

## Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee

### International Benchmarking: Research Degrees

#### Title

**PhD Students' Association at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh**

**Please give a brief description of the case study including which theme(s) it relates to (please see list attached). It would be helpful if this could include the developmental stage the practice is at, i.e. whether it is new or established, for example.**

This case study fits broadly into themes (a) and (c), with particular relevance to those areas which rely on the formation of a PhD community within the institution, such as supporting international and part-time students and promoting collaboration and interdisciplinarity.

As a small institution based on one campus QMU has an almost unique opportunity to forge links between our PhD students. For the past four years QMU has been operating a student led PhD Association which aims to take on a number of roles within the PhD community; including pastoral support, promotion and development of essential postgraduate skills and training, and the all important social events which propagate a sense of community and therefore a supportive environment in which collaborative working can flourish.

The PhD Association now plays an integral role in the induction of the new PhD students each year and also organises an annual conference for PhD students which is open to staff and students from QMU and other institutions. Both of these events have led to the PhD Association being allocated a budget and therefore a sense of fiscal autonomy from the University.

All PhD and Professional Doctorate students are automatically members of the Association and a number of 'Co-chairs' are identified from the membership annually. Normally the Co-chairs are first year students who have the time and drive to carry out the role and we have found that this also helps to gel the new intake of students as a cohort by giving them a sense of inclusion in the PhD community.

#### **A brief outline of the reasons behind the development, its purposes and benefits.**

The idea behind the PhD association was to give the PhD students a sense of ownership of both their own learning and their social network.

#### **Induction:**

At the beginning of each academic year, the PhD Association Co-chairs organise and oversee a series of events and social activities aimed to introduce the incoming PhD students to life at QMU. The decision to undertake a PhD can often be an intimidating experience, even more so for students who are new to Scotland or the UK. The induction events are held not only to introduce students to their new

academic environment and fellow students but also to help ease the transition into their new role and surroundings.

The Association organise a number of social events throughout the week to complement the academic and administrative induction – including bus tours of Edinburgh, meals and nights out and tours of the campus. They are free to allocate their allotted budget as they see fit.

#### **Conference:**

The annual QMU PhD Student Conference organized by the PhD Association is a one day conference intended to engage the wider research community with the research activities currently being conducted by QMU's PhD students. As attending and presenting at conferences is a key component of promoting research, the conference aims to provide PhD and Professional Doctorate students with the professional experience of attending and/or presenting at a conference as well as ensuring a safe space where people can build their confidence and experience of these events. Each conference generally operates under a particular theme. This year, the PhD Student Conference will be held in November 2011 and will operate under the key theme of Making Connections and includes three additional subthemes: 1) Communicating research 2) Relevance of research beyond academia and 3) Professional networking during and after research.

#### **Box Lunch Tuesdays:**

The PhD Association holds a monthly lunch for all PhD students called Box Lunch Tuesdays. On the first Tuesday of every month, PhD students are invited to meet in a pre-designated room to have lunch together. This event is designed to strengthen the social ties among PhD students in order to develop a more close and participative PhD community at QMU. It also gives PhD students a chance to catch up with each other as well as bring up any issues, either academic or otherwise that they would like to discuss, all in the comfort of a safe and supportive environment.

#### **Support Networks:**

The PhD Association provides PhD students with a support network made up of other fellow PhD students. This is extremely important in that undertaking a PhD can often leave students feeling stressed or overworked and having a network of other students to confide in or discuss pertinent issues can be vital to ensuring successful completion of the PhD. The Co-chairs also run confidential one to one 'surgeries', every three months, where students can go to discuss any issues they may be having regardless of whether these may be academic or personal.

#### **Membership of the Research Strategy Committee:**

Each of the Research Strategy Committee meetings, which are held on a monthly basis, are attended by two members of the PhD Association who then report back to the rest of the association on the topics discussed. The RSC is a standing committee of Senate. These meetings help keep the postgraduate student body informed about decisions regarding the short and long term research goals as well as collective achievements of QMU. Crucially, it also offers the PhD students a voice at the top level of the institution when it comes to research strategy and policy.

**A brief outline of what works well, any particular challenges faced and how these were addressed.**

The greatest challenge of the PhD Association pertains to a sometimes limited participation in some of the social activities. The PhD Association covers a range of ages, disciplines, skills, interests, nationalities, and career stages. As such there is often a struggle to organise academic workshops, professional opportunities, and social activities that appeal to a large enough percentage of the PhD Association's members. In order to overcome this, the Co-chairs ensure that they maintain constant communication with members and promote a participative environment where students are free to make suggestions or voice any concerns they may have. The Co-chairs also make certain that the PhD Association members know how and where to contact the Co-chairs if needed and they are assured a confidential support network at all times regardless of attendance in events and activities run by the Association.