

Where next for Researcher Development? A discussion of work-based learning for postgraduate researchers

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As practitioners who work directly with postgraduate researchers (PGRs) in order to help them develop their non-research-related skills, we are constantly interpreting demand and shifting focus in researcher development; based around what it is that ensures researchers a brilliant future and what it is that researchers need to ensure they contribute to the economy of UK p.l.c. This paper aims to explore the current thinking regarding development requirements for this group, in the context of recent developments, an increasing awareness of the national skills agenda and our own practice, and to offer up some conclusions.

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At the recent Euroscience Open Forum in Dublin on 13 July 2012, in a session entitled “What is the future of the PhD in the 21st century?” Maresi Nerad, director of the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education at the University of Washington, talked

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about the world-wide changes in PhD training and noted that: “PhD trainers recognise that students will learn from a spectrum of sources and that they need to pick up skills other than knowledge of the topic of their PhD, as most will end up in careers outside academia.”

CIHE (2010) *Talent Fishing: What Businesses Want from Postgraduates* surveyed 100 HR Directors from the industrial and business services sectors. The employers’ feedback was summarised as postgraduates having a lack of “work-wisdom” and this was defined as:

...a loose collection of requirements based around commercial nous, understanding of the market, willingness to put aside personal interests to focus on what the business needs, team-working and maturity. On the whole, deficiencies in the behavioural skills such as employability and cultural fit, which businesses seek from all graduates nowadays, are more of a concern than deficiencies in technical skills.

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If this is the employers’ view of PGRs then it strongly suggests we have some work to do in the area of ‘behavioural skills’.

However, many employees in Higher Education (academic and non-academic alike) would not consider this kind of personal development as the *raison d’être* of a University. Who said PGRs would leave higher education with ‘commercial nous’? As useful and informative as the plethora of research in this area is, the feedback and stories from employers and postgraduates has often been defined and interpreted and then re-interpreted by a number of agencies to produce frameworks and foci for practitioners. Culminating in the danger that practitioners can end up responding to reductionist stereotypes of both ‘postgraduates’ and ‘employers’ alike.

The period 2004-11 saw the skills agenda at the level of PGR rise in prominence. There was ring-fenced funding for PGR training (‘Roberts money’) and a codified framework of expectations which set out a ‘shopping list’ (based on the RCUK, 2001) *Joint Skills Statement*) of skills which should be developed. These skills were divided into ‘research skills’ (a & b: research skills and techniques and research environment) and ‘transferable skills’ (c-g: research management, personal effectiveness, communication skills, networking and career management.) The QAA (2004) *Revised Code of Practice “Special Review of Good*

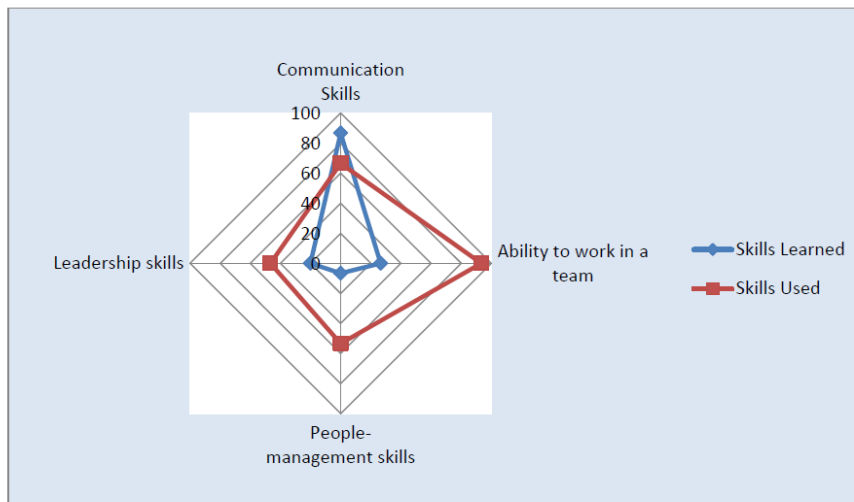
Practice in Research Degree Programmes” reinforced the message that it was highly desirable for PGRs to develop research-related, personal and employment related skills. The motive and the means were there for a rapid increase in the number, size and quality of graduate schools and a significant expansion in training courses designed for PGRs. *A Review of Graduate Schools in the UK*. Fuller, MP; Denicolo, P; Berry, D; Raven, C (UKCGE Lichfield UK, 2010) notes that the number of graduate schools had more than doubled between 1994 and 2004, as universities each developed their own training programmes which addressed the skills from the Joint Skills Statement. The tendency was to develop training in areas that were most easily defined and readily delivered to cohorts in a classroom. This meant that courses on communication skills, time management and cv-writing (amongst others) became staples of any Graduate School programme.

