POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER SYMPOSIUM:

Conversations about the doctoral experience

A report of proceedings and recommendations from the Postgraduate Researcher Symposium held at the British Library on 1 November 2011

CO-HOSTED BY:
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank those who attended the Postgraduate Researcher Symposium and who brought their ideas and developed recommendations with us. We are particularly grateful to all our external speakers for sharing their knowledge to spark our conversations.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE), the British Library, Vitae and the National Union of Students (NUS) brought together doctoral researchers, supervisors and academic staff, staff supporting researchers and librarians for a one-day Postgraduate Researcher Symposium to discuss the doctoral experience. It is rare indeed for the various stakeholders to communicate with each other to generate shared ideas. This report documents the proceedings of the event and the recommendations that emerged for how the doctoral experience could be improved for all the stakeholders involved.

Emerging themes
- Funding for research
- Work and social space for researchers
- Professional development and support for supervisors
- Preparation for embarking on the doctorate
- Representation of doctoral researchers within institutions and at national level
- Developing and recognising leadership during the doctorate
- The diverse nature of doctoral awards and doctoral researchers
- Researcher development and support for doctoral researchers
- Provision of resources for research
- Information literacy
- Facilitating networking among researchers
- Efforts needed from national bodies to support institutional improvements

Key recommendations

The primary recommendation is for a more holistic, integrated approach to the doctoral experience, ensuring the roles, responsibilities and contribution of doctoral researchers, supervisors, academic and institutional staff supporting researchers are recognised and valued in the research community.

We also discuss:

Institution-wide recommendations, which focus on raising the profile of doctoral research in all its diversity and ensuring doctoral researchers have a voice in debates on policy and provision.

Recommendations on the recruitment and preparation of doctoral researchers, centring on the importance of setting expectations for the doctorate before it begins.

Recommendations on providing an induction that is comprehensive, accessible and transparent, without creating ‘information overload’.

Recommendations on supporting diversity and shaping training and supervision to meet the needs of the diversity of doctoral researchers.

Recommendations on learning needs and engagement with learning, creating an institution-wide, needs-based and blended approach to learning.

Recommendations on supervision and networking, which highlight the importance of both supervisors and doctoral researchers understanding their responsibilities in the doctoral process.

Recommendations on encouraging doctoral researchers to form and participate in research communities.

‘I enjoyed talking to other students and contributing to the debate’
INTRODUCTION

The idea of bringing together a range of stakeholders in the doctorate was originally conceived in conversations between UKCGE, the British Library and NUS. We recognised that each of us regularly hold conferences and events at which we discuss the doctoral experience of doctoral researchers, supervisors and staff supporting researchers. But it is rare indeed for the various stakeholders to communicate with each other to generate shared ideas and rarer still for doctoral researchers to be part of the conversation.

We believed that between us we could put together an event that would draw from each of our usual audiences to bring a range of different individuals involved with doctoral study from all kinds of institutions, including doctoral researchers, into one place for a day.

Over time this germ of an idea became a reality as Vitae joined the group and we developed the idea of facilitated conversation among supervisors, doctoral researchers, librarians and staff supporting researchers that would lead to specific recommendations of what needs to change to improve the doctoral experience for everyone involved.

What appealed to us about this format was that it created space for everyone to have their say and negotiate through potentially thorny issues in a safe environment. We also felt that the event should have clear and specific outcomes in order to add value, rather than merely replicating existing forms of provision.

This report documents how we approached the day, the themes and issues that emerged and the subsequent recommendations for improvements to the doctoral experience. We invite all those who have a stake in the doctoral experience to consider how these might be taken forward in our different institutions.

We have also considered that the symposium format could work at institutional or regional level as well, and so we have appended a guide outlining how this might be brought about to support staff and/or researchers who might wish to deliver an event of this nature.

Overview of the Symposium

Our strategy was to mix expert input with a structured exchange of ideas. Attendees had the opportunity to hear from individuals and organisations who were either engaged with research into the doctoral experience or who had significant expertise in working with doctoral researchers (see Appendix I for contributors).

In the morning we devised a discussion format based on the Delphi technique (described in Appendix II) to determine the key priority issues for each group of stakeholders (doctoral researchers, academic staff, librarians and researcher developers/staff supporting researchers). Each individual was asked to attend the day with a list of five priority issues, which were subsequently negotiated within a group of peers down to a maximum of ten agreed priority issues that reflected the views of the whole group. These are reflected in the first part of this report (see Appendix III for the four lists of priorities).

Over lunch facilitators from the hosting organisations reviewed the similarities and differences in priorities expressed by the different stakeholders to generate questions about different aspects of the doctoral degree. For example, we asked questions about supervisor training, dissemination of information, library and other resources, and how better to integrate different elements of the doctoral degree.

