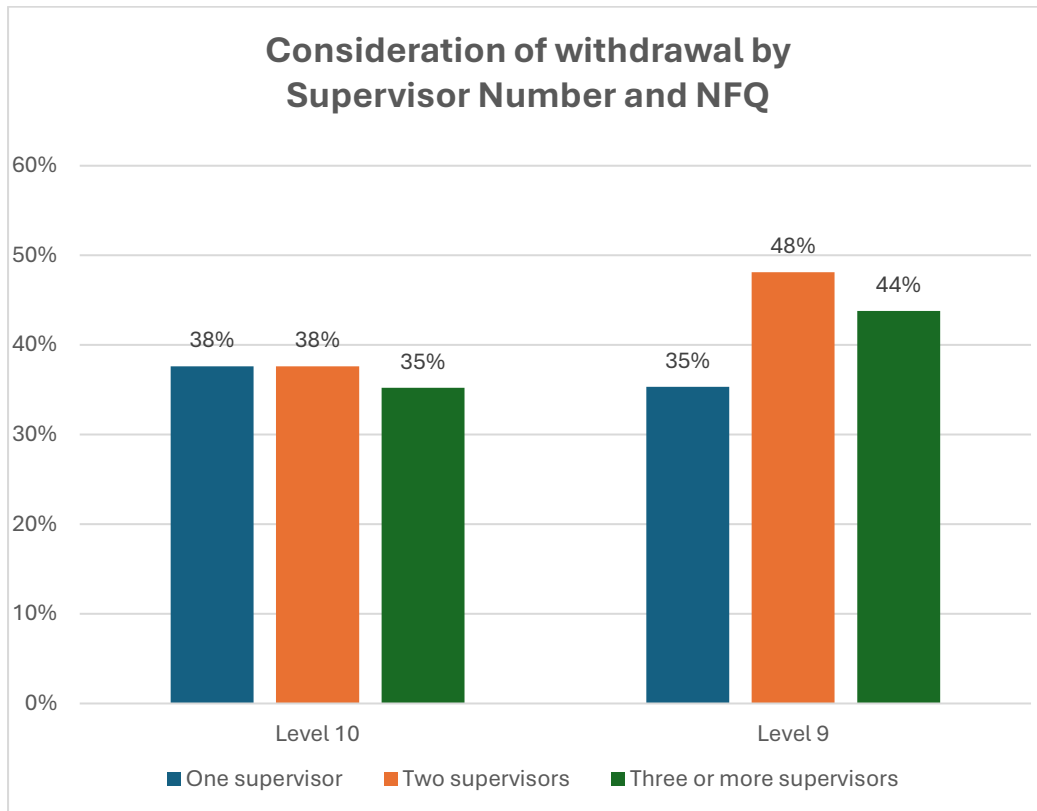


Figure 5. Consideration of withdrawal, by Supervisor Number and NFQ.

If we break down consideration of withdrawal into University and Technological Higher Education Institutions by NFQ Type a clearer pattern now emerges in Figure 6: three supervisors make withdrawal sentiment much less likely for all categories except Level 9 degrees in Technological Higher Education Institutions.

