

Response from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

Royal
Geographical
Society

with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning

● Review of the UK Social Science PhD - a major examination of the future capabilities needed by social science graduates

1. In your view, how well do UK social science doctoral programmes equip students with the skills needed for their future careers? How competitive are they internationally?

We recognise and support the significant advances that the ESRC has made in the last decade, both in terms of the structure and provision of doctoral training, and in the move towards a more professional PhD that emphasises training throughout the programme. This is consistent with producing social scientists qualified to an advanced level who are well positioned to pursue a variety of career paths (more on this below). It also embeds a commitment to continuing professional development.

Retaining discipline specific flexibility is important. Here we respond with respect to geography.

The relative shortness of the UK PhD remains an issue. Overseas PhD programmes, notably in N. America, give more time – a four-year PhD, often after a two-year Master's. This longer period of training enables students to be more deeply immersed in relevant literatures and methods and for more time to be devoted to developing and undertaking research. Many in the UK still complete a PhD without a publication. Many lack teaching experience. They are also disadvantaged by the time to build multi-disciplinary networks and lack of skills training. This reduces their competitiveness upon graduation. The UK PhD has assumed progression to regular post-doc opportunities for further development, but opportunities for these are limited.

Fees are the main barrier to international PhDs in the UK; this cumulative absence of voices from beyond the UK diminishes every discipline. We welcome recent announcements that up to 30% of DTP studentships can be awarded to international students. We encourage ESRC to continue to support overseas graduates to enter and to then have the opportunities to remain in the UK.

There are problems around matching what skills the funding body would like students to acquire and what skills actually fit with particular PhD projects. The former tend toward large classes with generic skills, whereas students often need more small-scale highly specialised interdisciplinary courses. These tend to take place in summer school workshops and at conferences.

We encourage ESRC to continue initiatives to address skills gaps at earlier stages – particularly data skills. We also note there is insufficient language training in UK programmes, with a lack of time and money available. This could be an area for cross-DTP collaboration and/or ESRC/AHRC links. For disciplines such as geography more resource is needed to support overseas fieldwork.



2. How can UK doctoral programmes best prepare graduates for non-academic career pathways?

Through our work with professional and Chartered geographers (in public, private and third sectors) we are very aware of the range of careers geographers with PhDs pursue and the value of their training to these sectors. They are much in demand and have varied and rewarding careers and are highly valued.

We would welcome any coordinated effort to change the culture where leaving academia after a PhD is seen as failure. We strongly support any initiatives to signal (from the very beginning) the value of research experience (and the knowledge and skills gained) for a range of careers, with students, their supervisors and prospective employers.

Generally, available careers guidance for PhD students is poor – though there are notable exceptions. University careers advice is geared towards undergraduates. Academics (supervisors) often have little experience outside academia (and/or have negative attitudes about careers outside academia).

We encourage any initiatives to build in time for internships and placements and exposure to non-academic settings so students can learn more and explore. But these need to be properly funded (e.g., to enable travel) and the time available in the PhD is again an issue. Internships can add 6 months (or longer) and may lead to immediate job offers after, before the PhD is complete. Flexibility in timelines to allow moving back and forth with a partner organisation is essential, as is flexibility to move from full-time to part-time status (more than once) during the course of a PhD.

We would also welcome new initiatives to support students studying for a PhD from a range of professional and practitioner backgrounds – i.e., moving away from thinking about a PhD straight / soon after an MA/MSc. We recommend that ESRC works to raise the profile of alumni including those who move from and to academia and other sectors.

3. How can social science doctoral programmes best prepare graduates to work collaboratively?

There is a sense that this is done best where academics are involved in UKRI funded projects which commonly call for interdisciplinarity and collaboration at the core of the work. Not allowing (most) research projects to include PhD students as part of project teams runs counter to this outcome (whether international, interdisciplinary or cross-sectoral). This is seen to be one of the downsides of concentrating PhD training in dedicated DTCs and DTPs rather than in active research projects.

Collaborating with community partners is important - providing opportunities to learn what works and what does not; having the time to experiment and make mistakes; and having the support to collaborate. Often, though, there are insufficient resources to bring collaborators into the school for workshops, so it depends on students going out and developing these opportunities themselves. CASE studentships, and supporting opportunities for collaboration (e.g., through placements) for other PhD students too are really important and valued.

There is, though, a need to maintain a balance between supporting disciplines and encouraging interdisciplinary research.

4. How can doctoral student health and wellbeing be safeguarded?

There is broad recognition that there are ever increasing issues for postgraduates in terms of mental health and wellbeing (as with undergraduates).



