

A12 Raglan Wednesday 5 December 12.00 - 12.30

Uncomfortable truths and dislocated communities in changing times: barriers, bridges and hierarchies between researcher developer, PGR and supervisor communities (0405)

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There has been an increasing focus on community in doctoral provision. Indeed, emphasis on doctoral training for groups of Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) alongside the more dyadic model of traditional supervision has been prompted by policy drivers from research councils and funding bodies (Research Councils UK 2011, Vitae 2010). Conceptualising PGRs as cohorts has also been encouraged by the formation of Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs), Doctoral Colleges and Graduate Schools (Smith McGloin & Wynne, 2015) as well as greater emphasis on timely completions. In addition, recent focus on PGR wellbeing and mental health (Levecque et al 2017) has highlighted community and belonging as important in supporting students during the doctoral experience, which is recognised as increasingly stressful in the context of increasing demands on those wanting to establish academic careers (Pitt & Mewburn, 2016). Indeed, as a recent Vitae report identifies, “pressures to gain experience of publishing, teaching, presenting work at conferences and, more generally, acquiring the professional experience to position PGRs for their future careers can make it hard for them to prioritise” (Metcalf et al, 2018, 21). Similarly, attention to supervisor development and support encourages recognition of supervisors as a distinct community of academic practice (Hill & Vaughan, 2017) on whom there are increasing demands (Lee, 2018). In terms of professional development, the doctoral landscape has thus become more complex and demanding for students, supervisors and institutions alike.

In the context of this changing landscape, this paper examines the impact of these multiple communities on research methods and professional development provision for PGRs. Community-building within doctoral education is largely understood in positive terms: desirable, impactful and the marker of good practice. However, there is limited research exploring interrelations between researcher development and supervisor communities even though engaging supervisors with doctoral training has long been recognised as problematic (Spencer & Wiley, 2013). The paper arises from our lived experiences of developing and facilitating professional development opportunities for PGRs and supervisors respectively in the Arts and Humanities in a UK Higher Education Institution with quite rapidly growing doctoral provision. Recognising the challenges of engagement and cohesion within and between different communities in our own provision, we initially sought to learn from other institutions and models of practice. Our research thus aimed to contextualise our experience and to investigate more widely the extent of collaboration and cohesion between communities of supervisors, PGRs and researcher developers, the impact that this multiplicity of community and provision has on PGRs as well as informing our own provision.

We undertook a research project to compare the situations, experiences and challenges across different universities in an Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded DTP. We chose to compare our experiences with the six institutions in the DTP because of the discipline commonalities in the Arts & Humanities and significantly because the DTP itself creates another arguably elite PGR community and layer of researcher development provision whilst also encouraging the sharing of provision across constituent institutions. Moreover, the requirements to meet AHRC doctoral training obligations and the highly competitive nature of securing funding within the DTP means that this provision might be seen as a benchmark of excellence, one that we were keen to explore in its relation to

community. Using a comparative mixed-method approach, we combined interviews and questionnaires with researcher developers, supervisors and students with analysis of policy and provision. Our objectives were to map and further understand the complexity of PGR professional development communities and to uncover the strengths and limitations of the different constellations of provision.

Alongside evidence of multiple discourse communities and communities of practice in each institution, our analysis points to challenges, tensions and dislocations between these communities. Indeed, whilst the multiplicity of doctoral provision that we unveiled points to its very richness and diversity, it also highlights a highly complex and multi-layered terrain that is difficult to cohere, communicate and navigate. Our research also identified and highlighted barriers related to the expanded expectations of PGRs in a precarious and managerial academic landscape (Wardop and Withers 2014). Significant issues that arose include tensions and hierarchies between the value placed on the support and development of the *research project* in comparison to that of the *researcher*.

There is also a challenge in making visible and connecting multiple communities in ways that are meaningful to these communities. For example, in reconciling provision from doctoral colleges or graduate schools and more localised provision within disciplines, schools and departments. The community established by the DTP itself might be seen to be especially successful and represent excellence in terms of coherence, engagement and opportunity. However, our findings also highlight perceived hierarchies of provision; in particular, in issues of inclusivity as to whether equivalent provision is available to wider cohorts of PGRs regardless of funding status. Key differences arose in relation to expectations and understandings of responsibility. Where does responsibility lie for mapping, signposting, developing and navigating doctoral provision and where do such responsibilities overlap across the multiple communities? Responsibility emerged as contested and was often cited as a failing in others for perceived challenges with lack of engagement.

In exploring and acknowledging these dislocations, we question their impact on the doctoral experience and suggest strategies for bridging divides through examples of good practice we uncovered and alternative pedagogies. For example, rather than PGR provision being communicated to supervisors with varying degrees of success, we propose approaches whereby these two communities of researcher developers and supervisors might inform one another as a form of collaboration. Similarly can we encourage agency in PGRs to not only navigate complex provision but also to extend and critique it? Whilst there are undoubtedly barriers, bridges and hierarchies at play; they are underpinned by an inherent complexity and diversity that we argue should be characteristic of Higher Education. Thus we argue that whilst some truths may be uncomfortable, that does not necessarily mean that they need to be entirely rewritten.

References

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