

UK Council for **Graduate Education**

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SUMMER CONFERENCE





SUMMER CONFERENCE 2002

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 Gloucestershire, July 2002.

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THE CHANGING TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE : AN E-LEARNING REVOLUTION ?

*Dr Richard Gadsden,
Director of CMS, Sheffield Hallam University*

The session offered a brief exploration of the experience of Dr Gadsden's School initially with distance learning Masters courses and, more recently, with e-learning and the e-University. Dr Gadsden focussed particularly on what students want and the quality of their experience.

The School had enrolled its first DL Masters students in 1989 and was named as one of 3 e-University pilot sites in 2001. The Distance Learning students' experience was defined as accessible and student driven, but essentially solitary. Considerable attention has been paid, over the years to ensuring that the DL student experience is safeguarded, and to addressing the solitary nature of DL study via telephone tutorial support, general tutorials, study schools and strong encouragement of networks of peer contact and support.

Dr Gadsden offered a number of possible definitions of e-learning but expressed a preference for 'Any learning which is electronically enabled'. Strengths and weaknesses of e-learning were identified, with particular attention to the ways in which the quality of the student experience may be enhanced. E-learning provides education for students who are geographically isolated or unable to attend for other reasons. It allows for large numbers to access learning provision and to share ideas with tutors and peers. Infrastructure support for EL is also easier than for DL. Weaknesses relate to the same issues about compensating for lack of face to face contact as with DL, plus the need both for technology to be reliable and for students to have access to appropriate technology for the media selected. The importance of presenting as great a variety of different learning modes as possible was stressed. Experience to date has shown that EL students particularly value flexibility, variety, easy access, high quality learning materials, peer contact, and face-to-face tutor support.

Discussion focussed particularly on the need to plan for – and resource - ensuring that units remain absolutely up-to-date: means to ensure staff competence: and the possible impact on Universities' physical resource strategies, of significant moves towards e-learning, in the medium-long term.

This was a highly interactive session, during which delegates shared experiences of supporting students studying off-campus and explored operational implications for Universities of the increasing emphasis on e-learning. The Sheffield Hallam case study offered a good basis for discussion of the practicalities of supporting a quality DL/EL student experience.

DYNAMICS OF THE PhD VIVA

*Dr Vernon Trafford,
Professor Peter Woolliams
(both of Anglia Polytechnic University) and
Dr Shosh Leshem
(Academic College of Education, Oranim, Israel)*

The speakers described the findings of a study that investigated the dynamics of the PhD viva. The research reported was practitioner-based with the researchers taking an insider's view of the viva process. Two of the presenters had experienced some 86 doctoral vivas – as either independent chairs of examination boards or as examiners. The third presenter had experienced a viva as candidate. The dynamics investigated ranged from the selection of examiners through the physical layout of the room to the awareness of candidates regarding the 'signalled invitations to engage with examiners at a higher level of scholarly discussion'.

The data that was reported in the workshop included notes of the questions that examiners asked candidates, transcripts of conversations



with participants and personal observations of the vivas. The speakers used cameos to illustrate the respective views and feelings of candidates and supervisors. They then proposed some explanatory models relating to the predominance of particular relations between examiners and candidates as they move through the phases of the viva. The dynamics described within these models encompassed academic, collegial, professional and social perspectives.

In terms of roles and relationships, the speakers discussed: (a) the constitutional role played by examiners in providing public external accountability, (b) the legal role played to ascertain that the thesis is in fact the work of the candidate, (c) the technical role played to ensure that the candidate is able to defend their research thus indicating that they can lay claim legitimately to being able to act as an independent researcher, and (d) the scholarly role played to establish that the research meets the academic criteria for the award of a doctorate – typically that the thesis forms a contribution to knowledge that is both original and significant.

In terms of the phases of the viva, the speakers identified: (a) a prelude in which common issues are identified and an agenda drawn up, (b) an opening in which the candidate is invited to make broad context setting statements, (c) a phase where opinions of the examiners in relation to the thesis are consolidated and (d) a closing phase where clarity may be sought about the research outcomes and the doctoral worthiness of thesis as well as its application to professional practice where appropriate.

