Response ID ANON-N51B-UQBT-J

Submitted to New Deal for Postgraduate Research - Call for input
Submitted on 2022-05-17 17:52:17

General guidance

Section one: goals of postgraduate research training

1 What should be the goals for contemporary postgraduate research training?

Please provide details on what you think goals for contemporary postgraduate research training should be:

To enable PGRs to produce excellent research.

To combine allowing sufficient time to focus on research and outputs with relevant, targeted training.

To offer appropriate support, recognising the particular challenges of postgraduate study.

To offer training in teaching and other areas relevant to postgraduate study.

To enable interdisciplinary and creative work as appropriate.

To promote a sense of academic community and wellbeing.

To offer career development and transferable skills, providing tangible pathways to careers (not necessarily just in academia).

To offer career opportunities, such as placements and internships, as appropriate.

To be accessible to people from varied socioeconomic backgrounds and contexts.

Section two: Areas of focus

Models and access

2 Are there any additional areas that we should explore under models and access? Please state why.

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.:

Length of funding:
*The move to fund PhD students for 4 years rather than 3 is very welcome. 3-year funding models are poorly constructed for all students. The model according to which students are funded for 3 years but it is regularly assumed that they will need a 4th, continuation, year, is problematic for all students, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds. This was felt by postgraduates generally to be a significant problem, and a clear barrier to access. Extending funding to 4 years would also allow for the current demands of the job market to publish and teach alongside the PhD and support other skills development activities.

Models:
*Would there be greater scope to support PhDs collaboratively with (e.g.) the charitable sector as well as industry? This may bring in students from more diverse backgrounds who also have relevant prior experience. This would need to be combined with appropriate support and management of the partnerships to ensure both student and partners achieve their aims.
*Internship possibilities, both within and without academia, would be welcomed when relevant, and may also promote diversity. Appropriate support would also be needed (see above).
*Explore PhD by publication portfolio model.

Post-PhD:
*Funded postdoctoral periods to enable recent PhD graduates to work on publications and develop CVs in order to compete in the very difficult job market would be particularly welcome.

3 What challenges should we prioritise under models and access?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.:

*Funding for four year PhDs and postdoctoral bursaries/fellowships (see above).

*Support and models to diversify cohort, for example, 'mature', or part-time students who may wish to work through their PhD (e.g. in a charity etc) or students with caring responsibilities.

*Opening PhD study out to professionals through professional doctorates.

*Tailored training for the PhD, for example to undertake participatory, co-produced or interdisciplinary research (see below).

*Explore models which encourage a sense of academic community and wellbeing. Providing pastoral and professional support in addition to PhD supervision. This can be especially important for Interdisciplinary PhD students, students undertaking their PhDs online / remotely or students whose research engages with 'deeply distressing materials' or 'ethical issues'. This may take the form of forums of support, co-mentoring, networks etc.

*Creating tangible pathways to first jobs, within or beyond academia.

*Providing opportunities to develop skills and experience which are directly relevant to the job market and support to communicate those relevant skills outside academia and identify areas of opportunity.

*Creating realistic expectations: as well as preparation for the job market, realistic engagement is needed with the difficulty and significant sacrifice entailed in entering academia. The highly competitive job market makes getting academic jobs very challenging. In addition, many early career appointments are temporary; some are also part-time. They are not typically well paid. Short term contracts and precarity lead to financial instability, are highly stressful and interfere significantly with other aspects of life, such as stability of location or having a family.

*More clarity on merits of different models of training and/or supervision: we know a number of different approaches to/experiments with models of supervision exist, and sharing of good practice, evidence of what has been successful and the implications of different approaches (including access) would be very helpful.

Routes in, through and out

4 Are there any additional areas that we should explore under routes in, through and out of postgraduate research? Please state why.

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.:

Routes in:

*See previous answer above: it is important to diversify the PhD student cohort and recruit students who have work/life experience in other sectors. This will enhance the experience of students in CDTs and the academy more widely and widen expectations of future career options.

*Reconfigure perceptions of postgraduate training as route to an academic career and develop opportunities that open out options outside academia.

