Resources Lite:
The added value of PGR Students

Susan Grey and Carolyn Wynne
FOREWORD

There has been very little research in the UK over the last decade to explore and consider the added value of PGR students. What research there has been has focused on the financial and economic advantages. In this new publication, it is refreshing to see the recognition among our members of the variety and diversity of non-financial added value that our PGR students bring. The case studies have also evidenced the value that institutions themselves have in the fact their students add value externally to local communities. Simply by choosing to talk about it in their case studies, institutions have demonstrated the value that research students bring and how much they are valued.

It is in this context that this publication is a useful and timely document for the sector, at a time of heightened focus of the financial value and cost of PGR students. I hope that these case studies and commentary will serve as a reminder to universities, policy decision makers, and indeed the wider population to engage with and support the added value that PGR students in the UK bring.

Dr Darren Van Loar
Chair, Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools Network

DEANS AND DIRECTORS OF GRADUATE SCHOOLS NETWORK

The Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools Network is a UKCGE Group for the sharing of information and expertise, the facilitation of mentoring, the consideration of best practice and discussion of any topic within the postgraduate community.

The network is open to all Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools and those with academic roles operating within the national and international postgraduate community and is chaired by a nominated representative with relevant expertise. The network benefits from an annual residential meeting in spring and a symposium at the UKCGE Annual Conference in summer.

GRADUATE SCHOOL MANAGERS NETWORK

Related to the Council’s Deans and Directors Graduate School’s (DDoGs) network, the Graduate School Managers (GSM) Network enables sharing of information and expertise, the facilitation of mentoring, the consideration of best practice and discussion of any topic within the postgraduate community.

The GSM is chaired by a nominated representative with relevant expertise. The network benefits from an annual meeting in autumn and a symposium at the UKCGE Annual Conference in summer.

RESOURCES LITE

This publication is part of the Resources Lite series that have been developed by UKCGE to inform members of key areas of postgraduate education.

ABOUT THE UK COUNCIL FOR GRADUATE EDUCATION

The UK Council for Graduate Education is a national membership organisation and a registered charity. The UK Council for Graduate Education mission is to be the authoritative and representative voice for postgraduate education in the UK, providing high quality leadership and support to its members and those with an interest in postgraduate education, to promote a strong and sustainable national postgraduate sector.

Our objectives are to support, represent and give opportunity to share best practice with and inform all colleagues employed throughout the postgraduate sector. In doing so we promote a strong and sustainable national postgraduate sector, by the sector for the sector.

UKCGE helps its members contribute to the development of the UK’s postgraduate education sector through systematic enquiry into, creative thought about and critical analysis of educational and related issues.

ukcge.ac.uk/about
This Resources Lite highlights the myriad of ways post graduate research students can add value to Universities. We know that HEFCE currently provides £240 million annually to support the postgraduate research supervision fund through QR funding. This Research Degree Programme (RDP) funding is allocated to Schools / Departments receiving mainstream quality-related funding in the same academic year and the inclusion of PGR students both in volume and as regards their associated research outputs in REF submissions often have a substantial bearing on this funding especially in STEM subjects. The benefits of PGRs, however, extend much further than this. This document highlights a range of contributions from the next generation of researchers in training.

The Council conducted a short survey of its members to learn about the perspectives of different institutions as to what value added means to individual institutions and what those areas of added value were. We asked members to select from a number of statements that they believe reflected the added value that PGR students brought to their institution and then to prioritise these. The survey results indicated and summarised in the infographic opposite shows that institutions rated “improving and enhancing research culture” as the statement that most reflected the added value that PGR students bring to their institution. It is clear that research environment in terms of not only its culture but also its research capacity and capability were consistently highly rated. This still chimes with the HEFCE report quoted above where PGRs were seen as providing an important stimulus and contribution to the research environment as well as significant added value to research functions. It is noted, however, that the integration of PGRs into research culture is not supported by the PRES results.

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CASE STUDIES

CASE 1
QUEEN MARY

1500 PGR students
3 Faculties

Our PGR students enrich the whole university environment, we could not do what we do without them.

Queen Mary University of London

CASE 2
UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE

700 PGR students
10 Schools
- School of Life and Medical Sciences
- School of Computer Science
- School of Creative Arts
- School of Education
- School of Engineering and Technology
- School of Health and Social Work
- School of Humanities
- School of Law, Criminology and Political Science
- School of Physics, Astronomy and Mathematics

The role of students goes beyond their studies, they give us added value by acting as our ambassadors.

