



# UKCGE SUMMER CONFERENCE 2001

## Summer Conference 2001

This booklet contains some of the presentations and summaries of keynote and workshop sessions that took place at the UK Council for Graduate Education's Summer Conference held at the University of Edinburgh, July 2001.

© UK Council for Graduate Education

Further information on the UK Council for Graduate Education can be obtained from:

Clare McCauley  
Administrator  
College Hall (DC004)  
Castle View  
Dudley  
West Midlands DY1 3HT

T 01902 323542  
F 01902 323380  
E [ukcge@ukcge.ac.uk](mailto:ukcge@ukcge.ac.uk)



### **Graduate Education in the UK: the Warwick experience of graduate schools and the national experience of improving training regimes**

**Sir Brian Follet**

Chairman of the Arts and Humanities Research Board

Sir Brian explored his twin themes of the development of graduate schools and the future of postgraduate research training in the context of ongoing national initiatives and the experience of the University of Warwick. The session was timely, since a number of important decisions would be taken shortly about the future of the PhD and research training in general as a result of the work being undertaken by the Research Councils/AHRB, HEFCE and the government. However, at the moment, the higher education community as a whole did not appear to be engaging in a meaningful way with this process. There was clearly an opportunity for the UKCGE to fill this gap and to influence the outcomes of the national debate.

- (i) Graduate Schools – the background and strategic rationale for the introduction of the single university-wide Graduate School at the University of Warwick were described. Key factors included:

the development of the postgraduate (pg) market following the fast growth in undergraduate student numbers in the mid-1980's

the increase in demand from young professionals for lifelong learning and continuing professional development provision

the need to reduce dependence on state funding and a long-term strategy to shift the financial base of the University.

The University concluded that the only way to develop an effective institution-wide strat-

egy for pg education (encompassing student number targets, prioritisation of subject areas and resources, accommodation issues, setting of fee levels, etc) was to do so via a single central Graduate School.

- (ii) Postgraduate research training – anecdotal evidence suggested that the quality of PhD degrees might be diminishing and that competition from outside the UK was resulting in fewer recruits from overseas. The effect of student debt at the end of undergraduate study and increasing demand for graduates from employers meant that it was also becoming more difficult to attract home-based research students. Whilst only funding around 30 per cent of research students, the Research Councils were taking the lead in pushing through a range of new initiatives but there was significant variation between them in their approach. The way forward might come from the ongoing Treasury review, which was considering the merits of a 2+2 PhD model, with the award of MPhil after two years and 'pre-doctoral' salaries in years 3 and 4 for students going on to complete their PhD.

Whatever the final approach adopted, it would be necessary to move away from the "little Rembrandts" model, under which pgr students had been traditionally viewed as low level technical help for academic staff, to one which more effectively recognised and met students' needs.

*The key issues for institutions included:*

- (i) whether to organise Graduate School provision centrally or on a subject by subject basis – the experience of Warwick strongly supported the former (particularly since this facilitated the development and implementation of institution-wide strategic planning);
- (ii) the future balance of taught Master's degree provision between high-cost, high-volume professional development (CPD) provision (e.g. as a means of income gen



### **Local and Global Trends in quality Assurance for Collaborative Postgraduate Education**

**Dr Derek Pollard**

*Chairman, Council of Validating Universities and Vice-Chancellor's Advisor, The Open University*

eration) and low-cost, relatively low-volume programmes intended primarily as preparation for PhD study.

Whether or not they successfully influence the ongoing debate about the future of research training, institutions will also have to respond to developments in the organisation and delivery of PhD degree programmes with respect to: the length of study (1+3, 2+2, 3 or 4 years?), the need for high quality research training, the level and availability of stipends, and the likely reduction in overall research student numbers. In doing so, institutions will need to achieve and maintain a successful balance between competition and collaboration. The latter will be particularly important in the delivery of formal research training and in the face of increased competition from other providers of postgraduate education – both at home and overseas.

This session provided delegates with a lively and thought-provoking introduction to the conference and a clear challenge to the UK Council to adopt a pro-active stance. Sir Brian recognised that his audience represented a wide range of institutions with varying missions, but with a common interest in the promotion and development of high quality graduate education. Many of the principles that applied to the University of Warwick's experience would also apply to other HEIs, even if the strategies underpinning the development of graduate education in these institutions were based on different detailed objectives.

Dr Pollard's session presented by way of background a brief overview of the CVU and postgraduate collaborative provision, reflected on good practice in quality assurance for collaborative postgraduate provision and offered some thoughts on articulation and 'postgraduateness'.

The CVU was established in 1982 to review the concerns of universities engaged in collaborative activity and support them in this work. It has a subscribing membership of 85 Universities and 52 FE Colleges. It publishes a useful and influential Handbook for Practitioners, offers workshops and practitioner groups, and sponsors research into issues of common interest to its members. Increasingly, it fulfils a representative or advocacy role in response to consultations and new developments.