Routes through:

*Align training with career opportunities and include opportunities to gain experience outside academia; encourage research supervisors to promote and support these.

*Training needs to be flexible and tailored to the individual. For instance, institutions such as BT Archives now provide their PhD CDA students with training on how to use metadata. This is an excellent innovation because it allows people to retrain as archivists and/ or to use these transferable skills in digital humanities/ digital sector roles. However, these skills are not universally needed. For example, one early career researcher in the Arts needed to do extra training and apply for extra funding during her PhD studies to learn British Sign Language. In this case, to have also had to do other, less relevant training would have been highly stressful.

*Interdisciplinary methods training: Given the current policy emphasis on interdisciplinary working, training is needed not simply in how to succeed in an interdisciplinary career, but also in specific methods/research practices that doctoral students might taking up without training at BA/MA level. For example, it may be important to address the trend for Humanities researchers to engage with Social Science methodologies, such as interviews or focus groups: these methods require specific training provision, particularly important given the sensitivity of potential research topics and the danger of damage or distress for participants if interviews and focus groups are not conducted thoughtfully and appropriately.

*Co-produced research training: researchers are increasingly encouraged to work in engaged/participatory/co-produced ways - however there is rarely any specific training in these methods, which are often highly specialised and often carry particular risks or challenges. In addition, supervisors often don't have expertise in these ways of working and so aren't able to offer adequate support and advice in this area; particular sources of support are needed for these students.

*Dedicated mentorship apart from PhD supervision. Students need advice and support in applying for jobs, understanding what extra work to take on, submitting their first articles and books, etc. Some receive much of this support through informal friendships and generous support from senior academics but it needs to be formalised so that it is accessible for all.

*Emotional or pastoral support provision particularly in contexts where the student is engaging with distressing material or undertaking research on lived experience.

*Mentorship schemes with a more advanced PhD student might help guide newer PhD students and provide valuable experience for the mentor.

Routes out:

*Set in place structures that enable students, working with supervisors and (if possible) external mentors, to develop and identify skills gained in the

course of postgraduate studies which are transferable to other contexts.

*Explore models which support more contact and networking opportunities for the PhD student with permanent staff beyond their supervisors to support professional development.

*Provide graduates with support relating to and information about employment, both within and beyond academia, both in relation to navigating the very difficult job markets in academia, and to other careers.

*Institutional affiliation is invaluable. The extreme administrative demands resulting from repeatedly changing University accounts/ email addresses are not appreciated. In a worse-case scenario this can result in losing library access and being unable to continue research. Constant, low-level stress results from administration, for example, repeated requirement to update accounts because so many portals are needed (e.g. ResearchFish, Orcid, PMCID, etc).

5 What challenges should we prioritise under routes in, through and out?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.:

Routes in:

*Diversification: see above.

*Attention needs to be given to the ethics of recruitment where there are so few job prospects in academia for graduates.

Routes through:

*Tailored training, including for interdisciplinary and co-produced research: see above.

*Facilities: In addition to individual studentships, institutions need to put funding into facilities for PhD students. We know that statistics on depression in PhD students are very bad (https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-03761-3#:~:text=Overall%2C%2071%25%20of%20PhD%20students,reported%20some%20level%20of%20anxiety) and that strong community support can help mitigate these issues. For this reason, Universities need to provide PhD students with offices and communal space to allow them to form connections with peers. These kinds of genuine friendships can sustain people through their PhD and ECR journeys.

Routes out:

*The period immediately following completion of a PhD, when funding has ended but graduates don't yet have jobs because of the challenges of the job market needs attention. Are there ways in which recent postgraduates/early career researchers could be supported so that this period of transition is less difficult?

*Consider ways to prepare candidates for intense competition in non-academic careers ensuring that the PhD is not seen as making a potential job candidate 'over-qualified' for other careers.

Rights and conditions

6 Are there any additional areas that we should consider in our work on rights and conditions? Please state why.

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.:

*How can we ensure students recruited have opportunities in the market? Scarcity of jobs and cuts to pensions may mean recruiting fewer students, but investing more in those recruited.

