Building a Research Community: Examples of Policy and Practice

Focus On:

The Postgraduate Research Student

Contents

Introduction

This work is part of QAA Scotland's [Focus On](#)[1] activity, which covers topics that occur frequently in Enhancement-led Institutional Review outcomes. [Focus On: The Postgraduate Student Research (PGR) Student Experience](#)[2] identified four main strands for examination:

- training and support for postgraduate students who teach
- support for staff who supervise research students
- building a research community for postgraduate research students
- student representation for postgraduate research students.

This document considers the research community strand.

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The work undertaken

The policy and practice document is intended to identify a number of key points for consideration, illustrate why they are important aspects of developing a research community and give examples of how institutions have tackled them. It considers in detail how institutions have recognised and engaged with these points in their own unique contexts. This work is intended to help other institutions interested in developing or enhancing their own research communities.

The initial questions considered by the project team are listed below. We explored policy and practice in a variety of institutions with a view to answering some of these questions. The discussion of policy and practice around research community in this document should be considered with these questions in mind.

- Is there a **consensus** around what constitutes a 'research community'? Do students and staff from different countries have different views?

- What does a **successful** research community look like? Does it have 'core' characteristics that postgraduate researchers are likely to expect?

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[1] www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/focus-on
[2] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/focus-on/the-postgraduate-research-(pgr)-student-experience

- What is the **purpose** of a research community? Is its primary function the promotion of student success, the enhancement of research quality, raising an institution's profile, some combination of these, or something else?

- Where do/should the **boundaries** of the research community lie? How does a successful research community integrate with the world outside of academia, and how does this affect the student experience?

- What are the benefits and drawbacks of a more centralised research community (institutional), as opposed to a more localised one (school, faculty, college)?

- What are the benefits and drawbacks of using virtual, rather than physical, spaces to develop the research community?

In addition to this scan of policy and practice, interviews were held with staff and students to obtain their views on how to build community for doctoral students. The results of those interviews can be found in *Building a Research Community - Student and Staff Views*, which complements this document.

In order to get a clearer picture of institutions' current policy and practice, we examined Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews (ELIR)[3] from 18 Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs), and 170 REF environment reports,[4] which take a detailed look at the research environment across a range of subjects within individual HEIs. We also looked at institutions from the rest of the UK and from other English speaking and non-English speaking countries.[5] University websites were consulted, as were Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)[6] summaries, follow-up reports on ELIR reviews,[7] QAA thematic reports,[8] QAA good practice case studies, internal institutional codes of practice, and internal guidance documents for supervisors and researchers.

The institutions selected were chosen in order to provide an in-depth overview of the Scottish sector and as wide a cross-section of HEIs from the rest of the UK and internationally as far as possible within the boundaries of the remit.

The range of approaches and activities examined in the project was diverse, each suiting the needs and culture of the institution. As a result, the communities that emerge from these approaches and activities vary widely. A question that institutions may wish to consider throughout is whether there is one ideal research community - or whether there is, in fact, a variety of community types, both formal and informal, varying in size, scope and purpose, in existence both across and within institutions, serving several different needs.

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[3] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review
[4] https://results.ref.ac.uk//DownloadSubmissions/ByForm/REF45
[5] Abertay University, Colombia University, Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), Lund University, Queen Margaret University (QMU), Queen's University Belfast, Robert Gordon University (RGU), Scottish Graduate School for the Arts and Humanities, The Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile, The Scottish Doctoral Training Centre in Condensed Matter Physics, University of Dundee, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, University of Melbourne, University of Northampton, University of Warwick.
[6] www.heacademy.ac.uk/institutions/surveys/postgraduate-research-experience-survey
[7] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review/elir-reports
[8] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review/thematic-reports

Defining community

'Community' implies something shared between people: a place, connection, experience, identity or set activities or practices. It also implies a social element or construct, for example, a physical place where people can meet, or the notion that you are connected to and supportive of people who live near you, or who share a hobby or cultural background with you.

Postgraduate research (PGR) students working in schools, institutes and departments across universities are brought together through their shared experiences as doctoral students and researchers, as well as their pursuit of research in specific disciplines, and their experiences of the many layers of university life. These layers may be related to academic or funding structures such as lab or subject groups or centres for doctoral training; to personal interests (for example, public engagement or science communication) or hobbies (for example, running, cycling or club activities); or to supportive groups (for example, PGR students who are parents).