Large numbers of students are enrolled on collaborative postgraduate programmes: 196,000 FTEs in 1999, of whom 29,400 were overseas students. This is a growth area, particularly in CPD and collaboration with organisations delivering CPD is of increasing importance. Global competition is an issue for the UK, particularly as HE outside the UK is more willing to seek ISO 9001 certification and the ability to deliver programmes of an appropriate quality and standard, needs to be evidenced to avoid erosion of international market share. The Bologna Declaration seeks to define a postgraduate cycle for all European programmes, and Australian Universities, for



## SESSION A2

example, tend to be far more entrepreneurial than their UK counterparts.

Dr Pollard therefore asked whether we should be addressing separately the issue of good practice in postgraduate collaborative activity and if so which issues should form the agenda.

He suggested that attention needed to be paid to the issue of the articulation of different sets of objectives. He suggested that, whilst there was a need to distinguish between 'learning' and 'education and training', these terms were unhelpful and that we should concentrate instead on learning objectives: academic, professional or vocational/employment. Appropriate assessment criteria were needed to ensure effective assessment in each area.

During discussion, reservations were raised about the limitations of the ISO 9001 standard despite its more extensive use in other HE systems and reference was made to the potential value to HE of the Business Excellence Model. Participants commented on the need for more data to enable them to be better informed about the threats posed by competitor universities overseas, and also about potential collaborators who may try several HEIs before finding one prepared to validate their programmes. Speed of response by UK HEIs was also important, in a competitive arena, but this had to be weighed against sufficient time for quality and standards to be ensured. Concern was also expressed about the lack of information generally on the current position on tariffs and services and the US aim to extend this to include education services.

The session therefore offered some useful food for thought in relation to the issues to be addressed by the UK HE sector, for collaborative postgraduate provision, in order to ensure that quality and standards may be ensured and evidenced in a developing and increasingly competitive context.

### **Dealing with Collaborative Agreements**

**Adrian Slater**

Solicitor, Leeds University

This session examined the problems associated with International Collaborative Agreements, particularly from the legal perspective. It can be difficult and costly, from the legal point of view, for a University to extricate itself from such agreements when they go wrong.

While there are considerable advantages potentially in such agreements, the risks are not always as obvious. The enthusiasm for the advantages can mask the problems. The international partner may indicate that problems to do with legal or financial issues can easily be resolved, when in practice this is not easy.

It is important to develop a clear international strategy, and to use this as a framework to assess whether to enter into particular collaborative agreements. A strategy is important, but may not solve the problem of academics choosing to set up, and even sign, agreements without reference to the University. Such agreements may in some circumstances be possible to break, but may well be legally binding.

A number of specific dangers were examined in the context of a case study of a possible agreement with an Indian institution.

The quality of information about the institution needs to be carefully checked – things may not be quite what they seem.

You should ensure that you retain control over the programme, in terms of finance, admissions and academic matters.

Ensure that you have an exit strategy built into the agreement – defining how you can withdraw from the arrangement.



### Research Training in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design

**Professor Sandra Harris**

Nottingham Trent University

Overall, it is important to make an assessment of the possible risks, and to balance these against the advantages. In practice these schemes do not often produce large financial benefit, and the costs can be very substantial if things do go wrong.

There are key guidelines laid down by both QAA and HEFCE, and these are mandatory on institutions. HEFCE require that all such projects shall, individually, cover their direct and indirect costs, in order to avoid any suggestion that these are subsidised from funds provided by HEFCE for funding the teaching of UK/EU students. QAA require that universities shall show due diligence in ensuring the quality of the courses to be offered, and there is a detailed specification of the issues to be covered in meeting this requirement. You are required to obtain a considerable volume of information about the partner organisation, covering aspects such as financial strength and stability, the quality of existing programmes, business plans, references, details of past, current and proposed international collaborations, etc.

In this session Professor Harris explained key issues addressed in the survey of research training in the creative and performing arts and design by the UKCGE working group she had chaired. In doing this Professor Harris referred to a related UKCGE report on research training in the humanities which, though advocating a needs based approach, had not included practice based disciplines in its work. The terms of reference for the creative arts group were fourfold being:-

- 1) to survey existing provision for practice based research
- 2) examine the relationship between taught masters and doctoral programmes
- 3) examine the feasibility of preparing guidelines for the development of research training programmes for practice based research
- 4) examine the implications of differing models of practice based research for training programmes.

