

User guide for the data from the Review of the PhD in the social sciences 2020-21

This guide accompanies the survey and summary qualitative data from the Review of the PhD in the social sciences undertaken by CFE Research and the University of York between 2020 and 2021 on behalf of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It provides information about the study aims and data collection and processing to assist those wanting to re-use the data.

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Background and study aims

In January 2020, the ESRC commissioned CFE Research in partnership with the University of York to undertake an independent study to inform its Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences.

The research set out to assess current doctoral training provision in the UK and make recommendations on potential revisions to funding, structures and content that would ensure a diverse student population, protect student wellbeing and optimise the value of ESRC graduates to a range of employers, within and beyond academia, in a global economy.

To achieve this, the research sought to address two overarching questions and a series of sub-questions:

1. What are the skills needed by social science PhD graduates to prepare them for careers both within and beyond academia?

- a. What are the skills UK social science PhD graduates need to compete in a global marketplace?
- b. How competitive do students, graduates and employers perceive UK social science PhDs to be nationally and internationally?
- c. What skills should be core for all students? Should there be variation in skills across disciplines or in relation to career pathways/student motivations?

2. What are the optimum ways to develop these skills for a diverse student population while also safeguarding student health and wellbeing?

- a. What are the strengths of current arrangements in relation to content, structure, support and supervision?
- b. What can we learn from different models nationally and internationally both within and beyond the social sciences?

Further information about the study and its findings can be found in our report to ESRC: CFE and the University of York (2021) [Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences](#)

A separate report on the rapid evidence assessment was published in April 2020: CFE Research and the University of York (2020) [Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences: Rapid evidence assessment](#)

Archived data

The archived data comprises the following:

- Survey data from current social science doctoral students and recent graduates
- Summary findings from workshops with students, graduates, PhD supervisors and employers
- Detailed notes from workshops with senior stakeholders from UK higher education institutions

Method

Overview

The study took 18 months and adopted a mixed-methods approach. This included:

- analysis of secondary data
- a rapid evidence assessment of UK and international research on doctoral training
- a sector-wide online consultation exercise
- an online survey of students and recent graduates
- individual interviews and focus groups with UK and international stakeholders, PhD supervisors, students, graduates and employers
- workshops with students and graduates, supervisors, employers and senior stakeholders from UK HEIs.

Sampled HEIs

The research was designed to ensure representation of views from across the spectrum of stakeholders. To focus participant recruitment and to capture a variety of experiences, ten HEIs were invited to join the study. Institutional characteristics considered in issuing invitations included the size of the social science PhD student body, geographical location, the range of social science disciplines offered and the amount of ESRC studentship funding received. The final selection included some institutions which are not currently part of a doctoral training network. The achieved sample included both ESRC and non-ESRC-funded students and graduates.

Table 1 below summarises the key characteristics of the sampled HEIs.

Table 1: Characteristics of sampled HEIs

Name	Region	Type	DTP	No. of doctoral students
More than 400 social science doctoral graduates				
UCL	London	Golden Triangle	Yes	940
University of Manchester	North West	Russell Group	Yes	680
University of Cambridge	East of England	Golden Triangle	Yes	620
Between 200 and 399 social science doctoral graduates				
University of Sheffield	Yorkshire and the Humber	Russell Group	Yes	385
Cardiff University	Wales	Russell Group	Yes	335
University of Glasgow	Scotland	Russell Group	Yes	290
University of Newcastle	North East	Russell Group	Yes	280
University of Bath	South West	Pre-92	Yes	245
Between 100 and 199 social science doctoral graduates				
Canterbury Christ Church University	South East	Post-92	No	150
Coventry University	West Midlands	Post-92	No	125

Survey of students and graduates

Survey design

An online survey was created to capture insights from current social science doctoral students and recent (since 2015/16) graduates. The survey design was informed by questions from pre-existing surveys, including the [Postgraduate Research Experience Survey \(PRES\)](#) and the [Nature postdoctoral-research survey](#). The survey was designed to take no more than 15 minutes to complete and aimed to explore student and graduate perceptions of the following:

- motivations for doing a doctoral programme and funding
- skills training, assessment and supervision
- future career plans (current students only) or current employment (graduates only) and role and influence of IAG
- impact of doctorate on wellbeing

- overall satisfaction with studying for a doctorate and value of qualification to employers (graduates only)
- personal information and follow-up

Survey questions were designed to ensure perceptions could be captured from:

- home/EU and international students
- ESRC-funded and non-ESRC funded
- full-time and part-time students

Screeners questions were used to ensure participants were eligible to participate and routing was applied according to whether the respondent was a current student or recent graduate.