University of Hertfordshire

CASE 3
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON

750 PGR students with a mix of Masters by Research, PhD and 11 Professional Doctorates
- Faculty of Health and Society
- Faculty of Education and Humanities
- Faculty of Business and Law
- Faculty of Arts, Science and Technology

We see ourselves as a university that does good and measures the good that we do.

University of Northampton

CASE 4
SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY

Small and specialist university of Humanities and Social Sciences
125 PGR students

Our PGR students run Public Engagement events to non-Academic members of the public, who go away feeling that they have learnt something.

School of Advanced Study

TEACHING

Research degree students make a significant contribution to teaching whether through lectures, tutorials or laboratory work.

"Students are supported through professional development to allow them to take part in research informed teaching, enriching the learning experience for those they teach at undergraduate level." (Case 2)

"All PhD students are trained and supported in providing and getting involved in teaching. Not only do they teach but the contribute material to other people's teaching." (Case 3)

RESEARCH CULTURE

The survey identified boosting research culture as the most important aspect of added value with 93% of respondents in support. This aspect is fundamental and in itself influences, and is influenced by elements such as student experience, research environment, the development of transferable skills, capacity, sustainability, quality and quantity of outputs and reputation.

"Our PGR students enrich the whole university environment, we could not do what we do without them." (Case 1)

"The role of students goes beyond their studies, they give us added value by acting as our ambassadors." (Case 2)

"We see ourselves as a university that does good and measures the good that we do." (Case 3)

"Our PGR students run Public Engagement events to non-Academic members of the public, who go away feeling that they have learnt something." (Case 4)
Public Engagement is now embedded in mainstream organisational structures and practice and this was evidenced in all four case studies. It was clear that PGR student involvement in engaging the public with research has emerged in tandem with public engagement activity. This was epitomised in the Queen Mary case study: “Students have shown that they are particularly keen to engage with community outreach projects and involve the local community in their research. One such project has seen PGR students go out to refugee groups to engage them in research and to have the opportunity to learn about community experiences. Such activity has enhanced the research culture further. With PGR students no longer assuming that they will pursue a career in academia, they are keen to identify opportunities to engage outside of the institution and in doing so, they directly add value to the areas of the their future careers and the population around them.”

**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

**SUSTAINABILITY AND RESEARCH CAPACITY**

- PGR Students are developed and nurtured for... sustainability
- The number of [PGR] students has boosted... research capability
- Improving reputation (through PGRs)... grows critical mass year on year
- Quality of students translates into quality of academics and post doctoral applicants

**RESEARCH COLLABORATION**

- Boosting research capacity
- Enhancing research culture
- Facilitating engagement
- Enhance funding (QR/Supervisory)
- Providing research-Informed teaching
- Contributing to REF
- Engaging in collaboration
- Sustaining research environment

**ADDED VALUE OF PGR STUDENTS**

The value of research degree students in initiating and contributing to research collaborations was a common theme. For example, The Institute of Advanced Studies highlighted the varying activities of PGR students have encourage interaction and knowledge sharing across the institution and through doctoral collaborations across London with other institutions. These collaborations have encouraged opportunities to share skill sets that can be utilised and harnessed, sharing the benefits of training across the different cohorts in the capital.

In a similar vein, PGR students at the University of Hertfordshire were seen to interact cross discipline and they themselves facilitate closer collaboration between academics and supervisors, picking up on possible projects that they can bring to the table.

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In a similar vein, PGR students at the University of Hertfordshire were seen to interact cross discipline and they themselves facilitate closer collaboration between academics and supervisors, picking up on possible projects that they can bring to the table.
Our PGR students enrich the whole university environment, we could not do what we do without them.

Our students are our best advocates and ambassadors.

Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) takes pride in its values and history in East London, its roots being embedded in a part of the capital where three of the poorest boroughs in the UK are on its doorstep. Centred around the People’s Palace (which was set up to enrich the life of the poor in the East End), the University was formed out of the East London Technical College and through a subsequent merger with Westfield College (a college of the University of London set up to educate women), and it is against this backdrop that the University highlighted areas of where they feel their PGR students add value, not just to the university itself, but also to the local community.

Public Engagement sits high on the agenda at QMUL, with a Vice-Principal specifically focusing on this activity for the university through its Centre for Public Engagement (CPE). In an article recently written for the Times Higher Education, QMUL’s Principal himself said, “Engagement is important in preserving and valuing existing public investments in higher education. A recent study by David Weerts, “The public-good variable: can public engagement boost state support for higher education?”, finds a positive relationship between levels of state funding to American public research universities and the culture and public profile that they foster towards the economic and social health of their communities.

