

Towards a Community-Informed Model for PhD research? A place-based exploration of attitudes to doctoral research in Nottingham

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Abstract

This paper explores findings from an SRHE-funded project exploring public perceptions of PhD programmes in Nottingham. Despite high-level policy initiatives aiming to embed civic principles within universities' missions (Harrow and Guest, 2021), a significant proportion of the UK public do not perceive that R&D benefits them (Campaign for Science and Engineering, 2023), and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups have few interactions with universities (UPP Foundation, 2022). Whilst there is potential to embed public scholarship in doctoral education (Deem, 2020, 2022; Porter, 2021), little is known about how doctoral research is understood and perceived by those outside the academy. This qualitative research took a place-based approach (McCann, 2019), within the context of Co(l)laboratory, a RED-funded pilot of a civically-informed DTP in Nottingham. This paper explores initial findings from this project, contributing to literature examining the civic role of universities, and the nature and purpose of doctoral education.

Full paper

This paper explores findings from an SRHE-funded project exploring public perceptions of PhD programmes in Nottingham. A recent report (Campaign for Science and Engineering, 2023) found a significant proportion of the UK public do not perceive that research and development benefits them, with those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds more likely to feel this way. Alongside evidence that those from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups have few interactions with universities (UPP Foundation, 2022), public engagement with universities and their research appears patchy, despite high-level policy initiatives aiming to embed the 'civic' focus of universities (Harrow and Guest, 2021).

Though there has been significant investment in UK universities' outreach activities in recent decades, with government policy agendas supporting increased awareness of the benefits of participation in undergraduate education, little effort is made to communicate the potential benefits of research degrees. Indeed, despite a proliferation of different

doctorates (Park, 2005), there is scant evidence about how – and indeed whether – doctoral education is understood, and to what extent any potential benefits of PhD research are perceived by the public. Given the range of socioeconomic challenges faced by communities across the UK (see Handforth and Smith-McGloin, 2024), and the significant public funding ascribed to UK funding councils and universities for PhD research programmes, it is important to critically examine the perceived public value and impact of doctorates.

Reviewing relevant literature highlights that there is little existing empirical work which looks to examine public attitudes to doctoral research. Whilst there is increasing interest in the idea of embedding public scholarship in doctoral education (Deem, 2020, 2022; Porter, 2021), an appetite for university initiatives which support civically-engaged research (Nuno Teixeira and Klemenčič, 2021), and ongoing debates about the purpose and value of doctoral education (see Guccione and Bryan, 2023; Nerad and Chiappa, 2022), there is scant evidence of research which aims to understand public awareness and perceptions of doctoral research, and who, and what doctoral education is for. This research was undertaken in the context of a place-based initiative, Co(l)laboratory, which looks to address some of the issues identified in this literature. Co(l)laboratory, a RED-funded pilot of a new, civically-informed DTP in Nottingham, aims to offer a potential new model for doctoral education, partnering with local community organisations and training doctoral candidates in civic engagement with the dual aims of diversifying doctoral graduate populations and increasing research capacity in the region.

This research took a public engagement perspective on doctoral research programmes, with the starting position that there is a need to better engage local communities with university research agendas (NCCPE, 2019). There are an increasing number of PhD researchers in the UK (Smith-McGloin and Wynn, 2022) and the PhD degree often represents the start of an individuals' research career (see Vitae, 2022), yet historically it is an elite qualification (Pasztor and Wakeling, 2018) with admissions and recruitment processes that are not always transparent (Burford et al., 2023; Smith-McGloin and Wynn, 2022; Smith-McGloin et al., 2024). Data collection was undertaken with Nottinghamshire residents in November 2023 via focus groups. Criteria for participation were limited; participants had to be residents of Nottinghamshire and not have completed a PhD.

In this paper, I explore initial findings from this research. Analysis indicated evidence of some awareness of the purpose, nature and organisation of doctoral study, though participants cited some concerns about the types of research being funded, and viewed academic research as limited in its capacity to contribute to pressing social and economic issues. Very little was known about how PhD research agendas are set, and there was evidence of some skepticism in terms of the motivations behind funding arrangements. Further, two clear views emerged on the types of people participants imagined undertook doctoral degrees; either a young 'career conveyor belt student' or a 'mature passionate

student'. It was evident that participants placed different value judgments on these two perceived 'types' of PhD students. Finally, there was very limited understanding of the outcomes and impact of PhD research, speaking to a clear need for individuals and institutions to better communicate current, local research to more general audiences to meet this desire for improved translation of research findings.

This research contributes to wider work examining the public role of academic institutions and those who benefit from working and studying within them, as well as literature examining the nature and purpose of doctoral education. It also has implications for how Co(l)laboratory and any future, similar initiatives may look to re-model the traditional UK doctorate within a civic framework.