The discussion opened up a number of issues relating to the viva – notably examples of what seemed to be definable as good and bad practice (though inevitable there was debate about applying quality judgements of these kinds) and the variance of practice across disciplines relating to both conduct and content of the viva and variance across the sector in terms of procedures for the

conduct for the viva. The call for some national guidance and/or training for examiners was made by some of the participants in the workshop.

SUPPORTING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS : THE ROLE OF STUDENT SERVICES

*Dr Annie Grant,
Director, Educational Development and Support
Centre, University of Leicester*

The speaker discussed what postgraduates are looking for in university support services, using the experiences of the University of Leicester integrated services within the EDSC (AccessAbility Centre; Careers; Counselling; Sick Bay; Student Learning Centre; Teaching and Learning Unit; Welfare; and with links to the Chaplaincy). Leicester has hosted a HEFCE-funded Student Psychological Health Project, which obtained information on the academic and social behaviour and help-seeking strategies of an entire student cohort. Most causes of stress and help-seeking behaviours were much the same for both undergraduates and postgraduates, though choice of subject emerged as having a marked impact on postgraduate stress levels (for both PGT and PGR) compared with undergraduates. What also emerged from the survey, and is evident in the EDSC experience, is that postgraduate students (both PGT and PGR) use central support services very heavily. As the discussion in the session confirmed, this reality contrasts with the perceptions of some staff, both administrative and academic staff, who may regard undergraduate students as the main clients of the academic and pastoral support services; and it also raises training issues for the staff providing those services.



NEW EUROPEAN POSTGRADUATE OPPORTUNITIES

*Dr Martin Penny, Director,
UK Research Office (UKRO), Brussels*

This session was focussed primarily on the mission of UKRO and why academics should be interested in European postgraduate opportunities. It was particularly useful in providing delegates with advance information with regard to Framework 6 programmes; the first rounds of Framework 6 will come on stream in October/November of 2002, with key cut-off points and multiple deadlines over the next four years.

The session explored briefly the mission of UKRO, which is to promote effective UK participation in EU funded research programmes, higher education and training and related activities. Dr Penny explored the policy, practical and financial reasons why delegates should take an interest in European postgraduate opportunities and talked about the concept of the European Research Area which underpins such programmes. He provided details as to which states are eligible for European programmes, including member states, candidate countries and Israel and Switzerland (who are eligible by associate agreement). Most of the session was devoted to the details of Framework 6, which provides a number of key opportunities for UK university graduate schools. Dr Penny identified the principal Marie Curie programmes within Framework 6:

Host fellowships for early stage research training

Host fellowships for the transfer of knowledge

Conferences and training courses

Individual fellowships

Intra-European fellowships

Outgoing international fellowships

Incoming international fellowships

Re-integration grants

Excellence grants, excellence awards, excellence chairs

Framework 5 host opportunities which are still available

Many of these present opportunities for UK graduate schools, particularly in the area of research training. Dr Penny stressed the importance of UK participation in EU programmes and the fact that UK academics and postgraduates were often disadvantaged by their inability to speak other European languages.

Delegates responded enthusiastically to Dr Penny's presentation, especially since the information he provided on Framework 6 funding is not yet published officially. Discussion focussed mainly on the details of applying for the various programmes. Several delegates expressed disappointment that European funding programmes were aimed in large measure at science, technology and social science, and that there were very few programmes which are open to applicants from arts and humanities disciplines. Dr Penny agreed that this was the case and suggested that it was crucially important for academics in arts disciplines in particular to lobby the EU to include more programmes aimed at encouraging the 'culture industries'.



STUDENTS ' ACCESS TO INFORMATION : RESPONDING TO STUDENTS ' LEGAL RIGHTS

Gary Attle, Mills and Reeve

New and updated legislation passed within the UK impacts on the management and administration of students. This includes the Data Protection Act 1998 ("DPA 1998"), the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The DPA 1998 repealed the Data Protection Act 1984 relating to the regulation of automatically processed data. The DPA 1998 has extended the ways in which data can be collected and used as it applies to some paper records as well as those held electronically.

Initially, delegates were taken through a case study based on a decision from the Court of Appeal: *R -v- University of Cambridge ex parte Persaud*. In that case it was deemed that, in the specific circumstances, the University had acted unfairly in the way it had decided to withdraw graduate student status. The Court sent the matter back to the institution to allow it to apply a fair process in determining the student's status. The case illustrates how an institution must use a fair and reasonable process in making its decisions.

