

## Developing Researchers in the Arts and Humanities: Lessons From a Pilot Programme

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### **Context: the 'state of the discipline' of UK graduate education for arts and humanities researchers**

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the development opportunities provided for postgraduate research students in UK higher education. 2001 saw the publication of the Research Councils' and (the then) Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB)'s Joint Skills Statement of training requirements for their funded research students; swiftly followed (in 2002) by Roberts' review of the skills of doctoral graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM subjects)?both of which sought to specify the skills which our research students should be expected to develop during the course of their doctoral studies. The Roberts review, in particular, identified a

significant 'skills gap' between the skills possessed and those needed by doctoral graduates, and recommended the provision of additional training, principally in transferable skills, for such students in the future.

Since then, the UK HE sector has seen a significant growth in more-or-less formal training opportunities for doctoral research students?perhaps most notably in the form of the UK GRAD programme (funded by the Research Councils to provide skills development for their doctoral students) and various university initiatives funded by the 'Roberts money' made available by the UK government to implement the recommendations of the Roberts review.<sup>1</sup> However, this activity is focused on developing research students' generic skills. It has largely been left to individual research councils and university departments to support students in developing the discipline-specific abilities they need to complete their doctoral studies and, potentially, to prepare for future academic practice.

This situation poses a particular challenge for arts and humanities subject areas. It is now widely recognised that different disciplinary fields demonstrate distinctive characteristics, both in terms of the nature of their subject matter (Biglan 1973a) and of their styles of enquiry (Kolb 1981); and that these have a differential impact on (amongst other things) the organisation and practice of doctoral research (e.g. Biglan 1973b, Clark 1993, Becher, Henkel & Kogan 1994, Smeby 1996?for useful reviews of the literature see Becher 1994, Neumann 2001). Typically, arts and humanities research does not follow a linear path or adopt a predetermined topic or methodology; rather, doctoral study in these fields tends to consist in significant part of a continual process of re(de)fining the research project. Research methods are frequently underdetermined, contested and in flux. This lack of a strong shared paradigm for research (cf. Kuhn 1962) tends to result in doctoral projects that are highly individualistic, and this in turn problematises the provision of appropriate research training (Smeby 1996); thus it is unfeasible to specify a core 'research training programme' which will be appropriate for all (or even most) researchers in arts and humanities disciplines (UKCGE 2000). Indeed, there is a risk that academics and students in the arts and humanities are alienated by the 'research skills training' agenda, seeing it as irrelevant to the nature of their discipline(s):

? an absence of generalised training is not a consequence of *laissez-faire* attitudes on the part of staff or an unwillingness to put time and effort into the development of students' research skills. It is, rather, a reflection of the nature of the disciplinary knowledge in question? (Becher et al. 1994:106)

Hence there was relatively little formal training provision for arts and humanities research students, and no UK-wide specification of training and skills requirements of doctoral graduates in these fields?until recently. In 2004, however, two key drivers prompted a re-think of this situation:

- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published its revised Code of Practice for postgraduate research degree programmes, which included increased emphasis upon structured provision of support, development and training opportunities for doctoral students.
- The AHRB (as was) became a fully-fledged Research Council, and set out for the first time a framework of research training requirements for postgraduate study in the arts and humanities.

This latter factor, in particular, represented a significant development for academic staff and students in arts and humanities disciplines?a new requirement of subject-specific research training provision. Unlike some other research councils, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) offers no centrally co-ordinated training opportunities, nor does it specify the content and structure of provision to be delivered locally; instead, it devolves this responsibility to the individual host universities and departments of their funded doctoral students. This approach was informed by the considerations outlined above, especially the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE)'s (2000) report on research training in the humanities?the AHRC was seeking to establish a framework for supporting research students which allowed the flexibility and diversity appropriate to the nature of the disciplines involved. Instead, host departments for AHRC-funded students were required to submit a statement to the AHRC outlining the support and training

opportunities available; and the AHRC supplied additional funding to support this activity.<sup>2</sup>

