

This special issue of *Teaching Matters* is devoted to the PhD at LSE. TLC has produced this document now in order to update readers on the latest developments and thinking – this is an area of HE practice that is evolving rapidly. At the local level, TLC is devoting ever more time and attention to PhD-related matters. Our research on the LSE PhD experience has now progressed to a stage where we are keen to disseminate the findings more widely. Two new members of TLC have been appointed: the Development Adviser for PhD students and the Adviser on PhD Completions. Increasing numbers of PhD students are benefiting from TLC's programmes of training and support for teachers in higher education. The national context of PhD research is also changing, as a number of the articles included here make clear.

Many thanks to those who have contributed to this edition. We hope to make these 'PhD special' a more regular feature of *Teaching Matters* – if there are any issues you would particularly like to see discussed, or if you would like to contribute, please get in touch with the PhD team at TLC. Our contact details can be found on the back page.

QAA Code of Practice – the national official stance on postgraduate research degrees

Although this isn't something to own up to in an LSE publication, in the first part of 2004 I was a member of a QAA working party. It was not an easy experience – at times I felt I was in the Henry Fonda role in 'Twelve Angry Men'. But it was a very instructive education in applied public policy.



Simeon Underwood

First a bit of background. The working party had been set up to revise the section of the QAA Code of Practice on 'postgraduate research programmes'. It had a complicated parentage. On one side of the family tree, the QAA has been producing sections of a 'code of practice' since 1999, and is now going back to refresh some of

the earlier sections. On the other side, since 2002 the Research Councils have been showing new interest in the PhD: they produced firstly a consultants' report, and then a couple of somewhat hawkish consultation documents; and they seemed set to produce their own code of practice until they were persuaded to merge it into the revised version of the QAA code. So the working party's job was to reconcile the gently hortatory approach of the QAA (honest!) and the firmly directive approach of the Funding Councils. Like all good educational experiences the working party meetings gave rise to a whole set of questions beyond those which it sought to answer. I want to look at three of them, which are closely inter-connected.

The first and most fundamental is 'what is a postgraduate research programme?'

There is an extensive literature on the question of 'what is a PhD?', which seems to suggest (a) that most people engaged with it now view it as an apprenticeship in research, but (b) that this seems to mean different things in different disciplines. However, the QAA, HEFCE and the Research Councils are as one in placing their emphasis on 'postgraduate research programmes'. The PhD is to be located in an organisational structure which is every bit as systematic as for undergraduate and taught Masters programmes. There is no room for romance and serendipity. And as an administrator who has had to deal with cases where the romance has gone sour, I find it actually hard to argue with this outlook (however many doubts I may have about how they want to enact it).

The second question is 'what is the place of training in the PhD?'

Here HEFCE and the Research Councils take as their starting point the fact that over 50% of PhD graduates do not go into academe. As a result PhD students need to be trained in the skills employers want. The definitive text on the subject is the Research Councils' Joint Statement of Skills Training Requirements of Research

Postgraduates.¹ They have a vision of a world where in a PhD student's first meeting with his/her supervisor they sit down side by side with the skills statement in front of them and go through it line by line to identify what skills the student needs to develop. Progress is then logged and monitored against that initial 'needs analysis': that is (almost) all there is to a PhD. This view is unshakeable. The fact that over 50% of PhD graduates in the social sciences do go into academe does not deter them. Nor does the possibility that some students may want more from a PhD – one academic on the working group pointed out that he had eight supervisees, all of them aged over 50, to whom none of this meant anything. This is an ideological absolute, so our job is to find ways of enacting it in ways that make sense to our disciplines and our students.

The third question is 'what is the appropriate supervisory structure for the PhD?'

Here the man from HEFCE was very much in Lee J. Cobb mode, with his prejudices out on stalks. The ideal of the PhD has been badly let down by the one-to-one supervisor:supervisee model and a lack of academic professionalism. Supervisory Teams are the only answer.