Meanwhile at a policy level postgraduate level skills have been invoked by (P. Warray, 2006) *Increasing the Economic impact of the Research Council*, (S. Leitch, 2006) *Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills - Final Report* and Smith, A. (2010) *One step beyond: Making the most of postgraduate education* (to name but a few) as increasingly required in our knowledge-driven economy, necessary for growth and drivers of economic recovery. The discourse around researcher skills development continued to change and evolve and ‘business-facing’, ‘employer engagement’ and ‘employability’ became more central to the core function of forward-looking, policy-responsive Graduate Schools.

At the same time Vitae published the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) in 2011 as an ‘evolution’ of the Joint Skills Statement which was developed in consultation with business, and which addressed some of the widely-accepted skills statement omissions such as leadership and management skills, team-working and IT skills. In a sense, the reductionist ‘shopping list’ approach had continued, with the list getting longer as ‘employability’ had been codified and added to it. A recent survey of PGR alumni from the Arts Faculty (majority graduated 2009 onwards), carried out at the University of Nottingham demonstrates this point. When asked to identify the skills in which they had elected to receive training and the skills they used in their current employment (mapped against the RDF), most PGR

alumni identified having received training in communication skills (mainly presentation skills) - in fact they felt they had received more training on this than they actually had cause to use.

However, the newly-mapped knowledge, behaviours and attributes set out in the RDF were clearly needed and had not been 'learnt' during their research degree.



These small-scale alumni survey results are corroborated in broader postgraduate employer surveys such as Connor, H., & Brown R. (2009) *The Value of Graduates and Postgraduates*, which identifies employability skills businesses need as: self-management, team working, problem solving, communication, literacy, numeracy, application of IT. CIHE (2010) *Talent Fishing: What Businesses Want from Postgraduates*, reports leadership skills as one area where “HEIs and businesses must work together to ensure postgraduates have the skills and knowledge that employers need.”

There is another key deficit which is often highlighted by alumni and employers alike in the survey data. In the alumni survey it was referred to as ‘life experience’, ‘work ethic’ and ‘office culture’. In Talent Fishing it was called ‘a lack of commercial awareness’, ‘a difficulty in adapting to non-academic environment’ and ‘limited work-experience.’ In this paper we adopt the umbrella term ‘work-wisdom’, which is referenced although not defined in the *Talent Fishing* report. We use it to circumscribe everything a PGR needs to be equipped with in order to effect ‘a smooth and effective transition between university and business environments.’ (Wilson, T. (2012) *A Review of Business–University Collaboration*: 1)

In a sense, 'work wisdom' is the key to unlocking the potential that Warry, Leitch and Smith saw in postgraduate-level skills.

There are challenges in adopting 'work wisdom' as a term and developing practice which addresses it. It sits uncomfortably in the codified world of the RDF. It cannot be 'delivered' to cohorts. It necessitates new, complex and multiple university-business interactions which typically have not been embedded within Graduate School activity.

At the same time we can argue that it is timely to invest resource and effort in overcoming these challenges which map clearly onto a policy imperative (at Research Council and Government level) to develop practice in researcher development which has the capacity to be tailored to individual student need (Vitae (2008) *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers*), to support and enhance student mobility between the research base and the user community (RCUK *Delivery Plan 2011/12*) and work effectively with business (Wilson, T. (2012) *A Review of Business–University Collaboration*).

At the present time, and arguably in response to the policy landscape, there is significant growth in placement activity at PGR level. It is reported in the government response to the Wilson Review that 71% of HEIs are currently seeking to expand their existing and work experience and internship offers.