*General issues discussed by the group had included:-*

the need to place practice within a research context  
the relationship between written and practical components  
the role and status of an exhibition or performance in examination  
collaborative research; relationships to other disciplines with particular reference to humanities  
the relationship between taught masters and research programmes

Key issues identified by the group had included discussion on the critical mass needed for research programmes and how



## PLENARY SESSION

smaller institutions might achieve this. The need for consortia and collaboration between institutions in providing training programmes was considered along with the desirability of providing core research training components for all students. In the course of these discussions the group endorsed the needs based model for research training as proposed in the humanities report. The importance of creating an active research environment was emphasised along with opportunities for critical engagement with other researchers. The group also concluded that more formal structures would be desirable for the training of research students in practice based disciplines. The need for research programmes to include a level of transferable skills to enhance employability was felt important along with the value of collaborations with practitioners in related disciplines. Also, the need to provide more opportunities for the training of research supervisors was considered a key issue that could be enabled by the identifying models of good practice, perhaps by Subject Centres and of clear importance was the need to see the Arts and Humanities Research Board established as a Research Council to support and promote research capability in the creative and performing arts and design.

In concluding the session Professor Harris noted that very little had previously been known about this area of research and that the picture had changed radically with expansion in the period 92-96 and the establishment of both AHRB and RAE.

This was followed by a lively question and answer session in which a number of issues were raised and a number of delegates suggesting that compulsory training programmes may not work in practice based disciplines. It was also suggested that, in this respect, the ESRC had perhaps been too prescriptive in its approach. The session closed with delegates showing appreciation for Professor Harris' work and for the full and detailed presentation.

### **Graduate Study in an Increasingly Borderless World**

**Professor John L Davies** (APU) and **Dr Svava Bjarnason** (Director of Research at the Association of Commonwealth Universities)

This plenary session was absolutely packed with information regarding four main aspects of borderless higher education - the context, the market, institutional responses and quality assurance considerations. New technology, mobility, competitiveness, access and the needs of undeveloped nations were calling into question the 'traditional' models of face to face learning support.

There is a potentially enormous global market emerging counted in US\$ billions around distance learning and e-learning. This is leading to the dissolving of boundaries, whether geographical, of time or of access. At the moment the UK is not a leading player and, should it wish to be, it will need to consider such issues as; collaboration and branding, customer focus, moving from cottage industry to multiple service provision by specialists, the operation of the global marketplace. It will need to build partnerships with overseas and public and private education institutions as well as private companies, professional associations and government agencies. It must develop newer modes of curriculum delivery that take account of the new types and circumstances of learners pursuing life long learning and continuous professional development. The potential problems, especially in the third world, of technological solutions must be acknowledged along with the barriers that diverse cultures, languages and learning orientations present.

A recent survey indicated that approximately 80% of UK Higher Education institutions thought these developments were serious and 70% had some level of activity that was



### **Inter-institutional collaboration in postgraduate education experience of regional initiatives and web delivery.**

***Dr Christine Leigh***

Leeds University

focussed on building partnerships and on regional and overseas markets - mainly in Business, Nursing, Engineering, IT and Languages. Our universities appeared to be being motivated by factors such as; outside threats from private providers, market needs, an internal culture of development, the opportunities of the global market, altruism (third world), transmission of our cultural values. However it was suggested that the UK's emerging position is vulnerable due to the narrow range of subjects offered, the gulf that exists between academics and practitioners, lack of investment, erosion of monopoly in degree awarding powers, unhelpful trade regulations.

In pursuing further development in these markets, Universities need to be mindful of; locating initiatives at the best level(s) in the institution, developing strategies for growth that are sustainable, linking developments to the institutional mission, playing to strengths, building strategic alliances and partnerships that compensate for weaknesses. Institutions will also need to recognise and deal with a host of issues around human resource development, infrastructures, quality delivery and assurance, legal and regulatory matters, if they are to prosper in this increasingly competitive global marketplace.

There was little time for discussion, but delegates were left with a very comprehensive agenda for action and much on which to reflect.

The session dealt with developments of collaboration within the YHUA framework in Yorkshire and the Humber. It outlines the drivers for collaboration and the way in which they had changed over the past ten years and described some examples of graduate learning environments.

Professor Leigh began by outlining the background to the YHUA and its evolution associated with the Regional Research Observatory established in the early 1990's.

She outlined the many drivers of collaboration, sharing skills and experiences and equipment, and establishing critical mass. Critical mass had been particularly important in accessing and packaging funds - and establishing research credibility. She illustrated the position of the White Rose grouping of Universities - Sheffield, Leeds and York, as a research cluster with a research power equivalent to Oxford or Cambridge on a range of research performance measures!

Innovations in delivery were particularly important for the development of courses. These innovations were exemplified with reference to the Virtual Science Park, and a masters course developed for the BBC.

Whilst successful, Professor Leigh emphasised the difficulties of collaboration, funding, institutional competition, resource transparency and territorial ambition.

Professor Leigh then used two case studies, to demonstrate the importance of col



## SESSION B5

laboration in the region. In the White Rose research grouping example. The White Rose Centre for enterprise is involved in business development, research and enterprise learning as part of a DTI 5 year programme to create 12 Centres of Enterprise. In this case, the objectives are to foster commercialisation of first-rate research and widen curriculum-based appreciation of business needs and practice in a disciplinary context.