This is a complex issue to address -- isolation and unrealistic expectations clearly contribute. The problem is not the formal university criteria for awarding the PhD, but an unrealistic research culture and too little time to complete the PhD. The pressure to complete in 3.5 years, including all the training, skills development and stakeholder engagement, has undoubtedly led to health and wellbeing issues. Lack of integration into department life, being considered a student rather than an academic or researcher can lead to intense anxiety and mental health issues. Postgraduates need good office spaces and facilities. This has exacerbated by Covid - poor housing and working from home for many students, increased isolation and anxiety, health concerns for themselves and others, care responsibilities etc.

Another key point is around the length of funded research, and the 'writing up' unfunded final year before submission. There is a tension here between HEIs setting the submission date (and rightly having leeway beyond the end of the funded period) and the funded length of time. One concern here is around the normalization of the 'writing up' unfunded year and changing expectations (students and supervisors) about the importance of completing within the funded period, even if this results in significant other pressures, as noted above.

A particular issue for field disciplines such as geography, is mental health first aid training. More resources need to be directed to this.

There are issues with the ESRC sick pay policy which puts additional pressures on students if they need to take leave.

5. How can we ensure a diverse and inclusive population of social science doctoral students?

We welcome recent UKRI statements on Positive Action and encourage additional resources be allocated to support such initiatives. There needs to be targeted funding set aside for BAME PhD applicants, with ring-fenced studentships to protect a minimum number but with an expectation that this number will ideally be exceeded. We note though there are challenges of how to implement this in practice. An excellent example is the partnership between WRDTP and the Stuart Hall Foundation - <https://wrntp.ac.uk/studentships/ring-fenced-pathway-awards/>

In terms of strengthening the pipeline, MA/MSc grants are needed to encourage students from under-represented groups to allow them access to the PhD. This highlights the importance of 1+3 awards. Many students from underrepresented groups have the capability, but because of structural issues they may be catching up at UG level and/or do not have a 1st Class Honours degree from the 'right' institution. Many do not have the opportunities and/or resources to take on MA/MSc study as a bridge to PhD. So that is the end of the road for them. There also needs to be recognition that recruitment / application processes should encourage applicants who have not followed a conventional academic route to a PhD – i.e., for assessment panels to value professional / practitioner experience, to reorganize application forms and assessment criteria to reflect this etc.

Often opportunities for funded PhDs are circulated by word of mouth or on academic lists of research active lecturers. Students from diverse backgrounds are more likely to do their undergraduate/Master's degrees at '92 and GuildHE universities where their personal tutor and dissertations supervisor are less likely to be in networks and hear about these opportunities.

Attention also needs to be directed to conversion of BAME applications into offers – issues that have been highlighted include transparency in the application process, overlooking applicants not from Russell Group (noted above), and the need for better communication of the value of a doctoral degree.

In applications, it would be helpful to encourage specific statements from students about their background and experiences that would highlight their characteristics and would carry a significant weighting in



shortlisting applicants. Change will remain very slow if selection criteria are only focused on a particular view of excellence.

An increased emphasis on hiring BAME academics also is needed, with positive action in hiring practices as well. Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter are steps, but they do not always enable more substantive changes in culture and practice.

The recent announcement to open up studentships to international students is welcomed. This has potential to diversify the student body (though we stress the need to increase the diversity of UK applicants/students too, as stressed above). However, it will increase the competitiveness of the existing selection process with more students/supervisor teams competing for relatively few studentships. Increasing the pool of applicants without increasing the number of studentships available adds strain to the existing systems of shortlisting and selecting candidates across DTP partner institutions, and may exacerbate the existing perception of the system as opaque, unfair etc. If there is scope to increase the number of studentships awarded to support this opening up of studentships to international candidates that would be welcome.

Programme design that requires international mobility and long periods of fieldwork away from the locality can also be problematic for students with family responsibility. More thought needs to be given to this in the design of PhD training programmes.

6. What aspects of current UK social science doctoral programmes could be developed to ensure they remain world leading?

We reiterate the statement above, that funding needs to be for longer. Three years of funding is too short. Many PhD students go beyond the current limit to submit (or have to take breaks) – causing financial and wellbeing pressures (taking on extra work etc). This amplifies the general sense of 'precarity' for Early Career researchers. Longer and more flexible timelines for doctoral study are also needed to accommodate complex personal circumstance and placements.

Flexible models are important. More attention also needs to be directed to different types and formats of PhD, beyond the PhD by thesis or PhD by publication model. Such formats would allow greater opportunities for students to build their transferable skills and create genuine societal engagement - as part of their thesis not an add on they do in their own time.

Masters training with some broad methods training is a considerable benefit for the PhD students and supervisors. Note, the comments above about the need for Master's funding in terms of access to PhDs for certain students. This is a critical issue for widening participation. The emphasis on ethics and research design at the Master's level is of value to a further research career, but also helps develop an ethos of 'care' for others that works for other contexts.