The final text of the revised Code isn't clear about what a Supervisory Team is, and it doesn't countenance the possibility that Supervisory Teams may create problems as well as solve them. But what is clear is that HEFCE, the Research Councils and the QAA will be looking closely to see that we are moving away from their (somewhat caricature-like) view of the faults of the past. The end result of the working party's deliberations is an A5 booklet² of 36 pages (compared to the 18 pages of the 1999 version). It is written in the QAA's best grey and white prose. In many places the element of compromise shows through in muddled thinking and writing. But for anyone interested in this area, whether as public policy or professional practice, it is about as important – and its questions as challenging – as it gets.

Simeon Underwood
Academic Registrar

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[http://www.grad.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/Universities/National_policy/Research_Councils_training_requirements/p!eaLXeFI:\\$C2s\\$0Fd](http://www.grad.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/Universities/National_policy/Research_Councils_training_requirements/p!eaLXeFI:$C2s$0Fd)

² Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education - <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section1/postgrad2004.pdf>

A new appointment in the School: the Adviser on PhD Completions

Doing a research degree is a very odd process. From having his or her life as an undergraduate or Masters student dominated by course work, a research student is all of a sudden charged with writing not a series of essays but a massive book which



Ray Richardson

shows a scholarly grasp of the available literature in a particular area as well as originality. It's a huge challenge, one for which the student is rarely well prepared.

The School normally admits between 200 and 250 new research students a year, giving us one of, if not the, largest concentrations of Social Science research students anywhere. Research students are enormously important for the School. They are the next generation of scholars; they are the source of many of the new and interesting ideas in all the subjects we teach; they are often very important in encouraging good academic staff to join or stay with us; and they provide us with excellent class teachers and research assistants. So they are essential for our success as a university, and it is important that we reciprocate and help them to be successful too.

Until recently, we were perhaps not as imaginative as we should have been in supporting our research students. We certainly did not neglect them but we did not fully recognise certain developments or their needs. More recently we have been much more thoughtful, for example, in providing systematic methods training, or in putting on a rich programme of events which seeks to make students fully aware of the research degree process, or in exploring the merits of different ways of supervising students.

After an extensive enquiry last year, we have also decided to appoint an Adviser on PhD Completions. This was not meant to be someone who would be concerned with the various problems, sometimes serious, facing individual research students – we already have a Dean of Graduate Studies for that. Rather, the new post is one response to a stubborn problem, which is that too many of our students find it hard to complete their degree within a reasonable period. This is a complex phenomenon, and there are

many reasons, good and bad, for slow completion. Sometimes, for example, a truly innovative thesis needs additional time to mature; in other cases, the student has to master a vast array of primary sources, or learn obscure languages. But other reasons for delay are not so defensible, and they sometimes imply that the School or the Department has failed to take reasonable action.

The new Adviser is charged with helping the School's Departments and Institutes do whatever is practicable to ensure that registration periods don't drag on unreasonably. Over the last 10-15 years we have had consistent success in meeting the rising completion rate targets of the Research Councils, mostly perhaps because the existence of these targets made us concentrate on the problem more effectively. There is certainly no suggestion that improving the completion rates of those who were supported by the Research Councils worked to the detriment of the students concerned. But we did not obviously have the same success with other students where there were no external targets. This is what we are now trying to achieve, and a good part of our effort will involve the wholesale dissemination of good support practices to all our research students.

Ray Richardson
Adviser on PhD Completions

The PhD at the LSE – supervisors' views



Frederico Matos

"[...] when you are faced with the inevitable you just have to try and adapt yourself and it as much as possible. It's a kind of Zen thing, don't fight the river but try and get it flowing the way you want."
(PhD supervisor)

The PhD has become, mainly due to external pressures, increasingly more structured and there are now a number of hurdles that research students are expected to cross. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in its Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher

Education, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) clearly state the need for a structured research training component in research degrees and for students' to audit their skills, not only when they start the PhD programme but also later and throughout their degree.

The introduction of a research training component is intended not only to make the process less unpredictable but has in mind a set of outcomes, besides the thesis, that it is believed students should attain at the end of their programme. This reflects a concern over the skills to be gained through a degree. A more market-oriented perspective is now in place, led by, amongst others, the research councils and the Government. A further overarching pressure is the need to have students complete their PhDs within a 4-year time frame (see Ray Richardson's article above).

