Quality Enhancement Network and UKCGE: The value of the PhD

Feedback from Quality Enhancement Network events
In June 2017 QAA and UKCGE ran two Quality Enhancement Network (QEN) events that looked at the value of the PhD. Workshops in London and Newcastle showcased research undertaken at the University of Sheffield, and featured presentations from current PhD candidates about how they value their experiences, along with discussion of some draft case studies developed by UKCGE to explore doctoral outcomes.

WHAT THE QEN EVENTS TOLD US

THE VALUE OF THE PHD

The PhD is perceived to be valuable because:

- PhD students are required to develop attributes such as resilience, self-determination and independence
- PhD students are required to develop skills such as high-level time management, critical analysis, problem solving, writing and managing uncertainty
- many of the skills and attributes that PhD students develop are extremely valuable in the corporate world, especially at senior management level
- in some fields, knowledge gained through research can be applied directly in the workplace
- it can become integral to doctoral graduates’ construction of identity, their personal confidence and sense of self, and their social standing
- it can have a positive impact on an individual’s interpersonal relationships and social networks
- it can provide opportunities for engaging academic and non-academic audiences
- PhD students can acquire indirect and/or unexpected skills
- it engenders tolerance and open-mindedness
- it can open up a range of choices for students
- PhD students have opportunities to participate in international research communities, and to work and make connections across disciplines

- PhD students can positively contribute to teaching in universities
- it fuels the knowledge economy and stimulates productivity through doctoral graduates entering the marketplace.

The value of the PhD is complex and perceived differently over time, with more value attributed in the longer term (for example as a result of career progression or following time for reflection). PhD candidates are often motivated by much more than career progression, although others highly value the opportunity to explore career options through placements and work experience.

CHALLENGES FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Challenges facing PhD and doctoral candidates can include:

- mental health and well-being issues
- financial constraints, especially during the ‘writing up’ year, which have the potential to impact student diversity
- practical issues relating to immigration status and requirements for international students
- building and managing relationships with their supervisors
- challenges relating to their uncertain status within a university (falling between staff and students)
- finding additional sources of help and support in difficult circumstances (for example when dealing with bereavement)
- working in isolation, and overcoming ‘imposter syndrome’.

UKCGE DRAFT CASE STUDIES

The events told us that these case studies:

- are effective in capturing and reflecting the complexity of doctoral study, alongside its value
- helpfully summarise key skills associated with doctoral study
- would be useful for both current candidates and prospective PhD candidates, to consider before they apply
- usefully display the unique pathways that candidates follow through doctoral study, and the disparity that can exist between experiences.
They can be improved by:

- following a more consistent format, so that comparisons can be made across case studies
- including key pieces of information about the profile of the students concerned (for example age and duration of study)
- better reflecting the different motivations of doctoral students, and that it can take time for candidates to decide upon their key area of interest
- providing more information about the support available for students to help them overcome challenges
- being written from the student perspective throughout
- making connections with industry skills gaps
- greater clarity about their purpose and audience/s.

**NEXT STEPS**

UKCGE will work with its Standards and Reputation Working group to update the draft case studies and publish them on its website in autumn 2017.

QAA and UKCGE will continue to work with the sector to support the sharing of challenges and good practice in relation to the quality of research degrees.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the events and provided feedback on the case studies.