Research Councils UK (RCUK) has set out a Statement of Expectations for Postgraduate Training (2016)[9] which asserts that 'Students should, wherever possible, benefit from the advantages of being developed as part of a broader peer group', highlighting the benefits of belonging to a wider group to individual development. The UK Quality Code for Higher Education includes advice and guidance on research degrees,[10] which encourages 'the provision of a research environment conducive to learning and developing research combined with the provision of encouraging and supportive supervision'.

Universities have implemented a variety of policies and practices with the intention of developing, supporting or enhancing research communities. These policies and practices seek to define the community's values, and then integrate, and ultimately change the culture of postgraduate researchers into the norms and structures of the community. Universities are also measured broadly on this activity through the assessment of the 'environment' in the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[11] and the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)[12] process through which the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) assesses institutional approaches to enhancement in higher education in Scotland. While a key measurement is the number of students who complete their doctoral studies, the narratives in the template documents submitted for the REF, tell compelling stories of research cultures in subject areas; ways in which universities support and encourage the development of students; ways in which they assist them to connect with broader disciplinary and international communities; and the physical infrastructure that assists this. Often the focus is on disciplinary communities and what is required of researchers in specific subject areas. Students may also perceive what is expected of them as a member of a particular community through the activities displayed or encouraged - what the institution would describe as a fully engaged research student and whether, as a student, an individual is seen as a full member of the community.

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[9] www.ukri.org/files/legacy/skills/statementofexpectation-revisedseptember2016v2-pdf (PDF 168KB)
[10] www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/advice-and-guidance-research-degrees.pdf?sfvrsn=b424c181_2 (PDF 151MB)
[11] www.ref.ac.uk
[12] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review

Building a research community - key areas for consideration

When reviewing examples of practice across the project institutions, it was evident that while there were many novel and sensitive approaches to building a research community, what was most striking were the ways in which institutions had tailored approaches to their own specific needs. There was no single definitive version across the institutions examined of what constitutes 'researcher community', and the examples discussed below emphasise that a multiplicity of research communities can exist across institutions, even though the general principles underpinning those communities are the same. We hope that the applicability of these practices across a variety of contexts is evident.

The seven areas identified and discussed below are those which appeared consistently and prominently in these sources, and in our *Building a Research Community - Student and Staff Views* work, as being key in the creation of an effective research community. There is, of course, overlap between some of the areas.

1   Supervisors
2   Physical space
3   Building academic identity for PGR students
4   Building academic identity for PGR students - postgraduates who teach (PGWT)
5   Centralised communities
6   Online communities
7   The role of PGR student training in developing a research community.

These are brought together in more detail in Building a Research Community - Key Issues for Discussion, intended to help institutions to facilitate discussion about their own practice in some of the key areas noted.

1   Supervisors

Supervisors play a vital role within the creation of the research community. The importance of the role in creating the tone of the research community, and in supporting successful transitions for their students into this community, can be evidenced by considering how extensively the role is discussed in codes of practice across all institutions, as well as in the increasing attention institutions pay to their training. Equally, the complexity of ensuring good supervisory practice is considered in the ELIR Thematic Report on the Postgraduate Student Experience,[13] which highlights the challenges faced by a variety of institutions in ensuring high-quality support for PGR students in the face of increasing student numbers and heavy workloads, as well as suitable training and mentoring for new supervisors.

The following measures can be considered in terms of ensuring that supervisors are in a position to play a fully supportive role within the research community.

Training using real-life scenarios - Robert Gordon University (RGU)

Institutions can design specific training sessions for supervisors. RGU has developed two types of workshops.

The first, for new supervisors, is a one-day training session covering all the basics about process, regulations and the relationship with their student, but also other aspects such as case studies and immigration compliance for those who supervise PGR students with study visas.

The second series of workshops are one-hour lunchtime sessions for existing supervisors on topics including, for example, immigration compliance, the application process, transfer application, preparing the students for viva exam, or thesis write-up. Existing supervisors must attend at least one session per year, but some attend more than that to plug existing gaps in their knowledge or to stay abreast of changes in RGU rules/processes.

Effective use of Codes of Practice - University of Dundee

Institutions can use codes of practice in order to make clear the role of the supervisor within the PhD, establish best practice, set the tone for the supervisor/student relationship, and underline their role in facilitating the PGR's integration into the research community.

