

Society for Research into Higher Education Postgraduate Issues Network 2004-2006: a review

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The Society for Research into Higher Education supports discussion events throughout the year under different themes, represented by its separate Networks, each with their own convenors. The Society re-launched its Postgraduate Issues Network in Spring 2004, with convenors Pam Denicolo, Alistair McCulloch and Carolyn Boulter (Carolyn stepped down after a year and a half and I joined the group, with Richard Race following to make four of us). The Network meetings attract a wide range of professionals working in postgraduate education from across the country, generally a different and dedicated set of people for the different occasions, normally for an afternoon's activity and discussion at the meeting rooms in the Institute of Physics in Portland Place, London W1. The first two discussion events were on 13 May 2004, with Gill Clark (QAA) on "**The revised QAA code of practice on postgraduate degree programmes: issues and implementation**", and on 7 June 2004, Alistair McCulloch (Edge Hill University) on "**The Support and Training of Supervisors in the Light of New Initiatives and Demands**", and these are reviewed elsewhere (Brown & Gough 2004).

On 3 December 2004 the Network invited Paul Hubbard, Head of Research Policy at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), to lead a session, in advance of a report, on policy issues surrounding "**Doctoral submission and completion rates**". This proved to be a most timely introduction, albeit dominated by a blitz of overhead transparencies showing graphs of trends, to the new linked funding arrangements for 2005/6 and it provoked a vigorous debate with a highly engaged audience. Hubbard gave some policy background. The Harris Report of 1996 established that departments must be of good quality, that is, be fit for supporting research study, this being tied to their Research Assessment Exercise score. The HEFCE review of 2000 reiterated this linkage and also promoted general training for researchers, as well as a returning to a lighter touch as regards dissertation submission deadlines. The HEFCE 2003 review promoted minimum standards, taken up more comprehensively of course in the 2004 QAA new Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes (2004). HEFCE's view is that the precepts are the key parts of the Code, and we should not get too distracted by the detail of explanation. Not much recommended in the Code is easily quantifiable, but completion rates are to be monitored, to compare differences between higher education institutions (HEIs), as an initial measure for quality.

HEFCE now uses Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures for actual completion of research degrees, not simply submission rates for dissertations (on which Research Councils have tended to focus their interest). HEFCE have been tracking a cohort of students starting with 1997 starters. After 7 years now, 75-80% of full-timers either finished or dropped

out. For part-timers 38% had dropped out, 34% completed with a doctoral award, so nearly 30% are officially still plugging away. Comparing equivalent points earlier in the period of study, the rate of part-timer dropout is higher than full-timer dropout. HEFCE have also delved into fine levels of granularity in the study, with variables including sources of funding, Home vs International status, age, sex and subject grouping.

Various points came out in discussion. Periods of suspension of study are ignored by the project. There was speculation whether the new Roberts training framework would facilitate a whole new perspective on this, in that it may significantly alter the trends. There is certainly interest in the relation between quality of research degree programmes to employability issues, including how unhelpful the HESA employment first destination statistics are, especially for PhD graduates.

The main point I impressed on Hubbard was that there was a need for a yet finer grained framework for recording different experiences: aspects could include whether postgraduates were teaching in their subject, whether in their department or not, and if so whether it is part of an overall contract including the registration for study, whether the student is still then effectively self-financing as a part-timer, or whether the study itself is supported by funding from the institution too, constituting formally a form of full-time engagement with the subject therefore. There are different sorts of part-time status: effectively just spare time only with a full-time job outside the institution, otherwise unemployed (perhaps then with more time to study), with a job (part-time or full-time) in the institution, etc.

There was also criticism emerging from the audience at the more general level of reliance on HESA as the source for HEFCE's data, as if the findings were pretending to be neutral. This arose in the light that there was an implicit conclusion from this study that full-time research council funded students "performed" better, so might be a better investment by funders. The data might tell us what has happened but any appropriate action ought to include encouraging better quality of programmes and provision, perhaps especially for part-timers, who could benefit marginally more than full-timers with extra support; and this depends upon HEIs too, not just funders and the students themselves!

