



Economic
and Social
Research Council

Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences: **ESRC Response**



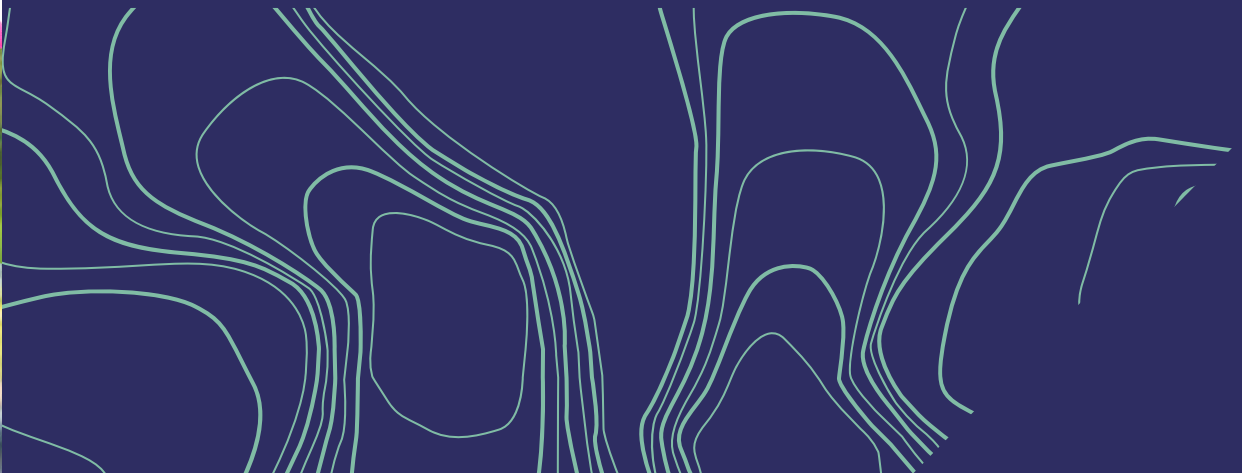


Introduction

At the beginning of 2020 we launched a fundamental review of the social science PhD. CFE Research and the University of York were commissioned to undertake a comprehensive analysis of existing literature and data and carry out extensive primary research with a wide range of UK and international stakeholders. The focus was the skills needed by social science graduates and the optimum ways to develop them. Their [evidence report](#) was published in October 2021.

The review has been guided by an independent Steering Group comprising members from across the sector, including major employers and students¹. This document, which includes input from the Steering Group, provides ESRC's response to the report. It sets out our vision for postgraduate training and the actions we will be taking to tackle the issues identified.

After ESRC commissioned the review the government asked UK Research and Innovation to work on a New Deal for Postgraduate Research. Our review is now also making an important contribution to that work, with the evidence collected being considered as UKRI develops reforms required for the wider system.



Vision

To develop globally competitive social science researchers who are able to operate in interdisciplinary, collaborative, and challenge-led environments across a range of sectors, and are drawn from diverse backgrounds and experiences.



The demand for social science has never been higher. So many major societal opportunities and challenges, from COVID-19, climate change, and low productivity, to the need to unlock the potential, and mitigate the risk, of new technologies such as AI and automation, involve people and behaviour. PhD training is a critical foundation underpinning the ability of the social sciences to meet this demand. We must ensure that social science graduates remain at the forefront internationally, with the right skills to work in complex interdisciplinary, collaborative and challenge-led environments.

The evidence report shows that there is much we can be proud of; the quality of doctoral training delivered by UK Research Organisations (ROs) is internationally recognised and ESRC investment in doctoral training is positively driving best practice and standards. However, the issues identified in the report are significant: training is still too focussed on the individual research project; students need more opportunities to gain experience of working collaboratively across discipline and sectors; and we must increase the diversity of the student population.

Equally it is imperative that research training keeps pace with cutting edge methods, particularly in relation to digital research. More broadly, the report points to the need to increase the flexibility of our training to respond to the diversity of students and breadth of social sciences disciplines.

