

# ENHANCING THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL RESEARCHERS KEY MESSAGES

Prepared by

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## OVERVIEW OF THE EVENT

The UofG-UKCGE event, which was inspired by our ESRC-IAA project entitled 'Towards maximising international PhD students' experience in the UK' was held on Tuesday 28th November 2017 at the Teacher Building, Glasgow. The thirty-five delegates were a good mixture of different speakers and delegates who have a sound appreciation and experience of international doctoral researchers in varying capacities, e.g. Doctoral College Manager, Dean of Graduate school, Postgraduate Coordinator, Academic Programme Leader, Graduate School Officer, Researcher Development Officer, Immigration Adviser, Director of Policy and Services, Professors, Associate and Assistant Professors in (Higher) Education and international PGR graduates and learners themselves.

These participants represented:

- University of Glasgow
- University of Edinburgh
- University of York
- University of Liverpool
- Bath Spa University
- Bournemouth University
- Heriot-Watt University
- Imperial College London
- University of the West of England
- University of Sussex
- University of Surrey
- University of Manchester
- Edinburgh Napier University
- University of Stirling
- Robert Gordon University
- University of Derby
- University of Bristol
- UK Council for International Student Affairs
- UK Council for Graduate Education
- Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities

Based on the research team's facilitated group discussions throughout the day, this document contains the synthesised messages obtained from the discussions on:

- 1) Guidelines for supervisors to enhance international PGR learners experience.
- 2) Guidelines for international doctoral researchers to enhance their own experience.
- 3) Guidelines for research training managers or research development coordinators to enhance international PGR learners experience.
- 4) Suitable HE institutional-level provisions and role of other UK organisations in supporting HEIs in their efforts.

These messages, which were generated with a view to enhancing the experience of international doctoral researchers, highlighted how crucial are such values as openness, collaboration and inclusivity in the process. Additionally, it conveys very strongly that these key messages for supervisors, international doctoral researchers, researcher training managers or research

development coordinators, as well as to the institutions and other key organisations are designed to benefit all doctoral researchers - local and international alike.

## COLLATED KEY THEMES

### KEY MESSAGES FOR SUPERVISORS (\*CONSIDERED THE MOST IMPORTANT)

#### Getting to know the doctoral researcher with a view to tailoring support provision

- \*Consider that effective support provision needs to take into account different cultural backgrounds.
- Endeavour to have prior contact with the doctoral researcher at the application stage.
- Get to know the PGR learners well – beyond their CV information – in order to build healthy relationships.
- Manage PGR learners' 'transition' with sensitivity; for example, ascertain how cultural 'distance' impacts on their transition.
- Assist PGR learners in deciding if courses offered are relevant to them.
- Help identify doctoral researchers' required skills (e.g. language, subject expertise) with an eye on their career development and destinations.
- Consider supervisory contexts, e.g. 'isolated' lone scholars vs those who work regularly with their supervisors in the laboratory; individual vs multi-disciplinary supervisory development.

#### Supervisors' partnership in developing international doctoral researchers

- \*From the beginning of the PhD, establish a learning alliance towards a shared goal, i.e. successful PhD completion.
- Encourage and support the development of the PGR learners' skills.
- Use online tool in effectively managing, tracking and communicating doctoral learners' progress (e.g. Bristol University's STaR).
- Help PGR learners to recognise the value of their work and responsibility for their progress and development from the very beginning.
- Encourage open discussion with doctoral researchers throughout the research journey – this itself is a crucial form of support.
- Involving PGR learners in supervisors' research and introducing opportunities to help widen their overall learning and development.
- Remember that supervisors' guidance may involve telling 'hard' truths but with sensitivity and essential support.

#### Clarity of supervisors' and researchers' expectations and institutional procedures

- \*Set expectations (including explanations and clarifications), that can serve as a 'contract' with PGR learners.
- \*Aim for clarity of deadlines, i.e. what is due each year, overview of processes and distinguishing what is needed and what is critical.