Key Points of Discussion

The case highlighted a number of issues:

The case was essentially about Natural Justice. Generally, students should exhaust internal procedures before bringing litigation.

Contract & breach of duty of care. Codes of Practice could help to define the student/institution relationship. Subject to other areas of law (discrimination etc), it was felt that judges would not wish to interfere with the scope of such agreed academic relationships.

Data Protection Act: can stop information being circulated to others, but not to a student about him/herself. Valid requests for access to data require 40-day response. However, examination scripts and confidential references are exempt, except in the latter's case, they can be obtained from the recipient, but not the sender (although the provisions regarding third party data should be considered).

Human Rights Act: pushes the world towards a rights based culture in which judges are required to balance the rights of individuals, including third parties, and information given in confidence. Article 8 refers to Rights of Privacy.

Duty/Balance of Fairness: there is a higher duty of fairness in the conduct of disciplinary proceedings than those relating to academic judgement. In disciplinary matters, copies of all paperwork before the decision-making body should be given to the student. Examiners and Transfer Assessors should be advised if, as part of an institution's policy, reports will be divulged to students. Even though procedures had been set up to preserve the anonymity of the independent academic in the Cambridge case, issues of bias and prejudice might have been avoided had the identity been known to the student.

Other issues arising from new legislation:

Freedom of Information Act 2000: extends the scope of the DPA 1998 and deals with any paperwork and rights of access. All public bodies will be required to set out what documentation is available and at what cost.

Litigation Disclosure: There are obligations to disclose information prior to the commencement of court proceedings. Advice should be sought in such a situation.

Race Relations Act 1967: RR65 Questionnaires will require full response; otherwise attempts to withhold information may result in the courts drawing inferences. Advice should be taken.

Evaluation

This was as lively interactive presentation with no opportunity to sit back and be receptive. The content and consequential debate for the thought-provoking session was sufficient to have deserved a longer session, and individual aspects and the Acts could be the subjects of whole workshops.



SHARING GOOD PRACTICE IN MONITORING PGR

*Jacquelyn Allen Collinson &
Dr Ros Jennings (University of Gloucestershire)*

The speakers used the monitoring procedures in place at the University of Gloucestershire as a basis for the workshop with the discussion covering issues relating to the quality of delivery of research degree training. The procedures they described were clearly intended to be both pervasive and transparent within a student's experience of research degree study. A close monitoring process was seen as essential in ensuring a satisfactory experience for all concerned and thus likely to lead subsequently to timely completion of programmes of study. The monitoring processes described were set within a context where effective management of research degree provision was seen as an important factor in the competitive postgraduate market – the suggestion was that such management needed to involve active reflection and an intent to self-improvement.

The speakers provided a case study consisting of methods currently employed at the University of Gloucestershire to monitor the progress of research students and to invite research student evaluations of their experiences. Participants in the workshop were encouraged to share good practice and reflect on needs and requirements for effective evaluation and thus more effective management of research degree provision. In discussion some time was spent on the issue of confidentiality and anonymity. Establishing a wholly confidential system for gathering feedback from students on the quality of their experience of research degree study as they perceive it was deemed to facilitate more honest views than a system where responses were not treated as confidential (it was suggested that many research student perceive themselves to be in a very vulnerable position vis a vis their programme of study, their supervisor and their assessment). Ensuring the maintenance of confidentiality – especially in situations where students are small in number – and at the same time enabling responsive action was noted as an issue. Some workshop participants raised the issue of anonymity – suggesting that anonymous feedback is most likely to give an accurate picture of the student (and indeed staff)

experience. It was also noted however that anonymous feedback does not allow for the accurate tracking of particular issues raised and therefore denies the possibility of checking the validity of claims made and the possibility of remedial action where that might be deemed desirable. Similarly the pros and cons of the centralisation of quality monitoring were discussed. The need for a centrally defined set of standards of quality monitoring to avoid variability at local level (i.e. at the level of department or faculty) was set against the need for local ownership of the monitoring process.

Although it is hard to define any general consensus arising during the discussion it did become clear that a range of monitoring procedures employed to monitor practice in relation to research degree training would allow for most effective overall management. Feedback questionnaires, six monthly in-depth monitoring, interviews with research tutors independent of the supervisory team were all seen as useful. But it was noted that in isolation they were likely to be significantly less effective than in combination.