In the second case study, the World University network was outlined. This is a grouping of UK, American and Chinese Universities with the objective of developing advanced research activity.

The discussion revolved around the opportunities for virtual course development. Using the example of the MA in Broadcasting, the audience were able to explore the programme on-line. Although the audience was quite small, there was considerable interest in what is evolving in the YHUA and the use that is being made of the web to enhance delivery.

### **Are we collaborating effectively with our pg students**

*Dr James Groves*

General Secretary, National Postgraduate Committee

Dr Groves opined that there is no typical postgraduate student: students have different reasons and motivations for taking a postgraduate qualification. More and more, however, students see themselves as customers of the university rather than as part of the academic community. Dr Groves wished to address whether these students' needs are being met by universities.

The experience of many postgraduates is that their chosen university's IT facilities are not up to scratch, and that the experience feelings of isolation. This is damaging for the reputation of the university spread by word of mouth, especially overseas. Dr Groves suggested that by either extending the concept of the academic community, or by treating postgraduate students as clients and improving systems and facilities accordingly.

Dr Groves wished to share ideas on best practice and to address such issues as whether postgraduate students have a feeling of collegiality in their university; whether effective provision exists for all postgraduate students; how universities deal with complaints; policies in Intellectual Property Rights (IPR).

Delegates had found that the following helped integrate postgraduates into the academic community:

- Social events in the department
- A web-based discussion/bulleting board
- An email network
- Involving postgraduates in facilitating social events, or running them themselves



### 'Heard it on the grapevine': PhD Candidates' Expectations of the viva

*Dr Penny Tinkler*, University of  
Manchester and  
*Dr Carolyn Jackson*, Lancaster University

Poster sessions by postgraduates for the whole department  
Journal clubs  
Welcome meetings after matriculation, part-academic, part-social  
Workshops on common interest topics, e.g., career planning; writing skills  
Treating postgraduates as members of staff  
Electing student representatives to department, faculty and university committees  
Permitting students to use work gained as a representative for credit (currently being developed at the University of Lancaster)  
Annual monitoring questionnaires  
Personal development planning

Delegates agreed that what is expected of postgraduates must be made clear to them, as well as what they should expect of their supervisors, the department and the greater university. Some delegates suggested that it would be preferable to take fewer PhD students and offer them a higher stipend, thereby increasing students' sense of self-worth and feeling of inclusion in the academic community. All delegates agreed that universities' support infrastructures need to be improved to the benefit of postgraduate students.

Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson debated two key questions relating to the PhD viva. They considered first how candidates prepare, or are prepared, for the viva and second what kind of expectations the students hold of the viva. The data underpinning these considerations came from: institutional policies from 20 universities; questionnaires directed at examiners (both external/internal), supervisors and final candidates; interviews with candidates pre and post viva experiences.

There was a gender difference evident in the data. Women tended to view the viva as a fluid, unpredictable, interpersonal situation whereas men tended to regard it as a fixed event less affected by interpersonal dynamics. Male candidates also seemed more likely to perceive of the viva as something within their own locus of control.

The speakers took the audience through a series of points relating to the viva and made full use of excerpts from interview transcripts. These transcripts led the speakers to a series of suggestions:

- (a) that students should be encouraged to seek information from a range of sources (rather than to rely on the grapevine exclusively);
- (b) that students should be encouraged to take available opportunities to present and defend their work orally in order to give them practice in the art of presenting views and defending arguments (the mock viva was debated in this context and its advantage and limitations outlined);



## SESSION B7

- (c) that students need to be made aware of the different purposes (overt and covert) that the viva may serve;
- (d) that students should be encouraged to recognise the interpersonal dimension to the conduct and process of the viva;
- (e) that supervisors need to work out their own understanding of the particular and general process of the viva in order that their guidance to their students should be based on more than their own experience of the phenomenon;
- (f) that there needs to be open, full and informed discussion of the possible benefits and disadvantage of the presence of the supervisor at the viva (recognising here that institutional policies in this respect differ);
- (g) that all concerned need to look to the whole process of doctoral study for sources of academic capital that might be employed to make the candidate perform to their potential in the viva.

The workshop was very well received and the discussion of the various points as outlined above full and interesting. There was a clear consensus on the need for more transparency with regard to the process of PhD oral examination and a sharper focus on what is required by way of satisfactory preparation of candidates.

### Appeals and Complaints - avoiding student litigation

*Adrian Slater*

Solicitor, Leeds University

Adrian Slater, of Leeds University, and a member of the universities' in-house lawyers' group (now counting 35 members), gave a lucid, and perhaps for some disconcerting, account of the impact students' recourse to the law is likely to have on universities. The Human Rights Act guarantees the right to an education, and the right not to be discriminated against. However, there are no guarantees of the kind of impact the Act will have when the Visitor system goes.