The stated aim of the AHRC in introducing this approach is as follows:

The framework is intended as a means of enabling institutions to reassure the AHRC that the doctoral students it funds receive appropriate and relevant preparation, training and support for their development, helping them both ***to complete a high-quality doctoral thesis and to develop a range of knowledge, understanding and skills necessary for their future employment.*** (AHRC 2004, paragraph 1, my emphases)

Arguably, this encompasses two key considerations:

- Satisfactory completion of doctoral studies. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)'s (2005) study of doctoral completion rates reveals that, even among research council funded students, completion rates are relatively low?approximately 36% of RC-funded full-time students complete their doctorate within the expected four years of study, and 80% within seven years. The study also shows that completion rates in the arts and humanities are lower than in many other subject areas. Naturally, all key stakeholders (the AHRC, the HEFCE, individual institutions, departments and students) have a vested interest in seeking an improvement in this situation.
- Preparing students for future practice. In the arts and humanities, more than in most other discipline areas, this will effectively entail preparing students for academic practice?UK GRAD's (2004) study found that 45% of doctoral graduates from these fields went on to work in higher education. However, it also found higher rates of unemployment, and of employment on short or fixed term contracts, amongst arts and humanities graduates than their peers in many other subject areas. There is also concern to ensure that those who are in employment are well prepared for their future careers; and evidence suggests that there is scope for improvement in this regard in contemporary arts and humanities provision (UKCGE 2000; CUDAH 2002).

The onus was now placed upon individual host departments of research students in the arts and humanities to demonstrate how their provision of training and support contributed to the achievement of these two aims.

In many cases, of course, departments were able to refer to relevant national- or institutional-level provision available to their students which would support such aims. For instance, all UK higher education institutions (HEIs) now offer their students (both taught and research) the opportunity to participate in a personal development planning scheme, which will help them to identify skill development needs and training opportunities (such as the aforementioned UK GRAD programmes). Most HEIs also now offer some form of postgraduate course and qualification in teaching in higher education to train new lecturers, which may also be available to doctoral students?for example insofar as they already also have teaching responsibilities, or given their status as prospective academic staff.

Typically, however, these opportunities are generic in nature, and have little to say about the distinctive subject-specific demands of conducting successful research, and preparing for a career, in the arts and humanities. Many departments thus struggled to identify what might count as appropriate subject-specific provision, beyond the one-to-one guidance traditionally provided by the individual student's research supervisor.

Developing and delivering such subject-specific provision is a particular challenge for smaller department and disciplines, where there are fewer researchers to form a 'critical mass' which might make structured training opportunities feasible. In recognition of this, the AHRC offered departments and organisations the opportunity to bid for pump-priming funds to establish collaborative research training schemes.<sup>3</sup> Such funding opportunities assist with overcoming practical obstacles?for example, helping to underwrite the costs of setting up a new research training programme?but do not alone resolve the underlying academic challenge of identifying discipline-specific training re

quirements and developing the capacity to meet those needs.

## **The role of the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies**

In light of these considerations, the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (PRS) felt that we were in a position to make a positive contribution to the development of such discipline-specific doctoral training opportunities.

A distinctive feature of the disciplines supported by the Subject Centre for PRS—namely, philosophy; theology; religious studies; history and philosophy of science, technology and medicine (HPSTM); and biblical studies—is that these are small academic communities. Individual departments often consist of only a handful of academic staff and postgraduate students, and thus face the aforementioned problems of scale in providing structured subject-specific development opportunities for their research students.

As part of the Higher Education Academy, the Subject Centre for PRS has a UK-wide remit to enhance the student learning experience—and this applies to postgraduate research students no less than to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students.<sup>4</sup> The distinguishing characteristic of the work of the HE Academy's Subject Centres is that we provide discipline-specific support which complements the generic provision already available (for example, from educational development units in most HEIs)—thus pioneering a discipline-focused approach which is increasingly recognised internationally as a strength in many areas of educational development (e.g. Biglan 1973b, Becher 1994, Jenkins 1996, Johnston 1997, Neumann 2001). We work with an established network of academics across the UK (and internationally), and were thus well placed to liaise with a range of students and staff in order to identify the skills development needs of doctoral research students in our disciplines, and the means by which those needs might be met.

