



# **ESRC Consultation: Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences**

## **Response from the Chartered Association of Business Schools**

13 October 2020

The Chartered Association of Business Schools is pleased to submit a response to the ESRC's consultation on the review of the PhD in the Social Sciences. The research community across our membership recognises the vital importance of ensuring that doctoral programmes are rigorous and impactful, and that the unique challenges accompanying doctoral study require special consideration. Our members are therefore keen to engage with the ESRC on this important review.

**Q1 In your view, how well do UK social science doctoral programmes equip students with the skills needed for their future careers? How competitive are they internationally?**

Responses from Chartered ABS member business schools note that the length of the typical UK doctoral programme is typically short compared to international standards, and our members are in favour of a move to a four year programme with a focus on research training in the first year. In Accounting and Finance, for instance, some Business Schools have extended their Accounting and Finance PhDs to a fourth year so that graduates would be on a level footing with those from the U.S. This in turn creates pressure for all Accounting & Finance doctoral programmes to move to four years with Business Schools then challenged as to whether this should be the norm for all programmes. The UK's withdrawal from the EU undermines our attractiveness to EU researchers, and perhaps also to researchers from outside the EU. Our members have also noted that in some disciplines the stipend relative to the cost of living does not always enable the recruitment of the very best PhD candidates.

The three year PhD registration period also does not provide enough time for students to develop other academic skills and softer skills that they are expected to develop on their own. The shorter duration also means that students are often not well-trained in how to write globally recognised 4\* research and do not have the time to produce such high-quality publications before graduation, thus harming their academic career prospects. There is also little room for language training which is invaluable in increasing graduates' global competitiveness.

Feedback from our members reveals that there is an increasing need for students to have technological proficiency and data analysis skills to deal with large datasets, and this isn't necessarily in place when students begin their PhD. Affordable and easy access to important datasets for research purposes can also be an issue. Equally, skills related to engagement and impact are assumed to be picked up along the way rather than being taught, and more could be done to develop students' skills in this area. This may be more about what is taught in Master's degrees rather than necessarily something that should be considered as part of the PhD programme. Either way, these skills need to be taught at some point before completion of the programme.

Whilst UK doctoral programmes are very effective at producing specialists, they could arguably be better at producing graduates with an effective command of a broader range of core research skills. However, whilst the programmes remain at a duration of three years, students will often feel overwhelmed and are unlikely to take-up the opportunities of broad training that are offered.

A rarely recognised but important contributor in the doctoral arena is the professional doctoral degree, the Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA). Under this programme a researcher is often embedded in an organisation with the purpose of bringing about practical change through sound academic research. However, despite their utility to industry and policy, and to those who wish to pursue an industry career, DBAs can be perceived as a 'lower form' of doctorate which rarely results in globally recognised 4\* research.

The potential for DBA research to generate impact and make a significant contribution to the UK research ecosystem and improvement to the economy has not been fully recognised and we believe

this qualification deserves greater investment, recognition, and support from government. This could potentially include a scheme which offers companies tax incentives if they fund applied doctorates such as a DBA. In addition, as the outcomes of DBAs are often intended to benefit an organisation, it is worth considering a matched funding model for DBAs.

It is very difficult to offer a blanket answer to the question on international comparability. Doctoral programmes, wherever they are undertaken, depend on the skills and reputation of the supervisor and department in which the PhD is undertaken. Where these are strong, PhDs from the UK can be world leading. The question of 'career competitiveness' is difficult to answer in the absence of longitudinal data on the career destinations of PhD graduates over a period of several years.

## **Q2. How can UK doctoral programmes best prepare graduates for non-academic career pathways?**

PhDs are research intensive and our members believe that they should remain focused on making new contributions to theory. While some PhD students may make immediate links with industry, producing theoretically driven empirical work, others will take a more conceptual stance and we believe there should be room for both models.

University research training and supporting infrastructure are naturally more focused on supporting and preparing students for an academic career but our members feel that more can be done to enable doctoral students to develop the skills and attributes required for non-academic careers. Funded internships/secondments during the doctoral programme as well as placements in industry could be highly beneficial and act as an extension to the PhD researcher's methodology training.