- \*Discuss academic cultures, e.g. how to address feedback received, what the PGR processes entail, expectations of supervisors and researchers, use of supervisor's first names or their titles, the role of indigenous knowledge when conducting research.
- Clarify differing expectations and doctoral researchers' future goals by explaining institutional standards.
- Record 'grievance' and unsatisfactory progress, if needed.
- Ensure there is an auditing mechanism to encourage regular contact and that supervisory and other meetings are recorded.

### **Guiding access to key sources of information and advice**

- Attend annual inductions to keep abreast of PGR progress and development.
- Know and advise PGR learners to contact staff members who can address their specific needs (e.g. visa, accommodation).
- Keep a record of IT and other university services.
- Recommend seminars, workshops and courses to PGR learners.

### **Informal support concerning international PGR learners' non-academic needs**

- \*Help address PGR learners' feeling of isolation.
- Consider international PGR learners' adjustment challenges.
- Promote research culture and PGR community development by organising or taking part in cultural activities, which help build a supportive community among (both local and) international PGR learners.
- Assist with other forms of support, e.g. pair PGR learners with an international peer mentor (or buddy).
- Endeavour to help create multiple layers of relationships and ways to support international PGR learners.

### **Harnessing international doctoral learners' contribution**

- Engage in open discussions with international PGR learners.
- Recognise PGR learners' expertise and prior experience.
- Make a genuine effort to get to know the learner, the real person, their strengths (e.g. previous work and publishing experience).
- Be open to the amazing and eye-opening experience that intercultural interaction with PGR learners can bring forth.

### **Reflecting on the support that supervisors themselves need**

- \*Stress the importance of peer and professional development.
- \*Possibility for induction with supervisors on a one-to-one basis, if necessary. An alternative could be a handbook for supervisors informed by the questions typically raised by the PGR learners.
- Value training designed for supervisors to enhance capacity for PGR supervision.

- Novice supervisors to be given an opportunity to observe expert PGR supervision.

## KEY MESSAGES FOR INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL RESEARCHERS (\*CONSIDERED THE MOST IMPORTANT)

### Take control of your own journey as an international doctoral researcher

- Aim to have prior contact with the supervisor(s) at the application stage.
- Map out expectations, stay organised and manage individual needs.
- Be open-minded and receptive to various forms of learning opportunities (formal and informal).
- Explore available resources and the range of support available in the university, e.g. induction, courses, seminars, PGR website.
- Assess one's writing style and other needs; participate in specific courses, e.g. language support, living in the UK, critical thinking, as appropriate.
- Be clear on the differences between written and oral communication. Be open to adapt 'learned' English into 'real', practical, colloquial English as well as to academic English.
- Engage actively in ongoing academic reading and writing.
- Be proactive in obtaining useful information, e.g. rented accommodation.

### Be strategic in transitioning to a new academic environment

- Avail oneself of a pre-arrival seminar (if available) as it helps in planning for cultural and academic transitions.
- Manage workload overload in the beginning by seeking to understand practical matters, e.g. opening a bank account, familiarising oneself with the new environment including naming 'new' fruits and vegetables, learning unfamiliar abbreviations, colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions.
- Consider that being an extrovert is regarded a helpful trait to develop.
- Be culturally aware in the broader context, including of the host culture and of cultures represented by other staff members and PGRs.

### Recognise the multiple benefits from socialisation and cross-cultural integration

- \*Aim for cross-cultural integration (UK peers can play a crucial role).
- Be part of different PGR networks, e.g. online and face-to-face.
- Go beyond befriending students from one's own culture/context.
- Find ways to interact with local students and/or local people.
- Participate in activities that promote socialisation or develop a hobby with other students and researchers – both local and international (football, bowling, organised lunches and dinners, a drink).

### Participate in various schemes organised at school, college or university level

- \*Funded-students should act as university ambassadors, e.g. student unions for PGRs or PGTs.
- \*Be involved in serving as PhD or country representatives.
- Participate in student-run conferences with institutional funding support.

- Volunteer for committee roles since running events lends opportunities for interaction with people.
- Engage and benefit from peer mentoring and buddy system pairing local and international learners.