In the afternoon we assigned the questions to groups composed of a mixture of all the stakeholders to discuss and try to answer. It is these discussions we have drawn on to generate our final recommendations, which form the bulk of the second part of the report.

Following what we believe to be emerging best practice we have referred throughout to ‘doctoral researchers’ rather than ‘doctoral students’, ‘postgraduate researchers’, ‘PGRs’ or ‘doctoral candidates’. However, a number of our recommendations relate to doctoral researchers’ student status, and in particular some may be supported at the institutional level by students’ unions and associated instruments of postgraduate student voice such as postgraduate representatives, committees and societies.

The stakeholder we refer to as ‘staff supporting researchers’ comprises researcher developers, training programme coordinators and graduate administrators.
WHAT THE STAKEHOLDER GROUPS SAID

**Doctoral researchers**

Doctoral researchers brought a strikingly wide range of priorities for improvement to the table ranging from practical measures such as improved funding and infrastructure for research, to identifying specific training needs, to more abstract ideas on how to improve research cultures by building a greater sense of trust between academic researchers.

After significant debate, which included work to reconcile or resolve several issues into one larger challenge, doctoral researchers were agreed that a key priority had to be **access to research funding** – particularly in the form of travel grants, bursaries and incidental costs like bench fees as well as full studentships. Linked to finance was the strong doctoral researcher voice in institutions was a crucial area for improvement. Doctoral researchers agreed that they would welcome a greater say in how they are supervised, and a proper recognition by institutions of the value of researcher-led activity and community, in both the social and professional spheres of research. Doctoral researchers wanted to be able to hold their institution to account, and to be supported to take more responsibility for their experience.

Finally, doctoral researchers highlighted the diverse nature of research degrees, and considered that inclusivity for different types of research and researcher was a priority area for improvement of the doctoral experience.

**Librarians**

Although animated discussion took place during the session, many of the participants shared very similar priorities for improving the doctoral experience. Most prominent was a feeling that the library is undervalued within the university, and that doctoral researchers and staff miss out on much that the library can offer. Thus many suggestions for improvements centered on raising the profile of the library: improving communication with supervisors to better market the library, raising awareness of training opportunities, engaging more closely with doctoral researchers and having library representation on boards and committees.

Librarians felt that doctoral researchers and their supervisors require more training in information literacy, particularly in reference management, data management, web 2.0 technologies and the use of open access data. However, some participants felt that existing provision was appropriate but awareness and attendance were low. Better integration into universities’ other induction and training programmes was suggested as a way of improving the effectiveness and take-up of library training. The need for better management of research outputs was raised as an issue by many participants: a lack of understanding about institutional repositories, open access, copyright and linked data means that data is often not stored or disseminated effectively.

The group stressed the importance of the strengthening the library’s resources to support doctoral researchers: to provide dedicated space for doctoral researchers and enable greater and easier access to e- and printed materials. Participants saw doctoral researchers as some of their most important users, and many felt that – amid rising resource costs and diminishing budgets - processes such as accessing e-resources or inter-library-loans needed to be streamlined to ensure researchers could access the items they needed.

Finally, although few participants mentioned it on their own lists of priorities, during the course of the discussion a theme emerged around the importance of engaging doctoral researchers in the decisions that affect them and seeking their feedback on library-related issues.

**Staff supporting doctoral researchers**

It was felt that an increase in funding would improve the doctoral experience, specifically an increase in the number of funded doctoral researchers, but also funding for attending conferences and other research expenses.

Unsurprisingly, staff supporting doctoral researchers felt that training should be a valued, integral and expected part of the doctorate. It was acknowledged that to improve the experience, training should be needs-based rather than a tick-box, one-size-fits-all approach. This ties in with understanding the diversity of doctoral researchers in all their varied contexts. One group of doctoral researchers that was seen as potentially benefiting from increased support was doctoral researchers who teach.

Staff supporting researchers talked about stronger communities in different contexts: departmental researcher communities and communities that extend beyond institutions and disciplines, both face-to-face and digital. It would be helpful to have dedicated space to work and socialize. Doctoral researchers should be encouraged to attend conferences in order to network with researchers in their field. Public engagement can relieve isolation and increase networking. It was also felt that understanding public engagement has a positive impact on career development. Staff thought it was important to enable doctoral researchers to make informed career choices from the start of their doctoral research.

A final area of improvement was seen to be the integration of supervisors with the rest of the doctoral experience and continuing professional development for supervisors to support the quality of their supervision of doctoral researchers.
Supervisors and academic staff

This group of supervisors divided their attention between things that would enhance their own ability to support doctoral researchers and things that they thought would improve the experience of doctoral researchers, particularly highlighting that they often felt as isolated and ill-informed as did their doctoral researchers.

