



UK Council *for* **Graduate Education**

What is a Doctorate Workshop

University of Reading

4 May 2007

Notes from Breakout Session

How are drivers of change impacting on the student experience?

Led by Professor Mick Fuller (Head of Graduate School, Univ. Plymouth) and Simon Felton (General Secretary of the National Postgraduate Committee).

The headings for discussion were taken directly from - Park C. (2007) "Redefining the Doctorate" Occasional Paper of the HEA, Jan. 2007.

Should doctoral candidates be defined and treated as students or employees?

Doctoral students tend to "fall between the stools" institutionally – neither students (typically undergraduate) nor staff (with employment contracts). The view was that it would help students if they have the rights and privileges of staff but be classed as students, and this is the case in a number of institutions. Having doctoral candidates as employees would affect UK PhD funding since NI contributions would need to be met. The National Postgraduate Committee said that a survey of postgraduates had shown that the students believe they benefit financially from being students; however the ability to have NI contributions being paid in relation to pensions would be helpful. It was noted that developing the idea of "staffness" in students may help them focus more on where they were going and the need to develop skills.

In what ways and how quickly might the European Charter for researchers change the way in which doctoral candidates are defined and treated?

The EC makes no distinction for the "student phase" on the career ladder of researchers and refers to doctoral students as early career researchers and the UK had agreed to the charter. We discussed what we would see as a better title for doctoral students. Both early career researcher and early career professional were offered. However, it was pointed out that doctoral candidates can actually be mid or late in their career (particularly professional doctorates) and there was concern that researcher might not be the right term for some professional doctorates. Once again caution was raised re the financial implications for our doctoral candidates if there is a move to have them as employees. It was noted that it is likely to be some years before the EC becomes fully implemented (10 years?) and it would take an act of EU or UK legislation to fully implement since it would require an amendment to employment legislation.

In what ways are the development of Graduate Schools, Research Degree Programmes and Research Training Programmes improving the quality of the doctoral student experience?

Graduate Schools come in a variety of forms; virtual, real, dispersed or with a physical centre (such as the lovely centre where this was held at Reading University) but usually all are very concerned with skills development. The research training programmes under the auspices of the Graduate Schools had been much appreciated by students; the most important thing was that it made them feel that they were "special", recognised and appreciated by their institution. However, the buy-in from supervisors in encouraging training was a factor in whether there was "improvement". The PRES survey should give valuable information on how life was changing for students (note added following discussion with Janet Metcalfe – PRES surveys show that the most significant factor affecting "improvement" is supervisory issues and this remains unchanged across surveys).

In what ways is the revised QAA Code of Practice improving the quality of the doctoral student experience?

The NPC was adamant that the QAA Code of Practice has definitely been useful in stimulating thought and discussion leading to actions within institutions to improve skills provision but more importantly to improve supervision.

In what ways are part-time and distant students disadvantaged by current institutional provisions and arrangements?

Institutions have various ways of supporting these groups who clearly are disadvantaged by not being in the institution where full-time students will be getting more access to training. Different Institutions have addressed this in different ways e.g.:

- Part-time students sign and agree to attend weekend schools (works well if there is a cohort).
- Most have remote Virtual Learning Environments, Portals or electronic notice boards
- Some University Consortia work together to provide the range of generic training for part-time students at appropriate times or in appropriate ways (e.g. Midlands hub of UKGRAD)

Most agreed that part-time distance students were still the subject of concern for HEI's and there was demand for innovative solutions to be shared between HEI's. The forthcoming UKCGE summer conference at Leicester in July 07 was mentioned as an event where such ideas would be shared.

Notes compiled by Dr Anne Hamblin (Royal Veterinary College) and Professor Mick Fuller (University of Plymouth)