

UK Council *for* **Graduate Education**

Winter Conference

2003





Winter conference 2003

Summary

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

UKCGE
Lichfield Campus
The Friary
Lichfield
WS13 6QG

T: 01543 308602
F: 01543 308604

ukcge@ukcge.ac.uk

www.ukcge.ac.uk



Winter Conference, 2003

The winter conference was held on 13 February 2003 at Regents College, London. The Council was very pleased to be able to welcome Professor Gareth Roberts and Higher Education Minister, Margaret Hodge, as key speakers. Gareth Roberts highlighted the needs for management and leadership in his talk on developments in research. Not surprisingly, questions focused on the review of the RAE he is currently undertaking. Colleagues were pleased to hear that a radical change is being proposed, with the prospect of a two-stream approach to assessment.

Margaret Hodge focused on the key proposals in the White Paper, research, teaching, access and fees. Questions centred on the impact on postgraduate provision and potential tensions between increased fees on the one hand and, on the other, the excellent work done to improve the stipend of research students. In response, the Minister pointed out that there had been an increase in the number of postgraduate students since 1996, suggesting that the earlier introduction of fees had had no impact on recruitment, and that universities would be able to offer 'golden hellos' to new staff who were joining with the additional debt incurred by postgraduate study. Delegates were no less anxious to emphasise the impact that any geographical concentration of research-degree provision and the ability of universities to award research degrees may have on widening access.

After the opportunity to question both speakers delegates split into groups that explored the implications of what they had heard and to share their ideas and concerns with others. What emerged was remarkably widespread agreement and strong, argued feeling.

Composite report of discussions

1. Introduction

What follows is a composite of the main points most energetically made in 'breakout' group discussions. There was so much agreement between the texts submitted by our note takers that it seemed sensible to reflect that in this single, extended summary rather than to reproduce the separate and repetitive originals.

Overall the delegates perceived a lack of substance in the White Paper, indicating a want of knowledge and experience of the University research world and postgraduate study. Furthermore delegates insisted that the White Paper's view of universities as existing primarily to deliver the Government's economic aims is too narrow and restrictive. They also expressed the following specific concerns.

2. Research

2.1 Standard Model

Delegates were concerned that the White Paper is predicated upon the natural-science model of research, and the standard 21-year-old, single, full-time, home, research student. Concerns have been raised that it makes no allowance for the wide diversity of research methods, practices, doctoral programmes or student types.

2.2 Concentration of Research Funding (and hence Research students)

The drive to concentrate even further the already highly concentrated funding, ignores the hard-earned increased outputs and RAE gradings achieved by some modern universities on the back of small amounts of GR and DevR. No account has been taken of value-added achievements or value for money, and the proposals deny any notion of growth of research potential from staff new to the profession within the modern universities. Nobody is born a 5 star researcher. Such people emerge from all manner of routes, and there has been no exploration as to how research and researchers are developed.



The impetus for concentration of funding into world-class research implies that the international research arena is large. This is not proven. The Council sees the proposed concentration of research in fewer institutions as a potentially damaging development. Though the Council welcome the opportunity for collaboration and accepts the principle of a critical mass, it is suggested that a very high degree of selectivity and over-concentration of researchers may actually discourage innovative and challenging research in many subject areas.

A diminishing number of research centres has particularly damaging consequences for postgraduate taught masters programmes, the implications of which the Government does not appear to have considered. (Indeed postgraduate taught programmes are not addressed in the White Paper at all, despite their being the most rapidly growing sector in higher education.) If research is concentrated in a few centres, this concentration will necessarily involve a re-configuration of taught masters programmes and a narrowing of them, with a much reduced distribution since it is very difficult to sustain a full masters programme without research and doctoral programmes. This would greatly lessen postgraduate opportunities in many regions of the UK, reduce choice considerably for international students and damage currently successful programmes.

