

Senior stakeholder workshops – summary findings

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This document provides summary findings from two workshops with senior stakeholders responsible for the strategic planning and management of postgraduate training within higher education institutions in the UK. The workshops were held on 4th and 6th May to discuss the potential strengths as well as the challenges and limitations of alternative approaches to doctoral training designed to enhance the skills and preparedness of social sciences PhD graduates for work within and outside higher education. Details of the options presented are provided in the accompanying Data User Guide.

Entry requirements

- One group discussed the proposed entry requirements for the foundational MRes. Participants supported the inclusion of a personal statement and accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) as a way to improve diversity. They argued that broadening entry requirements beyond traditional academic qualifications would also be helpful. One group member suggested that the Masters should not be a prerequisite for PhD study and that the Masters could be scrapped altogether in favour of a 4 year PhD.
- HEIs would benefit from guidance on how to assess non-academic skills and experiences. Some are already grappling with ways to reduce bias and subjectivity in the selection process and they say it would be useful to share good practice. Others are already starting to re-think the requirements of the PGR selection process to identify a more diverse range of people with the potential to succeed at doctoral level.

Entry at M level without a specific research question identified

Views on this proposition were divided, but more participants were in favour of it. A number of potential benefits of this approach were identified:

- It would provide greater flexibility and enable students to explore different ideas in a supportive environment before settling on their final research question. This would in turn help students to develop stronger PhD research proposals and reduce the need to rework proposals that are not feasible at D level.
- It would provide opportunities for students to work in cohorts (to reduce isolation) and engage in interdisciplinary activity. It would also provide dedicated space for the development of ‘non-academic skills’.
- It would improve accessibility to doctoral level study for under-represented groups who do not have the skills and/or access to the networks needed to identify a suitable supervisor and develop a research proposal prior to commencing their doctoral study. Removing the requirement would enable students to make contacts and get input from potential supervisors to help focus their research ideas.
- MRes is a helpful way for students (particularly mature students) to gain a fuller understanding of what is required to study at doctoral level.
- Those who choose not to continue to D level would have the opportunity to achieve a stand-alone qualification.
- It would support students to switch from one discipline to another.

Several concerns about a generic foundation year were raised:

- The value of a standalone generic MRes for students, including its currency with employers, was questioned by some. Examples of existing generic Masters that had proved difficult to ‘sell’ to students were provided. There was a perception that most students want to progress along a discipline-specific journey.
- There are practical and operational challenges of implementing a generic programme alongside existing discipline-specific Masters courses. To be economically viable for HEIs, provision needs to have wider appeal beyond ESRC-funded students.
- Some institutions already receive a large number of applications, and this approach could lead to an increase in demand which institutions may not be able to meet.
- It would present some operational issues, including challenging existing processes for assessing applications and ensuring consistency and fairness.

- There is a risk that the HEI delivering the foundation year will not be able to identify a suitable supervisor for some students if the research topic is not known in advance. Working with other institutions (e.g. as part of a DTP) could help to expand the supervisory capacity available and mitigate this risk.
- DTPs emphasised the benefits of project-led studentships whereby the supervisor develops a proposal in a pre-defined thematic/skills-based area. This is perceived to be a key strength of the current model which DTPs would be keen to preserve.

Diagnostic on entry comprising Training Needs Analysis (TNA) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

- The proposal to have a TNA at M-level was widely welcomed and some research organisations already do this. It would be useful to ensure the TNA at M and D level are connected, however, as this does not happen consistently.
- Incorporating APEL and wider (non-academic) qualifications into the TNA process would be valuable and could be undertaken as part of selection process.
- At the outset of their postgraduate studies, students are likely to have a limited understanding of the skills they will need to develop and a relatively narrow view of their training needs. The TNA needs to support and challenge students to think more widely.
- Some concerns about resource implications of introducing a TNA for students were raised. Some institutions have dedicated staff who work with supervisors to undertake the TNA and monitor student progress.
- There is a potential tension between the incorporation of a TNA/APEL (which identifies students' training and development needs, taking account of their prior qualifications and experiences) and a common foundation programme (which all students, irrespective of their existing skills and experience, complete). It will be important to ensure the benefits of a common programme are not lost by students 'dipping in and out' according to needs / prior experience.

Common research methods programme, including enhanced data skills

There was less support for a core methods programme. Most participants were of the view that the research methods element should take account of the students' background, discipline and pathway.