The question of part-time student status is raised in more depth in recent work (McCulloch & Stokes 2008, in their SRHE Guide), and the position of all those students not fitting into the neat full-time research council funded category was taken up in the next Network gathering on 14 February 2005. Miriam David, from the University of Keele, in "**Support of non-traditional research students**", led a discussion on our thinking about diversity and difference in doctoral studies.

David explained that the expansion of higher education over the last two decades in the context of globalization has variously augmented, even created anew, a range of postgraduate research studies and students, such as mature women students, part-time study professionals and those engaged in distance learning. She judged that the use of terms such as fairness and equity in the HE policy debate was too uncritical, that we need more debate about what these terms mean, e.g. in the context of widening participation. Especially in the postgraduate sector, the term non-traditional is problematic, with such a variety of people and modes of study. She again raised the fundamental problem with the recent HEFCE report on research degree completions, that it treats its own methodology as purely descriptive and unambiguously representative of reality, such that it is not a matter of debate. But it is questionable. It portrays funded full-time students as completing in a more timely schedule, implying that other sorts of student may not be worth supporting because they are less timely, reinforcing the view of the former, the traditional, as being the “norm”, as if their relative success (with the additional support they have) means they deserve yet more. This tendency goes as far as prejudicing the range of suitable subjects, i.e. “safe” subjects may be favoured if other “non-traditional” ones are perceived as risking variation in completion schedules, especially where the students are “non-traditional”.

On the skills training framework, David argued that there is a problem of a tick-box approach, especially alongside an assumption, or expediency, of a one-size-fits-all programme. Discussion on this point found support for provision being enhanced with options for students doing work, and even being assessed, as a way to cater for different needs, needs which would determine the nature of that work they could do, and needs which may not be met by an attendance based scheme where presenters would have to make assumptions about the needs of their audience. This is where the relatively new approaches to learning and pedagogy for research training for doctoral studies, including personal development planning, logs and portfolios, are on the right lines. That said, there may be need for introduction of criteria of successful work under these approaches, in order that they may serve their purpose well. For instance, is the personalized learning agenda contradictory in that it leads to more individualization, yet in the context of other moves towards more collaborative forms of study? Will these lead to better forms of doctoral practice and lead to better forms of academic practice in the university? Issues around the research training agenda are raised in more depth in later work (Gough & Denicolo 2007, in their SRHE Guide). David argued that there needs to be more research into the secret world of the *viva-voce* exam, certainly from the point of view of training frameworks providing preparation for it.

On cue, the gathering on 21 October 2005, “**Examining PhDs**”, was led by Penny Tinkler, of University of Manchester, and Carolyn Jackson, of Lancaster University. Their presentation was informed by interview and questionnaire data from several of their research projects undertaken over the last 5 years on the doctoral examination process. They considered the purposes of the doctoral viva as a prelude to focussing

upon agenda setting for the viva, including consideration of thorny questions such as when and how to release a recommended outcome. They considered strategies currently being used to monitor PhD *viva-voce* examinations, through examiners' and candidates' experiences of, and views about, respectively, independent chairs and audio recording. One of the main outcomes of this work is simply the raising of awareness about the previously relatively hidden variety of practice across the UK HE sector, for instance whether or not the candidate has to pass the *viva-voce* in addition to their dissertation. Discussion considered especially the matter of fairness in assessment and the place of a non-examiner chairing the *viva* or recording the conversation, with the respective resource implications. The important issues are summarised well in the presenters' own writing up of the area (Jackson & Tinkler 2007, in their SRHE Guide).

Following soon afterwards, on 2 December 2005, Richard Young led a presentation on "**Making research accessible: student issues and strategies for inclusion**", reporting on the PREMIA project, a HEFCE funded national initiative, led by his colleague Val Farrar, at Newcastle University. Disabled graduates are proportionately less likely to enter research education than their non-disabled peers. But, as the numbers of disabled students grows at undergraduate level, then those wishing to move on to postgraduate research education will increase. The project posed the question what are the barriers to entry, completion and successful transition to appropriate employment. The project had worked since 2003 with disabled students across the UK on a range of postgraduate research programmes to identify key issues. Using their experiences, the team analysed the factors within the research environment and culture which can make research education inaccessible. The issues range from exclusive pre-entry information, disabled graduates' self-image, the selection process, inaccessible induction programmes to the difficulties in acquisition and confident use of research language, barriers to informal and incidental learning, the management of research and adjustments to the *viva*. The project developed staff and student resources to address the issues and the students contributed to the materials, informing the content and using their own coping strategies and experience to illustrate best practice. The presentation addressed disabled students' participation rates and destinations, the added value of disability, the effects on supervisory practice and the on-line staff resources which have been designed by the team. Those resources include some disabled student strategies for managing research, one manifestation being a multifaceted website: <http://www.premia.ac.uk/> It provides useful general resources on research study for those without disabilities too. The project leaders have subsequently written up the main issues in hard copy form (Farrar & Young 2007, in their SRHE Guide).