Supervisors agreed that the supervisor role did not get the credit and support that it deserves within institutions. Many felt that they were restricted from giving their best support to doctoral researchers because of work overload, in many cases particularly because it received little, inadequate recognition in workload allocation models, and lack of peer support. They were also very aware of the need to keep up with rapidly changing practice and rules related to doctoral researcher activity but several regretted that they had little time, support and encouragement to engage in the development and updating of their own knowledge and skills in this area and in teaching/learning in general. Supervisors would appreciate more higher education teaching/learning in general. Supervisors agreed that the supervisor role did not get the credit and support that it deserves within institutions. 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They felt that doctoral researchers would embark more effectively on their studies if they had received better preparation and management of expectations by being informed in more detail about the processes, concepts, protocols and boundaries involved and the requirements upon researchers to engage in both theoretical and skills development in addition to pursuing research on a feasible topic and the production of a thesis. Thus they would begin with motivation to learn and improve across a broad spectrum. This should then be built on by the institutional provision of dedicated space to study and space/opportunities to network and gain careers advice.

The doctoral experience would also be improved by greater availability of funding/scholarships and opportunities for work experience/participation in other aspects of the work of the research team (if full time and lacking in such experience in a research/education field) and other opportunities for networking, such as provided by conferences and enhanced mobility.

1. Funding for research

All participants were well aware of the restrictions and multiple demands on funding in the higher education sector, but there was agreement across the groups (the supervisors, support staff and doctoral researchers themselves giving it the most emphasis) that although a greater number of studentships would be welcome, smaller amounts of money made available/accessible for research students to attend conferences and enhance their mobility to take advantage of research-related opportunities (meet other researchers, access resources and data, etc) would make a significant difference to the quality of the initial research experience. Research councils do include such resource with studentships, underlining its value, but this reaches only a small minority of the research student population. A greater number of studentships would be welcome, smaller amounts of money made available/accessible for research students to attend conferences and enhance their mobility to take advantage of research-related opportunities (meet other researchers, access resources and data, etc) would make a significant difference to the quality of the initial research experience. Research councils do include such resource with studentships, underlining its value, but this reaches only a small minority of the research student population.

2. Work and social space for researchers

This topic was deemed extremely important by all the groups. All noted a need for identifiable, available and dedicated space for doctoral researchers to study, work, network, and socialise that provides ready access to resources required by all. Discussion identified that even when work stations or office space were provided within departments there remained a need for a place where doctoral researchers from across a range of disciplines could meet up and discuss, in professional surroundings, matters of mutual interest. There was also an appreciation of space in which doctoral researchers could organise events and meetings with peers, such as research clubs, symposia, reading groups and so on.

3. Professional development and support for supervisors

Supervisors themselves noted the rapidly changing requirements of postgraduate research and the need to keep up with changing policy and practice in the field. They recognised the need to develop new or hone established supervision skills and to have the time and support to do so. While librarians identified that often supervisors needed help and training with information literacy topics the other support staff opined that it would be useful if supervisors had continuing professional development related to and integrated with the rest of the doctoral experience – doctoral researchers and supervisors engaged in development as a continuous ‘community of practice’. Although this topic was not high on the agenda of the doctoral researcher group, there was a general acknowledgement, indeed expectation, that supervisors would be knowledgeable about the doctoral process and skilled in its support.
4. Preparation for embarking on the doctorate
Both supervisors and support staff raised the issue of advance preparation for doctoral researchers before enrolment as an essential part of the recruitment process. Many recognised that often researchers embark on the doctorate with little understanding of the nature of the process, the key milestones in it and the substantial demands on them during it. The concept of expectation management was raised from two perspectives – that doctoral researchers should be alerted to institutional and supervisory expectations while greater account needs to be taken within institutions and doctoral programmes of the diversity of starting points of the range of doctoral researchers recruited e.g. international and part-time researchers. Suggestions were made about making more transparent in advance the actual requirements and how they are distributed over the period of registration so that the potential doctoral researchers can prepare in advance, while others suggested that investment in pre-doctoral course materials or programmes would radically reduce the resources expended when doctoral researchers struggle or fail to meet expectations.

5. Representation of doctoral researchers within institutions and at national level
The doctoral researcher group felt very strongly that it was very important that doctoral researchers have a role in shaping the policies and practices that affect and to a large extent determine their doctoral experience. For attendees, this issue ranged from the individual level of one-to-one discussions with supervisors to the institutional and national level. Librarians also raised the issue of engaging researchers in decisions of issues that affect them, though supervisors and staff supporting researchers did not.

Subsequent discussion did, however, flag up the need for doctoral researchers to be proactive and responsible in seeking out relevant information and making links between the different elements of their doctoral degree, behaviour that we might associate with researchers who believe that the core elements of their experience are within their power to influence.