The key points to remember in taking preventive action with regard to student complaints and appeals are:

- know what services the University has guaranteed to provide for the student (e.g. frequency of supervision, of assessment and of reporting on progress to sponsors, placements, resources)
- know about guidelines from external bodies (e.g. QAA) implied terms of reasonable teaching and supervision
- academic judgement has not yet provided the basis for successful appeal or complaint
- remember to follow codes of good practice and guidelines – and that the absence of explicit codes leaves room for interpretation
- liability can, for postgraduate students, run into tens of thousands of pounds on the basis of earnings forfeited
- all communications regarding the student are, in principle, open to access by the student, including email messages. (For example, reference to 'cultural misunderstanding' would be open to interpretation as racist.)

Because it is so important to be able to deliver guaranteed, or implied, levels of service, it is important to be clear about the maximum number of supervisees a supervi-



sor should accept, frequency of meetings with the student, frequency of assessment and of progress reporting (within the university and to sponsors), the University's responsibility to the student if a supervisor leaves. It is also important to give clear and timely warning to students who appear to have no hope of completing, to keep notes of meetings with students, to understand clearly the communications needs of international postgraduates, not to assume that 'no complaint means no problem'

Mr Slater introduced themes by way of case studies, which highlighted a number of issues: cross-national differences of interpretation of plagiarism; the risks when a supervisor enters into a personal relationship with a supervisee, which may turn into a sexual harassment case, and, in the event of any dispute, the importance of an impartial panel was emphasised.

With regard to copyright, it is useful to remember that anything written down is copyright. It is important that co-authorship rights should be agreed with supervisees. All communications about a student are in principle available to the student in the event of complaint or appeal.

Universities also need to be aware that they are vicariously liable for the actions of supervisors

Some points were made regarding references, especially that those for whom references are given may be able to obtain copies from the receiver of the reference. The implications of the data protection act need to be kept under review by institutions in order to remain fully aware of their potential exposure to appeals and complaints.

In sum, the potential for claims on a university by a dissatisfied student is growing, not always predictable as the effects of new legislation have not yet been fully tested, but institutions need to enhance their awareness of the risk of litigation.

### **Research Degree Examining — common principles and divergent practices**

**Professor Stuart Powell,**  
University of Hertfordshire &  
**Professor Howard Green,**  
Staffordshire University

Professor Powell's experiences of his intriguing role as "the opponent" in the public examination of a Swedish PhD (by publications) were in contrast to UK experiences. Briefed on his expected conduct, and conspicuous in academic dress, Professor Powell was required, to talk about the thesis in an event in which the examiners (probably having predetermined the outcome) were members of an audience witnessing the candidate's defence in the face of rigorous, scientific examination, with comments being defended or rebutted.

*Summary* — A subsequent UKCGE Specialist Seminar evinced considerable differences both with, and within the UK system, highlighting tensions between examination of the process of research training, and of the final thesis. Criteria checklists were rarely published, although assessment was usually based upon publishability, originality and contribution to knowledge or learning. The PhD threshold, and definition of the MPhil (still viewed as a failed PhD) lacked clarity. The QAA NQF had not helped to clarify either point. The earlier presentation of the research of Drs Tinkler and Jackson showed that student expectations and experiences of the viva were diverse, including between genders.

Several points now arose. Whose was the thesis, if the viva concerned amendments and fine tuning of the thesis - the candidate, examiners or supervisors? If about publishability, then in the Swedish examination, the inferior fourth publication was unpublished. In fairness, shouldn't a Supervisor see examiners' preliminary reports to advise the candidate? What was the point of the viva if examiners could indicate a



## SESSION C2

pass at the start, and some universities award posthumous degrees without vivas? Should the viva be a public forum?

Who, and how many should examine? The supervisor as examiner, observer and candidate's friend, or excluded? How do examiners get experience - by training, by whom and should they have supervised as well? Should the internal and external examiners have equal status? Examiners must be chosen with care - the personal ideologies and agenda of some examiners, and candidates' conflicts with supervisors, have been known to overwhelm the viva. An independent Chair is helpful in Appeal cases, but also can be an extra burden on resources.

Delegates felt that the viva was the point when students should be able to defend and expound their work independently, to qualified and trained examiners who expect a polished product which pushes back boundaries of knowledge. However, different Doctoral contexts require a re-think of the examination process, e.g. 3-D; collaborative research; practice based; professional doctorates - cohort based and credit rated; by publication - writing styles differ from thesis writing.

### *Key Points*

A variety of practices were still apparent. Transparency of the examination process both for the benefit of both the student and examiners was essential.

Transparency of the purpose of the viva was essential.

Training for examiners is needed but could be provided internally for the benefit of future external experience.