- Participants raised major concerns about a lack of discipline-specific research methods training and indicated there would be some push back from some disciplines in particular (e.g. economics and psychology).
- There was a view that it would be challenging to implement generic methods training, as quantitative skills requirements in particular vary widely across disciplines. Some questioned whether it was appropriate to ‘force’ everyone to do quantitative and qualitative methods; others felt it was important for all students to develop a basic foundation in / understanding of quantitative and qualitative methods, given the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of research.
- It is essential to ensure that students who follow a generic route are not placed at a disadvantage at D level because of lack of disciplinary methods training. If students have a lot of disciplinary knowledge and skills to catch up on, it could exacerbate the challenge of completing a PhD within the 3-year funding period.
- The introduction of a generic programme could further entrench inequalities. Many applicants already have a Masters, and a number of stakeholders questioned the merit of these students subsequently completing a generic MRes. Summer schools were proposed as a way to address any skills/knowledge gaps of students who already have a Masters. This approach was also identified as a way to help students later in their PhD journey to develop their writing for publication skills. Some suggested that it would be beneficial if the MRes was ring-fenced for those who do not have a Masters.
- Some questioned the proposed balance of credits in the MRes. If 60 credits were awarded for skills training and a further 60 credits for the proposal, this would leave no room for the development of student’s expertise in a particular discipline. It is a QAA requirement for research Masters to include an independent research project element. It was suggested that introducing a project as part of the ‘research in practice’ component could cover this.
- Some questioned whether a generic MRes would help to make the UK PhD more globally-competitive, given that UK social scientists are valued for their depth of disciplinary knowledge. However, others felt it would help to ensure students were more competitive, because it would encourage them to look beyond their own research / methods and develop a broader range of research skills including data skills.
- Some advocated for a 2-year Masters which includes generic training as well as a substantive discipline-specific element, even if this meant a reduction in the number of funded students.
- In EPSRC model, research training is delivered flexibly over the course of a 4-year doctoral programme. This approach would be worth considering as it would help to overcome the constraints of a 1+3 model.
- It is possible to have a Masters degree without a dissertation component, and a formally-assessed PhD proposal is a good idea, but it is important to recognise that the

experience of writing a thesis is very valuable for some (particularly those who have prior work but limited academic experience) and the lack of opportunity to develop these skills at M level could place some students at a disadvantage.

Those in support of a common methods programme identified a number of benefits:

- This approach could be beneficial for smaller institutions by helping to reduce duplication.
- The MRes could help to ‘beef up’ basic qualifications and help ensure students develop the marketable skills and qualities a range of employers seek.
- There was general support for the NCRM Research Methods training.
- This approach could better support students to make the transition from more structured undergraduate programmes by enabling students to get a ‘flavour’ of what the doctoral experience will be like.

Research in Practice

- Most participants supported the idea of introducing a ‘research in practice’ element, although one group questioned whether it should be mandatory.
- There was no agreement on the optimum time for students to undertake ‘research in practice’. Some questioned whether embedding it as part of the MRes was too soon, given that students have limited research findings at this stage and may find it challenging to identify and communicate the impacts of their research. Some argued for a range of ‘research in practice’ opportunities embedded throughout the doctoral training process.
- Developing relationships with employers is time- and resource-intensive, and additional resources would be needed to scale up provision. There is also a need to recognise the investment of time required by employers who host students on placement. Providing placement opportunities for part-time students as part of the research in practice module could present a particular challenge.
- It is important to ensure students are well equipped to undertake a placement so relationships with stakeholders that have taken years to develop are not jeopardised and students benefit from the experience.
- One group questioned how this module would be assessed.

Entry at D-level

- Although most participants did not anticipate a major stream of students wishing to progress straight to D level, some questioned whether there would be a direct-entry option.
- A mechanism to enable students to work-up a realistic research proposal would be needed for those students who had not done the foundational MRes.