6. Developing and recognising leadership during the doctorate
In a similar vein to the theme of representation doctoral researchers observed that activities that were researcher-led were very much to be endorsed. Researcher-led activities help to create a supportive community of peers within and between subject-disciplines and ensure that doctoral researchers are able to make a contribution to the wider research environment (rather than merely attending existing activities). At the same time researcher-led activity provides opportunity in which researchers can develop research and transferable skills in an informal, experiential way, although they require physical space to take advantage of this.

7. The diverse nature of doctoral awards and doctoral researchers
Doctoral researchers and staff supporting researchers raised the question of the variation in different types of research (‘traditional’ versus professional or practice-based doctorate) and different types of researcher e.g. overseas, part-time or distance doctoral researchers. It was felt to be important not just to acknowledge this diversity but to take active steps to ensure inclusivity and take account of the different contexts from which individuals had come that would influence their approach to research and to the wider doctoral experience.

8. Researcher development and support for doctoral researchers
All groups recognised that appropriate training for doctoral researchers is central to the doctoral experience. Slight differences in emphasis arose from the separate discussions: doctoral researchers want clear, personalised training pathways to be a priority, staff supporting researchers agree that needs-based supported training should be a valued, integral and expected part of the doctorate, supervisors pleaded for more opportunities for work experience/participation; while librarians emphasised training in information literacy.

9. Provision of resources for research
As might be expected, librarians were particularly focused on resources, or the lack of it, was felt that at a time when budgets and space are squeezed, it is even more crucial that the core resources for researchers are protected. There was an understanding that institutions will not be able to provide everything, but that when this is the case, clear signposting to other providers is required. Equally, librarians felt that existing resources could be better signposted. Supervisors were more focused on human resources, particularly highlighting the need for careers support at an institutional level. Doctoral researchers highlighted the need for adequate infrastructure and resources, but a particular focus was a need for institutions to consider in advance what resource would be required for individual doctoral projects. Access to the full range of online journals was also a consideration.
10. Information literacy

Training in information literacy was only prioritised by the librarians in the group, in particular as a requirement for both doctoral researchers and supervisors. The opening presentation by the Research Information Network (RIN) highlighted the importance of the supervisor in providing information literacy training, but warned that ‘information literacy as a concept is not generally recognised by supervisors’. It is telling that several librarians commented on the use of the term ‘information literacy’, and stressed the need for institutional agreement on what information literacy is and where the responsibility lies. A variety of information literacy issues were raised, although the use of digital technology was most frequently mentioned, from social media to open access data management.

11. Facilitating networking among researchers

Networking was highlighted as a priority in several guises. Libraries could facilitate networking among postgraduates. Supervisors would like to see more of a higher education research community, particularly interdisciplinary, in which networking helps reduce the isolation of researchers and academic staff. Face-to-face training courses are seen as good networking opportunities. The call for funding for doctoral researchers to attend conferences and enhanced mobility is driven in part to provide networking opportunities.

12. Efforts needed from national bodies to support institutional improvements

It was acknowledged that an increase in awareness of the work of national bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), NUS, Vitae, UKCGE and RIN would be valuable for doctoral researchers and supervisors. More general sharing of best practice and relevant research findings would help all stakeholders enormously. In addition, a need was felt for national monitoring of doctoral researcher progress to ensure consistency and make it easier to transfer institutions during a doctorate should circumstances require it.

From the above priorities the organisers distilled the following eight questions. These were submitted to mixed groups of the different stakeholders. Groups were asked to discuss the questions and come up with recommendations.

Questions about funding were avoided, as this is not in many cases within the gift of institutions, so discussion on this would not necessarily be constructive.

1. How can doctoral researcher training be more needs-based, tailored and individual?
2. How can doctoral researchers be given more ownership and responsibility over their doctoral experience?
3. How can doctoral researchers have better access to resources, e.g. equipment, libraries, space?
4. How can we achieve better integration of the delivery of different aspects of the doctorate?
5. How can the diversity of the doctoral researcher community be better understood and accommodated?
6. How can doctoral researchers better understand the processes and procedures (including supervision and training) from the start?
7. How can doctoral researchers be given more ownership and responsibility over their doctoral experience?
8. How can doctoral researchers have better access to resources, e.g. equipment, libraries, space?

‘Lots of ideas about how to support PGRs within the institution.’

‘Concerns are shared – feels less as if I am alone.’
General recommendations at the institutional level

The various strands of activity that form a part of the doctoral experience (supervision, undertaking and communicating research, training in research methods, professional development, teaching, networking and engagement with peer, professional and disciplinary communities) should be understood as integrated with each other. Doctoral researchers, supervisors, librarians and staff supporting researchers should be alert to the contribution that all strands of activity make to the total experience and successful completion of the doctorate.