In 2002 the Roberts³ report was published and it pushed the skills agenda even further. It suggested not only that there was a mismatch between the skills the graduates obtained through their degrees and the skills employers are looking for; but also that higher education was not helping students gain the transferable skills necessary for the workplace. It was thus suggested that the Research Councils fund PhDs only where the institutions were able to provide 'training meeting stringent minimum requirements'.

The PhD is thus mainly now seen as a preparation for future employment, either in academia or not, rather than an exercise whose aim is the exercise itself. The major consequence of this, it is often considered, is that PhDs have become less ambitious and less risky. With the consideration that students should complete their degrees within 4 years departments have been more aware of the risks that certain research topics can represent. The case is not that the 4 year deadline is new but rather that now departments are being more pressured into having their students finish within that time frame.

But is it all bad? The Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) has interviewed supervisors in different departments at the LSE in order to assess how they view the PhD degrees which are

³ Set for success: the supply of people with science, technology, engineering and mathematical skills (April 2002)

now being offered. All the quotations are excerpts from those interviews.

The (new) pressures

Many LSE PhD programmes now include a growing 'taught' component and various training expectations in the 1st year. Some say that this might take students away from the research itself - as if the training is not related to the specific needs and research of the student. As one supervisor put it:

"I think also we expect too much of the first year MPhil students, it is not just the intellectual demands, it is the timetable, if you think of it they have to produce project work, because most courses these days have an assessment ... so you have to be producing assessed coursework for your marks. And at the same time a supervisor is saying - come on, it is already the end of November. Isn't it time we started talking about the revising of the project. (...). Intellectually it is good and socially it is good. But all of these deadlines, I think, detract from coming to terms with research."

One possible suggestion would be that the training should perhaps be more adapted to not only students' more general needs but also to the very needs arising from every individual's research (and interviews with PhD students have revealed this concern). But supervisors have also expressed more positive opinions about this new PhD:

"well, I think ideally what [the academic community] should have gained is a group of young, highly skilled, highly articulate, intellectually trained researchers in particular areas (...)"

What are students being prepared for?

The Government⁴ and the Roberts report consider that the PhD should be more oriented towards the needs of the market, particularly outside academia. Whilst in academic fields other than the social sciences this may be more of a realistic approach, it could be argued that the majority of students who start their PhDs in the social sciences have in mind a future academic career.⁵ As a supervisor stated: "I think everybody who is doing a PhD, at one point wants desperately to be an academic".

It may be therefore that the move of the research councils is unfounded.⁶ However, this did not

seem to deter the supervisors we talked to in proceeding in this way. A very pragmatic approach is well represented in the following statement by one other supervisor:

"The time pressure makes it that. I think unless you go on an intellectual voyage you can't actually write a successful PhD. But I suppose what is missing is the space to enjoy that intellectual voyage. That is what you lose. Because you don't have the time to sit down and reflect much."

On the other hand, if an academic career is the ultimate goal of the PhD student, then the time pressures might be extremely useful. As one interviewee argued:

"(...) if you are going to become an academic, the pressures on us have changed. I have been an academic since 1986 and even in that time the expectations and the pressures on the market are so different. If you don't get through this PhD with these tight deadlines you won't survive. You will get a job somewhere but you won't necessarily be successful because you need to continue to produce this research."

In spite of this there is some market-oriented discourse coming from some supervisors.

"What is a PhD? It is a lots of things. I think it depends who is buying the PhD. If you are buying it as an academic institution the PhD is the standard that this guy is a qualified academic and you can hire them and they will do research and will meet things that you want to do. It is a master-apprenticeship thing. We are an institution saying this guy is a researcher, an academic. But to the job market it means lots of other things; so it really depends. I have a view of PhD which is pretty narrow, as a buyer of a PhD product, what am I looking for when I am buying these PhDs in? And really I think a PhD shouldn't be about that at all, it should be about this intellectual voyage you go on, and the discovery and so on. But in practical terms they do matter."

So, even if the language is slightly embedded in a pro-market discourse the underlying issue is that the supervisor just realises the practicalities involved in the PhD experience. In fact, what this supervisor is conveying is a wish that things weren't quite going in the direction they are.