The Subject Centre for PRS, in common with our sister Subject Centres for other UK HE disciplines, already had an established track record (since our inception in 2000) in offering subject-specific advice and development opportunities for postgraduate students and lecturers in their capacity as teachers—for example, through our database of discipline-specific teaching resources, and our series of national, regional and departmental workshops for new staff.<sup>5</sup> The opportunity to contribute to the AHRC's research training programme would enable us further to develop the support we offer to doctoral students by providing them with opportunities to develop their skills for research as well as teaching—thus enhancing our future academics' preparedness for academic life and thereby furthering the Subject Centre's mission to support and enhance higher education in our disciplines.

In view of these factors, the Subject Centre for PRS, in consultation with academic colleagues in a number of departments, decided to pilot a collaborative research skills development programme which would offer discipline-specific support at a regional and/or national level.

## **Setting up a pilot research skills development programme in philosophical and religious studies: needs analysis, aims and objectives**

Our first task was to identify the precise nature of the skill development needs of research students in philosophical and religious studies, and how the proposed programme might aim to meet these needs. In order to do this, we undertook a needs analysis survey. Our rationale for this approach was twofold:

- As discussed above, the research skills needed in such disciplines are typically very individualistic, fluid and underdetermined. We therefore felt it was important to involve research active staff and students in the departments in question in the process of designing the programme—this could not reliably be achieved by desk based research alone.
- Such an approach also helped to foster a sense of ownership of, and partnership in, the pilot programme—the re

sultant programme was not imposed upon departments and their students, but rather was a collaborative venture. The Subject Centre for PRS's role was to co-ordinate rather than to prescribe the programme's design and delivery.

This needs analysis was undertaken in two stages. In 2004 we surveyed the Director of Graduate Studies (or equivalent post holder) and the postgraduate societies (where such existed) of all UK PRS departments, plus the major subject associations for these disciplines, in order to establish the level and nature of demand for such a programme (see appendix 1). Although overall response rates were low, we received a good response from the subject associations, which gave us some confidence that the responses were representative of the subject community as a whole.

The most common response was that postgraduate research students in our disciplines are relatively isolated?as already noted, typically these subject areas consist in small research communities, and the research itself is a solo enterprise. As such, researchers in our disciplines stated that they would welcome the opportunity to expand their research environment by gaining the opportunity to share ideas and experiences with a wider range of staff and students in their field. The nature of this response was not unexpected; however, the strength of this recommendation did surprise us?it was considered to be more valuable even than additional funding in helping to enrich the students' research experience!

Other feedback comments were more varied, but the overall thrust was that students typically already received strong support from their supervisors in determining and developing the content of their doctoral thesis. Development opportunities were more variable, and thus support would be welcomed, in relation to strengthening students' understanding of, and competence in, the research process considered more broadly?for example, developing an enhanced awareness of the research environment beyond their own particular sub-discipline?and other aspects of academic practice, such as publications and career management.

In response to these findings, we established the following aims and objectives for our proposed research skills development programme:

- Primary objective: To provide practical, subject-specific support for sharpening skills in researching, writing, presenting and publishing.
- Secondary objectives: To offer regional networking opportunities; to relieve the sense of isolation experienced by many doctoral students in our disciplines; and to identify and develop students' transferable skills.

We decided to trial the programme initially in a single pilot region?Yorkshire and the North East of England was selected on the basis of its relatively large research communities in philosophical and religious studies (outside of the UK's 'golden triangle' of Oxford, Cambridge and London), and its geographical convenience for the Subject Centre for PRS (whose principal base is at the University of Leeds).