Industry sponsored doctorates/professional doctorates should be brokered with increased rigor and governed by better quality frameworks. However, these opportunities are often resource-intensive and it would be prohibitively expensive to provide funded placements/internships for the majority of postgraduate researchers. The location of internships can also be a practical and financial obstacle if the host organisation is based far away from the student's place of study. Furthermore, if PhD programmes retain the three year format students are likely to turn down such opportunities on the basis that they do not have enough time or 'head space'.

The development of longer-term relationships with non-academic partners would be helpful, particularly where the non-academic partner contributes to the skills training. On a similar note, funding could be made available for supervisor-led studentships that require a non-academic partner. Members of the Business & Management community have also noted that UKRI PhD funding schemes involving non-academic partners are complicated to set up and apply for and would benefit from streamlining.

To bridge the divide between the academic and non-academic worlds, PhD students should be encouraged to consider the impact of their research on 'real world' problems – that is, problems as experienced in practice or defined by practitioners as important problems. The boundaries between universities and other sectors are becoming increasingly porous, and researchers of the future will need to be adept in navigating those boundaries. The continued focus on 4\* research as the only acceptable outcome of doctoral studies – rather than research focused on real-world impact – is a further barrier to supporting doctoral students to pursue a non-academic career path.

Rather than offering parallel paths of training for 'academic' and 'non-academic' careers, doctoral programmes should encourage all researchers to develop a wide range of skills applicable in a range of career settings. These certainly include skills in leadership, resilience, project management, and team-working. More could also be done to improve the careers information given to doctoral

graduates as few doctoral programmes offer doctoral-specific career advice and it is often confined to generic guidance on CV writing and interview skills. Students could be offered much more information on the types of careers available to social science doctorates.

### **Q3. How can social science doctoral programmes best prepare graduates to work collaboratively?**

There are several potential approaches that would be effective in preparing social science doctoral students to work collaboratively. Working as part of research groups, particularly interdisciplinary research groups, would be helpful as these often entail cross-organisation and cross-sectoral research projects and interactions with different stakeholders. Interdisciplinarity can also be facilitated by encouraging interdisciplinary topics for theses and through cross-departmental supervision.

We would also suggest measures that encourage PhD students to play an active part in research centres and research groups in their discipline so that the postgraduate research programme is an integral part of the department or research cluster community. PhD programmes of a longer duration, allowing space and time for collaborative work at earlier career stages, would improve doctoral students' ability to work in teams. Changes to IP structures in doctoral contracts may also be useful, as would more studentships linked to collaborative research projects. International collaborative projects would also help to equip social science graduates with collaborative working skills but at present the funding for this type of doctoral work is quite limited. It is most often the case that students have to find their own projects and thus less collaboration is needed.

There would be value in increasing the opportunities for universities to use Doctoral Training Partnerships to recruit teams of postgraduate researchers across several institutions to work on interconnected problems. This would make it easier to embed co-authorship as a normal expectation in doctoral study. The move to the journal-format thesis has allowed for the introduction of more collaboration in the development of a PhD, although it brings with it added pressures within the time-limited PhD.

### **Q4. How can doctoral student health and wellbeing be safeguarded?**

Mental health and well-being is a particular concern for doctoral students given the range of challenges involved in undertaking a PhD. Doctoral students often work in isolation and need to have a part-time job to fund their studies. The worry of debt can heavily impact their well-being, in addition to the anxieties about whether they will be able to complete the programme on-time and before their funding runs out. Securing publications before the end of their PhD is an additional source of worry.

We believe it is the role of universities to safeguard the well-being of their students whose care is vital. Due to the isolating nature of PhD study, regular meetings can ensure some form of connection between PhD students and we would advocate that universities offer plenty of opportunities for developing social networks, such as through the Student Union, PhD cohort representatives, and organising residential weeks/summer schools.

Institutional governance is needed to nurture trusting and respectful relationships between PhD candidates and supervisors, and to enable PhD candidates' integration with wider academic and non-university communities. PhD supervisors need to be given enhanced training so they can identify the earliest signs that their PhD students are not flourishing and what steps they need to take to minimise unfavourable outcomes, including guidance in how to provide health and wellbeing support. PhD supervisors also need to be trained in advising PhD students on the appropriate

training pathways available to them. As the challenges affecting PhD students may be different from those normally facing undergraduates or postgraduates, it would be worth considering the use of a well-being service designed to support PhD students.

