

QAA Viewpoint

Doctoral research students: what should they expect from their academic experience?

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Almost 100,000 students studied for a doctoral research degree in the UK during 2014-15 ([data source: HESA](#)). This represents a significant body of students who, arguably, have not had the same level of attention as their undergraduate counterparts in recent and proposed higher education reforms. What sort of experience should these students expect and what do they actually get at the moment?

Characteristics of doctoral research degrees

Doctoral research programmes can be practice or discipline-based. The former are often the choice of mid-career professionals, in subjects such as business or engineering. The latter are by far the most common doctoral awards, involving a research project under the supervision of an academic peer, leading to a PhD. Candidates are typically assessed on their thesis, portfolio, artefact or composition, and by oral examination (viva).

The particular [characteristics of doctoral degrees](#) are set out in Part A of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). A core characteristic is that doctoral candidates should generate new knowledge or original research, or apply existing research in a new way. Doctoral graduates should have the ability to:

- discover, analyse, evaluate, manage, conserve and communicate an ever-increasing volume of knowledge from a range of sources
- think critically about problems in order to produce innovative solutions and create new knowledge.

That process of discovery and generating new knowledge demands a thriving and active research environment. The Quality Code emphasises the fundamental importance of a high quality research environment, both in the *Doctoral Degree Characteristics Statement* and in [Chapter B11: Research Degrees](#), which suggests that:

‘Higher education providers accept research students only into an environment that provides support for doing and learning about research, and where excellent research, recognised by the relevant subject community, is occurring.’

UK higher education has a world-class research base, the quality of which is assessed through the [Research Excellence Framework](#) (REF). The most recent REF results were published in 2014; of the 154 UK universities assessed, 30 per cent of their submissions were judged to be world-leading and a further 46 per cent to be internationally excellent.

Excellent research may not, however, automatically translate into a great experience for doctoral research students. The [2015 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey](#) by the Higher Education Academy found that, while the vast majority of students (82 per cent) were satisfied with their experience of the research programme, when this was broken down into different areas, research culture was rated the lowest, with 60 per cent of respondents agreeing that they had opportunities to become involved in the wider research community beyond their department.

Findings from QAA's reviews

QAA reviews have found that higher education institutions provide a good student experience overall. QAA's analysis of its Higher Education Reviews of universities and colleges in England, Northern Ireland and Wales during 2013-16 shows that higher education institutions performed very well: 97 per cent received satisfactory review outcomes in all areas and around 30 per cent received one or more commendations.

For postgraduate students specifically, however, the three years of Higher Education Review ([2013-14](#), [2014-15](#) and 2015-16) identified a number of areas for development to improve the student experience in some institutions. These include:

- the supervision, development and induction of postgraduate research students
- the breadth of subject and supervisory expertise available to research students
- the delivery of research degrees through partnership arrangements
- the collection of and response to feedback from research students.

A number of features of good practice were also identified in relation to research degrees during that period, including:

- high quality research environments at several institutions
- opportunities to study internationally to add richness to the research student experience
- integrated approaches to student support to enable a wide range of student needs to be met, including those of research students
- monitoring research students' employability rates.

QAA's view: what doctoral students should expect

QAA sets out the higher education sector's expectations for doctoral research students in the *Doctoral Degree Characteristics Statement* and the Quality Code, *Chapter B11*. QAA review outcomes and research by other bodies have found that, while the overall student experience is very good for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, there is room to improve this further for doctoral research programmes. QAA will be conducting further work over the coming months, through its [Quality Enhancement Network](#) and Postgraduate Advisory Group, to explore and better understand the doctoral student experience, and will share relevant findings with government and sector partners.

The [Higher Education and Research Bill](#) currently making its way through parliament proposes to change the higher education research landscape by combining the research function of the Higher Education Funding Council for England with the seven current research councils, to create a new body, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). A recent [Department for Education publication](#) (PDF, 309KB) helpfully provides clarity on joint-working between UKRI and the new Office for Students.

In the context of this shifting research infrastructure, and policy more focused on undergraduates, it is important that doctoral research students are also supported and valued. The new knowledge and skills they generate can continue to invigorate the UK economy and enhance the UK higher education sector's reputation around the world.