

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Changes in structure, strategy, culture and organisation in UK doctoral education

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Abstract: This paper reports on the findings of a 2021 update to the 2015 publication by the UK Council for Graduate Education on structures and strategy in doctoral education. This update draws on responses elicited by an expanded question set to explore not only structure and organisation but also areas of strategy and culture. The findings reveal significant changes in organisational structure, leadership, management and governance within doctoral education over time and in the context of sector changes in funding patterns, how research is organised and contemporary policy discourses on student experience, widening participation and internationalisation. The paper concludes with a thematic analysis of responses to questions relating to strategic priorities, challenges and opportunities and reveals the detail of widespread ambitions for growth, strong intentions to address inequality, commitment to innovation in new programme development and anxieties around access to funding, mobility and well-being in the doctoral community in the post-Covid, post-Brexit era.

Paper: Since 1994 the UKCGE has tracked developments and reforms of sector and university policy and practice relating to structures such as graduate schools and doctoral colleges, institutional support for postgraduate researchers, priorities and ambitions in doctoral education.

When the first report was published 25 years ago, the postgraduate researcher (PGR) population looked very different to how it looks now. An average research-intensive university had ~2,500 PGRs. An average modern higher education institution had around 300. Males outnumbered females 2:1 on most programmes and there were less than 200 black PGRs in the first year of their doctorate across the UK (HESA, 1995-6). Just 33 respondents to the initial survey had a formal structure to support doctoral education in the form of a graduate school.

By the time UKCGE published the most recent report in 2015 (Smith McGloin and Wynne, 2015), the total PGR population had risen by around twenty percent and many modern universities were registering more than 500 in their postgraduate researcher populations. 89 universities who responded had at least one graduate school and there were a total of 171 separate graduate schools configured across universities, faculties, departments and research centres. PGR population growth, diversification of doctoral programmes and an increase in collaborations at doctoral level were

identified as drivers of this change.

Doctoral communities face major challenges in the post-covid period which range from: constrained institutional investment in future studentships brought about by delays in doctoral research that are caused by lockdowns, fatigue and ill-health across PGR, supervisors and professional services staff and loss of physical space on campuses in some cases as universities prioritised delivering teaching in a socially-distanced context.

At the same time, there is much doctoral education can contribute to post-covid recovery, including to the UK government's agenda on "levelling up" – the commitment to "ensure the benefits of growth are spread to all corners of the UK" (Treasury, H.M., 2021), tackling regional disparities in health and education outcomes and supporting regeneration in towns and cities, the 2050 net zero greenhouse gas target and the aspirations towards a "Global Britain". This might include place-based doctoral training partnerships, further work to ensure doctoral programmes are inclusive so that all parts of society have a voice in shaping and contributing to the future agenda for research, and international collaborative programmes, including work on virtual mobility and at-distance doctoral training.

This paper reports on the findings of a 2021 update to the 2015 publication which draws on responses elicited by an expanded question set to explore not only structure and organisation in doctoral education in the UK but also areas of strategy and culture. 70 responses from Deans, Directors, Deputy Vice Chancellors or equivalents in universities across the UK were received April – July 2021. These responses comprise enrolments for 65% of the doctoral population^[1] in the UK.

The data reveal changes in organisational structure, leadership, management and governance within doctoral education over time. Mapping 2021 findings back to previous survey data highlights how doctoral education has evolved in the context of: sector changes in funding patterns; how research is organised; and contemporary policy discourses on student experience, widening participation and internationalisation.

A notable trend is the continued prevalence of institution-wide organisational structures to support doctoral education, such as Graduate Schools or Doctoral Colleges, although some diversification of names for this structure to affirm the research focus is evident. New variants include: 'research school', 'researcher academy', and 'graduate research school'. These organisational structures also vary significantly in the number of dedicated staff they contain. 20% of respondent universities reported 0-2 full time equivalent (fte) staff and 13% reported more than 20.

As in 2015, very few doctoral college or equivalent structures had responsibility for taught masters students although an increasing number reported responsibility for early-career researchers and supervisors. Whilst common key metrics to monitor performance continued to include submission rates and postgraduate research experience survey (PRES) results, career outcomes, internationalisation and diversity data are emerging measures of successful support for doctoral education in many respondent universities.

The paper explores these areas further before it concludes with a thematic analysis of responses to questions relating to strategic priorities, challenges and opportunities and reveals the detail of widespread ambitions for growth, strong intentions to address inequality but a general acknowledgement that activity is in the early stages, commitment to innovation in new programme development and anxieties around access to funding, mobility and well-being in the doctoral community.

[\[1\]](#) UK Universities, Student FPE for (2019/20) Research degrees (Data source: HEIDI)

References:

- Smith McGloin R. and Wynne C. (2015) Structural Changes in Doctoral Education in the UK: A review of Graduate Schools and the developments of Doctoral Colleges. UK Council for Graduate Education
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