We then repeated the needs analysis in our pilot region in 2005, in order to review the findings of our initial survey and to obtain more detailed feedback which would enable us to tailor the content and approach of the pilot programme to the particular needs of the researchers in this region. This second-stage survey was conducted by means of informal email discussion. All of the departments we consulted took part in the survey and agreed to participate in the pilot programme. <sup>6</sup> We also applied for and obtained funding from the AHRC's collaborative research training scheme (£10,000 over two years) to pilot the initiative during 2005/6 and 2006/7.

## **Developing postgraduate researchers in philosophical and religious**

## studies: a description of the pilot programme

Our next step was to convene a meeting of the Directors of Graduate Studies in the departments who were taking part in the pilot scheme, to review the findings of our iterated needs analysis and to agree the details of our pilot collaborative programme. Again, the rationale for this approach was to ensure that the project was undertaken in partnership with the departments involved, rather than merely imposing on them the Subject Centre's own vision for the programme. In keeping with this ethos, each department agreed to contribute to the events programme, with the Subject Centre for PRS playing a coordinating role, rather than acting as sole 'training provider'. The division of labour was agreed as follows:

Subject Centre staff co-ordinated the scheme—for example, compiling the programme and recruiting contributors for each event, preparing publicity and handling event administration (venue bookings, delegate registration and so on). We also administered the AHRC's funding of the programme, and provided some matched funding from our own central budget, mostly in terms of staff time to support the programme.

Participating departments provided academic staff to lead the programmed sessions for each event, and also co-ordinated the distribution of publicity at a local level. Academic staff contributions constituted matched funding of the programme, insofar as the AHRC funding covered speaker expenses, but precluded the payment of honoraria.

During each academic year, we held two regional events—a twoday residential event in the winter and a one-day conference in the summer. The precise nature of the programme varied according to the interests and expertise of the contributors, but the events calendar each year covered the same broad themes.<sup>7</sup>

The winter residential consisted in a series of skills development workshops—students explored a variety of issues from those faced at the beginning of doctoral study, to the challenges of preparing for life after your PhD. Topics typically included:

- Research methods and trends in the discipline
- Building your bibliography
- The conference scene
- Giving presentations
- Breaking into the publishing racket
- Career planning

The summer conference largely consisted in graduate research presentations, giving students an opportunity to practise, in a supportive environment, some of the skills discussed in previous workshops. An additional feature, which distinguished our event from most other graduate conferences, was that presenters received detailed formative feedback on their performance—including advice on the proposals submitted prior to the conference, and constructive guidance on the delivery, as well as the content, of their presentations. The programme also included further workshops on conference-related topics, for example on preparing conference proposals, or on asking and responding to questions in a research seminar situation.

Throughout, the emphasis was on enabling students to learn from peers and academic staff in the particular context of their discipline—as such, most sessions were subject-specific, with parallel discussions for philosophy / HPSTM and for theology / religious studies / biblical studies, each led by a practising academic in the field. This enabled the programme to address (often subtle, but significant) disciplinary differences within issues which at first might seem generic, or at least common to all arts and humanities subjects. For example, one might initially assume that the publishing cultures of the PRS disciplines are largely similar, as all fall within Biglan's (1973a, b) classification of 'soft,

'pure' fields which tend to favour publication in the form of monographs rather than journal articles (see also Becher 1989, 1994).

However, this overlooks important differences between the disciplines – in particular, the journal-oriented publishing tradition in philosophy – which are crucial to students' mastery of the norms governing research and communication in their subject.

Student participation in the programme was subsidised by the AHRC funding – no conference fees were charged, and all meals and residential accommodation were provided free of charge to delegates. This support did not extend to paying delegates' travel expenses – however, as the event was run on a regional rather than national scale, these were kept to a minimum; and delegates were encouraged to seek departmental bursaries to support their participation in the programme. 85 students attended one or more events over the two-year pilot period, of whom more than 25% attended two or more programme events. Given that, at the time of establishing the pilot, there were only 35 AHRC-funded doctoral students based in the region (although we did not have authoritative figures for the total number of doctoral students), we considered this level of participation to be indicative of success, particularly for a pilot project. We also experienced a very low level of attrition from event registration to attendance, particularly in the second year of the programme's operation – given that events were entirely voluntary, and that failure to attend incurred no financial costs, this was a strikingly positive outcome.