Flexible programme duration and funding

- More flexibility around the duration of the PhD is welcomed.
- As the majority of students currently struggle to complete in 3 years, most stakeholders were in favour of greater flexibility to extend the funded period to widen access, particularly for part-time students who work alongside their studies. Most stakeholders do not believe there would be significant demand for a shorter PhD, although it is acknowledged that this would be attractive to some potential students with significant prior qualifications and experience. A professional doctorate could cater for these students.
- It was acknowledged that many institutions already offer students some flexibility to extend the length of their PhD. In addition, programmes that cross research council boundaries are already of a longer duration as students often have additional training needs. This proposition would help to operationalise this more clearly.
- Some cautioned against ‘too much flexibility’ because rather than helping to diversify the doctoral student population, this could result in fewer opportunities for those from under-represented backgrounds. There is also a risk of students ‘gaming’ the system and not using the additional time appropriately.
- Introducing PhDs of differing lengths could raise questions of parity and quality (would a PhD completed in 2.5 years be perceived as comparable to one completed in 4 years for example?). It would be important to manage expectations, should more flexibility be introduced to ensure all students perceive the process as fair, to understand there are no ‘short cuts’ to achieving a PhD, and to have an equitable experience. It would also be important to manage supervisors expectations of what could be achieved in the agreed funding period.
- The framing and parameters of the additional flexibility would need to be carefully thought through and communicated. Most stakeholders would prefer to see the funded period extended across the board, rather than just in some circumstances.

- An initial TNA would be crucial in determining the most suitable pathway, content and length of a programme. However, making the decision on length at the point of entry could be restrictive. It was suggested that HEIs would need the flexibility to make a final decision on length during the programme (e.g. in first two years) to enable students to engage in training and other opportunities to address presenting needs that may not be evident or identified at the outset.
- Offering programmes of different lengths and subsequently managing them would present practical and logistical challenges for institutions and would have resource implications. How would institutions decide how many programmes of different lengths they could offer? This may not be viable for smaller institutions and those with only a small number of ESRC-funded students.

Credit-bearing training and development spanning duration of doctorate

- There was widespread support for the inclusion of a training and development elements to address gaps in knowledge and skills and to provide opportunities to apply research in practice. However, some were concerned about the additional burden this would place on students who already struggle to complete the existing requirements within the current funding period.
- Most questioned the value and practicalities of this element being credit-bearing. Introducing an additional credit bearing module would increase the burden of assessment for both students and HEIs. Questions were raised about who might deliver the training and development. Individual institutions may not be able to meet all of a student's training and development needs. If students undertake courses delivered by different providers, which one should undertake the assessment and award the credit? This may require students to be simultaneously registered on a PGCert or PGDip in addition to their PhD. How practical is it for students to access training offered by different providers that may be geographically-dispersed?
- Stakeholders questioned whether students would be motivated by further credit for training given their primary focus is on their research. One institution offered its doctoral students a 'mini MBA' but there was no take-up. Those that have tried this approach are moving away from credit-bearing training towards a more flexible approach that offers opportunities for students to build their own portfolio of training and experiences.
- Stakeholders reflected that a combination of 'carrot' and 'stick' would be required to encourage students to take up wider skills training and recognise its value in the context of their future careers.

Supervision and diagnostics (TNA and APEL)

- The TNA is often viewed as a tick box exercise, particularly by supervisors, who are often not equipped with the skills, or afforded the time, to effectively undertake this process with their students.
- It is important for supervisors to engage with and buy-in to the TNA process to demonstrate its credibility and value to students. However, some centralised support may be required to ensure TNAs are undertaken consistently at the outset and progress is monitored and regularly reviewed throughout. Appointing a dedicated staff member to work with supervisors and students on the TNA has been shown to be effective in one DTP. Ongoing communication with students ensures these dedicated staff members are well-placed to signpost students to relevant training and development opportunities and identify wider academic or wellbeing issues.
- An annual Training Needs Analysis survey which is completed by the student and their supervisor was suggested to ensure it is a collaborative process. The outcomes should be discussed at annual progress reviews with some external input to help direct the conversation.
- An online resource/ toolkit signposting students/supervisors to training would be useful. Identifying opportunities for collaboration between HEIs could help to build capacity for training and development and minimise duplication. This could be achieved through an exercise to map what is currently offered via DTPs and HEIs.
- It would be beneficial to provide a ‘community’ of peer support, beyond the supervisor(s), that students can draw on for signposting to specific training, but also for indirect training and support. Is there a role that the ESRC could play here via the DTPs? Integrating students into a shared space can be beneficial to address these requirements.
- There was widespread support for supervisor training to address gaps in knowledge and skills. Training for supervisors on EDI, mental health and GDPR were identified as priorities. Gaps in supervisors’ knowledge and experience in areas such as ‘coaching’, ‘supporting progression’, ‘giving constructive feedback’ and ‘handling difficult conversations’ could also be addressed to enhance the student experience and their sense of wellbeing.
- As with skills training for students, a combination of ‘carrot’ (mandatory training) and ‘stick’ (accreditation / recognition / reward) may be required to support and encourage supervisors to engage in training and personal development, particularly in those areas perceived to be outside of the scope of the role.