The University of Dundee's Code of Practice highlights best practice examples to allow staff to reflect on opportunities for development within their own subject area. For example, it flags that the School of Life Sciences developed a workload model to ensure that supervisors had reasonable time to dedicate to PGR students - resulting in weekly (and sometimes daily) meetings.

www.dundee.ac.uk/media/dundeewebsite/qualityframework/documents/research_degrees_Quality_Code_2018-9.pdf (PDF 1.55MB)

The University of Aberdeen's Code of Practice is explicit in stating the importance of the supervisory role to PGR success, and makes detailed suggestions as to the frequency and nature of supervisory meetings. It also flags situations where PGR students might need alternative arrangements in order to ensure progress, such as part-time study.

www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/postgraduate-research-taught-codes-of-practice.php

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[13] www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/elir-student-engagement.pdf (PDF 368KB)

Using handbooks to make clear supervisors' role in the wider student experience - Queen Margaret University (QMU) and the University of Edinburgh

QMU's *Handbook for Doctoral Supervisors* is especially sensitive to the psychological challenges faced by PGR students as their research progresses, and highlights these throughout, creating an expectation that supervisors will be fully aware of all aspects of their students' experience.

The University of Edinburgh's handbook for researchers specifically uses the word 'community' throughout the document. It makes clear that the institution values doctoral students as part of its research community, and that supervisors have an important role in helping the student's transition into it.

www.ed.ac.uk/studying/postgraduate/facilities/academic/tutoring

2   Physical space

Physical spaces or buildings, where these exist, are often named as key aspects of the research community at institutions. These can take many forms. Examples include:

- dedicated graduate school buildings (or part of a building) with both work and social spaces for students to gather
- spaces that contain a school or subject area, providing common areas, work spaces and training or meeting rooms that bring staff and students together
- space that has been set aside for postgraduate use within common buildings, for example, university libraries
- catering facilities that are differentiated from those primarily aimed at undergraduate students, for example, a desirable coffee shop, as opposed to a cafeteria.

There are many benefits to shared physical spaces. Spaces shared by students from across different disciplinary areas can provide a means to both foster and reinforce interdisciplinarity. They can also help to establish shared ideas and norms for behaviour, as well as a sense of academic identity. If staff share the space, then the PGR students' sense of being valued by the institutions is strengthened, and their identity as a researcher, as opposed to a student, is reinforced.

However, shared physical space can also have disadvantages to take into consideration. PGR students in large, busy offices might have to seek out quiet spaces in which to work. PGR students in the later stages of study might especially feel this to be the case, particularly when they share offices with, for example, first year PGR students, who might use the space as an opportunity to network and make connections. Shared space designed for interdisciplinary PGR students might not be used if PGR students perceive themselves as 'belonging' more to one subject area than another, and do not see themselves as interdisciplinary.

Overall, effective and sensitive building or refurbishment design can also support working areas that are conducive to interactivity, collaboration and socialising, as well as providing high quality work spaces that are attractive to use. Coffee rooms or other informal gathering places are well known for bringing people together for conversations, whether social or work-related, and can act as a hub for unofficial support networks. A distinct 'researcher' café

(with good quality coffee) can provide a space for researchers to meet informally with seminar speakers or guest lecturers and help to build a sense of academic identity.

Creating a Graduate School - Abertay University

Abertay University brought their postgraduate community (both taught and research students) together into a single graduate school space in 2014, as part of a new research strategy. This has given postgraduate students a 'home' where they can mix with, learn from and inspire each other. Students report feeling less isolated and are able to benefit from dedicated training and social space. Students also identified other benefits, including: increased intercultural awareness, developing as students of different nationalities work more closely together; opportunities for collaboration and interdisciplinary working across discipline areas; and an appreciation of a space to 'be a researcher' when they come through the door.

www.abertay.ac.uk/discover/academic-schools/graduate-school

A centralised multipurpose space for PGR students - Queen's University Belfast

Queen's University Belfast has restored and extensively remodelled a building on campus to act as a physical graduate school. It has space for training workshops, student-led groups and silent study. It also acts as the social hub for the PGR community. Postgraduate taught and PGR students both have dedicated space in the same building, so that the two groups can interact and form a wider postgraduate community without encroaching on each other's space. There is also access to staff, so information and advice can be obtained, as well as face-to-face interaction.

www.qub.ac.uk/Discover/Campus-and-facilities/The-Graduate-School

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Creating PGR engagement and community - University of Warwick