Higher education institutions need to be clear in their understanding and definition of who their postgraduate researchers are, whether they be full or part-time, students or staff, funded or not. While institutions may be fully aware of the diversity of researchers, this may not always come through in the way policies are implemented, or in the language that is used. We would encourage institutions to consider policies that may inadvertently be inappropriately applied, for example, in compulsory training provisions that may not be suitable for every researcher.

Institutions should prioritise the provision of adequate space for study, networking and socialising in departments or centrally for doctoral researchers.

Institutions should ensure that doctoral research is afforded the status it deserves by recognising that supervisors need ongoing support and training as do doctoral researchers. Barriers to supervisory engagement with continuing professional development should be considered and minimised as far as possible.

Institutions and students’ unions should ensure effective doctoral researcher representation on main decision-making bodies so that doctoral researchers are not only fully informed of changes that might affect them and able to provide feedback, but are also contributing to the strategic debates that lead to the creation and development of provision.

The library is most effective when it is fully embedded within the institution. Informational activities should be undertaken to communicate the value of the library to staff, researchers and students, and the library should be represented on key groups and boards. Steps should be taken to ensure that information literacy policies and strategies and their implications for research practice are well-understood across the institution.

Research training and individual research activities and the importance of ethics should be incorporated into undergraduate programmes to alert students to what research is, what it entails and how exciting and rewarding it can be.

The term ‘doctoral researcher’ was considered a better title than ‘student’. We recommend this for further discussion as it may not be appropriate for all disciplines.

Although conversations led to a wide range of recommendations, the basic insight that there are many different stakeholders with responsibility for the doctoral experience, not least doctoral researchers themselves, is one of the most important. It is striking how each group of stakeholders experienced themselves as to some extent powerless and/or misunderstood in the doctoral process, suggesting that there is some need for a more coordinated, holistic approach to supporting the doctoral experience across departments, faculties, graduate schools and central service providers in institutions. This is important to ensure a match of expectations, activities that compliment each other and support the researcher on his/her doctoral journey, rather than creating an experience that is fragmented and disjointed, with different information coming from different sources.

As such, the recommendations below should be read as stemming from this important first principle, rather than standing alone.

We would also suggest that all stakeholders be given opportunities to develop and shape the policies and provisions that are put in place to support the doctoral experience, and to speak up if provisions are not actually meeting needs. Better mutual understanding and recognition of the various challenges that doctoral researchers, supervisors and staff face can only make a positive contribution to research communities.
Recruitment and preparation of doctoral researchers

From the very outset clear expectations about the doctoral process should be set and agreed with doctoral researchers. This should be a collaborative effort that includes doctoral researchers in a professional way. Institutions and departments should make transparent in advance the actual requirements of the doctoral process and how they are distributed over pre-registration periods so that potential doctoral researchers can prepare in advance. Investment in pre-doctoral course materials or programmes would radically reduce the resources expended when doctoral researchers struggle or fail to meet expectations.

Institutions and departments should be clear about, and discuss with doctoral researchers and their supervisors, resource (materials and equipment) requirements and availability before and regularly during their registration so that appropriate project planning according to availability of resources can take place. Where funding is available to support conference attendance, fieldwork or travel for research purposes this should be made clear.

International recruiting agents should ensure that they are raising appropriate expectations in the doctoral researchers they send to the UK. Research administrators and supervisors should provide information prior to enrolment on roles and responsibilities, entitlements and approaches to independent learning employed in British higher education institutions so that doctoral researchers arrive ‘ready to learn’.

Induction

Induction is key to the ability of doctoral researchers to establish ownership and confidence in their work from the outset, and needs to be comprehensive, accessible and transparent but avoid information overload - more about signposting where relevant information, support and resources can be accessed. Additional information on specialists and expertise within the University environment other than academic and discipline based, e.g., librarians and IT specialists, and staff who support researcher development, should be introduced at induction to ensure these staff are recognised as integral members of the wider research culture. Doctoral induction processes and materials should be regularly reviewed for their relevance and the information they provide, and feedback sought from doctoral researchers of their experience of induction.

Induction or researcher development training should also deliver opportunities to explore, discuss and learn about ways for doctoral researchers to work effectively with their supervisors since this is at the heart of the doctoral process.

Induction should be viewed as an ongoing process, and link effectively with training needs analysis, the development of peer support networks, integration into research community and professional development provision.

Recognition of diversity

Institutions should actively support supervisors and staff who support researchers in amending their practice to suit the different types of doctoral researchers with whom they work. Recognition should be given to the time and resources required to enculture doctoral researchers from diverse pedagogical and research prior experience backgrounds.

