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Guided by an ethic of care: creating a 'deliberate' doctoral community within a UK-based doctoral education and development programme

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

Postgraduate researchers (PGR) in the UK are critical of the lack of attention paid by universities to 'cultivating' inclusive research communities. Reflecting on inclusivity in doctoral education prompts us to think about how we care through creating and sustaining inclusive, compassionate research communities. At Nottingham Trent University we are creating 'deliberate' doctoral community – 'deliberate' because we ground our work in social justice and care, and because we enable PGR to network across disciplines, cultures and ethnicities. Guided by Tronto's ethic of care, which moves from recognising the need for care and providing it, to integrating care into institutions in visible and recognised ways, we work both *for* PGR and *with* PGR to co-create community through formal and informal events and platforms. We will share our insights from the design and PGRs' evaluation of these events, closing with a critique and reflection on our approach to deliberate community-making, and ways forward.

Full paper

As noted in the 2022 PRES report (Neves 2022), UK-based PGR were critical of what they saw as a lack of attention paid by universities to 'cultivating' research communities they could be a part of. Many of the survey respondents reported that they did 'not feel that their work [was] influenced by a research community, which implies that their institutions have not always been able to effectively build a community that PGRs feel they can access' (p.23). Islam (2024) suggests that further work is needed to build inclusivity into research communities and research culture, and that attention must be paid to PGR who are under-represented and more likely to feel invisible, uncared about or for, and therefore likely to experience profound isolation and loneliness, such as racially minoritised and international students (Islam 2024), and students with disabilities and LGBTQ+ students (Gagnon, 2022). This work on inclusivity in doctoral education prompts us to think carefully about how we care for PGR through creating and sustaining inclusive, compassionate research

communities that provide spaces for both intellectual and social integration (Manathunga 2014). In other words, how do we create compassionate, relational spaces for PGR that show them empathy and care and that enable them to show care, empathy and compassion for one another?

Anecdotally and in research, two words that are too-often attached to doctoral study are 'lonely' and 'isolating'. Blogposts and edited collections offering advice on how to combat loneliness and isolation and 'survive' the doctoral journey, written by postgraduate researchers (PGR) and doctoral educators, are plentiful (see, for example, Halliwell 2024; Lempriere nd; McMaster et al. 2017; Frick et al. 2017). More recent collections have focused on specific groups of doctoral candidates and their needs and experiences, such as Black students (Ackah et al. 2024) and international students (Eliot 2023). These texts all have in common a thread on the experience of PGR as being **unique** compared to other students like taught Masters and undergraduates, because of the nature of research, and **uniquely lonely and difficult**, because of the way doctorates are undertaken, in small research groups or alone, guided mainly by two or three supervisors. These texts also have in common, as a response to this thread on loneliness and struggle, community – finding your people and finding a space in a research community where you can be visible, supported and cared for.

At Nottingham Trent University, since 2022, we have been working on several different strands of research community building, with the idea of creating and sustaining doctoral communities *deliberately*. We use the term 'deliberate community' because we want to infuse the communities that are created for and with PGR with the values of equity, social justice, and care, and we are deliberate because we argue, based on our collective experience that it is problematic to assume that doctoral students can and will create and sustain their own communities, or know how and where to meet fellow PGR and connect with them 'organically'. It is also problematic to assume that university departments and doctoral supervisors will a) have thriving research communities that doctoral students can join, and b) will always think to expressly include them in such communities where they do exist.

Thus, in the Doctoral School, which is now part of the Directorate of Research Culture and Environment, we use a two-pronged approach to community which we want to share in this presentation: working *for* PGR, through events we create and fund to bring them together with peers, and working *with* PGR to co-create events. Our work is guided by Joan Tronto's ethic of care, which focuses on five phases of care, from recognising the need for care and providing it, to integrating care into institutions in visible, formal and recognised ways (Tronto 1998, 2010). We take Tronto's ethic of care as a prompt to reflect on how we can work with and for PGR to challenge institutional narratives of care that appear insincere to many PGR (see Neves 2022, 2023), notably female and disabled PGR (Neves 2023). We will focus on some of the key events we have created for and with PGR, sharing the design and PGRs' evaluation of these events, which we have reflected on using the lens

provided by Tronto. The paper will close with a critique and reflection on our approach to deliberate community-making, and consider ways forward into the future.