The Business & Management community also believes that more needs to be done in respect to Covid-19 and the impact on doctoral students' well-being. The UKRI response of extending grants for UKRI grant-funded research and fellowships is welcomed but more support will likely be needed to fill the gap where doctoral candidates are not UKRI funded.

#### **Q5. How can we ensure a diverse and inclusive population of social science doctoral students?**

All HEIs should have open, transparent and fair processes for recruitment, supervision, training and assessment of doctoral students. They also have to be accountable for both the processes and the outcomes from those processes and they have to assure their key stakeholders in this process. International students are attracted to PhDs from the UK's business schools and therefore programmes are likely to already have a very diverse cohort.

That said, more targeted support could be given to doctoral students from minority/excluded backgrounds. For example, applicants from minority/excluded backgrounds may not have previously considered an academic career and therefore not engaged in training in the research skills required to develop strong applications and could benefit from mentoring and guidance on the ESRC website.

Universities could consider introducing mentoring schemes to ensure that research careers are better understood by undergraduates and taught Masters' students, especially in target groups. A more diverse population of doctoral students could potentially be achieved through dissemination about doctoral programmes across the diverse range of student cohorts at an earlier stage in their studies.

Improving the representation of different groups in doctoral programmes may be helped by a degree of flexibility in the interpretation of the criteria applied when assessing the suitability of candidates for doctoral study (e.g. due recognition of the importance of prior professional experience). Part-time routes into doctoral programmes should also be encouraged with improved provision for part-time and (in some contexts) distance-learning to enable those with family or caring responsibilities to navigate doctoral study successfully. It would also help if the amount of up-front payments made by doctoral students for fieldwork and conference costs is minimised.

Role models for doctoral students are critical. More diversity is needed in academic seniors: minority ethnic groups and women. HEI funders could do more to develop collaborative support mechanisms aimed at these groups, for example, extra funding to develop skills and careers. This support should not be confined to the process of recruitment to Doctoral programmes, but to what happens after completion.

#### **Q6. What aspects of current UK social science doctoral programmes could be developed to ensure they remain world leading?**

There are three main suggestions we would like to propose. First, that funding and support be provided to establish and strengthen doctoral programmes that involve visiting or linking to other institutions to develop international connections. We would welcome some consideration of how joint/dual PhDs with international partners could be supported through Doctoral Training Partnerships. This will help in terms of impact and the continued high reputation of UK PhDs globally, and will also help employability for Doctoral students.

Second, enhanced training on formulating research questions to ensure they are well formulated from the outset. This area can be missing from many research methods training courses and is possibly not given enough emphasis in the supervisory process. This will then ensure rigour of methodology.

Third, we suggest a transition away from three year doctoral programmes as the norm towards a four year programme with a strong emphasis on research training in year one. This will make it possible for doctoral students to balance the demand for timely completion with the need to publish, to gain international or non-academic work experience, and to develop the impact of their research. It should also have a positive effect on doctoral students' well-being.

### **About the Chartered ABS**

The Chartered ABS is the voice of the UK's business and management education sector and our members consist of 121 business schools and higher education providers across the UK, as well as affiliate stakeholders, corporate members and international partners.

The UK's business and management education sector produces vital research, for example, how best to disseminate new technologies to SMEs; the impact of the current crisis on front line workers; calculating the trade-off between short and long-term benefits in policy-making; informing policy to tackle corruption in professional sports; transforming palliative and end-of-life care for service users; cutting carbon footprints in the service sector.

Business and Management represents 1 in 5 university students and contributes £3.25bn to the UK economy. Its management students go on to lead global businesses and its entrepreneurs contribute to our dynamic economy. Its research has an impact across society and helps to turn our capacity for invention into viable businesses.

While MBAs may enjoy the highest profile of all business school programmes, they make up a very small proportion of what business schools do. In terms of student numbers, MBAs make up less than 5% of the over 325,000 students studying in business schools in the UK, and this doesn't take in to account short programmes, often offered under the umbrella of Executive Education, which caters for an increasing number of open and bespoke programmes delivered to employees in both large and small firms.