## KEY MESSAGES FOR RESEARCH TRAINING MANAGERS OR RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT COORDINATORS (\*CONSIDERED THE MOST IMPORTANT)

### Cultivating greater cultural awareness

- \*Raise cultural awareness of the trainers, coordinators and supervisors.
- Consider giving PGR learners space for different activities.
- Guide PGR learners on the best way of spending their doctoral time.
- Raise awareness of other people's perspectives in all events through mixing and mingling.
- Stress the importance of multicultural integrity and diplomacy (e.g. Global Challenge Research Funded projects).

### Making resources more readily accessible for staff and PGR learners

- \*Ensure provision of accessible staff and materials.
- Offer well-signposted online information, materials and websites about the provision, training availability and advice on specific issues.
- Organise accessible and staggered inductions to cater adequately for PGR needs throughout the year.
- Consider using the virtual learning environment to communicate with PGR learners and track their progress.
- Consider providing parallel platforms, e.g. face-to-face and online or blended provision as part of the institution's long-term investment.

### Offering tailored provision for local and international PGR learners

- Help understand the links between different university support services.
- Consider giving not only academic but practical support for international PGR learners.
- Effective scaffolding for development takes into account different starting points (basic, intermediate, advanced) among learners.
- Give more specific/localised training that is aligned with PGR needs.
- In terms of researcher development, training has to do with effective research, with tailored one-to-one meetings, if required.
- Coordinate with different departments to deliver effective research training that is pitched at the right level.

### Promoting an active, diverse and inclusive PGR experience

- \*Offer programmes, courses, and seminars with inclusivity checks.
- Arrange inclusive events taking into account careful timing of events.

- Run an inclusion management workshop, e.g. managing diversity of views, intercultural supervision, cross-cultural learning process.
- Be sensitive to the needs of various learners, e.g. family responsibilities, religious needs. Timings of events, e.g. evenings, weekends need to consider part-time or working PGRs.
- Raise awareness and dissemination of wider training offerings to all PGRs, e.g. local, international, part-time and working doctoral researchers.
- Consider collaborating with other institutions to create cross-institutional international student events.

### **Supporting supervisors to enhance PGR supervision (local and international)**

- Support supervisors by providing them with standard principles of effective PGR supervision irrespective of disciplines.
- Provide a handbook for supervisors comprising useful information, e.g. graduate handbook, doctoral researchers' development.
- Consider whether organising training provision for supervisors is more effective at School or wider level.
- Consider whether a bottom-up approach or a top-down approach is more appropriate in coordinating supervisor training.
- Organise ways of conducting 'impact measurement' of doctoral researchers' experience of supervision.
- Identify excellent/worthy practices, e.g. when inviting external speakers for thesis bootcamps, arrange the mechanisms to assess impact. Claims are then backed by data.
- Advance cultural orientations of supervisors to their new international learners through publication of a 'tourist' guide booklet for academics as well as further training and guidance concerning supervising international doctoral researchers.
- Encourage role-playing in a supervisory setting and use this in providing useful feedback to supervisors.

### **Engaging and international PGR researchers in various schemes**

- \*Organise student-led PGR inductions.
- \*Create a Doctoral Society founded by PGR learners themselves. This can be a project that is collaborative and promotes student involvement in extra-curricular activities where social media help facilitate information sharing. (Forming research associations requires pump-priming).
- Think about how to engage more participants as it can be a struggle to have PGR learners attend the training sessions; encourage everyone to value taking part in the training provision because they want to learn.
- Consider facilitating PGR-led seminars.
- Organise buddy sessions and mentoring schemes among PGR learners.
- Consider arranging informal mentoring between staff (post-doctoral) and PGR learners.