As the single largest funder of postgraduate training in the social sciences, ESRC is committed to using our investment and influence to tackle these issues. Our renewed vision for postgraduate training is ambitious and will require changes not only to systems and processes but to the culture within institutions. We cannot do this alone. High quality doctoral training is based on a partnership between funders and ROs and some of the issues raised extend beyond the social sciences. To do this, we will work with our sister councils within UKRI, ROs and other stakeholders. The government's commitment to a New Deal for Postgraduate Research, as part of its [R&D People and Culture Strategy](#), makes this a particularly opportune time to be taking collective action to address broader issues.

Professor Alison Park
Interim Executive Chair ESRC

Research in Practice: Leading a Step Change

Doctoral training must prepare students for the changing research environment and ensure they have the core skills fundamental to both academic and non-academic career pathways.

We will introduce Research in Practice as a core component of the doctoral experience for all ESRC funded students

Research in Practice will comprise a suite of options, aimed at developing students' transferrable skills and providing practical opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge and methodological skills in different contexts. Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)¹ will be encouraged to co-develop this suite with employers, users and learned societies, ranging from foundational training in communication, impact and project management to experientially based masterclasses, summers schools and project-based opportunities. As part of Research in Practice our ambition is that all students will have the opportunity to undertake a 3-month placement in academia, policy, business or third sector organisations with their studentships extended to reflect this.

Through Research in Practice, we want to ensure students are prepared to engage in collaborative and challenge led research across sectoral and disciplinary boundaries, both within and beyond the social sciences, and that they have the wider core skills which are essential for academic and non-academic careers alike. It will also help develop students' awareness of the breadth of careers open to them as social science graduates.

We will use training needs analysis to tailor the Research in Practice options students take (including the placements available) to their prior experience and ongoing needs.

Students come to doctoral training with a range of experiences and aspirations and some of the Research in Practice options available will be more relevant than others. For example, for those with limited professional experience, a placement with a non-academic organisation could provide an important opportunity to strengthen their employability and develop their understanding of, and networks, with user organisations. For others who might already have it, it may be more valuable to gain insight of working within a Research Organisation.

We will support DTPs to develop placements, phase their introduction and carefully monitoring progress

Ensuring high quality placements is critical. While DTPs already have some infrastructure in place to support non-academic collaborations, Research in Practice is at a different scale. We will therefore pilot our approach, setting DTPs phased targets for the number of students able to undertake a placement and carefully monitor their quality and the experience of students and hosts. To support all students to participate in placements there will be maximum flexibility in when they can be taken, and DTPs will be expected to work with host partners to ensure opportunities are available both physically and virtually and on a full and part time basis. We will review the pilot as part of the Mid Term Review of the DTPs.

We will be providing dedicated funding to support DTPs to develop Research in Practice. ESRC will also help DTPs to develop placements through the expectations we place on our Impact Acceleration Accounts and major research and infrastructure investments.

¹ This will also apply to any other future investments we make in doctoral training, including Centres for Doctoral Training.

Research Skills: Building from Excellence and Incentivising Innovation

We want ESRC research training to remain the gold standard in the UK; this requires us to ensure it keeps pace with cutting edge methods and that students have access to strong advanced training. The report also encourages us to consider how we can make our training more responsive to the diversity of student experience and the specific needs of disciplines.

We will review our core research training requirements, and as we recommission our DTPs will encourage and support them to innovate in the content and delivery of core training

The report highlights the importance of embedding digital methods and strengthening quantitative training but in reviewing our requirements we will not lose sight of the importance of qualitative training and ensuring all students have a strong foundation in research design. We will explore a range of potential innovations in the content and delivery of training including: providing a pre-course foundation week for students with no prior methods learning to facilitate more advanced core training; delivering more training through more intensive courses rather than spread over several semesters; and the potential for digital methods to collapse the division between qualitative/quantitative approaches. This work will be informed by the pedagogical learnings from the recent evaluation of the Q Step initiative and focussed work we have commissioned to look at data skills needs in the social sciences².

We will strengthen the advanced training offer to students

To complement RO provision and the investment we make through our [National Centre for Research Methods](#), to deliver core and advanced methodological training, we will be revisiting the expectations we place on our major investments to encourage them to contribute more systematically to advanced training in the social sciences. We will also explore how we can most effectively support partnerships with learned societies and other organisations to strengthen the offer for students.