The University of Warwick has a Postgraduate Hub which is a study and social space for postgraduate taught students. There is also a Research Exchange in the Library which although originally intended to 'provide a forum for interdisciplinary collaboration, as well as space for both individual and group study' has shifted to also provide more in terms of wellbeing and pastoral support, due to greater demand for this (in relation to the space). The University also employs a Postgraduate Community Engagement Manager who leads a team whose specific remit is to support and develop community. This post is associated with the Library at Warwick and the remit of this role covers all postgraduate students.

www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/pghub/about

Creating a social space - University of Glasgow

The University of Glasgow created the Gilchrist Postgraduate Club in 2012 to offer a space for working and socialising for both staff and postgraduates. As well as a seminar room, it contains study booths with TVs with AV connections, enabling group working. There are also catering facilities, and several social activities, some of which ('Stitch and Bitch', a knitting and chat group) give postgraduates the opportunity to get pastoral support from peers, as well as to form social networks.

www.gla.ac.uk/studentlife/studentunionsandorganisations/gilchristpostgraduateclub

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Enabling PGR-led activity - University of Melbourne

The University of Melbourne's Graduate Research Hub webpages clearly signpost room booking information and links to a contact. This means that obtaining space on campus for PGR-led activity is prioritised and easy to arrange. Highlighting this facility on the PGR webpages is a clear signal to students that the institution considers that obtaining space is seen as something that PGR students are likely to want to do, and something that they should be able to do.

http://gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/key-contacts

Informal interactions in a formal space - Colombia University

The Graduate School at Colombia University has specific office hours where PGR students can visit and seek advice from staff on a variety of issues. This is an example of a centralised space where PGR students from all subjects and at all stages can feel welcome. Staff report that this shared space also provides an informal means of networking, communication, and peer support, as PGR students often meet and make friends when waiting to see staff. These interactions are no less valuable than the formal contact with staff that takes place in the space.

3   Building academic identity for PGR students

Most organisational units (schools, subjects or departments) organise themselves into research centres, areas or clusters that provide a focus for research-related activities. These often act as a 'home base' for students, even though the areas might have permeable boundaries or be cross-disciplinary. Students and staff may be members of several themes or clusters, depending on their areas of work or interest. Many institutions explicitly describe their students as members of their communities on an equal footing with staff, and many local activities, such as 'work-in-progress' sessions, are shared. These groups also support the development of an identity as researcher, a specific disciplinary community or graduate school structure.

Nearly every environment statement produced for the REF in 2014 described activities within organisational structures that are related to discussing and presenting work among colleagues, both peers and staff members: seminars, work-in-progress sessions, reading groups. Not only do these activities introduce researchers to a standard feature of academic

life - sharing work and networking - but they encourage self-reflection, and comparison with other people's work and progress.

Researchers may also perceive themselves as having a specific identity within the research community based on their personal circumstances and/or background. For example, part-time PGR students, PGR students with children, PGR students with disabilities.

Making the community visible - Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)

The Graduate School at LJMU considers that developing identity is a key issue for postgraduate researchers. They remain students but are also forging another concept of themselves as researchers that is closer to being a staff member. LJMU are keen to provide a hub for training and for social events - a point of contact for PGR students and a place to celebrate success. One example of this is the dedicated room they have set up specifically for viva voce examinations, and where they take photos to record successful completions. Another simple measure they have recently introduced is the use of specially coloured lanyards for ID badges for PGR students. This instantly gives PGR students a sense of having a separate identity from undergraduates and allows them to identify each other easily.

www.ljmu.ac.uk/research/graduate-school

The Doctoral College - The Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile

The Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile has, in response to student demand, set up a Doctoral College to manage matters such as induction, quality assurance, funding, interdisciplinary working, personal and professional development and internationalisation as they apply to its community of doctoral students. While some of these initiatives are relatively new, satisfaction is high with what has been developed and the University is continuing to progress its career development support, as well as planning to bring all postgraduate students and early career researchers into the Doctoral College. Students have an affinity with the Doctoral College beyond their own faculties due to the prestige of being clearly identified as a doctoral student at a prestigious university, but also a strong relationship with their individual faculty communities.

http://doctorados.uc.cl/en

Supporting under-represented groups - Lund University

Other 'identity' groups may also emerge in order to ensure that under-represented groups have a place and voice within the research community. For example, Lund University arranges targeted networking and career development events through its women in science WINGS group.