For part-time doctoral researchers there should be training and development opportunities outside normal office hours, face-to-face training offered in blocks possibly through residential ‘schools’ or weekend workshops, training courses available in e-learning format to maximise take-up and accessibility and intelligent use of social networking tools to maintain a sense of community and allow researchers to offer informal support to each other. Further, since this is about core not optional learning, academic staff taking on this load should be rewarded.

Analysis of learning needs and engagement with learning

Supervisors and doctoral researchers should take seriously and engage with needs analysis so that individual needs are met while resources are not wasted when a need does not exist. Training needs analysis systems should not be a tick-box exercise but lead to a professional development plan that is respected by, and useful to, supervisors and doctoral researchers and, crucially, revisited on a regular basis.

There should be an institution-wide and blended approach to learning that is sensitive to the needs of different disciplines and facilitates independent access to training (e.g., online resources). Training programmes should recognise and value informal and peer-led development opportunities.

Incentives for supervisors to engage in skills as well as disciplinary teaching, such as recognition in promotion, and incentives to doctoral researchers and supervisors to maintain skills development, such as requirements for progression and accreditation, indicate that the institution values these aspects of the doctoral process.

Graduate teaching assistants need an induction explaining what is expected of them, what support and training is available and how to access this, including tailored training in different aspects of university teaching that is appropriate to the types of teaching they do. They should also have mentoring by an established academic who can provide feedback, support and encouragement, feedback from students that they have taught so that they can reflect on their practice, clear limits to workload including preparation and marking time and monitoring of this and teaching resources that can be handed from one cohort to the next.
Supervision and networking

Supervisors and doctoral researchers should be made aware of their personal responsibilities to the research projects, to each other, to the discipline/s and the institution. Integration can be facilitated by attention to communication so that all participants are kept aware of developments, protocols and policies.

Although budgets are tight, consideration should be given to making provision for doctoral researchers to engage in networking and dissemination activities within and outside their own institution. Doctoral researchers, supervisors and institutional staff will also benefit from opportunities to network with each other, and share good practice in supporting the doctoral experience.

Integrating doctoral researchers into a research community

Academic staff and doctoral researchers together should seek, and be supported in participating in, collegiate activities and communities of practice.

Heads of graduate schools, students’ unions and staff supporting researchers should consider how to support and facilitate the growth of researcher-led activity among doctoral researchers.

Students’ unions and institutions should work together to ensure that doctoral researchers are able to engage in decisions that affect them and keep the representation system under regular review to ensure that doctoral researchers are not excluded.

APPENDICES

I Contributors and Topics

‘The Researcher Experience’ – Research Findings
- Julie Reeves (Southampton University) – The Researcher Development Framework
- Stephane Goldstein (RIN) – Supervisors’ Role in Information Literacy
- Martin Gough (Kent) – Postgraduates in the Research Community
- Debbie McVitty (NUS) – What do Researchers Want?

Doctoral Researchers: Worker ants in the academic ego-system
- Professor Chris Park

Doctoral students, communities of learning and collaborative cultures: challenges for research degree programmes in the 21st century
- Professor Rosemary Deem – Royal Holloway, University of London

II Resources for running your own Symposium

Introduction
Institutional staff and/or doctoral researchers may find it helpful to run their own version of the Postgraduate Researcher Symposium at institutional or regional level to help consider what needs to be done to listen to the concerns of different groups of stakeholders in the doctorate, and develop ideas for changes and improvements.

The basis of the event is facilitated discussion using an amended version of the Delphi Technique, which allows consensus to be reached, encouraging collaborative and jointly agreed solutions, while recognising individual differences.

The first part of the event aims to reach consensus from each group of stakeholders on their priorities for improvement. The second part involves groups of mixed stakeholders in turning the priorities into recommendations for practice.

Requirements
Attendees who are a good mixture of different stakeholder groups, in our case, doctoral researchers, supervisors and academic staff, librarians and researcher developers. You may identify others.

Enough time on the day to have at least two facilitated discussions with time in between to formulate discussion topics for the second session.

Enough facilitators to lead the discussions: one for each stakeholder group

Plenary and breakout rooms: enough for each stakeholder group to converse apart from the others

Name badges, colour coded according to stakeholder group

Flipcharts, Post-its, pens and some means of displaying these e.g. poster boards

Plenary speakers are optional, but help to stimulate thought and can also be useful to set the appropriate tone. You might wish to invite researchers in the topic of doctoral study, senior academics with responsibility for doctoral education, institutional managers, or a representative of doctoral researchers.

Overview of the day
Participants should be encouraged in advance to consider five specific personal priority areas for improvement along with rationales for their choice. We left this entirely open, as we were curious to see what would emerge. You may wish to be more specific, or ask for ideas along set themes or issues.

There are two phases of group work and general feedback involved in the process and we recommend at least 60 minutes for group work, followed by 40 minutes for feedback (depending on the size of the group involved).