National guiding principles were required and there was a need for an organisation to take the lead (perhaps UKCGE)?

This thought provoking session should have given delegates useful ideas to discuss about the openness of their own institutions' regulations, processes, and pre-viva information, although national guidelines would be preferred.

### **Training Supervisors**

**Professor Richard Balment,**

University of Manchester &

**Professor Tony Fell,**

University of Bradford

The session presented two contrasting models of training supervisors of research students: a Faculty scheme at Manchester, which has Faculty-based Graduate Schools, and a university-wide scheme at Bradford, which has a single Graduate School.

Generic issues ('challenges') discussed first included: the respective merits and demerits of discipline-specific or discipline-related (Faculty) and generic (University-wide) schemes; how to design programmes that staff saw as supportive rather than threatening; strategies for involving both inexperienced and experienced supervisors in training programmes; and the importance of training relevant to supervising all types of students (full-time, part-time, etc).

The rest of the session divided into descriptions of the approaches taken at Manchester and Bradford. In the Manchester Biological Sciences example, all new staff have a three day general university induction programme, which includes a three hour session on graduate studies. They then get a half or one day session from the Faculty covering: the institutional code of practice; responsibilities of the supervisor; responsibilities of the student. In addition there is a rolling programme, stimulated by Research Council (eg BBSRC) requirements, in which staff have to attend a half-day workshop on a rolling three-year cycle. The term 'workshop' rather than 'training session' was explicitly used, and the philosophy (and design of the content) was designed to stimulate experienced supervisors to bring their own experience to the session in terms of sharing best practice. Bradford has a two day workshop, mandatory for probationers,



### **The Challenges of PT Provision (concerning PGR & PGT)**

***Professor Diana Woodward***

Cheltenham and Gloucester College of  
Higher Education

*the content including:*

- 1) participants describing their own experience being supervised;
- 2) 30-45 minute presentations covering topics such as: recruitment and selection; research programme planning; monitoring and transfer to PhD; writing and finishing; the examination process; Intellectual Property Rights;
- 3) small-group discussion of real but anonymised case studies (prepared by Tony Fell) with a facilitator and an elected chair – case studies such as a first year student being treated as ‘data fodder’, a problematical case for transfer from probationary to PhD status, a completing student whose work is being hijacked by the professor, and so on, followed by plenary review sessions. There was an informal dinner for participants on the evening of the first day, with role play supervisor-student sessions after dinner if things went well!

*The general conclusions were that:-*

- 1) there were merits in both targeted (Faculty) and generic (University-wide) supervision training;
- 2) whichever route was used it was vital to have high quality case-study materials on typical student case histories to engage staff;
- 3) regarding the latter, it was surely sensible for UKCGE member institutions to collaborate and share resources (with ownership and copyright properly acknowledged).

Special opportunities and threats exist when it comes to providing for part-time PG students. Both taught and research part-time PG students have special needs above and beyond those of full-time PG students. How best might these be met?

There is an increasing need to provide PG training on a part-time basis. As access to undergraduate education expands, it follows that more graduates in the community seek to top up their education at subsequent stages in their lives, whether for CPD purposes or personal satisfaction. The problem of balancing a return to higher education with personal and professional demands cannot be under-estimated. Therefore across the HE sector there is a need to develop and share best practice in this form of provision. Individual part-timers share diverse backgrounds and circumstances. A challenge common to the all is continually to juggle external commitments with academic activities. It being so difficult for them to ‘carve out chunks of time’ to study, HEI’s have an obligation to create an environment for them in which their time can be spent as profitably as possible. Often, a key issue will be lack of proximity to the HEI, which can tend to isolate individual students from the academic community. Thus there are a range of processes and services that must be available to minimise this disadvantage. These include dedicated student induction facilities, convenient timing of teaching and adequate out-of-hours access to libraries, laboratories and administrative services. Opportunities to gain and give peer support must always be encouraged. Above all else there must be



## SESSION C4

### **Careers Services Unit On-Line Application System for Postgraduate Study**

*Dr John Hogan*

University of Durham

customised supervisory and tutorial sessions where problems can be aired, milestones established, progress assessed, counselling provided, and any special needs at an administrative level reviewed. Sympathy and empathy alone are not enough

The major points of discussion centred around the problems associated with provision of out-of-hours access to libraries, laboratories, etc. Both financial and Health and Safety issues must be considered here. Where proximity is an issue, it was felt that many part-time students would benefit from an initial short period of full-time attendance before commencing their part-time studies from a distance. Issues surrounding the part-time PG training of HEI administrative staff were also raised, focusing on fees, academic standards required for access and less conventional routes to higher degrees such as PhD by publication. The consensus reached was that "one size does not fit all".

This was an excellent talk on a challenging topic that attracted a lot of interest and feedback, reflecting the increased activity in this area.