The White Paper's homogeneous view of research, ie that 'big' is necessarily the best and most effective means of carrying out research, is particularly damaging to the Art and Humanities. The White Paper model is very much dominated by science and technological subjects which require a costly infrastructure and where team-led projects are the norm. A concentration of research in a very large centres is unlikely to facilitate excellence in the Arts and Humanities, where most research students (and probably still the majority of academic staff) work on individual projects with individual supervisors. Arts and Humanities research has been hugely successful (and dispersed) under the current

RAE model, and to adopt a Science oriented model unilaterally for all research disciplines would be a retrograde step.

2.3 Relationships between Teaching and Research

Delegates disputed the White Paper's claim that research is not necessary to underpin high-quality teaching. Active involvement in research may not be necessary for teaching a Foundation Degree, or the first year of an undergraduate degree, but it greatly strengthens the quality of teaching of second and especially third-year honours work, underpins all teaching at Masters level, and is the sine qua non for supervising research degrees.

Delegates believed it a mistake to think that research is not needed in any sector and that there is no connection between research and teaching. Research underpins excellence in teaching and practice. This is best demonstrated by the recognition of the need for evidence-based practice in the healthcare professions, not least nursing. The benefits of scholarship alone are limited.

2.4 Research Specialisms

Participants were concerned that under these proposals research in whole areas of subject disciplines would disappear because of the concentration of funding and encouragement to collaborate. This, in turn, would lead to ossification of subjects and curricula.

2.5 Importance of research

There was unanimity on the fact that training high-quality research students is critical, not only to supply future researchers in HE and the needs of specific 'associated fields' such as industrial R&D, but also in society as a whole. A successful knowledge economy depends on people with advanced analytical skills.



2.6 Research Training

Collaboration on research training sounds splendid in principle, but will be difficult to make functional at any distance. Aspects of generic training may be made more cost effective through collaboration, but there are issues of student mobility - even within regions - consequent on lack of funding, family commitments and poor infrastructure.

There is a mismatch between government views, research-training needs, employer needs and student needs (the European model in particular requires the provision of subject-specific training). There is also no clarity about who will supply the requisite funding, particularly in areas that would not attract employer contributions, and collaborative research training cannot succeed without appropriate funding.

3. Postgraduate Education

3.1 Status of postgraduate education

Conference delegates would wish to see much greater awareness than shown in the White Paper of the importance of postgraduate education (both PGT and PGR) which supports many of its identified priorities for economic growth, widening participation etc (points 3 and 4 below).

3.2 Postgraduate activity

The White Paper appears to equate graduate study with research students, but the greatest expansion in PG activity in the UK over the past 15-20 years has been in taught postgraduate programmes, meeting the needs of a wide variety of student groups. The wide range of postgraduate taught courses at universities such as Leicester, for example (full-time, part-time, campus-based, work-based, distance learning), is specifically designed to support this wide range of target groups.

- Taught PG degrees play a major role in pre-doctoral training (eg the 1+3 system of AHRB and ESRC and the MRes of the sciences) and taught Masters provide the training building blocks of all the New Route PhD programmes in the UK
- Taught PG degrees play a key role in the provision of high-level vocational training, the development of specialist discipline skills and the acquisition of new disciplinary or inter-disciplinary skills through conversion courses etc
- Many students move straight to taught PG courses after their first degrees, but taught PG programmes are also a vital part of the CPD/Lifelong Learning agenda, a key vehicle for mid-career skills development. Widening access cannot not just about undergraduates
- Taught postgraduate courses are one of the major reasons EU and international students come to Britain to study. These students are a major source of revenue for UK universities. They also enormously enrich the UK student experience and are very likely to be positive 'ambassadors' for the UK after graduation

3.3 Graduate Schools

Here again, the White Paper takes no account of taught postgraduate programmes. The reference to Graduate Schools is predicated upon a research-student only model. The position of taught PG programmes, and the research needed to underpin their provision, is ignored.