There was a further session held in 2005, on 5 May, when Howard Green from Staffordshire University and Stuart Powell from Hertfordshire University, supported by Jim Ewing, General Secretary of the National Postgraduate Committee, provided an overview of "**Institutional challenges to doctoral education in the UK**". The workshop comprised an interactive discussion

format throughout. Green posed the question whether there is to be a new implicit 2-tier structure, in other words, due mainly to HEFCE allocated funding planned to go only to depts with RAE rating 4+, alongside Roberts funding being attached to Research Council funded researchers. Powell posed the general discussion questions whether such a structure would matter and how HEIs could then deal with it. Ewing emphasised that what matters is that there always has been variable research student experience over the whole sector, in post- vs pre-92 HEIs, in high vs low rated departments, and variety in other ways.

Discussion drew out various points. The relevant two-tier structure is not so much a matter of post- vs pre-92 HEIs but one arising between one subject and another in an HEI as well, for instance, will RAE low rated department students not be allowed to have the same entitlements as higher rated departments? or will departments with good research degree programmes but with low RAE rating be forced to become teaching only (and only undergraduate at that)? The future of stipends (especially those awarded by HEIs) might be that levels of funding offered to potential students would become more variable according to market fluctuations, with a knock-on effect on recruitment. Yet the Government wants to see more home postgraduate researchers, to maintain capacity, a capacity which would then be threatened in certain subjects by the effects of two tiers. Furthermore, academics are retiring in greater numbers, coupled with there being less funding for those remaining to cater as supervisors in those areas with rising postgraduate numbers.

The presenters introduced for discussion another development, the increasing diversity of doctoral awards: three year PhD, PhD by publication, four year "new route" PhD (which has plenty of taught provision throughout programme), the practice based PhD, professional doctorates. The three year original route will now be supplemented by Roberts funded development provision, so one discussion question concerns the difference in content from the "new route" PhD. How will innovations, such as personal development profiling, e-submission of theses, and other issues from the QAA Code of Practice affect the award? And how will the diversity within the student population be affected? This provoked a lively debate especially about funding, the diversity of awards and the diversity of the student population.

The *International Journal of Graduate Education* was launched with appropriate fanfare in the form of the conference, "Research Ethics and Postgraduate Training: Issues & Challenges", at Edge Hill University on 29 September 2006. Earlier in the year, on 23 May, the SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network ran one of its own sessions, turning out to be a complementary event emphasising the importance of the area as an avenue for enquiry, "**Governance and Ownership of Ethics in Research**". This earlier event, implicitly and more modestly at least, promoted the themes advertised at the September conference. The particular contribution of the SRHE event was, on top of this, to introduce the problems of ethics in postgraduate programmes, relatively speaking, from the perspective of university based *science* research.

John Gibbins, Director of Postgraduate Skills Development at Newcastle University and sometime historiographer of John Grote and author of several works on theory and organisation of knowledge and contemporary value change, opened our eyes and ears to a Foucauldian take on the governance of scientific professional practice. (See the ppt file alongside this one in the Archive section of the web page, 'Governance and Research Ethics: DR JOHN GIBBINS'.) His central stance is that scientists and other researchers need to take ownership of, and with that responsibility for, the ethical problems that arise. Discussants learnt that ethics, the development of moral awareness in practitioners, and governance, the managerial concern to reduce risk of harm, procedurally are becoming increasingly central to contemporary postgraduate training and practice. We learnt in general terms about both the political and the ontological reasons for this heightened profile, which highlight the tensions between governance and ethical approaches to regulation. Governance will play a minimal role in research in many subject areas, which is for the best, but in other areas, such as Medicine and Health research, governance is indispensable, to protect researchers and participants from unnecessary harm as well as to facilitate good research.