## KEY MESSAGES FOR THE INSTITUTIONS AND BEYOND (\*CONSIDERED THE MOST IMPORTANT)

### Clarity over institutional services, regulations and procedures for all PGRs

- \*Clear information dissemination at School, College and University levels.
- \*Executing common standards and opportunities for inclusion and involvement (e.g. GTA, RA) for all PGR learners.
- Provide career-focused guidance for all PGR learners to assist post-doctoral career development.
- Ensure adequate funding support for doctoral researchers' participation in conferences and research methods workshops.
- Make PGRs aware of support services, e.g. hardship funds.
- Consistency and transparency over printing costs and other hidden fees affecting PGR learners.

### Campaign to improve all PGRs' and supervisors' experience in general

- Practise inclusivity as an underpinning principle in improving all PGR learners' overall experience.
- Promote the importance of the relationship between supervisors and PGR learners at all levels.
- Support an efficient allocation of labour to clarify the PGR framework, structure guiding PGR courses, workshops and training provision.
- Ensure communal space provision to encourage communication, networking, support, discovery and friendship among PGR learners, post-docs and staff members.
- Continued investment for better experience among PGRs, post-docs, and supervisors. This can be centralised or situated within the Centre for Doctoral Training that are also linked to faculties.
- Support the campaign to facilitate PGR learners' experience via mentoring schemes; pairing up international learners with local learners who might be able to provide assistance, e.g. getting around, setting up a bank account, GP registration.
- Widening local students' awareness of the challenges facing international students while encouraging them to maximise the benefits of intercultural interaction with them.

### Address concerns specifically affecting international doctoral researchers

- \*Proactively address typical challenges facing all PGRs, particularly international learners, e.g. space, comfort, wellbeing, sense of isolation, identified difficulty in finding opportunities to interact with local people.
- Better information, support and communication before international PGRs' arrival (e.g. accommodation) and ongoing holistic consideration of PGR learners' needs (e.g. student visa, external institutional sponsorship). Visa matters often lead to additional costs but also to learning disruption.
- To assist transition, PGRs are given an 'information pack' with useful information concerning transport, safety, weather, expectations, language learning curve, activities (outdoor, 'non-pub' life, societies for postgraduate learners), distinct cultural characteristics of the host country. Preparing a brochure on what awaits international PGR learners is a good example.



- Collect, distil and package student experiences via student blog/FAQ/wiki on School's website to complement official institutional induction.
- Consider putting in place additional institutional provision or structures based on discussion with all doctoral researchers, e.g. PGR fellowships.
- Immigration schemes for post-PhD and institutional support/sponsorship.
- Organise trips and activities to cater for the needs of international and local PGR learners and their families.

### **Share examples of excellent practice within and out with the institution**

- Sharing best practice on PhD development across institutions.
- Promote useful links and available information from relevant websites, particularly UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) with respect to training courses and tailored advice for staff and international PGRs, e.g. doctoral period extension.
- Demonstrate through available provision and support that all PGR learners are getting good value for money.
- Reflect on addressing issues more strategically, e.g. changing ways of thinking or resolving issues with minor adjustments in the use of resources.

### **Set up mechanisms to capture (both local and) international PGRs' voice**

- \*Proactive communication with all PGR applicants.
- Current lack of data about international students requires further analysis of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and International Student Barometer data. Further analysis of this data will enable identification of international PGR learners' most crucial needs.
- Practise prevention rather than cure. This entails listening to PGRs' needs, e.g. most useful and least helpful types of feedback. One possibility is to set up a unit of research for PGRs, post-doc and supervisors and conduct needs analysis periodically to gauge each cohort's needs.
- Provide space for sharing personal and professional stories, including staff and PGRs to show diversities of journeys, i.e. how they got to the university, and make this publicly available.

### **Working with relevant UK organisations**

- Capitalise on HEI links by providing information and possibly introducing activities in conjunction with UK organisations, e.g. Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Higher Education Academy (HEA), UKCISA, the British Council.
- Discussions with HEA might lead to a better appreciation of issues facing both local and international PGR learners raised through PRES data.
- QAA can play a key role in setting practice benchmarks for all international learners.
- National Union of Students (NUS) may consider paying greater attention to the research experience of international research students.
- Increase PGRs participation in UK-wide organised events (e.g. those organised by UKCGE) by offering reduced rates.