



**QAA
Scotland**



Postgraduate Research Experience Scoping Workshop

Friday 11 September 2009

Aim for the scoping workshop

The aim of the workshop was to identify and agree the main themes of importance to the sector regarding the postgraduate research student experience. These themes will form the basis of subsequent workshops and will help inform the scope and focus of the QAA Scotland/SHEEC international benchmarking exercise on research degree student experience.

Welcome and brief introduction regarding the purpose of the day

Attendees were welcomed to the workshop by the Chair, Professor Alan Miller and Professor David Gani, Director of Research, Innovation and Global Engagement at the Scottish Funding Council.

Breakout sessions

Attendees were split into four groups. The breakout sessions provided a forum for open discussion of the issues affecting postgraduate researcher experience. Each group was invited to discuss all topics – those suggested within the papers and any other themes which participants thought were relevant.

The remainder of this report records the significant points of discussion.

The following overarching issues were identified:

1. Graduate schools and postgraduate communities
2. Progression, Review and Support
3. Valuing PGR skills and widening participation
4. Internationalisation

These should all be considered in the context of the following questions, which arose in discussions throughout the workshop:

How different from the rest of the UK can Scotland be in the experience it provides for PGR students?

How can Scotland's current collaborative nature be used as a distinct advantage in this area?

What is the correct balance between a pan-Scottish agenda and individual institutions' autonomy?

1. Graduate schools and postgraduate communities

Creating cohorts and communities

It was agreed that postgraduate students largely thrive in a substantial cohort but how can such communities develop/be created (especially if there are very few students in a department)? Some issues to be considered when developing communities of PGRs include:

The differing start points of a PhD and different experience of students upon starting (e.g. after a Masters or not);

The different funding cycles and student cycles (should there be later entries?);

The different examples of communities/cohorts for different subjects and processes;

What is the role of the PGR student? Are they student or staff?;

The possibility of research networks and more developed infrastructure.

Benefits of graduate schools

It was noted that the sense of community created by graduate schools is a critical part of a graduate school and of particular value for part-time researchers. Other benefits include the use of graduate schools in monitoring quality processes and in building a strong research environment, thereby raising the student experience. The role of graduate schools in increasing employability and internationalisation could be considered further.

It was also noted that it takes time to establish and show the value of a graduate school.

Multi-disciplinary graduate schools

How do interdisciplinary students fit into a graduate community? There is great value in seeing how researchers from other disciplines work, and therefore there are benefits of a multi-disciplinary graduate school such as enhanced opportunities for multi-disciplinary collaboration. Such a set up is particularly useful in smaller HEIs.

Pan-Scottish graduate schools

There are benefits for PGRs of being within one of the research pools' graduate schools. The schools are considered to enhance a research environment and students' experience but is the quality of the pools' graduate schools being monitored?

Can the Pools' graduate schools be compared with the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) plans for a Scotland wide graduate school in the social sciences? It was questioned whether the ESRC's plan for a pan-Scotland graduate school was to be the first of many such schools. It is important that good practice is extracted from the exercise to focus any thinking in the future around this issue.

It was suggested that a community discussion was needed on regional graduate schools. It was suggested that an exploration of what 'pooling' means in the arts and humanities with respect to PGR training would be beneficial. Key characteristics and the best practice from all established graduate school models must inform the thinking behind the establishment of others.

Membership of multiple graduate schools

Many students will be members of a number of different graduate schools, depending on their discipline and institution. What are the pros and cons of being a member of a subject graduate school, a faculty graduate school and/or an HEI-wide graduate school?

UHI Millennium Institute was discussed as an example of an institution in which the different models of graduate school interact within one another, but the geographical issues associated with the institution means that it is difficult to manage all the relevant interactions.

Can Scotland rationalise and manage its large number of graduate schools in a better way? It was suggested that there might be some benefit in establishing a common purpose behind graduate schools, the development of which SFC or the Research Councils could facilitate.

2. Progression, Review and Support

Pre-study

The first transitional period for a researcher starts before the individual has chosen an institution, with prospective students sometimes getting academic guidance on writing their PhD proposals. The quality of this guidance is variable as is the quality of the proposals produced. Issues surrounding this period of transition include:

- supporting preparation for research;
- staff time not always being accounted for;
- student opting to go another HEI;
- Intensive summer schools? Grad school option?

Diversity of research careers

There is a diversity of routes through research and on to other careers. Although some research careers do progress in a linear fashion, linear representations are largely unhelpful in depicting all the possible routes for PGR students.

There is a need to view the PGR student experience as one part of a career continuum, which for some would involve continuing in research and for others would not. This requires PGRs to be introduced and engaged with a career service offering post academic career advice early on in a PhD. There is a need for students to be encouraged to develop and use their transferable skills, this would involve a change in culture for some supervisors.

A student's background and expectations of a research degree will alter their perception of their research experience. The different starting points and backgrounds will influence the kind of support that each student requires and what they hope to get out of the experience. There is a need to start thinking about career pathways for PhD at the undergraduate stage. The diversity in research degrees needs to be taken into account when trying to meet the needs of all researchers, as needs differ with discipline. It was suggested that PRES could be used to bring out these issues.