A copy of the questionnaire is provided to accompany this guide.

Implementation and response

Following ethics approval from individual participating HEIs, the survey was pilot tested with a small sample of current students and recent graduates to check the survey length and comprehension. The survey was disseminated between June and July 2020 through a key point of contact at each HEI.

1,285 students/graduates responded to the survey (879 completes and 406 partials). After removing duplicates, test responses, and insufficiently complete partials, the final sample was **991** (876 completes, 115 partials). Further details on the respondent profile can be found in the final report.

Data processing

The raw data was cleaned and ‘other’ open response options were back-coded to existing response codes and new codes were created where necessary. Survey respondents were required to state their primary PhD subject discipline to ensure it fell within a social sciences discipline. This list originally comprised 21 response options but was re-coded and reduced to 8 response codes for the predominant social sciences disciplines for the purpose of analysis. Variable ‘H1’ is a hidden variable that is used for routing purposes to enable separate survey analysis by current students and graduates. The accompanying code book provides instructions about which variables require filtering and are specific to current student or graduate respondents. For example, the question bank about current employment is only relevant to the graduate respondents.

Data anonymisation processes have been carried out to remove any personal identifiers including forename, surname, date of birth, email addresses and telephone numbers. Higher Education provider names have also been removed. Further steps to minimise the risk of identification from the data include the re-coding of ethnicity into a binary variable (white vs.

non-white), gender, disability status and care taking responsibilities. Details of response option codes for these variables can be located in the accompanying code book. All open response data has been removed from the dataset. Cross-tabulation data checks have been performed to ensure there are no cell counts of less than 10.

Workshops

Stakeholder workshops were held between March and May 2021. Originally planned for earlier in the review, they were delayed in order to increase the possibility of running them on a face-to-face basis. Unfortunately, COVID-19 restrictions remained in place, and all the workshops were undertaken online.

A total of five workshops were undertaken: one with **students and graduates** of social science doctoral programmes (recruited from survey respondents), one with **supervisors** (recruited with support from the ten sampled HEIs and UKCGE), one with **employers** (recruited through ESRC's network of contacts, steering group members and the research team) and two with **senior stakeholders** responsible for the strategic planning and management of postgraduate training within HEIs (recruited from the ten sampled HEIs and ESRC's wider networks, including doctoral training partnerships).

The purpose of the workshops with students/graduates, supervisors and employers was to build on the emerging findings from the desk research, primary research and open consultation and to begin testing out possible scenarios. Three core themes were explored at each workshop.

The student, graduate and supervisor workshops explored:

- content, timing and nature of skills training
- the value of placements
- the format and length of the PhD.

A total of 15 doctoral candidates and 7 recent graduates attended the student/graduate workshop from a range of disciplines including human geography, education, psychology, sociology, management and business studies and economics.

14 supervisors from 8 HEIs attended the supervisor workshop representing a range of disciplines including human geography, education, computational and social sciences, psychology, economics, law and criminology and sociology.

The employer workshop explored:

- the 'added value' of PhD graduates to employers' organisations over and above those with lower-level qualifications

- the range of skills that PhD graduates should be equipped with to succeed in employment and the ways in which employers could help to support their development
- the role of placements in equipping graduates with the skills and capabilities needed to be competitive and secure their chosen career.

A total of 7 employers from a range of public and private sector organisations that recruit social scientists attended the workshop.

The purpose of the workshops with senior stakeholders was to test out a potential vision for the PhD along with suggested changes to the structure, content and length of the PhD based on findings from the rest of the research and consultation. These workshops were chaired by a member of ESRC Council.

Ahead of the workshop a brief summary of the emerging findings from the research was shared with delegates, together with the proposed overarching vision and model for doctoral training. Delegates were also provided with information about current ESRC doctoral training provision. As with the other workshops, three broad themes were discussed in small breakout group facilitated by the research team,

- **Theme 1** considered the pros and cons of entry to doctoral training at the master's level without a specific research question, the role of training needs analysis and a core research methods programme for all students, irrespective of their chosen discipline within the social sciences.
- **Theme 2** focused on entry at doctoral level and considered options designed to introduce greater flexibility in the funding and duration of doctoral training and opportunities for students to apply their research in practice, including through an accredited module.
- **Theme 3** explored aspects of supervision, interdisciplinary and collaborative working along with careers and pastoral support to ensure student health and wellbeing.

A total of 53 stakeholders took part over the two workshops, including Pro-Vice Chancellors, DTP Directors, Directors of Graduate Schools and Deans of Social Science Faculties.