www.wings.lu.se

Diversity and inclusion for PGRs - Columbia University

Columbia University includes a specific 'Diversity and Inclusion' role within its Graduate School, which includes pre-arrival and face-to-face support for integration to the researcher community. There are several sub-communities which exist for specific groups, ensuring that specific needs and multiple identities are recognised and supported within the research community.
http://gsas.columbia.edu/diversity

Part-time researchers - The Scottish Part- time Researcher Conference

The Scottish Part-time Researcher Conference is a collaborative venture between Scottish HEIs, offering space for part-time researchers to talk with others facing similar challenges and learn practical strategies for overcoming these. A welcome addition to the 2016 conference (hosted by University of Strathclyde) was the existence of a crèche, which allowed researchers to bring their children to the event.

Chronically Academic

Chronically Academic is an online support network for academics at all stages who have disabilities and/or chronic conditions. It is led by an international team of academics and PGR students, and is most active on Twitter, seeking to make connections and raise awareness of current issues.
https://chronicallyacademic.org/index.php/en

The Clinicians in Research Network

The Clinicians in Research Network (CIRN) offers an opportunity for clinically trained early career researchers to form networks and meet senior clinical academics. They discuss the unique challenges they face, as well as best practice regarding remaining research-conscious throughout their careers. They also provide a means to arrange informal meetings in order to let researchers support each other, refine ideas and provide inspiration.
www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/mvls/researchimpact/supportingimpact/cirn

4   Building academic identity for PGR students - postgraduates who teach (PGWT)

Stepping into the role of teacher is a vital transition for PGR students in taking on the identity of a researcher, as opposed to that of student. Many institutions have guidelines in their codes of practice which highlight the value of teaching for PGRs in terms of development and future employability, and which outline best practice.

The Statement of Expectations for postgraduates who teach - University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, QAA Scotland

The Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, along with QAA Scotland, have produced a number of resources for institutions to support postgraduate research students, including specific resources for supporting postgraduates who teach. These include a Statement of Expectations for the support of PGWT, a practical tool used to benchmark, evaluate and enhance provision in this area, using approaches tried and tested by colleagues in the Scottish sector and beyond; a national and international scan of policy and practice to see at a glance and in detail what a variety of UK and international institutions provide for their PGWT in terms of policy, pay, training and recognition; a key issues for discussion document to help institutions to evaluate their own effectiveness in supporting PGWT; and a short film for PGRs by PGRs - 'What I wish I'd known when I started teaching' - drawing from their own experiences to outline the advice they would give to others who are starting to teach.

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/focus-on/postgraduate-research-student-experience

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Code of Practice and PGWT - University of Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh's Code of Practice for tutors and demonstrators states that 'The University recognises that tutors and demonstrators play a valuable and significant part in the delivery of undergraduate courses and accordingly maintains that they should be regarded as integral members of the course team in which they play a part.' Throughout the document, the multiple benefits of the role of PGWT - for the institution, for students and for the PGWT - is emphasised. Further, comprehensive support is provided for every aspect of the work of PGWT, from how to deal with the pastoral element of the role, to employment rights and development opportunities. The overall message sent is that PGRs in this role are important members of the research community.

www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/coptutoringdemonstrating.pdf

Supporting PGWT through training - University of Northampton

In response to PGR feedback on the difficulty of obtaining teacher training, and consequently being unable to apply for teaching roles, the University of Northampton has implemented measures that entitle all PGR students to training, enabling them to obtain teaching contracts at the University, and to take part in training workshops with academic staff. Successful completion of requisite training allows PGR students to apply for teaching positions, with additional support available for HEA membership. Further evaluation on the success of these measures will be sought from PGR students, in recognition of the importance of this issue to the PGR experience.

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5   Centralised communities

Many cross-institutional, or indeed pan-Scotland, activities are discipline-specific, but others are more broadly defined (for example, social sciences). These can also transcend individual institutions through structures such as research pools, for example, the Scottish Universities Physics Alliance (SUPA) or the Scottish Imaging Network: A Platform for Scientific Excellence (SINAPSE); cross-institutional subject-related training initiatives (such as in economics or mathematics); or either of the Scottish Graduate Schools.

Activities here often relate to training across a number of institutions, such as advanced training, summer schools or annual conferences. Cross-institutional organisations are generally created as a result of government or funder strategies.