Put another way, effective engagement that is central to university strategy may provide the most powerful driver of the agility required to thrive in the uncertain environment to which universities are subject worldwide.”

QMUL prides itself on its engagement with the local community and the PGR students are integral to that. During QMUL’s annual Graduate Festival the PGR students often show the highest level of interest in sessions around disseminating research, especially to non-academic audiences. Students can also gain access to small public engagement activity funds through the CPE.

An increasingly popular choice with students is working in partnership with local schools, making their areas of study accessible to local school children, interacting and engaging with them either through organised trips to the schools, or by hosting days at the university itself. The University is a sponsor of a number of schools and through these links PhD students can engage with the local community. There are many other opportunities for PhD students to undertake public engagement activities with one particular example being a PhD student doing work with a group of children to stop them being afraid of going to the dentist. The University said, “We are keen to do more to engage with the local community, particularly looking to support local areas with high levels of social deprivation, and this reflects the values of the University, which we are proud of. We hope we make a difference.”

That difference was later indicated when there was reference back to a pupil from one of the local secondary schools that the university sponsors, who had just started her first term at university and was the first person from her family to do so. The student said, “The Brilliant Club has been a massive help to me in my studies, and I feel very grateful for the support they have given me.”

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The high proportion of international students at QMUL has promoted many opportunities for international collaborations. These research links have been strengthened by students who have returned to their country of origin following graduation, taking up academic roles and assisted in the establishment of partnerships across the whole university. In some cases these partnerships have developed into exchange programmes between academics and staff at various levels. Academics have retained links with international students that generate further research links which are fostered and nurtured.

The PGR students at the university also contribute to teaching at undergraduate level and are encouraged to participate in research informed teaching. In so doing they act as role models to those who are thinking about continuing onto PGR study at the university. With the university wishing to continue to increase its PGR numbers significantly over the next few years, the PGR students are considered the best advocates and ambassadors to encourage current undergraduate students to pursue a research degree and to do this at QMUL.

A significant amount of research the university generates is led and driven by their PhD students. These students often sit at the coal-face of research and their research outputs can, open new doors and avenues of research that perhaps would not have been realised otherwise.

The examples given as part of the case study have contributed to driving up the quality of PGR students at the university, where the quality of students translates into the general research and teaching environment helping to attract higher quality staff and consequently higher quality students creating a virtuous circle to which PGR activity is central.

UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE
PROFILE IN BRIEF
700 PGR students with a mix of Masters by Research, PhD and 11 Professional Doctorates
Split between ten schools:
- School of Life and Medical Sciences
- Hertfordshire Business School
- School of Computer Science
- School of Creative Arts
- School of Education
- School of Engineering and Technology
- School of Health and Social Work
- School of Humanities
- School of Law, Criminology and Political Science
- School of Physics, Astronomy and Mathematics

The role of students goes beyond their studies, they give us added value by acting as our ambassadors.

The University of Hertfordshire emphasised the social and cultural diversity of their PGR students in their case study, how it enriches the research within the local community and economy and the big impact it has for both students and the local populations. PGR students regularly support academics in driving local initiatives for residents in the local area and projects for local businesses. One such example was the collaboration between the university and the Queen Elizabeth and Lister Hospital in developing diabetes research. Working in consortia with two hospitals and an international research link in India, the university is bringing benefit to the local community.

This particular collaboration for research was initiated by an ex student who upon completion of his studies, commenced running his own diabetes clinic in India and had retained links with the university and the Queen Elizabeth and Lister Hospital in developing diabetes research. Working in consortia with two hospitals and an international research link in India, the university is bringing benefit to the local community.
The university commented that “the role of students goes beyond their studies; they give us added value by acting as our ambassadors”. The university is conscious of the value of maintaining links with former students and actively builds on its alumni base.

PGR students interact cross discipline and they themselves facilitate closer collaboration between academics and supervisors, picking up on possible projects that they can bring to the table and discuss with academics. An example was given of a particular area of work between the School of Engineering and Technology and the School of Life and Medical Sciences around exploiting stem cells. The collaboration between these two disciplines developed a programme of research through simply having the opportunity to interact and learn about what facilities and capabilities were available, looking outside their Schools and outside the university. This particular example demonstrates how fresh new ideas are borne outside of the areas of research for the students and inter-disciplinary research and knowledge sharing is encouraged. Such examples have enhanced the research culture, and this is translating to prospective students as the university being the university of choice. By growing the PGR numbers and through improving the reputation of the university, further students are encouraged, obtaining the critical mass required to grow year on year. This has allowed the university to build capacity.