The ownership model is a strong approach for reconciling these tensions and achieving heightened professionalism, for purposes of ensuring that our research is ethical and not just paying lipservice by minimal compliance with governance and its codes of practice. Things owned, whether individually or collectively, tend to be valued more and cared for better, require less enforcement and encourage better practice. Several facilities allow governance and professional autonomy to reside together and promote each others' missions: research ethics training and personal development planning for all stakeholders to research, promoting ownership; "ethical release" before "ethical approval"; regular briefings and updating sessions embedding good practice and revealing unfolding agendas; prioritising negotiation techniques with stakeholders to achieve informed consent more agreeably; creating efficient procedures to ensure ethical funding and sponsorship of research; creating and managing procedures to defend Freedom of Information and Academic Freedom, to protect the rights of all stakeholders; ensuring a balance of rights and duties between all stakeholders in all codes, policies and procedures.

Althea Allison, Manager of the Office for Research Ethics Committees (RECs) covering the Thames Valley, Hampshire and Isle of Wight areas, continued with a contrasting focus on National health Service (NHS) specific research. (See the ppt file alongside this one in the Archive section of the web page, 'Applying to an NHS Research Ethics Committee: Dr Althea Allison'.) The regional RECs are linked through the Central Office of Research Ethics Committees: <http://www.corec.org.uk/> Allison's main aim was to demystify the process of submitting an application for ethical review and remove misconceptions about the expectations of RECs in the NHS. She sought to influence researchers to seek early advice regarding their applications and explain why this is important, acquaint researchers with the process and documentation required in making an

application to an NHS REC and where to find on-line guidance to support the application, share with researchers the common areas of concern for RECs, familiarise researchers in ways to avoid common errors and omissions, and explain the distinction between the responsibilities of RECs and of research and development (R&D).

Her area of concern relates to the requirements around ethical approval and she emphasised that this is a separate procedure to governance arrangements for conducting research understood as a more general practice, which fall under the remit of colleagues in NHS R&D departments and/or Universities. That said, all research on human beings which falls under GAfREC 3.1 (Governance Arrangements for Research Ethics Committees, Department of Health, July 2001) must be given a favourable ethical opinion from an NHS REC, so the ethics approval process is a function of the overall governance framework. Depending on the scope and nature of the work, different legislative considerations may have to be satisfied (such as indemnity arrangements) but, essentially, the REC is seeking to review more specifically the ethical issues within the research. She was also able to provide a brief update with the current position on the Consultation Process following the Review of NHS RECs (Warner Review).

The explanation of the procedures, explained by Allison in some detail, focused minds on the day-to-day situation of both practitioners in Health areas and also on academic concerns. Just considering the sheer bureaucracy is quite stifling. RECs comprise a group of eighteen lay and expert members, who have to spend many hours trawling through research proposals. Submitters can expect the consideration to take up to sixty days, with a period of time to propose and consider amendments after that. Not surprisingly, discussion with the workshop participants focused on the bureaucracy, particularly in the form of strong concerns from Masters dissertation tutors, in the context of the short time students have for formulating and then completing and writing up their research projects, and from health related social science researchers, who until recently had been able to work outside the strictures of governance of science research, such that their tried and tested research methods have now been called into question.

All of this did serve to focus discussion towards the pedagogical need for a more integrative model for the relation of ethical requirements and research practice. The pedagogy of research needs to encompass all these procedural elements, rather than treat them as additional management procedures bolted on to supervision of the research idea and its execution. Easing the time delay is going to be a priority for all applicants to conduct research and so there is incentive for enhancing communities of research practice, in order to share wisdom of setting up projects within an ethical framework. Knowing how to become a researcher means developing an ethical consciousness. At the same time, both academic supervisors and bureaucrats of the ethics approval industry do need to make a priority the smooth organisation of Masters dissertation projects and not let the pursuit of truth fall by the wayside of governance's procedural convenience.

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