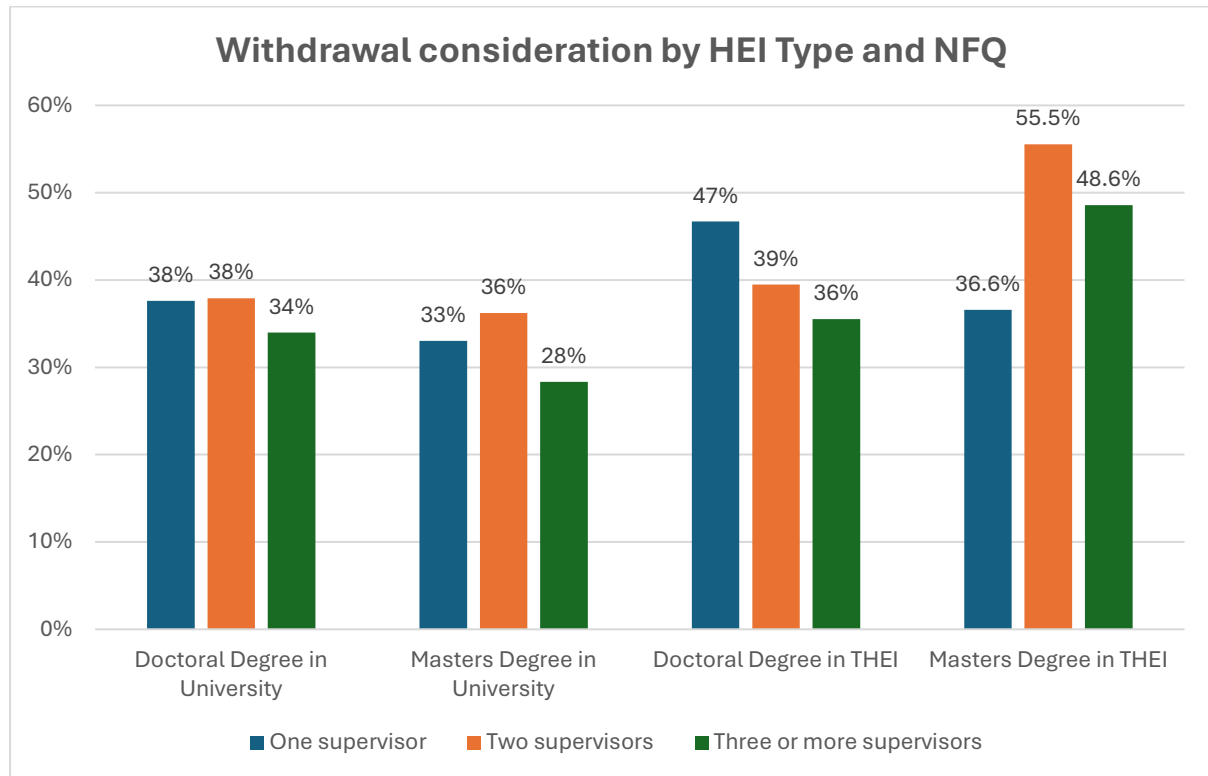


Figure 6. Withdrawal consideration by Supervisor Number, HEI Type and NFQ

All this seems to suggest that there is a qualitative difference between the kind of supervision we see with three supervisors versus one. However, increasing the quantity of supervisors by itself seemingly won't reduce withdrawal if it only extends to two supervisors, and indeed two supervisors might actually produce worse withdrawal consideration outcomes than just having one (though of course there may be other explanations: students struggling academically may be more likely to be assigned a second supervisor, or transitioning towards a third).

It is worth pointing out however that the story needs a little more clarification. As Fig. 7. shows there are clear differences observable in the number of supervisors across Field of Study:

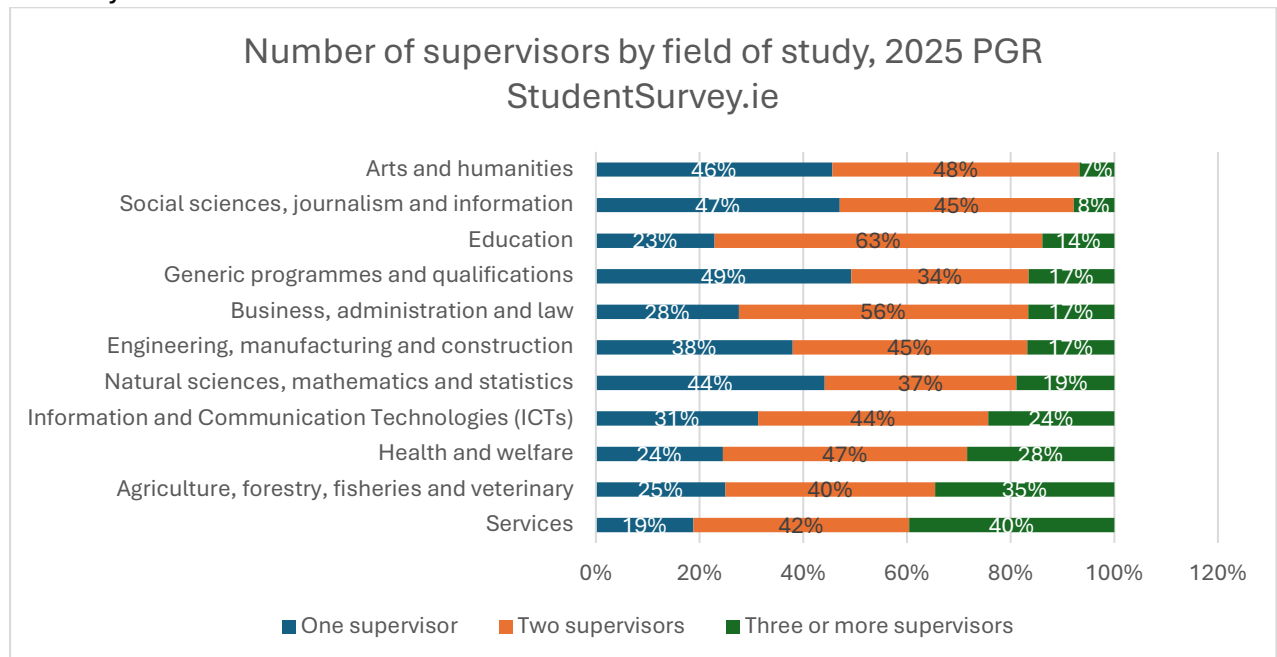


Figure 7. Number of supervisors by field of study. 2025 PGR StudentSurvey.ie

As we can see, only 7% of Arts and Humanities respondents have three or more supervisors in contrast to 40% in Services. This is important when comparing institution categories because the subjects like Arts and Humanities/Social Sciences (nearly exclusively universities) don't tend to have three supervisors unlike Services (nearly exclusively Technological Higher Education Institutions) and indeed those in the Arts and Humanities are much more likely to be traditional single subject supervisor research programmes.

If supervisor numbers are tending towards three or more, but are only changing in some Fields of Study, for example Services, we might (speculatively) see improvements for Technological Higher Education Institutions, but no improvement in withdrawal sentiment in University dominated areas such as Arts and Humanities, which have large numbers of students.

However, the move to three or more supervisors does *not* appear to be field dependent, in an all or nothing sense. As the data in Appendix A below shows, the change over time in Supervision numbers that we observed in Fig 1. appears to show broad if uneven consistency regardless of field of study (with the exception on Generic Programmes and qualification). This seems to suggest that we can expect to see continued reductions in withdrawal sentiment regardless of institution type.

That said, Arts and Humanities, which accounts for about 12% of the research student body in 2025, is moving much slower towards three supervisors than many other fields; and shows there is degree of dependency when it comes to Field of Study.

Either way, if these numbers hold on the next PGR survey in 2027, and the current trends continue, there may be a compelling hypothesis to pursue here that increasing Supervision numbers to three may usefully help reduce considerations of withdrawal in Level 10 and Level 9 researchers.

More data will also allow us to look closer at the role of two supervisors across all categories, as well as supervisors more generally in Level 9 research in Technological Higher Education Institutions.

Appendix A: Change of Supervision over Time by Field of Study

	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary			
	28%	46%	26%
2019	38%	48%	14%
2021	31%	42%	27%
2023	23%	51%	25%
2025	25%	40%	35%
Arts and humanities			
	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	56%	40%	4%
2021	52%	43%	5%
2023	50%	44%	6%
2025	46%	48%	7%
Business, administration and law			
	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	45%	49%	5%
2021	40%	46%	14%
2023	36%	48%	16%
2025	28%	56%	17%
Education			
	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	43%	48%	9%
2021	34%	50%	17%
2023	30%	62%	8%
2025	23%	63%	14%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction			
	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	42%	46%	13%
2021	41%	44%	15%
2023	37%	45%	17%
2025	38%	45%	17%
Generic programmes and qualifications			
	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	7%	61%	32%
2021	100%	0%	0%
2023	27%	67%	6%
2025	49%	34%	17%
Health and welfare			
	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	38%	47%	14%
2021	35%	50%	15%
2023	31%	46%	23%
2025	24%	47%	28%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)			
	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	50%	44%	6%

2021	35%	51%	15%
2023	33%	55%	12%
2025	31%	44%	24%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	56%	34%	10%
2021	49%	39%	12%
2023	49%	36%	15%
2025	44%	37%	19%
Services	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	32%	39%	29%
2021	20%	62%	18%
2023	19%	52%	29%
2025	19%	42%	40%
Social sciences, journalism and information	One supervisor	Two supervisors	Three or more supervisors
2019	61%	33%	5%
2021	55%	41%	4%
2023	45%	46%	9%
2025	47%	45%	8%