With the financial constraints of the sector, the rise in the number of research students has boosted the university’s research capability. This has been capitalised on to provide a clear career track, retaining knowledge and skills within the university which then boosts research capability further. Such is the value of PGR students that they are developed and nurtured for sustainability of the university. Similarly to St Mary University of London, the University of Hertfordshire invest in the long term sustainability of the university in wanting to retain the best students to drive up the quality of the staff. The improving reputation and research culture of the university and its Doctoral College has seen a higher calibre of students, applications and academics wishing to work at the institution.

In addition to inter-institutional collaboration, cross-institutional collaboration provides students with the opportunities to establish links and identify other techniques and aspects of research that can be exploited and vice versa. Being a member of the University Alliance Group, for example, has enabled potential involvement in a range of themed areas of research, expertise and facilities for utilisation across all Alliance Group universities.

The university is currently initiating a new initiative to create a doctoral training programme with industrial experience to bridge and link with industry. The programme has been designed to target local industry and to really encourage local growth in the region, to then develop further as a three-way partnership with an international partner. With opportunities to pursue a career in academia restricted, the programme has been designed to create another breed of student for the different career markets.

The university has witnessed excellent performance in the PRES and has been on a continual upward trajectory, which is a reflection of the dynamic environment the students say they find themselves in and the interaction they have both in their Schools and through the Doctoral College. Many of the research events, seminars and conferences are student led and students are supported through professional development to allow them to take part in research informed teaching, enriching the learning experience for those they teach at undergraduate level.

“In everything we do there is an economic value; however our major driver is the reputational stance. If we don’t have a good research base and a strong research culture, we would see a big hit on undergraduate numbers which would have economic cost to the University and the community.”
The University of Northampton focused its case study around how students were becoming integral to the university’s strategy of “Transforming lives and inspiring change” through entrepreneurial capability and capacity.

The University referred to one particular PGR student who had demonstrated exceptional ability and, as a mature student, wanted to pursue a career in academia. On completion of his PhD, the student was employed as a researcher on the basis that they could research into any relevant area they wanted as long as it was legal, ethical, and all costs (including his salary and on-costs) were covered by externally generated income from bids and contracts. The new researcher focused his work in measuring and reporting on client organisations’ socially innovative initiatives designed to deliver social impact i.e. doing something and seeing if it had made any positive impact. The first commissioned research project was with the Canal and River Trust, assessing whether a canal restoration project would positively impact the local community. The success of this research led to more contract research and bids being won and work quickly exceeded the researcher’s capacity. Therefore, an additional University of Northampton PGR student was recruited on completion of her PhD, initially on a temporary basis. The researcher has now grown the team to employ an additional four ex-PGR students from the University. These staff have now formed a formal research institute of the University and they supervise their own PGR students, encouraging them to develop their own entrepreneurial skills, as well as their research expertise. There is thus a virtuous circle where successful ex-students are employed as full-time researchers, and supervise their own PhD students, while paying all the costs of the Institute from external income.

The institute yields a small surplus each year which is reinvested into other social impact research projects. It is gaining reputation nationally and internationally. The university stated that "PGR Students with the right opportunity can respond fantastically and demonstrate enormous research skills, integrity and entrepreneurship. Income generation is important but it’s the output and opportunity that affords the extra value.”

The University has gained a much greater profile through the work of the Institute. The Institute supports and informs national policy-makers, specifically the Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and the Ministry of Defence. It also works on a number of European Commission funded projects and supports national third sector organisations such as the Big Lottery and Big Issue, and local authorities. The case demonstrates the very positive outcomes that can be achieved when PGR students are empowered to develop innovative ideas and find entrepreneurial means of funding these.

For the University of Northampton, the Institute is a shining example of what the University should be doing more of, and now needs to be replicated: “The team is out there working in industry and government and winning research contracts. They produce high-quality outputs, and teach on under-graduate modules. They are the future.”

As the only University in the county, it works in close partnership with Northamptonshire County Council. Following the Council’s cut in funding, the University has assisted in the transformation of service delivery into standalone social enterprises, in two of which the University is a partner. One new social enterprise provides wellbeing services within Northamptonshire. This £30 million p.a. turnover business delivers services including mental health, weight loss, smoking cessation, debt and housing advice, and health checks. PGR students are doing research designed to develop innovative improvements in wellbeing service delivery. One simple example involved PGR design
students developing new designs of door handles to assist individuals with restricted mobility. Some PGR students at Northampton are thus able to directly apply their research findings to help improve the lives of others. PGR students are supported to actively seek opportunities to collaborate with local authorities and stakeholders within the country. The University’s focus on good practice and ‘making a difference’ is very much centred on the county. Successful innovations can then be taken nationally and internationally.