What should the School be aiming for?

"I would want all my PhD students to treat it as an intellectual project. One of the big problems is the student who treats it purely as an intellectual project, where there is none of the professionalism and it becomes simply the production of their magnum opus and they get so concerned about producing the perfect piece of work that writers block, anxiety, nervous breakdowns...you know, basically where students treat it too seriously and there is none of the kind of professional framing. I think that is always difficult."

The overall impression after talking to the supervisors is that the underlying goal is preparing people to become academics. Is this new type of degree the right answer? The first

⁴ Realise your Potential (Science White Paper), May 1993

⁵ Interviews with students showed that 72% of interviewees had an academic career in mind when deciding to do a PhD

⁶ For a discussion on the research councils move and how it could in fact clash with students' aims see Rudd, Ernest (1990) "The Early Careers of Social Science Graduates and the Value of the PhD". In *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series A (Statistics in Society)*, Vol. 153, No. 2, pp. 203-232

impression is that students will come out from their research degree with a different set of skills, but less intellectual maturity, than their supervisors did.

"I am not sure whether we are going to fill the ranks of well trained, seriously cultivated people and academics for the future. (...) We will actually have many very good professionals in different fields but people who actually have an acquaintance with one might say, an inter-disciplinary approach to literature, philosophy, no I don't think we give them the time and I don't think we expect them to be those sorts of people any more. However, for the people who do PhDs with me, and don't possibly go into academia, and they go on to do [work] in Brussels, I think that is terrific."

One supervisor was very honest in terms of how students can gain from the new more structured and more controlled PhD:

Well, I think ideally what [the academic community] should have gained is a group of young, highly skilled, highly articulate, intellectually trained researchers in particular areas (...). What has been lost? Well, what has been lost is the fact that some institutions which had many research students who basically stayed in the institution for five, ten, often more years. And were often very, very, bright but often very distressed, they could never bring their theses to a conclusion. They no doubt gave a lot in teaching, they gave a lot to the department, but I don't think it did them too much good to be honest with you.

Supervisors also revealed concern in terms of examiners' expectations and how what can realistically be expected now from the students can meet the examiner's standards. The degrees of concern shown vary. If one of the supervisors we talked to believed that some examiners are already *changing* (for some people this is *lowering*) expectations, one other voiced his concern over the higher expectations that LSE PhD theses carry. He believed that the expectations are as high for LSE students as they have always been, and higher than for other institutions. But the following quote reflects the majority of the supervisors' opinion:

"So I think, at the moment, there is almost certainly a mismatch between what is the expected standard of a PhD, or a PhD with a pass, and what a lot of students working on a lot of topics can realistically achieve, certainly in three years, and even, sometimes, in four. And as we all know, peoples' expectations of what theses are doesn't [change] because they see it as dumbing down the standards. It is a difficult one. We don't want to reduce standards. But I think the direction it points in is that the formulation and the articulation of the thesis topic during the first year become much more important. That has to be got right. So that you have something which is realistic, realistically achieved over the next two or three years."

Where are we now?

All supervisors we interviewed agreed that the process which students go through to get their PhD has changed and is changing. A situation

like this: "[a] senior professor in the department, who was my PhD supervisor and the PhD supervisor of several better known members of our department [...] never had a PhD" is now increasingly less likely.

The duality between a degree that is embedded in a PhD-as-voyage-of-discovery tradition or one which is based on the US research training model keeps coming up in the conversations with academics. And if a certain melancholy over the lost lonesome voyage underlies the conversation there is, notwithstanding, a certain pragmatism over external pressures which makes academics accepting of the *new* model. But, importantly, the PhD "is still both. Still an intellectual exercise and part of your professional accreditation, but the balance is swinging more towards professional accreditation."