However, we did not observe a significant year-on-year increase in delegate numbers. We can only speculate as to the reasons for this – however, given the relatively small size of our regional 'pool', it is possible that a two-year cycle of events may have been sufficient to approach saturation levels for the contemporary cohort of doctoral students.

It was also gratifying to note that the events attracted interest from across the UK (and indeed internationally) – circulation of the event publicity on discipline-specific discussion lists led to enquiries from Europe and the US, for example). In the first year of operation, delegate registrations from within the target region were slightly below capacity so we were able to include a handful of doctoral students from elsewhere in the UK; however, by the second year of the programme events were over-subscribed.

## Evaluation of the pilot programme

We adopted a number of measures to seek to assess the effectiveness of this pilot programme. Quantitative measures were restricted to monitoring student participation rates (see above) – we did not attempt any assessment of student performance, not least because we felt this would have been inappropriate given the collegiate approach taken and the deliberately (indeed, necessarily) indeterminate nature of the learning outcomes involved.

Evaluation data included the use of feedback forms at all programme events, and these indicated a very high level of participant satisfaction (see appendix 2). For example, the residential workshops were rated as 'good / very good' on average by 90% of respondents (from a 70% response rate), with the equivalent ratings for individual sessions varying from 76% to 94%.

Qualitative feedback from delegates on the programme was also overwhelmingly positive. Common terms used to describe the programme included 'helpful / useful / valuable / informative'; 'friendly / supportive'; 'motivating', 'thought provoking', 'reassuring' and 'relevant'. Many participants also testified to the benefits of the networking opportunities the events afforded. A particularly noteworthy outcome was that two students who had attended a previous event explicitly referred in later feedback to the benefits they had obtained from the earlier event, and that this had encouraged/enabled them to participate in subsequent programme activities.

Of course, feedback also included some criticisms and suggestions for improvement. Many of these were highly individualistic (as one might expect, given the nature of humanities research), but two common themes can arguably be discerned:

- **Subject-specificity.** In several cases, it was felt that the programme still failed to provide sufficiently nuanced support for the individual (sub)disciplines: specifically, for HPSTM and theology / biblical studies (in our programme ?as in many academic departments?these were 'clustered' with philosophy and with religious studies respectively). On the one hand, this arguably strengthens the mandate for a discipline-focused approach. On the other, it highlights the challenges of providing a suitably finegrained programme: in each case, our 'clustering' was motivated by considerations of feasibility (given the small size of the relevant research communities) rather than a disregard for the disciplinary differences involved.
- **Expert input.** One respondent expressed a wish for a higher proportion of senior staff amongst our academic speakers (although this may reflect an assumption that academic expertise is correlated with age!), and several commented that interactive workshops risked 'pooling ignorance' rather than advancing understanding. This could be construed as a challenge to the pedagogy underpinning the programme's approach?namely, that a dialogic rather than didactic approach is more appropriate in fields lacking a strong shared paradigm for research (Becher 1994, Smeby 1996, Neumann 2001). Arguably the alignment between the programme's objectives and its methods would benefit from being reviewed and/or communicated more clearly.

It is also worth noting, however, that both of these critical points were to some degree counterbalanced by feedback from other participants, who found value in the learning to be gained from their peers and/or from other disciplines. Greater clarity from both organisers and participants regarding the expected learning outcomes from the programme might help to mitigate these tensions in the future. We also sought to probe the programme's potential impact on students' learning. We designed a 'reflective evaluation form' which was circulated to delegates at each residential event?this consisted in a series of questions which invited students to reflect on what they had learned from the workshop sessions, and how they might apply this to their future research practices (see appendix 3). This was principally intended as a tool to support students' action planning; however, we also invited students to share their completed forms with us (on an optional basis), and many of them did so. These provided a valuable insight into what students felt they had learned from the programme, and as such formed a useful additional evaluative resource for us. Finally, we also contacted all Directors of Graduate Studies in participating departments at the end of the pilot programme, to invite their feedback on whether/how the project had benefited their students, and to seek suggestions for future developments. As with the needs analysis, this was undertaken by means of an informal email conversation rather than a structured survey. Approximately half of the participating departments responded, and all were extremely positive about the scheme?comments included:

- Our research students have enjoyed it and benefited from it a great deal.
- I found it a particularly enjoyable event to take part in myself as it was an opportunity to raise some of the practical issues involved in developing a career in academia which are not formally part of the academic teaching and supervision for individual research students? The feedback I had from students who participated was uniformly excellent. They enjoyed the opportunity to meet students from other institutions and to compare experiences, especially as for those who do go on to professional academic life, these are likely to be their future colleagues... The overall effect was greatly encouraging to them, as they saw that the difficulties are real and shared, but also that there are ways to cope?
- It helped [students] to think about their long-term teaching goals and the ways in which their research fit in with their teaching? It is a helpful resource and it assisted in helping PGs from across the country to meet each other and to compare notes on their studies.

Of course such feedback, however glowing, provides only anecdotal perceptions that the programme is of genuine benefit. However it was unfeasible, given the small scale and short lifespan of the programme to date, to obtain more robust measures of, for example, any impact on doctoral students' retention or completion rates, let alone their graduate career progression.

In this respect, we were particularly encouraged by the positive assessments from academic staff? whereas students typically have only a single experience of doctoral study against which to judge the programme (namely, their own), many of the staff involved have a wealth of experience of supervising doctoral research, and thus arguably are in a position to offer a more informed judgement of the merits or otherwise of the programme. In this regard, it is also particularly encouraging to receive independent confirmation that the programme is seen as a useful complement to existing provision by universities, departments and individual supervisors, and that it is judged to support both students' current research needs and their preparation for future academic practice.

## **Reflections on the pilot programme and lessons learned**

Given the success of this pilot programme, it is instructive to seek to identify the factors which contributed to its effectiveness; and I will argue that the most important feature in this regard was its disciplinary focus.

Feedback shows that both staff and students saw the programme as relevant to their needs because it was subject-specific, in contrast to generic institutional-level initiatives (of which many staff and students alike expressed scepticism as to their relevance and benefit). The event sessions which received most positive responses from students were those which were led by discipline specialists; and, in mirror image of this, the only significant negative feedback attracted by the programme was with regard to sessions which did not succeed in achieving a sufficiently fine-grained disciplinary focus. Of course, such judgements may well do a disservice to the genuine benefits to be gained from more generic programmes; nonetheless, students do not obtain these benefits if they do not perceive the value of engaging with such schemes? as Jenkins observes: 'unless we demonstrate this disciplinary focus, most? will ignore what we have to offer' (1996:56).

However, the benefits of this approach go beyond the merely tactical consideration of 'enticing clients through the door'; there is also a (small, but increasing) body of research evidence to indicate that a discipline-based approach enables such programmes to be tailored more effectively to the distinctive features and demands of the subject, and to the learning needs and identities of its students and indeed staff (for helpful reviews of the literature, see Jenkins 1996, Neumann 2001). Most of these studies of discipline-based pedagogy are based on undergraduate learning and teaching and/or staff development programmes; but doctoral study is no less shaped by its discipline, and thus, as Becher summarises, 'effective research training should necessarily take such differences into account' (1994:158).

It is thus, I argue, crucial to the success of such a programme both to create and communicate its disciplinary focus to one's target audience; and in this respect, I consider that the involvement of academic staff at every stage of our programme was of critical importance. Discipline academics had contributed to the design of the programme, so knew that it had been tailored to their students' needs, and therefore were happy to recommend that their students take part.

Sessions were led by discipline specialists with relevant expertise? for example, a workshop on publishing was led by the editor of one of the leading international philosophy journals? and so students were assured that input would be provided by recognised experts in their field.

