

Graduate Research Faculty Board: Strategic Plan 2008-2011

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2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This paper sets out the background to and the aims and action plan approved by the Graduate Research Faculty Board as its strategic plan for the period 2008-2011.

3. Preamble

- 3.1 The nature of the UK PhD is changing, as indicated by recent publications (e.g. Park 2007; Powell & Green 2007), national conferences on the future of the UK PhD, new instructions from research councils, and the advice offered by HEFCE Chief Executive, David Eastwood, to the Senior Management Group Residential in September 2008. The most likely major changes which we will experience in the next 5 to 10 years are:

- (a) Research Councils are increasingly moving to awarding PhD studentships as block-grants or doctoral training grants, rather than to individual students. Research Councils will increasingly attribute greater importance to the 'process' of the PhD (i.e. the development of the researcher) than the product (i.e. the thesis). Research Councils will put greater emphasis on the strategic interest to the UK economy and society in the allocation of studentships.

- (b) In return for funding, students will be expected to either teach (notably in the

social sciences, humanities and arts) or undertake collaborative research (in the sciences and engineering) for part of their time. This also creates clearer pathways for future careers and maps closely on to the USA model of doctoral training (Powell & Green 2007).

- (c) A 'professionalization' of the PhD processes, which may include the use of committees to decide on annual progression and which take on a 'duty of care' for the skill development and early career progression of PhD students. This may also include a greater degree of transparency through the publication of the thesis (or a thesis based on publications) and the use of public defence of the thesis.
- (d) David Eastwood also stated during his talk that he thought that the RAE-2008 was unlikely to achieve significant research concentration (since confirmed by the published results), and that the funding of research students could become a key method by which research intensity in the UK HE sector will be achieved. This will be reflected in the REF metrics. Building capacity in PGR activity will therefore be a prerequisite for Exeter as a research-intensive University.

4. Background: PhD Student Numbers

4.1 Currently, the University of Exeter lags behind its Top 10 competitors in the number of PhD students by about 0.75 PhD FTE per FTE academic staff, equivalent to 450 FTE PGR enrolled students (Top 10 by 2012 Report; see Table 1). Alongside the direct significance of this KPI in the drive to become a Top 10 University, the numbers of PGR students and PGR completions will also inform the REF to a degree that was not the case in the RAE (possibly 25% of the quality profile), and excellent research performance in the REF is predicated on increasing the numbers and completions of PGRs to levels comparable to our Top 10 competitors. PCMD has similarly defined its new Graduate School's strategic target to increase the numbers of PGRs to 3.5 per FTE academic staff.

4.2

PGRs Actual numbers 2007-08	FTE PGR	FTE Staff	PGR:Staff
Biosciences	94	48.83	1.92
Business	68	56.75	1.20
HuSS	212	135.74	1.56
Law	15	26.00	0.57
Physics	43	28.00	1.53
Psychology	30	33.93	0.88
SALL	110	76.5	1.43
SECAM	65	51.33	1.23
SELL	167	23.83	7.00
SHS	33	26.00	1.25
SoGAER	63	67.50	0.93
Total	897	600.24	1.49
Top 10 target (450 extra PGRs)	1347	600.24	2.24
PCMD (Exeter only)	72	39.00	1.85

Table 1: PGR: Staff ratios (all FTE numbers) – based on Actual PGR number for 2007-08 and Staff submitted to RAE 2008; Top 10 target (450 additional PGR students) for comparison only.

4.3 We already knew that one of the principal reasons for the low numbers of PhD students at Exeter was the relatively low research income from Research Councils feeding into doctoral training awards algorithms. In addition, the University has had, to date, no one with overall responsibility for PGR development.