Working in partnership with a number of institutions (including the universities of: Durham; Glasgow; Lancaster; Nottingham; UMIST; Warwick and York), the Careers Services Unit (CSU) is developing a pilot system for prospective Postgraduate students to apply to individual institutions electronically via the CSU national postgraduate database. The session discussed the development of this project and sought views on its future progress.

Dr Hogan reminded delegates of the need for a web-based UK online application system, quoting statistics which show that 79% of Undergraduates use the web to assist them in making their next career and/or study decisions. Further, our competitor institutions in the USA and Australia have developed online application systems and the UK risks being perceived as out of touch if such systems are not developed here soon. CSU, holders of the official directory of Postgraduate study information, is a not-for-profit organisation which will not charge institutions or applicants to use their online application system. Dr Hogan reinforced the view that this system is not intended as a "Postgraduate UCAS", rather as a means of facilitating application for all prospective Postgraduates, and those from outside the UK in particular.

Once a prospective applicant has searched the CSU Prospects database ([www.prospects.csu.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.csu.ac.uk)) and has found a programme of study of interest, s/he will see a button "Apply Online" which will take him/her to the institution's application form specific to that programme of study. All



applicants have to register with "My Prospects", which will permit them to save core application data such as name, address, qualifications, etc. Other institution- or programme-specific data will then have to be added by the applicant for each application made. Delegates agreed that it is important to strike a balance between making application easy, and discouraging spurious applications.

Once the application form has been completed and submitted to the institution, a named contact at the institution receives an email informing them that an application has been received. The applicant receives an email confirming that their application is complete and has been forwarded to the institution. The institution can then log in to the Prospects website and download or print the application, at which point the applicant sees in My Prospects that the institution is processing their application. Thereafter the institution's usual application processing procedures are followed i.e. it is not intended that the decision on an application, request for further materials, etc., will be made via the Prospects site. Institutions will have the option of mounting on the Prospects website additional documents for download by the applicant, such as referee report forms.

An unresolved issue is that of data protection, and whether CSU or the individual institution is the owner of data submitted via this online application system. Institutions will be required to check this locally.

The institutions involved in the pilot of this system will be required to give feedback to CSU in order that changes can be made before it is offered to a wider audience. The pilot system will be launched in October 2001.

### **Collaboration in Postgraduate Research Training in the Life Sciences (PLUS—Postgraduate Lifesciences in Scotland)**

*Professor Stephen Hillier,*

University of Edinburgh

This alliance between the following universities: Aberdeen; Dundee; Edinburgh; Glasgow; St Andrews; Stirling; Strathclyde was created to co-ordinate what is a very active area for teaching and research. There is quantifiable strength in the life sciences teaching and research at these Scottish universities. Industry makes a great deal of use of the expertise at these universities, and between them they have a high level of research income from the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and generate 42% of all science-based PhDs.

PLUS took the training of PhD students as its main impetus, especially in light of the government White Paper "Realising our Potential" focussed institutions' minds on the PhD. The "1+3" pattern of postgraduate study became the ideal norm in science and technology, with a shift towards a Masters/MRes training period. A perceived concern at a decline in the quality of PhD students was not borne out by the data, however this is an issue being monitored by PLUS, which also recognises that research training needs to become more relevant to the subsequent employers of graduates.

The Wellcome trust 4-year PhD, piloted at institutions including the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow is also of concern to PLUS. The University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow have begun developing enhanced programmes for non-Wellcome students, at a time when the duration and style of PhDs



## SESSION E1

have become hot issues. PLUS believes that acting together, its member universities can have a strong voice in government and other external consultations, and help to shape the PhD of the future.

It has been convenient to PLUS that only seven of the 14 Scottish Higher Education institutions are involved in training, researching and publishing in the life sciences, and that they all have good Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) scores. Each university is research-led, and the Biomedical Research Output index (a survey of research productivity across the UK) scored the Scottish institutions highly, especially the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow.

PLUS has its own website ([www.plus.ac.uk](http://www.plus.ac.uk)), holds regular meetings and advertised its existence in *Nature* in May 2001. It has as its aim to "promote excellence of provision in life sciences across Scotland", as well as sharing best practice, resources and information where possible, while recognising the tension between collaboration and competition. PLUS also aims to ensure that postgraduate training is second to none at its member institutions. PLUS aims to assure the quality of supervision and of generic and transferable skills, while developing standards and ensuring that they are being achieved. At its core is the wellbeing of the student. PLUS intends to attend recruitment fairs, scientific events, symposia, etc., and to investigate collaboration with other UK universities.

### **Postgraduate Education and Collaboration - the Quality Issues**

*Peter Williams*

Director of Institutional Review, QAA

Peter Williams from the QAA gave an insight into the methods and opinions of those who now sit above the arena in which we work, whose thumbs may signal the fate of institutions. His talk complemented the sessions run by Adrian Slater: while Slater may keep us out of the courts and bankruptcy, the QAA should keep us on the path of virtue.