Thus the programme was? and was seen to be? designed and delivered by discipline specialists, for discipline specialists. Not only did this ensure the relevance of the content of individual sessions; it also granted the additional benefit of enriching participants' research network by giving them the opportunity to meet and learn from colleagues from other departments. Neither of these outcomes could have been achieved to the same extent by a more generic approach.

It is possible also that the imprimatur of AHRC support for the scheme may also have contributed to its positive perception by staff and students alike? it will be interesting to discover whether the programme will retain a similar high standing in the future as we seek to maintain and indeed expand the programme on a self-sustaining basis. We were

also pleasantly surprised by the level of enthusiasm evinced by doctoral students for such professional development opportunities. Not only did they commit time and travel costs to attending our pilot programme?often participating in more than one event (as outlined above)?but many expressed a wish to see more such opportunities made available to them. Indeed, our pilot project has already resulted in a number of such 'spin-off' events:

- A group of students who attended the pilot events have independently set up their own regional research network to maintain and develop further the links and shared learning they gained from our pilot programme.
- As a result of attendance on the programme by members of the British Postgraduate Philosophy Association (BPPA), the Subject Centre for PRS has now been invited to contribute a regular 'professional development strand' at future BPPA events.

Both of these developments indicate a genuine appetite amongst doctoral students for such professional development opportunities?the latter, in particular, suggests that such activity is being seen as an integral part of postgraduate life and preparation for future academic practice.

Of course, the pilot programme presented some challenges too.

The first of these is a corollary of one of its success factors?namely, the integral role played by practising academics in delivering the programme. The quality of the programme was thus dependent on being able to identify academic staff with suitable expertise who were able and willing to contribute. Given that academic staff were being asked to give freely of their time and expertise, this required a degree of good will (hopefully facilitated by a sense that their contribution would secure a clear benefit for their department and wider academic community). In light of this fact, and the relatively small research community involved, identifying and securing the contribution of appropriate participants sometimes took a significant amount of effort and persuasion on the part of the Subject Centre staff who co-ordinated the programme.

In co-ordinating the overall programme content, we also had to balance potentially conflicting considerations of achieving consistency and coherence with the need to grant our academic contributors the freedom and flexibility to determine the content and methods of individual sessions as they felt to be appropriate?although the feedback from the pilot gives us no reason to consider that this approach undermined the quality of the programme.

Another concern was how to ensure that the pilot programme was accessible to as many of our target audience as possible. This is a particular challenge in PRS disciplines, which tend to have a diverse research student population with a high proportion of mature, part time and distance learners. Notwithstanding these considerations, we decided to proceed by means of a combination of day-long and residential face-to-face events, in order to maximise delegates' opportunities to meet and share experiences with colleagues from other departments ?and feedback affirmed that students did value this opportunity. (Indeed, one student stated that this structure of fewer, more intensive events was more conducive to the demands of their research than the common model of a seminar series, which requires a more long-term, fragmented time commitment.) Nevertheless, cost considerations may in future lead us to reconsider the current model in favour of a series of shorter events, which are less expensive to host. (The AHRC's funding underwrote the costs of our residential events in the first two years, but these may be more difficult to justify if the programme is to be fully self-financing in the future. We are currently consulting our partner HEIs in the pilot programme to explore funding options for continuation of the scheme.)

We also trialled a weblog as a complementary means of maintaining regional network links between doctoral students in the participating departments, but this has not proved popular. Again, we can only speculate as to the reasons for this, but it may be due to the fact that such technologies are, to date, little used in our disciplines, and as such it would require significantly more support in order to enable students to engage with this approach more fruitfully.

## **Looking forward: future developments in preparing for academic practice**

## in the arts and humanities

Across the UK HE sector, there is increasing interest in, and support for, enhancing our provision of professional development opportunities for doctoral students. Perhaps one of the most significant discoveries we made during our pilot programme is that there is also a genuine appetite amongst postgraduate research students themselves for such opportunities?as long as they are seen to be of relevance and high quality. In common with the rest of the university population (staff and students), doctoral students often need to juggle multiple commitments, both within and beyond their life in higher education (e.g. Becher et al. 1994: chapter 9). Consequently, they often do not have the luxury of engaging with programmes from which they are uncertain of obtaining direct benefits (see also Johnston 1997 for discussion of the impact of the multiple demands of academic life on engagement in professional development).

