

Difficult Research Support Network

2025-26 OVERVIEW

Convened by Maria Obrebska
DPhil at the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, University of Oxford
maria.obrebska@reuben.ox.ac.uk

1. ABOUT THE NETWORK

1.1. What DRSN is

Difficult Research Support Network (DRSN) is a student-led community within the Social Sciences Division at the University of Oxford. It provides a supportive space for researchers working on emotionally demanding topics, offering regular check-ins and events led by experienced academics and practitioners.

1.2. Why it was established

DRSN was created in recognition of research which comes at a significant emotional cost. While work on challenging topics is vital, many experience isolation, stress, or uncertainty about how to manage its impact. At Oxford, support remains limited – a limited number of counselling sessions and a valuable but one-off Vicarious Trauma training. DRSN was founded to address this gap, offering an ongoing community where researchers can pursue excellent scholarship while receiving continuous emotional support.

1.3. Vision

Our vision is a research culture where wellbeing and rigorous scholarship go hand in hand. DRSN seeks to normalise conversations about mental health in research and to equip researchers with strategies, resources, and a peer community.



2. WHAT WE DO

2.1. Types of activities

DRSN prioritises creating a productive space where participants feel empowered rather than overwhelmed – a goal the Convenor pursues by combining open sharing with practical outcomes. The Network offers workshops and panel discussions with qualitative researchers and mental health experts, peer support and networking sessions to foster community and shared learning, as well as the development of resources such as toolkits and guides to support research practice.

2.2. Past and upcoming events

DRSN hosts two events per term. In Trinity 2025, these included an introductory get-together and a panel featuring three social sciences researchers, who shared their experiences with research on topics such as sexual violence and online hate speech. Planned events for Michaelmas 2025 include an introductory session for new members and a practical workshop focused on developing coping strategies for difficult research. Events for future terms are yet to be confirmed.

3. WHO CAN JOIN

3.1. Eligibility

Membership is free and open to all postgraduate students and early career researchers. Although our focus is on the challenges of qualitative fieldwork, we warmly welcome interested students from all disciplines.

3.2. How to join

Membership is facilitated through a mailing list, allowing members to receive updates on network activities and resources. One can join the list by filling out an online form at forms.cloud.microsoft/e/5WGTKYXiant



4. LOOKING AHEAD

DRSN has many ideas for future activities to strengthen researcher support and address existing gaps. The following priorities are drawn from the Convenor's experience, insights from vicarious trauma workshops, fellow academic's insights, and discussions at past DRSN meetings.

- **Information gathering:** a survey of Oxford postgraduates and early-career researchers on the emotional challenges of research.
- **Resource development:** a guidebook on managing emotionally challenging research, a fieldnotes template reflecting researcher wellbeing, resources on handling disclosures, and improved risk assessment processes.
- **Physical safety workshops:** sessions on personal safety, first aid, and self-defence.
- **Community-building:** a conference for researchers working on difficult topics to share experiences and strategies.

Implementation will depend on factors including available funding, staff support, and member engagement.