The remainder of this paper will take an in-depth look at what placements can offer researcher development and specifically how well-supported and managed placements can create an opportunity for PGRs to develop *work wisdom*.

The Graduate School at the University of Nottingham started investing resource in PGR placements in 2008; in Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities to begin with. To date, we have facilitated around 300 postgraduates placed on short-term, flexible, discreet projects for a broad range of employers and employment sectors: local, national, international, small and medium sized enterprises, large organisations/corporations, public sector and third sector.

There are challenges; as facilitators of placements in this context we are keenly aware of the concerns around the potential impact placements may have on the PGR's primary goal; their research. There has been limited research at undergraduate level which, demonstrates the positive impact placements have on academic achievement but, as a relatively new phenomenon, there is yet to be similar research conducted at postgraduate level. Consequently we have structured placements, which are short-term (around 120hrs) and part-time (around 6-10hrs per week) in order to limit the risks associated with an increased workload.

In the context of these limitations, the depth and breadth of experience that placements have offered remains noteworthy.

In terms of the big picture, and the future direction of researcher development in the new Post-Roberts era, we have found that placements:

1. Can reunite the Roberts 'shopping list' of skills, knowledge, attributes, behavioural skills by offering experience-based learning which treats the postgraduate as a whole individual and tailors development opportunities to 'where they are at';
2. Help postgraduates to transition to post-PhD employment, within or outside academia;
3. Can be the start of longer-term relationships between university and business.

Specifically in terms of the contribution to PGR's *work wisdom*, by seeking to facilitate opportunities, which are employer-led, placements can also provide postgraduates with experience of understanding and interpreting a non-academic brief. Our experience has shown that even when employers provide a research-based project brief, their inherent expectations of the outcomes of the placement differ somewhat from the outcomes expected in an academic research environment.

Placements also offer experience of a particular field, role or work culture, and ultimately inform longer-term career decisions. PGRs may complete placements outside of their field of study or within it, either way the opportunity to gain vital information on the actuality of working in, for example, a small or large organisation or differing roles within publishing, has been quoted by our alumni as a key benefit of undertaking a placement.

Placements can offer insight into business protocols and 'standard practices' about which potential colleagues (often subordinate and with lesser qualifications) will have gained an understanding through experience in the work place. It is our perception, from the research and feedback from clients, that it is specifically this lack of understanding, which employers interpret as a 'lack of maturity'. Placements can also bridge the gap for PGRs, sometimes offering them their first opportunity to work closely with non-experts in a field, and can provide a non-academic context to their research, along with an understanding of its impact.

There are further benefits of placements, not directly contributing to the development of *work wisdom* within the PGR. These include changes in employer thinking as a result of placements; they gain a better understanding of the skills PGRs have to offer and often feel encouraged to invest in their development as a result of these interactions. As well as creating contacts and networks for PGRs to be able to access on completion of their research, placements often culminate in permanent work.

In conclusion, it is clear that placements can and do facilitate the development of all of the skills that are set out in the RDF and are articulated in recent employer and alumni surveys, but we have evidence that they do more than this. They offer PGRs the opportunity to become *work wise* by stepping between research and business and having an experience – for some their first experience – of the world of work earlier in their career. Evaluation data shows that this can be a double win. PGRs who have undertaken placements are more motivated, more conscious of their career options, clearer about their career aspirations and more aware of the skills they have and their training needs.

Placements are a relatively new but interesting departure for the individual researcher, where researcher development has been typically been mapped to cohort frameworks and delivered to groups. UK Research Councils are responding by structuring Doctoral Training Centres and Programmes to include placements as, in some cases compulsory, components of PhD programmes. This is essential in removing the barriers for PGRs who see the importance of developing their *work wisdom* and employability skills through placements.

Not all PhDs have this flexibility built in however, and the challenge, as we see it, for practitioners in researcher development is to ensure that where possible traditional-route postgraduate research students have equal access to these opportunities. This will not only support postgraduate employability in non-academic careers and help unlock the potential of postgraduates for business. It will also quite simply develop better researchers.

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