The process requires each participant firstly to identify with a particular group with a specific range of expertise related to the field of exploration – ie a cognate group. In our case the field was the doctoral researchers experience and the four cognate groups were doctoral researchers, their supervisors, those staff who support doctoral study programmes and librarians. There is no necessity for group sizes to be exactly equal.

The facilitator reports to the main plenary on the range and distribution of original priorities and describes the top ten priorities. This enables the whole group to see where there are areas of overlap and emerging themes.
It is useful to leave the list of priorities from each group plus the summary of individual contributions on display during a break periods so that the range, diversity and commonality of opinion can be digested by participants.

Over lunch, the facilitators combine the priorities from all the groups and derive from them general themes. From these they formulate questions that will form the basis for discussion in the second round of group work aimed at yielding concrete recommendations for the improvement of practice. This process should be as transparent as possible, so that participants can follow the thread of discussion throughout the day.

The second round of group work involves mixed groups, each with roughly equal proportions of those from cognate groups. Each group should be provided with one or more questions (depending on time available) drawn from those priorities provided by the cognate groups. For instance, if some questions address issues or priorities that were common to all groups then each ‘mixed group’ should have an equal share of these and an equal share of questions derived from more ‘disparate’ priorities, while any one question could be discussed in more than one mixed group.

The task for the mixed groups is to discuss, using the resource of their wide range of expertise, how their question/s could be addressed so as to provide for a plenary session, to follow, a set of suggestions for improving the field undergoing exploration. More than one potential way of addressing each problem can be suggested. Where possible these groups should identify who in the institution should be responsible for implementing their recommendations.

The facilitators write these up as they go along and report the outcomes in final plenary session.

Chatham house rules apply throughout so that participants feel free to explore ideas without a record being made of who contributed each idea.

How to run the initial discussion groups using the Amended Delphi technique

The process used in the Symposium was loosely based on the Delphi Technique. It recognises individual difference while encouraging collaborative and jointly agreed solutions.

The principles that guided the process were that participants are:

- Able to express their opinions freely without undue social pressure to conform to a group;
- Encouraged to refine their views as the process of group work moves from round to round;
- Enabled to learn about other’s perspectives and to clarify or amend their own views;
- Engaged in jointly producing feasible and useful suggestions for practice change.

Groupwork 1: identifying priorities for each group

Participants, having brought their five areas for improvement, copy each of these onto five single Post-it, which are attached to a display or flipchart. The aim of this is to capture the full range of issues and concerns before these are refined into key priorities.

Then pairs share priorities and negotiate their ten combined priorities down to five that they agree are the most practical and useful.

Next, two pairs join up and repeat the process of debating the priorities and selecting a mutually agreed five from the ten presented.

While pairs and groups of four are working, the facilitator organises post-it notes into lists by similarity. This will be useful for feedback later to show range and distribution of priorities within group at the beginning of the exercise. The facilitator should also support groups to reach decisions, and ensure the whole process keeps to time.

In whole group discussion, all of the foursome’s priorities are listed then combined to produce a smaller number by debate and negotiation. Finally each member of the group votes using show of hands on the one priority which is the most important for them. The priorities that receive the most votes become the top priorities for the group as a whole.

Groupwork 2: arriving at concrete recommendations to address some of the identified priorities in mixed groups

The task for the mixed groups is to discuss, using the resource of their wide range of expertise, how their set of priorities could be implemented in practice so as to provide for a plenary session, to follow, a set of suggestions for improving the field undergoing exploration. More than one potential way of implementing a ‘priority’ can be suggested.

The facilitators lead participants to discuss the feasibility of each priority, what would be needed to implement it, and who would be responsible for such implementation, producing an ‘action plan’ that demonstrates what could be readily achieved, what needs more time/resources and what might take some time and resources. These can then be produced as recommendations.

Example timings:

9.30am – Registration
10.00am – Welcome & Introduction
10.15am – Breakout Discussions – Delegates break into separate groups
- Doctoral researchers
- Academic staff and supervisors
- Staff supporting researchers
- Other groups identified, such as librarians
11.35am – Tea/Coffee break

Flipchart notes from breakout sessions displayed.
12.00pm – Plenary feedback session
1.00pm – Lunch
1.45pm – Parallel Workshops – Mixed groups

To debate the priorities identified earlier in the day, with a view to proposing recommendations for change.
2.45pm – Plenary feedback session
3.15pm – Summary & Close

Plenary speakers can be interspersed by either reducing times throughout the programme or by adjusting the start and finish times.
Timeline for organising

- Identify a specific topic
- Appoint main person responsible, who should engage with representatives from all stakeholder groups as far as possible
- Set budget
- Book venue
- Create a communication/recruitment strategy
- Identify/book speakers
- Identify/book facilitators
- Decide on pricing (where appropriate)
- Finalise timings
- Registration opens
- Publicity, targeted at the different stakeholder groups
- Event information available
- 1 week: Send out pre-event information (including asking to think of 5 priorities, information on the topic covered and copies of Chatham house rules)

Top tips for success

1. Make sure the facilitators of the discussions are clear and comfortable about both the methods and the intended outcomes.

