

UKCGE

celebrating **10** years  
promoting graduate education

## Winter conference 2004

### Summary

Further information on the Council can be obtained from:

**UK Council for Graduate Education**  
Lichfield Campus  
The Friary  
Lichfield  
Staffs  
WS13 6QG

T. 01543 308602  
F. 01543 308604

[ukcge@ukcge.ac.uk](mailto:ukcge@ukcge.ac.uk)

[www.ukcge.ac.uk](http://www.ukcge.ac.uk)



UK Council for Graduate Education

**The winter conference was held on February 11th 2004 at Regents College London. The Council were pleased to welcome a variety of speakers who gave presentations on an assortment of topical postgraduate themes and issues.**

Here follows composite reports of each presentation.

**Mr Roger McClure, Chief Executive,**  
Scottish Higher Education Funding Council

**'Has devolution made a difference? The postgraduate experience in Scotland'**

In the opening session of the Conference, Mr McClure described SHEFC's operational style as moving from interaction with individual institutions around previously undergraduate-focussed issues towards consideration of a FE and HE system as a whole for Scotland, and more knowledge of postgraduate issues.

Whilst being smaller than England but larger than Wales, Scotland is distinctive, its geographical nature lending itself well to interaction of institutions and aggregating to a critical mass, and also in the context of a country with a different cultural, legal, and parliamentary structure within which postgraduate education is diverging with devolution.

Using the years 1997-2002 for comparison, Mr McClure argued that statistically, there had been little change between the proportion of postgraduate researchers (PGRS) to undergraduates around 1:27 within the student population, a rural mix in comparison to the predominance of numbers in the English "Golden triangle", and almost identical growth rates of five to six percent. However, whilst rapid growth in postgraduate taught (PGT) numbers was mirrored in both Scotland and the rest of the UK there were greater percentages in the rest of the UK than in Scotland. Another area of similarity was the convergence of the split of full-time and part-time numbers.

Scotland was a net importer of English students but England was more successful in recruiting non-EU PGTs, perhaps as a result of what Mr McClure termed the "London effect" and there were concerns about this and about the decreasing Scottish population impacting on recruitment. At the same time, Scotland was also considering the financial consequences of English Top-up fees.

Demographically, there were differences in the age ranges, the reasons for which had yet to be defined with PGTs being younger, and PGTs older than in the rest of the UK. Contributory factors might be the longer Scottish Honours degree programmes, and the higher proportion of Business, Management and Education programmes which attracted older PGT students.

Different subject emphasis may also play a part. Scotland had a greater proportion of Medical and Bio Sciences, Computing, Business and Education, providing fifty percent, whereas there was a lower proportion of Sociology, Economics, Political Studies, and Languages. Creative Arts and Design were emerging from a lack of research in those areas and SHEFC was trying to improve the situation by injecting funds into specific institutions. Scotland had strength also in Veterinary Studies.

Four years after Devolution, Scotland was seeing the impact from issues of scale and identity. There was a greater propensity for collaboration; for example, all eight Universities were involved in a single Doctorate programme for Economics, and four were collaborating on an MSc Design programme.

Quality Assurance matters were also being dealt with differently in Scotland compared to HEFC's different approach to audit. Also, whilst Research Assessment rules were UK-wide, funding councils were interpreting and implementing them differently. SHEFC was providing base funding support to Grades 4 or rising Grades 3a to maintain interest and prepare the ground for collaboration. A strategic research development grant foreshadowing the White Paper had been provided to plug gaps and raise standards. All collaborative projects were between Grade 3, 4 and 5 departments.

Scotland's response to the White Paper and the perception that funding was being concentrated in the "golden triangle" was the need to maintain the international research base and competitiveness without the divisive concentration within a small number of institutions. Funding was being pooled at subject rather than institutional level and through "selective inclusion" anyone could enter a pool of staff at international level. A pilot study around Physics was being undertaken which would have a recognisable entity distinct from institutions, but nevertheless be part of the six participants. It was the intention to create a distinct landscape as a viable alternative to the London/Oxbridge concentration.

In response to questions, Mr McClure indicated that SHEFC was planning to double funding for Knowledge Transfer over the next two years. He acknowledged also that the methodology for “selective inclusion” was a delicate question, in theory easy to accept but in practice difficult to implement and test the impact. There were also some gaps that need to be filled to provide appropriate opportunities for those with access only to remote provision in the Highlands and Islands.

In conclusion, Mr McClure said that there was no instant change as a result of Devolution, but some apparent structural differences were emerging and divergence would grow due to wider effects of funding approaches, Scotland’s scale and identity, and collaborative potential. There was also a caveat that what works in one country may not necessarily work in another.