Pros and cons of flexibility

The multiplicity of PhD models (1+3, 2+2 etc), maybe as many as six varieties, raises questions of equivalence and standards. In considering the advantages and disadvantages of the flexibility in PGR degrees, the following questions should be considered:

What are the variations in access to supervision, training, other opportunities etc? For example, the Robert Gordon University has a compulsory certificate in research methods. In other HEIs, this may vary across different academic areas.

What are the indicators of evaluation when models and programmes are different?

Is there parity of esteem between funding types?

The very nature of the PhD is personal and unique, and we cannot legislate for some differences.

Support mechanisms

There is a need for any support provided to PhD students to recognise that undertaking a PhD was both an academic and psychological process, which can be lonely and requires adequate pastoral support. The benefits of the North American system which provides students with a supervisory committee should be considered. Providing students with more than one supervisor could be beneficial if the student finds their primary supervisor unhelpful. Such set ups can lead to confusion however over what everyone's role with regards to the student is.

It is at the postdoc level that the support is needed. Schemes such as Crucible and the RCUK fellowships are critical.

Some further suggestions of supportive structures include:

students in the latter years of PG study mentoring students in their early years; and

common courses not focused on any one discipline for all PGRs to be provided at the outset of a course focused on tackling some of the issues outlined in this report.

Good practice in supporting PGRs

Support for PGRs differs by institution. Some examples of good practice include:

University of Aberdeen: a careers person specifically for PGRs is paid for by Roberts funding;

University of Glasgow: eSharp is a student-led interdisciplinary postgraduate journal.

Training

It was questioned when training within postgraduate degrees should start. It was noted that practice varied with each HEI, and varies strongly across disciplines. Some questions that need to be looked at include:

How does training fit in to the overall PhD programme? What graduate courses could be provided to underpin technical training? What is the skills development in a PhD?

How can the links between industry (as well as other employers) and PhD training be strengthened? The possibility of developing graduate schools with industry partnerships, maybe even along the German industrial PhD lines was suggested.

How are students prepared for a variety of possible future careers? Could more management skills be introduced to strengthen preparation for industry/non-academia.

What training requirements are there for those students who teach? The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) reports that PhD students want to teach but do not feel supported in doing so. It was observed that, in some communities, postdocs and research students were leading their own training.

Is there scope for some additional (research) skills training at undergraduate level?

What are the possible implications for Scotland if Roberts funding finishes or is no longer ring fenced?

Can an emphasis on training lead to students being overly 'spoonfed'?

3. Valuing PGR skills and widening participation

The value of researchers and the skills they have acquired during a PhD require to be further explored. Do people recognise the skills that can be developed during a PhD? Vitae's employer briefing tries to address this need. The individual growth involved in a PhD should influence employability. How can the benefits of a research degree reach a wider audience? If there was more of an understanding of what was involved in a research degree, it might be more attractive to a wider variety of people. On the otherhand, PhD students are now expected to do so much: research, outreach, KE, public engagement and generic skills training. It is too much?

Widening participation is strongly linked to issues affecting access to undergraduate degrees as this is the primary source of PGR students. Widening participation in PGR degrees is therefore strongly linked to work in schools, which introduces pupils to research. What more can/should universities do to contribute to the widening participation agenda?

How can universities facilitate people to come back from industry or other employment routes into research?

4. Internationalisation

The internationalisation of Scottish Higher Education is desirable. It was suggested that not to do so risks parochialism and damage to (all) students' experience here. Some issues that need to be looked into include:

Increasing pressure (in some countries) for students to stay in their home countries, in light of this will rising recruitment of international students continue?

The 'export' of our students seems to be increasingly harder. What are the reasons for the decreasing number of Scottish students opting to go abroad?

The UK's unique selling point (the English language) is being eroded as other countries now teach in English.

Issues surrounding the regulations regarding visas and post-PhD employment.

The length of a PhD in the UK is attractive to overseas students but support for longer than 3 years is hard to come by in the UK. Flexibility in funding, particularly at the end of a PhD would be desirable. Overseas students do not always arrive with sufficient money to pay for studies and need to earn it as they go along.

The idea of a Scottish position on the value of the PhD was suggested: research training, research output, KE arising from PhD, effect on employment? The possibility of graduate schools offering language training, overseas exchanges etc to boost movement was also suggested.

The unique nature of the Scottish Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme was recognised.

Competitiveness of Scotland

In considering the competitiveness and attractiveness of Scotland for PGR students, the following questions should be considered:

How do HEIs work together to make Scotland an attractive option to undertake PGR?

Why do home students go abroad and where do they go?

How are we delivering on students' expectations of a PhD?

Why is there an increase in PhD students coming to the UK?

Is Scotland internationally competitive?

What measures could be used to answer these questions?

PRES provides interesting data and if it was possible to increase the response rate it would be more useful in answering some of these questions.