All PhD students are trained and supported in providing and getting involved in teaching. Not only do they teach but they contribute material to other people’s teaching. The University has developed from a very teaching-intensive institution and undergraduate cohorts are inspired and their learning experience is enriched through the research-informed teaching of PhD students.

The University of Northampton echoes other case studies about the importance of PhD students acting as ambassadors for the university, stating, “If we don’t have an active and thriving cohort of PhD students, we won’t attract further students. Undergraduate students will look at the research environment at a particular institution.”

PGR students at Northampton are also encouraged and supported to provide cost-effective consultancy to local businesses, especially SMEs with limited R&D budgets. This work develops the enterprising skills of the student, helps build their CVs, and provides proper research capacity and capability to businesses that are unable to afford the Full Economic Costs of more experienced academic experts.

All PhD students are trained and supported in providing and getting involved in teaching. Not only do they teach but they contribute material to other people’s teaching. The University has developed from a very teaching-intensive institution and undergraduate cohorts are inspired and their learning experience is enriched through the research-informed teaching of PhD students.

PGR students are absolutely essential, find the right person and you can achieve surprising things with very little resources.
Students have shown that they are particularly keen to engage with community outreach projects and involve the local community in their research. One such project has seen PGR students go out to refugee groups to engage them in research and to have the opportunity to learn about community experiences. Such activity has enhanced the research culture further. With PGR students no longer assuming that they will pursue a career in academia, they are keen to identify opportunities to engage outside of the institution and in doing so, they directly add value to the areas of their future careers and the population around them.

Students are also involved in the Being Human Festival which is run from the School in partnership with the AHRC and the British Academy, but has nationwide reach, funding activity at Universities and cultural organisations across the UK. Many of the events are run by the PGR students themselves. It provides a valuable opportunity to engage with members of the public, developing and running activities to involve the community in their local university and the research which is undertaken there. This engagement not only adds value to their own research by encouraging them to think about their research in a different way, but enhances the cultural life of where they live.

An example was given of one particular student who had secured a small grant from the AHRC to develop an exhibition in collaboration with Blackburn Museum, the British Museum’s largest collection of 800 rare books including 21 medieval manuscripts and 73 incunabulae as well as thousands of ancient coins bequeathed by rope maker Robert Edward Hart, had not been catalogued but were of great scholarly significance, and important locally. Following the success of the exhibition in Senate House at SAS, a related conference took place, further funding was then secured through London’s 2 Temple Place to collaborate with two further museums, Towneley Hall in Burnley and The Haworth in Accrington, to stage a major exhibition in 2015, Cotton to Gold. The project attracted significant exposure with 36,000 visitors and the student was invited to take part in programmes and interviews with the Independent, the Guardian, Radio 4’s Front Row and other media. Through the success of this project an academic partnership was established between the Blackburn Museum and IES, SAS. In 2016, the partnership successfully applied for £55,000 from an ACE Resilience Grant which has enabled the Museum to hire a professional cataloguer to map the collection, improve their study space and to reinvent their volunteer programme. The remit of the exhibitions both at Blackburn Museum and in London was to connect with communities. This student is now able to talk to other students about how to work with other museums and galleries, broadening the skills and upskilling the rest of the PGR students in the cohort – a virtuous circle. They have also been able to demonstrate to other students that other opportunities develop and grow from one particular strand.

The varying activities of PGR students have encouraged interaction and knowledge sharing across the institution and through doctoral collaborations across London with other institutions. These collaborations have encouraged opportunities to share skill sets that can be utilised and harnessed, sharing the benefits of training across the different cohorts in the capital.
CONCLUSIONS

The case studies illustrated how students added value and provided real benefit to others around them: other students, local communities, business and industry, providing a useful qualitative insight to the initial survey focus of added value to the institution.

The case studies offered perspectives from a range of University contexts in terms of size of provision, type of HEI, disciplinary fields and location. There was nonetheless a great degree of commonality across the four cases. While the subject of the case studies where very specific to the individual university, the underlying themes of public engagement, working with the community, enhancing the learning and research culture for others spanned across all case studies; statements that “students act as ambassadors and advocates”, “our university would not exist without them” and “our students provide virtuous circle” were common themes.