Provision of specialist and independent careers advice

- There is widespread recognition that institutional careers services are primarily geared up to support undergraduates. Doctoral students have specific career guidance needs. Their career pathways are complex to prepare for and navigate so specialist, bespoke support is essential.
- The Career Development Concordat is beginning to have an impact on the provision of career guidance for research students. DTPs are increasingly putting on sessions about non-academic careers which often involve input from employers. Some HEIs have dedicated careers advisers for doctoral students in place and/or offer a career programme for PGR students. There is, however, a need for better information on the range of career destinations of social science PhD graduates.
- The primary role of the supervisor is to support their student to do excellent research. Their focus must therefore be on research training. Stakeholders agree that it's not appropriate or realistic to expect supervisors to become experts in all career options for doctoral graduates. Nevertheless, they do need to know where to signpost students for advice. One solution is to ensure students to have access to a non-academic supervisor who can provide advice on (non-academic) career options. This does have cost implications though.
- Many students aspire to non-academic careers from the outset but can feel nervous about 'coming out' to their supervisors about this. Work is required to change the culture as well as understanding of the range of career options available to PhD graduates amongst supervisors and the valuable contribution that doctoral graduates make to organisations and sectors outside HE.
- There is a danger in separating out those who are aspiring to an academic career and those who are not and directing them down different pathways.
- There is a potential role for organisations such as learned societies and the British Academy in broadening students' knowledge of the range of career pathways available in different industries.
- There could also be a role for mentoring in raising awareness of the range of careers and how doctoral graduates can apply their knowledge and skills in different contexts. There was a suggestion that the PROSPER project (which is designed to connect research staff with employers to identify skills needs which could be addressed through doctoral training) could be expanded to include students.

- Students themselves need to take some responsibility for their own career development and seek information on the range of opportunities available. This is a vital skill, but signposting is important.
- Many students come to doctoral study with work experience. These students, along with alumni, could offer insights into non-academic careers to their peers. However, they may need advice and support if they are seeking a career change (including a switch to an academic career).

Ensuring an interdisciplinary perspective

- The term ‘interdisciplinarity’ means different things to different people in different disciplines and will be perceived differently by those who routinely work with people from other disciplines and those who do not. Overall, however, stakeholders recognise the value in students working with researchers from other disciplines where appropriate and of preventing silo working.
- There is likely to be kick-back from some disciplines/supervisors who would question whether *all* doctoral research needs to be interdisciplinary. The composition of the supervisory team should be determined by the research and should not be interdisciplinary just for the sake of it. Academics from the same discipline can bring different perspectives and so it’s not always necessary to have to have supervisors from different disciplines to achieve inter-disciplinarity.
- There is the potential for conflict between supervisors from different disciplines. This could serve to confuse rather than support students and could have implications for their wellbeing.
- There is no support for mandating interdisciplinary supervisory teams. Mandating inter-disciplinarity could make the ESRC route less attractive to some students.
- Collaborative PhDs are more challenging to deliver but very worthwhile. Employers can bring an interdisciplinary perspective. In the social sciences, however, HEIs tend to work with charities and health-related organisations, not commercial businesses, and so have limited time to offer support in this capacity.

Provision of health and wellbeing support outside of supervision

- There was a general acknowledgement that more needs to be done to support the health and wellbeing of research students. The focus needs to be on fostering a culture of ‘wellness’ and preventing issues that have a detrimental impact on mental health, as

well as on services for those who need support with existing or developing mental health issues. The Mental Health Catalyst is leading to change in some institutions, for example, by providing students with access to online mental health modules.

- There is a need to better understand how current approaches to doctoral training and institutional cultures impact on student mental health, but existing research suggests that relationships between students and their supervisors, and expectations and length of funding are contributing factors. Competitive environments have also been shown to contribute to poor mental health and wellbeing. It is important to address the systemic causes of poor mental health (including through greater flexibility and training for supervisors) as well as increase access to support (including counselling).
- Creating opportunities for ‘peer to peer’ support (e.g. by developing cohorts of students via a core methods programme / foundation year) could also fulfil an important role in enhancing student wellbeing by isolation.
- Supervisors are often the first port of call for students. They therefore need to be able to recognise when a student is struggling and signpost them to available support. Supervisors may need training and support to do this effectively.
- Supporting the wellness of supervisors is also important.