**Dr Liz Beaty, Director (Learning and Teaching)**  
Higher Education Funding Council for England,  
HEFCE

**‘Learning, Teaching and Research, the importance of postgraduate student experience’**

Dr Liz Beaty, the Director of Learning and Teaching for HEFCE, entitled her talk at the Winter Conference: Learning, teaching and research: the experience of postgraduate students. In introducing this topic she promised to romp through the HEFCE policy agenda so that the main focus would be on issues related to research and teaching that face postgraduate research students (PGRS) and those who support them. Indeed, she did take us through a plethora of slides that raised a large number of important issues salient to the PGRS community, presenting the HEFCE viewpoint and then inviting feedback from the audience.

In addressing the HEFCE vision for Higher Education she emphasised that this was a defining moment for the sector, not just for the students involved but also for society at large in this era of globalisation and global competition, and of widening participation with its inherent progression issues. The core strategic aims of HEFCE were declared as enhancing excellence in research, teaching and learning while increasing participation so that Higher Education’s contribution to the economy and society could, in turn, be enhanced in comparison to international standards. This entails: building on the strengths of institutions, recognising that these are diverse across the sector; developing leadership, governance and management and hence engaging in organisational development. Dr Beaty outlined the changes in HEFCE’s own internal management to achieve these aims,

stressing that there would in future be more focus on the interaction between the regions and policy.

As an overview about PGRS research and teaching, two particular points were made: that it is the quality of Higher Education that matters, rather than the titles of the institutions providing it, and that it is important to focus on the quality of learning achieved when considering what counts as excellent teaching, the outcome rather than the input being the determining factor. In relation to enhancing excellence in research, Dr Beaty noted the dilemma involved in considering the competitiveness of English HEIs within a global context while at the same time focussing on developing processes within the country. She suggested that the introduction of minimum threshold standards for postgraduate research degree programmes was one of the ways in which this was being addressed. The formal consultation on these standards had indicated, she averred, broad support for the adoption of high standards of supervision and training in order to qualify for PDR funding. These standards were in the process of being integrated into the QAA code of practice so that two sets of standards would not be assessed separately. The funding bodies remain committed to announcing these standards by the summer 2004 for implementation in the academic year 2005-6.

While she recognised that the PGRS population is diverse and that that diversity is mirrored in the locus of their research, she felt it was important not simply to address what students want but also to address the needs of society and employers. Hence the QA exercise would encompass a review of teaching quality information, statistics on student employability and the development of flexible learning modes e.g. work-based learning and e-learning. Institutions would be encouraged to collaborate to develop Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for PGRS. High quality in learning and teaching is equally dependent on the process and content of the experience: both should be professional and informed by research. Standards for teaching would also be applied to supervision as well as course programmes. Dr Beaty expressed a hope that, in encouraging the development of quality provision for students, teachers/supervisors would be supported in demanding resources to accomplish this, including mechanisms to support their own continuing professional development.

At this point, Dr Beaty addressed in some detail the issue of PGRS as teachers, presenting statistics about how much teaching by Graduate Teaching Assistants goes on in HEIs. She reviewed a variety of mechanisms and scenarios through which PGRS could be trained, and accredited, for such teaching before going on to

draw out the issues arising from this move towards the development of excellence in teaching and research as a series of questions. How should such excellence be identified and rewarded? What is the relationship between research and teaching in terms of both process and outcomes? What is the position of PGRS in this in relation to their training and their role? What is the fundamental nature of higher education?

There was much debate, both immediately and later, in response to this presentation. There was a query about the resources available for the required development of academic staff to meet these new aims. Dr Beaty suggested that consideration would have to be given to using Staff Development funding and other Human Resources-type funding to meet these requirements. Some colleagues thought that perhaps the last question on the nature of HE should have been addressed first before considering standards and how the achievement of them should be measured. There were concerns about registration periods and timely completion rates when students and their supervisors were faced with additional demands on their time for training activities well beyond those required for successful completion of a particular research project. To many it seemed that the diversity of the PGRS population was not being well considered, with the now redundant model of the full-time, funded and young research student still taking precedence in devising policy, to the neglect of part-time, mature students (often researching issues from within professions in which they were already engaged), overseas students and students undertaking doctorates in their later years as an intellectual challenge. Dr Beaty undertook to convey these concerns back to HEFCE.

**Rt Hon Barry Sheerman,**  
MP for Huddersfield and Chairman of the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee

### **‘Enactment of the White Paper’**

As Chair of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Skills Barry Sheerman gave a witty overview of the Committee’s role in holding government to account in the area of Education and Skills Development at all levels. He indicated that Postgraduate Education and its role in Continuous Professional Development was not an area that the Committee had investigated in recent years. He undertook to investigate this

area and encouraged members of the Council to contact him via the Executive of UKCGE with ideas/views on the specific questions to which any investigation should seek answers. Members are encouraged to forward any ideas that they may have for Barry Sheerman to Elizabeth Long at UKCGE for formulation by the Executive Committee into brief that it will suggest to the Parliamentary Select Committee as being appropriate for any investigation into the Postgraduate Education sector.