We will no longer make Master's training a pre-requisite for an ESRC funded PhD

While we remain committed to ensuring all students have the necessary core research training, we recognise that students can gain this through other forms of study and work experience. Therefore, subject to students being able to demonstrate they have the required core research skills through a robust training needs analysis, Master's training will no longer be a pre-requisite for our doctoral funding³.

² <https://esrc.ukri.org/skills-and-careers/scoping-the-skills-needs-of-social-sciences-to-support-data-driven-research/>

³ ESRC will continue to provide master's funding when linked to a PhD.

Flexibility in structure and funding: Maximising the Value of our Investment

The Review recommends we extend PhD funding to four years. However, it also highlighted the potential for this to have a negative impact on the diversity of the student population if it leads to an overall reduction in the number of students ESRC can support (for example, because of increased competition for studentships or the potential for longer study time to be less attractive to students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds). The pressures on ESRC's budget mean it is not possible for us to increase the length of our funding without reducing the overall number of students we are able to support. For every 6 months we extend the PhD we will be able to support 10% fewer studentships. The Review also suggests that simply increasing the length of the PhD may not, on its own, solve the problem of students not completing before their funding ends. It emphasises the need to ensure expectations of what can be achieved are realistic and students are supported to develop their project management skills. Our response seeks to balance all these issues.

We will increase our PhD funding from 3 to 3.5 years as standard

One of the key findings from the Review is that we need to develop students' wider skills. A 6 months extension to our funding will provide time for a 3 month Research in Practice placement and 3 months for additional training. We will also emphasise the importance of realistically scoping projects to enable them to be completed within this period and moving away from a culture of an unfunded writing up year.

We will target our master's funding at students who don't already have a social science masters

Currently around 60% of ESRC students awarded a 1+3 studentship already have a postgraduate qualification in the social sciences. We will therefore be targeting our master's funding at students who don't already have a social science masters. Master's provision is important for supporting the participation of under-represented groups and there will also be the flexibility for DTPs to award master's funding where the needs of the discipline requires higher level training ahead of a PhD, where the students master was undertaken some years previously, or to support interdisciplinary skills development including discipline hopping.

We will reallocate Master's funding to support additional training at the PhD stage for students who have met some but not all our core training requirements

Students would receive a fractional award of between 3.5 and 4 years instead of being required to complete a second Masters. This is building on existing practice within a number of DTPs.

Based on the above we anticipate a 10% reduction in the overall number of students ESRC can support. Targeting our masters funding at those who don't have a social science masters and increasing the use of fractional awards to support additional training at the PhD stage, will allow us to minimise the overall level of reduction caused by increasing the length of our PhD funding from 3 to 3.5 years. We anticipate that circa 25% of our studentships will include master's funding (1+3.5 years), 50% will be standard 3.5 years and 50% will receive either a masters and PhD (4.5 years) or a longer PhD award of between 3.5 and 4 years.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The report challenges us to do more to ensure we support a diverse student population. While recognising the positive steps we have already taken, it emphasises the scale of the issue in terms of the low access to ESRC studentships by ethnic minorities and the differential access of students from different social economic backgrounds. More broadly, it points to a perception that the current doctoral model is tailored towards younger students studying full time.

We will require all DTPs to provide an EDI Strategy, incorporating their evaluation approach, as an assessed part of their bid for funding, to be reviewed annually

This must consider EDI broadly, recognising the full range of protected characteristics, and the socio-economic background of students, setting out how they will widen participation and provide an inclusive environment for all. As part of a holistic strategy DTPs will be required to set out how they will make entry requirements more inclusive, with greater focus on assessing potential. They will be encouraged to use contextual offers and move away from expecting fully developed research proposals on application.