2. Assign someone at the start to ensure that all the bits of paper and notes are gathered up and retained at the end of the day for writing up and actioning - otherwise you will quickly forget the detail of the discussion.

3. Avoid anxiety and encourage frank discussion by working under Chatham House Rules - ask everyone to agree that they will not name individuals when discussing what was said at the event.

4. Ensure there is a plan to review discussions and take action on key recommendations emerging from the day - perhaps a senior member of university staff could attend the final plenary discussion to listen to the outcomes and respond.

5. Make sure to involve representatives of the different stakeholders at the start of the planning process and in the follow-up activity, so that it is clear that everyone has an equal say in how the day shapes up. Nominating and (properly briefing) facilitators from all the stakeholder groups - especially researchers, but also support staff - is particularly important.

6. Do not expect everyone to understand the value and purpose of the day from the get-go - think carefully about your marketing of the event and how you will persuade busy people that the exercise is worth the time required. Encourage researchers to bring supervisors and vice-versa.

7. Share your experience and the outcomes more widely across your institution and via national networks such as those provided by Vitae, UKCGE, British Library and NUS, and help enrich the national picture and keep the conversation going.

III Top priorities by stakeholder group (each in random order)

Priorities that would improve the doctoral experience from doctoral researchers

1. Doctoral researchers have a say in how they are supervised
2. Access to funding (bench fees, travel grants, bursaries, information about what is available)
3. Adequate infrastructure to carry out research project e.g. space for work
4. Universal system of progress monitoring
5. Proper recognition of the value of researcher-led activity and community, both social and professional
6. Inclusivity for different types of research/researcher
7. Provisions for the work of national bodies such as QAA, NUS, Vitae, RIN to filter down to doctoral researchers and supervisors.
8. More of a voice – holding institution to account, researchers taking responsibility for their experience
9. Clear, personalised training pathways
10. Clarity about the role and responsibilities of the supervisor and how supervision is delivered

Priorities that would improve doctoral experience from librarians

1. Better embed the library and the role of the librarian within the wider institution; raise awareness of the value the library can offer.
2. Get more support in marketing the library – from better web pages to engaging supervisors to promote the library to doctoral researchers.
3. Doctoral researchers and their supervisors need more training and support in information literacy (although they are often unaware of the training already on offer).
4. Greater clarity is required across institutions on the management of research outputs.
5. Provide the means for doctoral researchers to develop communities.
6. Doctoral researchers need dedicated working space within the university.
7. Improve access to resources: establish a protected ‘core’ set of doctoral resources and make it easier to access e-resources.
8. Engage doctoral researchers in the institutional decisions that concern them.
Priorities that would improve doctoral experience from staff supporting researchers

1. Needs based supported training that is a valued, integral and expected part of the doctorate.
2. Understanding doctoral researchers in their varied contexts, for example part-time, overseas.
3. Create stronger communities; departmental, interdisciplinary, doctoral and wider, face to face and digital.
4. Improve supervisors by continuing professional development and their integration with the rest of the doctoral experience.
5. Dedicated space to work and socialize.
6. Increase in funding: increase in number of funded doctoral researchers, but also for attending conferences and other expenses.
7. Enable doctoral researchers to make informed career choices from the start.
8. Increase support for doctoral researchers who teach in their teaching, ideally by mentoring.
9. Enable doctoral researchers to attend conferences.
10. Importance of improved public engagement skills as this will impact on career development and can relieve isolation and increase networking.

Priorities that would improve doctoral experience from supervisors

1. The supervisor role should be given more status and time, e.g. greater recognition in workload models.
2. Supervisors must keep up awareness of rapidly changing practice and continue to develop own skills.
3. Doctoral researchers need greater preparation for doctoral studies so that they have more realistic expectations and an appropriate command of English.
4. They need more help in understanding the system and the various processes involved, for example protocols and boundaries.
5. They need to be more willing to engage in developing a broader range of skills and to widen their experience.
6. There needs to be greater access to funding and resources so that doctoral researchers can be more mobile and thus engage in networking and research work experience.
7. Space is needed to allow researchers to network, study together, set up research groups and socialise.
8. They need to be encouraged to make the best of careers support and advice from the early stages.
9. They need to be encouraged and supported from the early stages to learn about and practice for the viva.
10. Supervisors and doctoral researchers would benefit from the establishment of a ‘supervisors’ college’.