No additional detailed analysis has been undertaken as to the underlying reasons for this shortfall, principally because this data is not publicly available, but the reasons for the relatively small number of PhD students at the University of Exeter are likely to include:

- (a) limited financial support provided by the University and a disparate system of awarding studentships, bursaries and student grants;
- (b) late release of financial support for PGRs in the planning process;
- (c) a somewhat conservative regulation system; a (real or perceived) slow and burdensome application process, especially where appropriate supervisors can not be readily identified;
- (d) diverse and sometimes ineffective ways of incentivising PhD supervisors, especially of international students with comparatively poor English language skills;
- (e) poor internal and external communication on PGR opportunities at the University;
- (f) an unconvincing reputation for delivering the next generation of academics.

4.4 Over the last 3 years, the number of PGR applicant to Exeter has risen by 47%, but the conversion of applicants to acceptances has only gone up by 3% in that same period. From the figures (see Table 2), it is clear that this is not due to a deterioration in the quality of applicants (with offers up by 35% between 2006 and 2008), but probably because:

- limited financial support offered to applicants with an offer from Exeter;
- variable (and possibly deteriorating) period of response.

Offers to applications ratios vary significantly between Schools, and vary significantly between Home/EU and International students (see Table 3).

4.5

	Applications	Offers	Rejects	Accepts	%Accepts
2006 cycle	1131	567	332	432	38%
2007 cycle	1388	623	390	460	33%
2008 cycle	1666	768	406	444	27%
06-08 change	47%	35%	23%	3%	

Table 2: Acceptances to Applications ratio for 2006-2008. Note: the difference between applications and (offers + rejects) are withdrawals.

4.6

School	Home/EU students			International students		
	Applications	Offers	Offers/ Appl	Applications	Offers	Offers/ Appl
Biosciences	19	11	57.89%	34	15	44.12%
Business	15	3	20.00%	218	25	11.47%
HuSS	130	81	62.31%	255	115	45.10%
Law	9	3	33.33%	38	5	13.16%
Physics	30	13	43.33%	39	15	38.46%
Psychology	14	5	35.71%	11	0	0.00%
SALL	40	31	77.50%	39	21	53.85%
SECAM	23	16	69.57%	53	11	20.75%
SELL	31	10	32.26%	106	23	21.70%
SHS	6	4	66.67%	20	6	30.00%
SoGAER	18	10	55.56%	31	14	45.16%
TOTAL	335	187	55.82%	844	250	29.62%

Table 3: Applications (minus withdrawals) and Offers made during the 2008 cycle up to 14th July 2008 (data from the July 2008 VCEG report)

4.7

To achieve the core aim to increase PGR numbers, a series of actions have been agreed. School business plans for the period to 2011/12 already aim at building capacity, and projected PGR numbers are close to the levels needed to fulfil our Top 10 by 2012 strategy (see Table 3).

4.8

School	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Biosciences	89.8	110.8	130.8
Business	71.6	77.8	82.5
HuSS	296.3	391.8	474.0
Law	13.0	22.0	26.0
Physics	53.0	64.5	70.0
Psychology	31.9	39.5	43.5
S&HS	43.6	45.2	49.7
SALL	141.5	164.5	173.0
SECaM	93.7	105.2	117.3
SELL	200.9	203.6	209.2
SoGAER	88.6	105.1	105.3
Total	1123.8	1329.9	1481.3

Table 3: PGR numbers from School business plans (Science Strategy posts are included)

5. Completion Rates

5.1 An important additional issue is that we will need to improve completion rates at 4 years after commencement of PhDs. In recent months, both the AHRC (in its PhD block-grant application procedure) and the ESRC (in the Capacity Building Award in Sport, Leisure and Tourism), have stipulated or enquired after the early completion of PhD students. It seems highly probable that the REF will include as an indicator of research excellence the percentage of students completing within 4 years of commencement, and this understanding of future REF metrics is shared with other research-intensive Universities. According to the most recent internal Research Monitoring, no subject at Exeter achieves a rate of 50% completion within 4 years. Thus, without significant improvements in the completion rates at 4 years, the sustainability of our Top 10 ambition would be undermined following the REF.