This type of community creation offers valuable insight into how research communities can be created and maintained despite the physical distance between participants.

The School of Law - University of Edinburgh

The School of Law at the University of Edinburgh describes its thematic groupings of centres, networks and institutes as its 'research communities' and describes their support for collaboration, interdisciplinarity and commitment to scholarship. This is the top-level category in the University's description of its research, as well as clear terminology used throughout its description of itself. Within the grouping of 'research communities' are 'centres', 'institutes', 'networks' and 'academies' - but the terminology used is that fundamentally these are all communities. This sets out a clear expression of the importance of community and the importance of 'belonging'.

www.law.ed.ac.uk/research/research_communities

The Scottish Universities Physics Alliance (SUPA)

SUPA is a strategic alliance of eight Schools/Departments of Physics in Scotland and is a community of over 1200 physicists (staff and students). SUPA has invested in high-quality video-conferencing facilities to support the delivery of training, some of which is mandatory for students, across this community. There are also opportunities for students and staff to interact at events such as inductions, face-to-face training courses and an annual conference. There is, however, tension between students being keen to develop additional skills, especially career skills, and what is required of them by their supervisors or their research projects. They are keen to develop mechanisms for dialogue with their community, such as the recently set up Student Representatives Network.
www.supa.ac.uk

> **The Scottish Graduate School for the Arts and Humanities**
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> The Scottish Graduate School of Arts and Humanities (SGSAH) is a national graduate school in arts and humanities, with a community comprising researchers from across 16 Scottish universities. It offers a range of training opportunities that give researchers from across the country the chance to come together and share their ideas. The School also makes sure that these opportunities take place in a variety of different institutions, underlining its identity as a national organisation. Maintaining connections between researchers who are based across several different institutions is a challenge, and SGSAH offers events, such as an annual summer school, as a means for researchers to meet and forge new bonds. Developing a sense of community across such geographically separate and diverse institutions is a real challenge. The School's focus is on support for the training and development of arts and humanities' researchers and staff feel that what works for them is not the focus on the creation of community by the Graduate School, but creating spaces for communities to develop, which might be subject-specific or have a more social focus.
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> www.sgsah.ac.uk

> **The Three Minute Thesis competition**
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> The Three Minute Thesis competition (3MT) was founded by the University of Queensland in 2008. Initially based at Queensland alone, the competition quickly became national, and then multi-national. PGR students aim to communicate their PhD research to a general audience in three minutes. Institutions have internal competitions, with the winner going on to compete nationally. By the nature of its structure, the competition highlights the various levels of research community that operate simultaneously: internal competitions often have college/department/subject area-specific heats, before those sub-communities are brought together to compete to represent the institution nationally. It also underlines what is felt to be a crucial activity within the research community - communication.
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> https://threeminutethesis.uq.edu.au

6   Online communities

It is important to emphasise that for many students, including but not restricted to those learning through online approaches, community can be, and in many cases is, virtual. Universities produce huge numbers of communication-related activities: podcasts, blogs, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages and so on. These provide a range of information and opportunities for interaction, support from colleagues, and connection to activities - even where individuals are unable to attend. Similarly, a graduate school, doctoral college or similar structure can be a virtual space.

Online communities can develop following shared experiences such as event or training programme attendance, or grow from a desire for shared information, for example, on navigating PhD procedures and milestones, such as annual progress reviews. The interactive online communities identified in the project tended to be organic and researcher-led, while the institutions themselves focused on the dissemination of information (albeit via a variety of means).

Using an academic blog - University of Glasgow

The University of Glasgow has a blog written by and for postgraduate researchers, designed to support students in navigating their way through the University and taking advantage of development opportunities available. It also provides an online community and sense of shared experience, despite the size of the institution. Through guest posts and the work of the PGR editing team, the blog provides a voice for PGR students to discuss the issues that are relevant and important to them.

http://researcherdevelopment.academicblogs.co.uk

Blending online modules and face-to-face events - University of Warwick

The University of Warwick has intentionally created online communities and spaces for PGR students to interact. One example of this is its 'Postgrad Realities', which it describes as 'a set of online modules providing you with the tools you'll need to tackle the twists and turns of your PhD journey and help you reach your finish line'. The modules are complemented by events on campus ranging from academic skills training to social events such as coffee and craft mornings. Staff are dedicated to managing these spaces and developing the community that uses them.

www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/pghub/postgradrealities

www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/pghub

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7   The role of PGR student training in developing a research community

Training programmes are often cited as a focus for bringing students together. Universities describe layers of training at school/subject level, and/or at college or similar level. There are centrally organised programmes, as well as externally organised activities that include students from other institutions.