In this context, I have argued that it is important to adopt a discipline- based approach to our research skills development provision, in order to maximise its relevance and benefit, and thus student (and staff) engagement with the programme. I have further suggested that the active involvement of practising academics in both the design and the delivery of such provision is critical to achieving such a disciplinary focus.

In order to secure this level of academic involvement, of course, it is crucial that academic staff are likewise convinced of the benefits of the scheme. We hope that the feedback from the pilot programme will help to achieve this; but it would be valuable also to develop more robust measures of impact where possible?and to this end, we intend to undertake some longitudinal case studies of the 'graduates' from our pilot programme, to ascertain their progress and the extent to which they consider that participating in the programme has helped them to achieve their aims.

Such a discipline-focused approach should thus help to improve doctoral researchers' preparedness for academic practice by enhancing both the relevance of, and student engagement with, the professional development opportunities on offer. However, this alone is not sufficient to ensure maximal impact?we also need to ensure that access to such opportunities is as widespread as possible. As we have already observed, many national or institutional research training schemes have been restricted to RC-funded students (who constitute a minority of the UK research student population) and/or those in STEM subjects?both of which groups evidence a higher rate of retention and completion than is typical of humanities students, although there is to date no research evidence to confirm any causal basis for this correlation (HEFCE 2005).<sup>8</sup>

Although it is not possible to do more than to gesture towards this substantial topic within the confines of this paper, it is my contention that?notwithstanding the high level of research, policy and pedagogic development activity on widening and increasing participation in higher education?relatively little attention has been paid to supporting and promoting the diversity of our postgraduate student population (and hence, potentially, that of the academics of the future). Expanding the reach of research training provision could prove an important factor in ensuring that we provide equal opportunities and support for all current research students and future academics, thus promoting quality and diversity in all aspects of higher education.

We are under no illusions that our small initiative in philosophical and religious studies can alone effect significant change in this regard; however, we hope that, by co-ordinating such a regional programme, the Subject Centre for PRS might help to 'level the playing field' in this regard and move towards greater equality of support and development opportunities for all students in our disciplines, irrespective of their access to funding or the size and resource capacity of their host department/institution. Given the success of the regional pilot, we hope to expand our programme to other UK regions in 2007/8 and beyond?and have already received expressions of interest from a number of departments in participating in a similar scheme.

We also intend to continue to refine the content and delivery of the programme?for example, expanding its remit to cover other aspects of academic practice such as leadership and management (thus seeking to provide a more holistic programme of academic development, as advocated by Johnston 1997); and increasing the availability of written resource materials as well as face-to-face events in order to improve accessibility for research students who may not

be able to attend the workshops. The development of a repository of resource materials should also help to mitigate the demands placed on individual academic contributors to prepare all their session materials 'from scratch'.

Arguably, more could be done to develop a 'joined up' approach to supporting doctoral students in their research and preparation for academic practice, linking up the various initiatives and opportunities available to present a coherent and comprehensive 'package' from the researcher's perspective. The Subject Centre for PRS will continue to work with regional contacts in UK GRAD and institutional graduate training schools in this regard.

There is also scope for more work in providing support and development opportunities for individual research supervisors who support doctoral students on a one-to-one basis. Arguably, this is a crucial complement to any student-focused development opportunities, given the importance of the student-supervisor relationship in doctoral studies (see especially Becher et al. 1994). Such opportunities are at present largely generic in nature, and in 2007/8 the Subject Centre for PRS will explore demand for a subject-specific supervisors' forum, which would mirror the approach piloted by our programme for research students—namely, emphasising the 'support network' dimension and the opportunities it offers to learn from peers and senior colleagues, rather than offering formal 'training'. Again, we believe that an approach which is thus sensitive to the distinctive features of individual disciplines is critical to ensuring both academic engagement and the relevance and quality of provision.

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