6. Other Observations

6.1 A Top 10 University might be expected to have the very best PhD students enrolled – these will not only contribute to a better reputation for the University in the long term but also, especially in the sciences, contribute directly to research output. A Top 10 University might also rightly be expected to generate income from its PGR training and supervision, and whilst it seems improbable that we can make the step-change in the number of PhDs at Exeter without significant investments from the University, we should work towards building (financial) sustainability during the period covered by this strategy.

6.2 The Faculty of Graduate Research will normally include all School Directors of Research, who have direct responsibility for delivering REF performance. It is envisaged that much of the drive towards increased numbers of PGRs and their timely completion, both key aspects of the REF, will be taken forward through this body. However, it is beyond doubt that only a joined-up approach, involving the whole University, can make the step-change in time for the REF in 2014 for all subjects.

7. Graduate Research Strategy

7.1 Following consideration of a paper '[Graduate Research – Thoughts towards a Strategic Plan 2008-2011](#)', the Faculty Board approved three Strategic Aims at its meeting on [12 November 2008](#), and, following detailed discussions, which included an additional meeting of the Board in [December 2008](#), a [detailed action plan](#) was approved at its [5 February 2009](#) meeting.

7.2 **The strategic aims for the Faculty of Graduate Research in the period 2008-2012 are:**

1. Increase PGR numbers by c. 450 PhD students

2. Increase percentage of PGR completions within 4 years to 70% in all subjects

3. Develop a sustainable environment for higher levels of PGRs, which is decreasingly dependent on own funding

8. Increase PGR numbers by c. 450 PhD students

8.1 The actions identified within this section of the plan are designed to assist Schools in achieving this target and doing so early, ensuring the full benefit for the REF. This includes a radical simplification of the studentship and bursaries system; identifying internal and external sources of funding; liberating regulations that stand in the way of attracting potential PGR students; and a number of additional actions. The individual actions, target dates and lead responsibilities are included in the action plan.

9. Increase percentage of PGR completions within 4 years to 70% in all subjects

9.1 The actions identified within this section of the plan are designed to assist Schools in achieving this strategic target without altering the formal maximum number of years of study for individual students, again ensuring that we perform well at the REF. This includes a review of all administrative procedures that involve the student experience; ensuring that all students get the best possible research training at appropriate points in their study; developing better monitoring of students; and appropriate progression processes. The individual actions, target dates and lead responsibilities are included in the action plan.

10. Develop a sustainable environment for higher levels of PGRs, which is decreasingly dependent on own funding

10.1 The actions identified within this section of the plan are designed to prepare the University and Schools for the changes that are expected and widely referred to as 'the future of the UK PhD'. The individual actions, target dates and lead responsibilities are included in the action plan.

11. Action Plan

11.1 The Graduate Research Faculty Board holds formal responsibility for the management and monitoring of this plan, and will maintain a regular overview of it.

The success of the plan is dependent not only upon the actions of the Dean and central agencies, who will be tasked with responsibility for taking forward particular actions under these aims, but will be reliant also on Faculty Board members ensuring that their Schools engage fully with this plan. This means considering what actions might be taken at School-level which would progress this plan – for example changes to School workload models, and making decisions on applications, will be as much a matter of School agency as of central planning.

Increase PGR numbers by c. 450 PhD students			
No. ¹	Associated Action	Priority	Lead Responsibility
1	Simplification of PGR studentships and bursaries. Target date: new system to be used for central advertised 2009 entry – to be formalised by 01/08/09	High	Dean and SRAM, thereto advised by the T&F group on bursaries, chaired by DVC Resources
2	Funding for PGRs from School budgets is agreed and released not later than the preceding February each year Target date:01/02/10	High	Dean, working with DVCs, Schools and Planning Services
3	Improve internal and external communication, organise centralised advertising of University-funded PGR studentships and bursaries. Target date: first advert on 05/02/09; annual adverts thereafter; annual monitoring of improved communication.	High	SRAM, RKT, International Office, working with Schools
4	Selection procedures involve advertising, selection and interview Target date: to be used for central advertised 2009 entry onwards	Medium	RKT working with Schools (Directors of Research)
5	DARO to raise £3.3M between 2008/09 and 2012/13, subject to it achieving the philanthropic gift target for the Forum project. Target date: ongoing from 2008 to 2013; annual monitoring of progress	High	DARO
6	Optimise income from external sources, including RCs,	High	RKT

¹ This table has been re-numbered following its approval by Faculty Board.

