

AUA CONFERENCE 2012
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Student support in postgraduate research student achievement: making the most of a university research environment

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OVERVIEW OF THE SESSION

(5 min)

INTRODUCTION

ACTIVITY 1

(15 min)

Who you are, your role, your affiliation
Say a little about the research degree provision at your institution

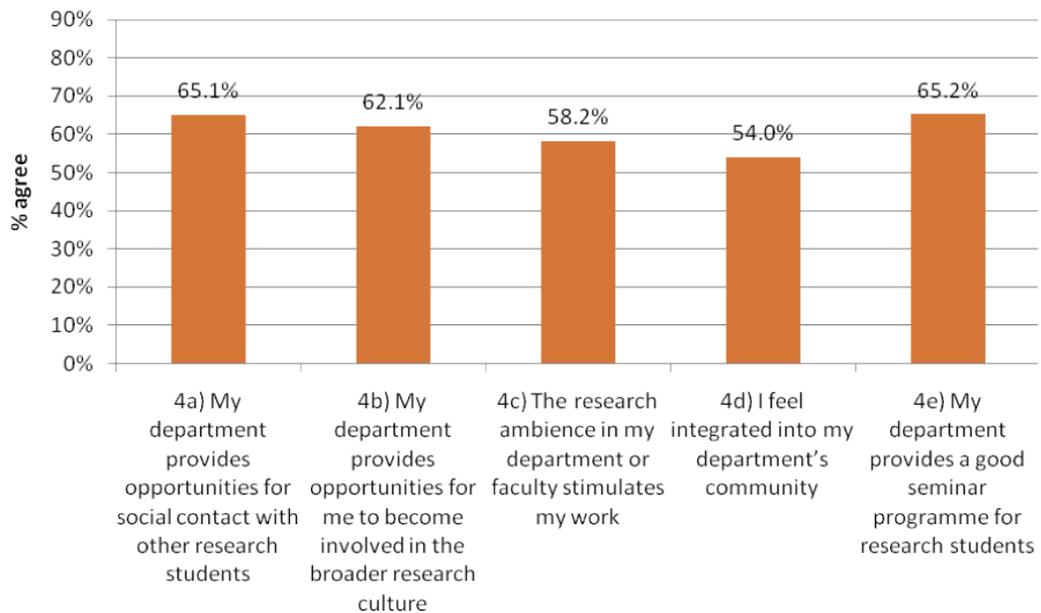
THE INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE (PRES)

The intellectual climate is said to play an important role in successful completions (Park, Hanbury & Kulej, 2007).

PRES: 'The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) is a service made available to all higher education institutions (HEIs) across the UK which have postgraduate research students. PRES is designed to help institutions enhance the quality of postgraduate research (PGR) degree provision by collecting feedback from current PGR students in a systematic and user-friendly way.

PRES takes the form of an online questionnaire that students are asked to complete. It has proved to be a valuable way of collecting information about what PGR students think about their experience. A growing number of HEIs have elected to use it because it provides them with valuable evidence to inform decisions about enhancing the research student experience. The facility for HEIs to benchmark their results against those for the sector aggregate and against benchmarking clubs has been particularly welcomed, as has the focus on enhancement, the lack of league tables and the ability to share effective practice between HEIs'.

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/postgraduate/pres_information_sheet



http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/postgraduate/PRES_2011_report
Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2011: The Intellectual Climate

ACTIVITY 2

(15 min)

How is the intellectual climate fostered in your institution?

How is good practice shared across departments?

How is the equality and diversity agenda implemented?

THE SUPPORT ENVIRONMENT AND THE NATURE OF STUDENT SUPPORT

ACTIVITY 3

(20 min)

How is support for research degree students provided in your institution?

Think about the different sources of support and how well integrated these are?

Is it clear to students how to access the full range of support available?

How is the support to students evaluated?

How is the equality and diversity agenda implemented?

THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

ACTIVITY 4

(15 min)

How does your institution monitor research degree attainment rates?

What comparative data, both internal and external, do you use?

How is the equality and diversity agenda implemented?

SUMMARY

Some concluding remarks:

According to the QAA Code of Practice Section 1 (2004) the environment is all-encompassing:

- supervision
- access to facilities
- providing students sufficient and relevant information related to their studies and their academic environment
- evaluating the success of postgraduate research degree programmes.

Building a supportive environment for a diverse student body is about focusing on the social aspect of support, rather than providing support tailored to the particular needs of individuals (Jacklin and Le Riche 2009).

There is a need for research students to build a sense of community in an attempt to overcome problems of isolation that usually affect the researcher. Johnston (1995) provides practical examples of strategies for building the said community such as networking, organising a series of seminars and a research conference.

According to Taylor and Beasley (2005, p122) there are two archetypal ways in which personal support is organised within an institution. On the one hand it can be 'divorced' from the supervisory role, whereby the support function is fulfilled by a separate entity. On the other hand, support can be the responsibility of supervisors along side their academic duties.

Supervisors have traditionally been at the heart of student support, thus making them 'the meat in the sandwich' (Neumann, 2004).

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ACTIVITY 5

SWOT analysis

(15 min)

Name of institution: _____

	helpful strengths	harmful weaknesses
Internal		
external	opportunities	threats

WHAT THE LITERATURE TELLS US (time permitting)

Key findings arising from the research that I carried out.

Published research linking research student support and the learning experience is still scarce (Leonard, 2006; QAA, 2011). Indeed, Leonard (2006) sets the scene very clearly when she writes that 'research is lacking on student support, with the exception of academic literacy support'. To investigate this assertion, a count of the number of articles published in the journal 'Studies in Higher Education' reveals that only nine articles were dedicated to postgraduate research studies between 2004 and 2011¹. The years 2009 and 2010 combined account for five of the nine articles. All nine articles span a wide range of topics, with no common theme or thread, and with each addressing a specific aspect within the doctoral study cycle, such as supervisor selection and experience (Ives and Rowley, 2005; Lee, 2008); professional doctoral programs (Servage, 2009); or mock viva experience (Hartley and Fox, 2004). Two of these articles report a gap in the literature. Indeed, for Neuman and Rodwell (2009), little attention is paid to part-time students while Lee (2008) notes that her article aims to 'fill the gap' in the literature about doctoral supervision.

In addition, some of the gaps in the literature specifically highlight 'a lack of comprehensive evidence' relating to a student's perspective on the doctoral experience on which policy can be built (Leonard, 2006). Even in 2011 when further research is undertaken on doctoral awards, the information available to prospective students is referred to by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) as 'disparate' (QAA, 2011).

However, student support is of paramount importance. The QAA Code of Practice Section 1 (Postgraduate research programmes) (QAA, 2004) states: 'They [institutions] will wish to assure themselves that they provide appropriate support and guidance to enable research students to complete their programmes...'

WHAT THE LITERATURE TELLS US: EXTRA ACTIVITY

Share any research about research degree student support that has been carried out in your own institutions or that you have come across in the literature?

¹ Volume 36, Issue 2, 2011

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