The introduction was a review of current structures: the quality framework, benchmarking (which Peter suggested were not 'benchmarks'), the Bologna/Prague discussions, research council statements on research training, professional doctorates, and the 'new route' PhD recently implemented by ten universities to match more closely the US model. The first two were direct products of the QAA, while the last two were external initiatives toward which the QAA was neutral but interested. Material on benchmarking was available on the web, and a visit to [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk) subsequently revealed that some draft statements from pilot projects (in Chemistry, Law and History) had gone up on 19 June together with a consultation document inviting comments in the period starting 16 July. Peter's languid style did not convey the currency and importance of this topic to the audience, nor was it clear that the framework would now be more vigorously advanced into doctoral territory.

The next section of the talk covered the Code of Practice and the feedback from Continuation Audit visits. Although research programmes were strictly not covered by the review process, teams had talked to students and brought back consistent



requests for more consistency and transparency in their treatment. A common request was for better support and training for research students when expected to teach other students. Peter thought future reviews would include PG provision, and linked that comment to the HEFCE (2000) review. Students expected to receive appropriate levels of support and supervision within a studentship. There was a tension between setting fixed standards and maintaining the highest quality, but small local problems could exert high leverage in the international market. However, the QAA thought that the overall provision of UK research degrees was "in safe hands" and this was not an immediate area of concern, despite claims that PhD standards were dropping.

In respect of international collaboration, Peter picked up on points made by Adrian Slater: the imperative to do the market research; to select the partner most carefully; to work together, document and monitor in a timely fashion; to use realistic full costings and allow for termination costs. There must be no compromise on quality assurance, so good and frequent communication was essential to ensure that all parties understood what was expected or allowed.

Despite these strictures, horrific failures were rare, and could be traced generally to failure to appreciate alternative cultural views or to over-enthusiasm such as pushing through agreements under vacation powers. Failures were not infrequently followed by a suggestion of the need for staff training - the link of training to punishment sparked in this reporter the idea that allowing staff to 'grow' was a euphemism for put

ting them on the rack. Not unexpectedly, failures were also often followed by senior staff avoiding responsibility and melting into the background.

In the questioning, participants raised various topics that appeared still problematic and ill-defined. Would the QAA comment on the student:supervisor relationship that remains at the heart of the research studentship? Apparently not, but this might be a HEFCE function. Who decides whether HEFCE might need to do this in order to discharge its statutory responsibility? Apparently HEFCE would decide. Where there is variation in practices within one university between departments, might a focus on defined quality lead to litigation by aggrieved students? Possible, but it takes time to get the system right, and meanwhile the losers may be students but also staff and institutions. The questioner [Tony Fell] suggested that current confusion and variation must lead onto to a lack of standard.

Another topic raised in questions was that of collaboration between institutions within the UK. This, distance learning and e-learning were all not explicitly covered by the QAA remit.

In so many areas, it seems that we look for guidance only after a failure. Surely a minimal requirement in higher education is to anticipate and avoid failure, and the higher standard is not static but one of constant improvement?



### **Synergy: How a research alliance has grown**

***Professor Andrew Hamnett***

Principal & Vice-Chancellor  
University of Strathclyde

Professor Andrew Hamnett, the Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Strathclyde University, addressed the session on the Research Alliance between Glasgow and Strathclyde Universities that has been in operation since 1998. The arrangement is for both universities to recognise each other as a “preferred partner in research”, and is understood by the staff at both institutions. However, this, he insisted, is not the same as a merger, nor would it make sense for a merger to occur, as both universities were already too big for a merger to be practical anyway.

Historically, Glasgow and Strathclyde were both established over 200 years ago and have always had relations, usually hostile. From the late 18th century, industry began to show an interest in university research, and so the two universities grew out of each other. It was eventually recognised that there was a need to support each other in research, and the close geographical proximity was an important factor. It was not an exclusive arrangement and both universities have other partners in certain areas.

One effect of the research alliance has been to undertake collaborative research in areas where it has been beneficial to do so (but in other areas research has continued to be run by one university alone). They are joint ventures where joint credit is taken, and the projects are run by joint meeting of both universities, to an estimated total budget of £10m. Areas include pharmaceutical drug design, renewable power, Scottish studies, medical computational science and several politics/economics areas.

The other major effect has been the introduction of joint courses, such as creative writing, social history, structural engineering and the Graduate Law School. All students apply to one university only, but the degree is a joint award of both universities. Where postgraduate courses are jointly run, post-graduates have two supervisors, one from each university. The talk ended with the one case where the alliance had gone as far as a departmental merger. The maritime departments in both universities were both too small to function on their own, therefore a single department of Naval Architecture was created. Several examples of the achievements of this joint department since the merger were then given.