	GWR+, CASE awards Target date: ongoing, annual monitoring of outcomes		
7	Develop PhD by Publication and fast-track route for existing researchers. Target date: 01/08/09	High	APSA
8	Streamline applications process, ensuring that decisions on applications are made in a timely fashion. Pilot pre-application support via the MEO office Target date: Review of applications process complete 01/10/09; Changes in place 01/01/10	High	RKT International Office (MEO) working with Schools
9	Ensure applicants are not rejected unnecessarily ; provide examples of good PGR proposals to potential applicants; set up database of supervisors and research topics supervised at Exeter Target date: examples of proposals: 01/08/09; first database: 01/12/09 with continued maintenance	High	RKT working with Schools
10	School workload models reflect strategic importance of PGRs. Target date: 01/08/09	Medium	Dean, working with DVCs and Schools
Increase percentage of PGR completions within 4 years to 70% in all subjects			
11	Review procedures: from offer letter through to the delays incurred after submission. Admission of Students	High	SRAM/International Office/ RKT

	<p>Examination of Students</p> <p>Quick Wins in place: as soon as possible and following June FB</p> <p>Assessment of delays: 2009/10 Full Implementation: for 2010/11 cycle at latest.</p>		APSA
12	<p>Reduce interval between submission and viva voce in return for higher external examiner fees</p> <p>Target date: 01/08/09</p>	Medium	APSA
13	<p>Ensure all Schools are engaged with the Effective Researcher Development Programme</p> <p>Target date:01/08/09</p>	High	Education Enhancement, working with Schools
14	<p>Replace ARSME with a more rigorous review of progress</p> <p>Target date: review of available software packages: 01/06/09; pilot with one School: 2009-10; full implementation: from 2010-11</p>	Medium	APSA, working with Schools
15	<p>Consider financial incentives to encourage students to submit at the earliest point appropriate for them.</p> <p>Target date: 01/08/09</p> <p>Target date: 01/08/09</p>	High	<p>Lead : Dean</p> <p>APSA, SRAM DVC Resources</p>
16	<p>Abolish regulation on minimum years of study.</p> <p>Target date: 01/08/09</p>	High	APSA, DVC Education
<p>Develop a sustainable environment for higher levels of PGRs, which is decreasingly dependent on own funding</p>			
17	<p>Develop the concept of the University Graduate School as a federation of subject/area</p>	Medium	Both Deans, working with AS/SRAM and Schools

	graduate Schools, Target date: concept ready for 2009-10		
18	Develop a distinctive experience for PGR students, including development of interdisciplinary PGR activity, and the use of the Forum development Target date: report to Faculty Board: 01/05/10; Forum complete: 2012	Medium	Dean
19	Disseminate existing best practice on attracting, supervising and completing PGR activity using the University Graduate School/Faculty Boards as principal forums. Target date: first meeting in autumn term 2009; annual meetings thereafter	Medium	Both Deans, working with SRAM/International Office (attracting), Education Enhancement and Schools
20	Further development of Effective Researcher Development Programme Target date: ongoing 2010-12	Medium	Education Enhancement working with Schools
21	Explore the feasibility of more professional doctorates. Target date: review report available 01/04/10	Medium	APSA SRAM
22	Ensure effective use of PSC generated from additional PGRs for PGR activity Target date: review report available 01/04/10	Medium	Dean, working with AS

12. Acronyms

12.1 Acronyms used in the document:

APSA – Academic Policy and Student Administration

AS – Academic Services
DARO – Development and Alumni Relations Office
EE – Education Enhancement

MEO – Middle East Office
RKT – Research and Knowledge Transfer Office
SRAM – Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing
T & F – Task and Finish Group

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Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Research

February 2009

02/03/09 RVDN/KEB
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