4. Access and Funding

4.1 Research Council PHD Stipends

Delegates welcomed the increase in Research Council PhD stipends, but given that such students represent only a small proportion of UK postgraduates, and the importance of supporting postgraduate education as a whole, consideration should be given to accessible repayment and loan schemes for postgraduate as well as undergraduate students.

4.2 Access, Widening Participation, PhD Places and Supporting the Community

Here the White Paper's proposals (including the top-up fee and student debt issues) contradict the Government's policies on access and widening participation. Moreover, there is a questionable class aspect embedded in the assumption that everyone is, and can be, mobile.

5. Collaboration

5.1 Calibration of RAE and Partnerships

The White Paper gives no evidence on the calibration of RAE and partnerships in practice. It is felt that consortia exemplars may be lauded at institutional level but those approvingly cited do not actually work well at ground level. In some geographical areas - even within greater London - it is not easy to identify obvious partners and there will be many disciplinary mismatches. It may be ideally beneficial to have multi-partners according to discipline, but this may be practically impossible. Collaboration in a highly competitive world is difficult and in some areas could be impossible. Furthermore, whilst some universities that have merged might find it more beneficial to de-merge in order to win money for collaboration.

6. Teaching Universities and the Student Experience

6.1 Teaching-Only Universities

Conference delegates were concerned that the development of 'teaching only' universities will lead to educational ghettos characterised by poor staff, poor retention, and a lack of student exposure to research. Students will be short-changed in their higher education experience and tomorrow's researchers will come only from those lucky enough to have afforded study at an 'elite' University. There is also a concern that Government's view of the means of achieving a 50% participation rate is based upon the commitment to Foundation Degrees in FE and 'teaching only' Universities, as an 'add-on' to the current degree system.

6.2 The Student Experience

The nature of the student experience, identification with and 'belonging' to an institution need to be carefully managed if research training is regionalised, or nationalised. There is anecdotal evidence of students being poached or transferring to other institutions following post-admission contact with other institutions, and institutions may be protective about sending their students to other institutions for training for other reasons too. It is difficult in some disciplines, or with some types of student, to ensure attendance at research training events. There are many reasons for undertaking research, and making training mandatory can have a disruptive effect on the willing student.



7. European dimension

What the White Paper proposes would be very much out of step with our European partners. The White Paper strategy would reduce institutions' opportunities within Europe. If the high-graded departments are promoted, and other institutions deemed to be second-rate, it will be difficult for those affected to

- recruit European students at UG as well as PG level
- gain exchange partnerships with European universities
- enter into research partnerships for European funding
- offer their graduates the prospect of European employment

Furthermore, should Government seek to remove research-degree awarding powers, whether virtually through attrition or actively through legislation, affected universities will cease to have university status within Europe. This will have a wider detrimental effect on UK earnings.

8. Comparisons with American Higher Education

All agreed that the comparison with American higher education in the White Paper is both a superficial and an inappropriate one. Only a handful of British universities can be compared with the American Ivy League universities, and even they have nothing like the endowment resources of a Harvard or Yale. There is no British equivalent at all to the small, well-endowed, private American liberal arts colleges, which mainly concentrate on high-quality teaching but do engage in some research in the Arts and Humanities subjects. The proper American comparison for the large majority of British universities is the large state university. All such universities are both teaching and

research institutions, in which research and substantial postgraduate programmes co-exist with the teaching of large numbers of undergraduates.

9. Recommendations

9.1 Development of Research

The lead of the Research Councils should be followed in rewarding researchers (cf PG students) working in underdeveloped areas and in small departments.

9.2 Definition of 'The Community'

The White Paper does not define what is meant by 'working with the Community'. This may be deliberately vague so that institutions can apply their own interpretations, but clarification would be appreciated.

9.3 Incentives

The White Paper indicates that the less research-intensive universities should work more closely with other organisations such as Charities. Charities do not pay overheads, and it will be at a cost to the institutions unless this type of work is incentivised.