We will encourage DTPs to consider ring-fenced funding for under-represented groups

Data suggests that action to increase the proportion of PhD students from under-represented groups is urgently needed as, without short-term action, current inequalities are likely to persist for some time. Some DTPs have begun to offer ring-fenced scholarship to students from specific groups, with a positive action mandate. This has led to co-funding from external organisations, demonstrating potential appetite among other external trusts and foundations to co-fund dedicated scholarships. We want to encourage more DTPs to consider this approach.

We will embed consideration of student health and well-being in DTPs' EDI strategies

An inclusive research culture is one which must also support the health and wellbeing of students. The report highlights the pressures students face, many of which have been exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19. The causes of stress and anxiety among students are varied – some point to failings in the culture as well as the systems and process within DTPs and individual institutions. As part of their EDI strategies DTPs will be asked to consider how they will promote and support student health and wellbeing. More broadly we will work as part of UKRI to support and promote a positive research culture and support student health and wellbeing.

We will ensure that existing flexibilities are clearly communicated, including the ability to switch readily between part-time and full-time study and to request flexible working

Through our existing terms and conditions, we require all DTPs to offer part-time study and provide for flexible working and students to move between full and part-time study. Awareness of these provisions needs to be strengthened.

We will continue to incentivise DTPs to incorporate in their consortia smaller pockets of research excellence in the social sciences which lie outside the larger research-intensive institutions

When we commissioned our DTPs in 2016, we provided additional studentships to those who included what might be discipline-specific, local pockets of excellence in their proposals. As a result, we saw a significant increase in the number of institutions which participate in our Doctoral Training Network, from the 45 institutions which participated in the Doctoral Training Centre's scheme (which preceded the DTPs) to 73.

We will work with our sister councils and the sector to tackle the inequalities in access to doctoral funding and consider the financial and other support provided for students

UKRI has identified an initial four areas to address as part of the [New Deal for Postgraduate Research](#); diversification of models and access, funding and stipend levels, rights and conditions and routes in through and out. It will work collaboratively across the sector on these areas and the evidence collected as part of our Review will make an important contribution to this work. As part of ongoing work across UKRI to increase diversity in doctoral study, ESRC is already part of a cross-UKRI project which seeks to strengthen the quality of data on applicants for doctoral study and develop UKRI wide guidance/requirements for best practice in doctoral recruitment. It will also develop a campaign/series of campaigns targeted at under-represented groups to encourage participation in higher education.

We will review our support for recent doctoral graduates through our Postdoctoral Fellowship Scheme.

Our DTPs are also allocated funding to support [postdoctoral fellowships](#) for recent graduates, with fellows benefitting from the training and development infrastructure and cohort activities that DTPs provide. We will review the support provided through this scheme in light of the changes we will be making to our doctoral support and commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

Supporting Excellent Supervisory Practice

Supervisors play a critical role throughout the doctoral experience and the increased demands placed on students have impacted the complexity of supervisory roles. At the same time the academic background of many supervisors means they are not always well equipped to provide advice on careers out with academia or able to effectively support students to undertake training or enrichment activities.

We will update our expectations in relation to supervision and ensure supervisors are appropriately supported

In recommissioning the DTPs, we will provide updated guidance on our expectations in relation to supervision and ensure supervisors are appropriately supported drawing on existing practice and the work of UKCGE. The primary role of supervisors is to provide disciplinary and methodological expertise; however, they must be able to encourage students to access the breadth of training we want and sign post them to relevant support including pastoral. We want to strengthen the guidance and professional development opportunities for supervisors and encourage more ECRs to join supervisory teams.

Strengthening the Role of Training Needs Analysis

Training needs analysis is fundamental to achieving more flexible and responsive doctoral training.

We will commission a review of the existing literature and landscape of doctoral Training Needs Analysis to identify best practice and areas for potential development and innovation

The review will identify 'quick wins' for immediate implementation across and areas for longer-term development, including piloting and innovation of new approaches. We will seek to learn from UKRI's 'Résumé for Researchers' to enable students to use the TNA to evidence their capabilities and capture the learning gained from professional development.

Next steps

Our vision for doctoral training is ambitious. In 2022 we will commence recommissioning of our doctoral training partnerships, many of the changes outlined above will form part of this recommissioning.

For detailed information of the timeline for the recommissioning, please click [here](#).