**Chris Pressler,**  
JISC and University of London Library

### **‘UK e-theses - where are we now?’**

The speaker addressed the question of e-theses and current developments, primarily in relationship to the UK. He began by talking about the JISC Fair Programme (Focus on Access to Institutional Resources), both its background and its various projects. He then went on to talk about the National Digital Library for Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD), which is based at Virginia Tech University in the US and has been in existence since 1997. This is probably the most advanced scheme for enabling wide access to academic research in the form of theses in the world. A number of UK universities are already working with NDLTD, as is JISC, in order to share experience, exchange ideas and encourage participation. The speaker also described a number of other e-thesis projects which were well-advanced, including locations in India, Africa, Europe, South America and Australia. He stressed that there was a very wide-spread and active international interest in e-theses and clear opportunities to contribute to a worldwide e-thesis network.

The speaker stressed that at the current time the UK was lagging behind its international competitors and partners and needed to move forward, especially since 4% of the total research output in the world originates in the UK. By not providing sufficient access to UK theses on a global basis, the UK is presently not making full use of its research and the funding which supports it. The speaker argued that the British Library should be the way forward for the UK, in partnership with JISC, and that an e-theses model for the UK had been proposed at a major meeting in London in January 2004, aimed at placing e-theses in the wider research context. Further input from the academic and research community was being sought, and details could be obtained from Chris Awre (FAIR Programme Manager) on website [c.awre@jisc.ac.uk](mailto:c.awre@jisc.ac.uk).

**Ms Janet Bohrer, Development Officer,**  
Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

The Code of Practice: Postgraduate Research Programmes - an update on current developments

Janet Bohrer gave delegates an insight into the way in which the QAA is revising the section of the Code of Practice relating to research degree provision. It was noted that it is five years since the publication of Section 1 of the QAA's Code of Practice - relating to postgraduate research programmes. The current review of that Code is taking place in the context of the outcomes of the two phases of the HEFCE consultation exercise 'Improving Standards in Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes' and of the interim report of the Better Regulation Review Group (BRRG).

There is perhaps an apparent tension between expectations of the Funding Councils' threshold standards approach and the original, and recently re-emphasised, QAA view, which is essentially that the Code is not about 'compliance'. The HEFCE consultation exercise, however, indicated linkages between Research Degree Programmes (RDPs) and funding. Janet Bohrer talked through the inevitable tight timetabling (driven by deadlines coming from the Funding Councils) and noted that the working group was established in January 2004 with a view to working towards a formal consultation period - a minimum of 10 weeks - likely to begin in mid to late May. The working group comprises mostly senior academics, with representatives from the Funding Councils, the Research Councils and postgraduate student bodies, as well as QAA officers. The current intention is that a new section of the Code will be published in time for the academic year 2004/05. At the moment it is envisaged that there will be a single document encompassing the 'Improving Standards' requirements, thus seeking to avoid any misunderstandings and/or duplication when institutions are developing their own codes. Although it is currently anticipated that the audit models will continue into the next cycle much as they are now, these developments do suggest that there may need to be an additional focus on research supervision where appropriate.

Having given a useful update on the current situation the speaker then opened the session to a discussion from the floor. She took as her starting point questions arising from the first section that the working group has begun to tackle, namely supervisory arrangements. The questions used to promote discussion were:

should it be compulsory for existing supervisors to have refresher training, should the document refer to supervisory teams, and should supervisors always be currently undertaking research in their own subject? The subsequent discussion indicated considerable divergence of views among attendees. There was some consensus (though certainly no universal agreement) around acceptance that there are areas of genuine concern relating to supervision and that a Code could therefore raise, legitimately, important issues of the quality of RDP supervision to act as focal points in an institutional audit. There was, however, less agreement around the detail of possible 'solutions'. For example, for some colleagues the answer to the three questions posed was simply 'yes, and we already do it' while for others there was only partial agreement. For some the first question was seen as particularly problematic. In addressing this question the broader point was made that the role of QAA should be in providing guidance for the improving standards agenda - any Code should therefore focus on advice regarding good practice rather than compulsory statements. This echoes the views of the Agency and BRRG that the Code is not, and must not be, concerned with compliance. In addition, the view was expressed that these kinds of questions were an unwelcome intrusion into what is an academic matter that should be left to institutions to resolve for themselves in a responsible, self-regulatory manner. This view was countered by a representative of postgraduate students who drew attention to inadequacies in the system and the urgent need for these to be addressed. There was, then, a healthy debate.

For those in the audience with responsibilities within their own institutions for the delivery of RDPs - wherever their sympathies lay in terms of the debates from the floor - the session proved extremely useful in updating on what is clearly an important development and gaining insight into current QAA thinking on the matter. It also provoked thoughts about just what it is that we provide in terms of research degree study, why we do what we do, and the possibilities for change.

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Kathy Ludlow, UKCGE Executive Committee