

# Review of the PhD in Social Sciences

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Early insights from workshops with students and graduates, PhD supervisors and employers

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# Employer perspectives

- PhD students ' generalist research skills, critical thinking and resilience are key attractions for employers. Specialist subject knowledge is less important.
- Very rare that a *social science* PhD is a *requirement* for a job outside of HE but workplace experience is highly valued.
- Graduates need to be able to demonstrate a range of research skills and an ability to identify the most appropriate method given the research objectives and time and budget constraints.
- Graduates must be able to communicate effectively with different audiences, including non-researchers
- Employers acknowledge that they have a role in skills training and development – for doctoral students and the graduates they employ.

# Training in employability skills

- Students and graduates agree that employability skills training would be valuable.
- Although it is acknowledged that mandating skills training can be helpful in underlining its importance and ensuring consistency, most agreed that it should not be made compulsory.
- Training should be flexible and tailored to individual needs and not a 'tick box' exercise.
- Students need advice on what employers are looking for and how to sell the skills developed during a PhD.
- Gaps in non-academic writing and communication skills were highlighted.

# **Interdisciplinary and collaborative activities**

- Students and graduates recognise the importance and value of this type of activity - graduates described these activities as 'transformative'.
- Candidates hungry for more opportunities to network and collaborate with their peers.
- Candidates need help to find and secure meaningful opportunities for interdisciplinary and collaborative working – supervisors are not always well-placed to provide this support.

# Training in data and digital skills

- There is some support for generic data and digital skills training for *all* social science PhD students to ensure graduates are ‘data literate’.
- Training should be aligned to students’ discipline, project focus, interests and needs.
- Specialised and in-depth training in data and digital skills may not be available within HEIs. Resources are required to source external providers.
- It is important to provide opportunities for students to apply their training in practice to ensure these skills become fully embedded

# Placements

- Placements can provide valuable opportunities for students to network and collaborate, develop generic employability skills and apply their knowledge in a work setting.
- They should not be mandatory but should be flexible and tailored to individual need - three months would be too long for some, not long enough for others.
- Placements need to be high-quality, address identified learning/skills development needs and not be exploitative.
- Employers need clear incentives. Creating good placements requires substantial time and investment.
- Equality of provision requires careful consideration – online placement could provide flexibility
- Additional time and funding may be required to enable students to undertake a placement and ensure under-represented students are not disadvantaged.

# Format and length of PhD

- There is no 'one size fits all' approach. Training should be tailored to the needs of the individual, informed by a training needs analysis.
- Studying for PhD is intense. Supervisors are concerned about adding 'clutter' which distracts from the core purpose of the PhD.
- But, there is little appetite for a substantial extension to the length. Longer PhDs may be off-putting for groups who are already under-represented (as well as international students)
- Greater flexibility would be welcomed e.g. option to extend timeframe and funding for a specific purpose, such as developing articles for publication.

# Implications for EDI

- Stipend insufficient and means students need access to additional income.
- Loading more requirements on candidates without additional time and funding is likely to have a negative impact on wellbeing
- Greater flexibility (or awareness of existing flexibility) to move between part-time and full-time study is needed.
- Greater recognition of the different skills, experiences and backgrounds of candidates is needed, with flexibility to accommodate these.