Training as described might be discipline-related, focused on personal and professional development. Alternatively, it might be related to developing broader skills related to academic life, such as teaching, or gaining fieldwork or publications experience through student-led journals or similar. It may be related to developing skills and networks connecting to career objectives or interests, such as entrepreneurship, social enterprise or public engagement.

Funders are increasingly supporting structures such as Doctoral Training Partnerships and Centres for Doctoral Training. Through these funding mechanisms, cohorts of students are brought together across several institutions, and often around distinctive themes. Funders are increasingly supportive of greater structure in doctoral programmes. In addition, students are more likely now than ever before to receive training in a group setting (which allows more opportunity for peer support), to be offered the same core training programmes, and to have similar explicit milestones in their degree structure.

In addition, PGR training does not deal solely with subject-specific topics, or more general skills. Increasingly, training sessions are offered on a wide variety of pastoral and support topics, for example, in areas like overcoming procrastination, managing perfectionism, how to deal with imposter syndrome and building resilience. These topics all come under the umbrella of mental health and wellbeing, a topic that is currently the focus of much attention in the context of the research community. Academia is demanding at every stage, from first-year undergraduate to senior researcher, and the value of teaching strategies for managing mental health can be seen to be recognised in the offering of these types of workshops and creating a further layer of professional and peer support, and community, for the students attending.

Achieving community through training - The Scottish Doctoral Training Centre in Condensed Matter Physics

The Scottish Doctoral Training Centre in Condensed Matter Physics is a collaboration between the Universities of St Andrews, Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt. The CM-CDT has been running since 2009 and has had the opportunity to try different approaches to building community among its students across the three institutions. When the cohort was, at the beginning, a smaller group, a sense of community was easy to achieve. However, once the group grew larger this was more challenging, as PGR students were more at home within their own institutions and research groups. The CM-CDT has evolved its approach to focus on bringing students together for training events, such as summer schools and retreats. These events which tend to be longer and larger scale, bring together students from across year groups and research groups, and provide more value for the time invested than shorter meetings.

www.st-andrews.ac.uk/physics/prosp_pg/phd/cmdtc/index.php

Student mental health - Universities UK

The Universities UK Student Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education Good Practice Guide notes that many more institutions are offering these types of workshops, moving away from a 'deficit model', where mental health is only addressed once problems have emerged. It also suggests practices that might be implemented, such as 'regular service provider liaison meetings bringing together interested parties and student representatives to work on improving communication and protocol development including reporting and learning from incidents, relevant audit and responding to student feedback.' (p 31)

www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2015/student-mental-wellbeing-in-he.pdf (PDF 904KB)

Conclusion

Although the key issues that emerged in the research have been broadly categorised into seven key areas, institutional responses to these issues are characterised by how much they differ depending on their own unique context. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to the research community, because there is no one 'research community'. Even under the umbrella heading, researchers might identify as being part of any number of sub-communities at any given time, for example, a part-time PGR student, a PGR student in arts, a PGR student parent and so on, and indeed this might change over the course of their degree.

Universities' codes of practice, policies and strategies provide a window into their own vision of the principles underpinning these research communities, ensuring that new staff and students understand what is valued within the community and what are the norms of professional behaviour. For example, a shared workspace explicitly places value on multidisciplinary work and networking. Talking with staff and other researchers and seeing common working practices allows researchers to gain an understanding of shared values. Research seminars encourage the sharing of work, and reflection on research as well as the development of important academic skills. Researcher-led initiatives that develop organically can flag up emerging areas of need and guide institutions in how to support researchers and facilitate new types of community. Support for student-led activities helps to develop other transferable skills as well as the independence and tenacity required to be an effective researcher.

It is important that accessibility is taken into consideration when designing policies. Regular seminar series may inadvertently exclude some students due to timing and/or frequency. Social events afterwards may not be financially possible for all students or may be culturally inappropriate in some cases. Shared working space might require special accessibility considerations. All the approaches discussed above have value and can be applied beneficially across a variety of different contexts, but they also need to be carefully considered to ensure that they are open to all types of student, ensuring the diversity of the research community.