*Funding opportunities are currently considerably more limited for international students than for UK students. For international Master's students hoping to stay in the UK most funding schemes are not available. Some funding schemes cover UK fees, but not international fees, meaning that the student has to cover the remaining fees – often a very significant sum. More funding for international students is acutely needed, and fee reduction schemes/scholarships directed to international students who have completed Masters degrees at UK universities. Inconsistencies with UKVI and university standards for recognising student status also need to be addressed (the PhD stipend ends with submission, but international students are still limited to 20 hours work/week).

*Finding a job after completing a postgraduate degree program can be a particularly pressing concern for international students whose visas may depend on employment; those completing Masters degrees have even less time than PhD students to find a job. International postgraduates require clear, timely and tailored information and support relating to their status.

7 What challenges should we prioritise in our work on rights and conditions?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.:

*The health (mental and physical) and wellbeing of postgraduate students should be an immediate priority. These may be very considerably and detrimentally affected by the challenges and isolation of postgraduate studies and, particularly following completion of graduate studies, stress created by financial challenges, conditions of precarity and instability, competition for jobs and the difficulties of short-term contracts and/or periods of unemployment.

*There is a need for students to aware of their right to 10 days CPD a year under the Concordat.

*We assume this consultation speaks to the debate over making PGRs employees, which we know would have significant negative implications, but some granular examples/evidence of the specific problems would be very helpful in making that case, as would thoughts about and examples of what else might be done to improve PGRs' positions and address the underlying concerns which give rise to this proposal.

Funding and financial support

8 Are there any additional areas that we should explore in our work on funding and financial support?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.:

*Funded early career fellowships. For example, one-year ECR research fellowships have enabled recent graduates of PhD programmes to work on monographs/publications rather than being absorbed by multiple short-term teaching contracts. They are then prepared to apply for jobs with stronger CVs.

*See earlier response regarding support for extending funding to 4 years to more honestly reflect the time input expected and to allow time for career and skills development opportunities.

9 What challenges should we prioritise in our work on funding and financial support?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.:

*A particular challenge is to address what comes after the PhD, and how to prepare postgraduates for this, both through career development and offering interim funding following the PhD, including funding early career fellowships.

*Sustainability of financial support and the financial challenges facing universities: we would like to be in a position to make a strong case about sustainability and the implications of current funding imbalances for PGRs.

Overall approach

10 Are there any areas that we could usefully focus on, or other questions that we should explore, not covered within our four focus areas?

Please state why and provide links to evidence where possible.:

11 Do you have any further comments on the New Deal?

Please provide any further comments:

Section three: Future engagement

12 What factors should we consider as we develop our engagement plans for future New Deal work?

Please provide any further comments:

Consider using existing networks as a way to access views such as our Institute for Medical Humanities PG/ECR network or our Northern Network for Medical Humanities PG/ECR Network. [https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/medical-humanities/people/pg-ecr/]

Recognise there is a large and growing cohort of students who are undertaking interdisciplinary PhDs who often have different or additional training and support needs.

Section four: About you or your organisation

13 Are you responding in a personal capacity or on behalf of an organisation or group?

I am responding on behalf of an organisation or group

About your organisation

31 Please state your organisation's or group's name:

Organisation or group name:
Institute for Medical Humanities, Durham University

32 Which of the following best describes your organisation or group?

As a mission group, representative group, union, or other body representing the collective views of its members, A Higher Education Institute (HEI), A research institute

If other, please state:

33 Are you responding:

On behalf of the whole of your organisation

If you are replying on behalf of only part of your organisation, please give details::

34 If your organisation or group is funded to provide postgraduate research, please name your main funder(s):

Main funders:
Wellcome Trust

35 What is your name?

Name:
Evelyn Tehrani

36 What is your email address?

Email:
evelyn.tehrani@durham.ac.uk

37 Would you like to receive email updates on the progress of the New Deal from UK Research and Innovation?

Yes

38 We may publish a list of the individuals, organisations or groups that have responded to this exercise as part of our summary of responses. Please state whether you would like us to:

Publish your organisation's or group's name in the list of respondents