Frederico Matos,
Research Officer, TLC

Developing PhD students' skills

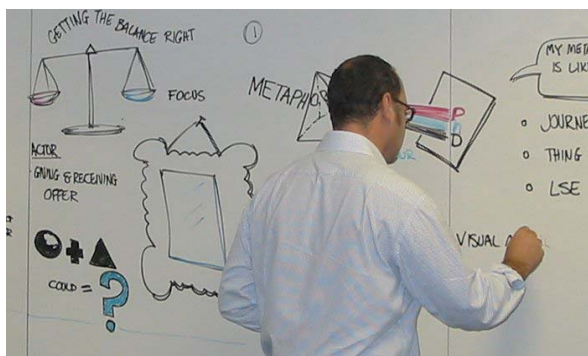
Support for students working towards a PhD in the UK is growing. At the national level, many of the key developments emerged as a result of the



Rhianon Thompson

Roberts report (2002), which outlined the key findings of a review into the supply of science and engineering skills in the UK. The report made a number of recommendations that have had an important impact on policies affecting postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers working in all disciplines. In particular, the stipends paid to PhD students funded by UK Research Councils have increased notably over the past two years. Additionally, all UK Universities have been granted funds to be spent on improving the provision of transferable skills training for postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers. The funding is targeted at developing the skills that will help to equip researchers for their future careers, whether in academe or beyond. The focus is on developing researchers' capabilities in areas such as communication, time and project management, networking and career management itself. As the article by Frederico Matos elsewhere in this issue demonstrates,

these national level policy developments are having an noticeable impact on the way that 'the PhD' is perceived by those most closely involved in the process.



Creativity and originality: thinking outside the box in a PhD workshop

At LSE, the use of "Roberts" funding is being co-ordinated by the Teaching and Learning Centre, together with the Methodology Institute and the Careers Service. Two new members of staff were appointed in summer 2005: Dr Rhiannon Thompson is the Development Adviser for postgraduate students and postdoctoral researchers, based in the TLC. She is responsible for developing and delivering the central skills training programme and related projects (see below for more details). Frances Meegan (f.meegan@lse.ac.uk) is the dedicated Careers Adviser for postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers. Based in the LSE Careers Service, she offers one-to-one careers-related support, and is developing a series of seminars looking at general career management issues for these groups, including sessions on job searches, interview techniques and networking. Rhiannon and Frances work closely together to support PhD students and postdoctoral researchers. This working relationship is made particularly effective by the existence of the new Academic and Professional Development division of the School, which brings TLC, the Careers Service and the Language Centre together into one organisational unit.

One of the most significant skills-related developments for PhD students at the School has been the expansion and re-design of the *Authoring a PhD and Developing as a Researcher* programme. The course builds on a popular and successful seminar series delivered at the School over the past several years by Professor Patrick Dunleavy. The additional funding now available, and the appointment of the Development Adviser for postgraduate students, has enabled us to develop this course

into a series of participatory workshops, tailored for students at different stages of their PhD career. Nineteen workshops have taken place since the programme began in October 2005, and over 250 individual students from across the School's departments have attended at least one session.

Each workshop is designed to work best with around 25 participants, and lasts for 3 hours (including a coffee break!). A mix of activities is included – the agenda varies from workshop to workshop, but most include a combination of presentation from the facilitator, individual work and group tasks. Emphasis is also placed on the importance of peer feedback and support. We have been fortunate to benefit from the continued enthusiasm and expertise of Professor Dunleavy, who has been closely involved in the design of the new programme and has contributed to the leadership of the workshops. A number of other experienced academics have also given up their time to participate, and some workshops have been enriched by the involvement of experts from external organisations, such as Cliff Dennett and his team from BOX (the EDS innovation space at LSE), and staff from IB Tauris (an independent publishing house).

Feedback from participants in the workshops held since October has been extremely positive, with over 90% of those attending stating that they would recommend the session to colleagues. Every workshop has been fully booked, with some oversubscribed – testament to the series' popularity. We are carefully monitoring bookings and attendance to ensure that as many students as possible can have access to the programme in the coming years.

The *Authoring a PhD and Developing as a Researcher* programme is currently the largest component of TLC's transferable skills training for PhD students, but we are also keen to develop the support infrastructure in other more devolved ways. In particular, we are happy to help facilitate (and in some cases fund) student-led initiatives that focus on building the key skills of communication, networking and career management. For example, TLC is currently supporting a PhD mentoring project in the Social Psychology Institute, providing funds to enable best practice to be disseminated round the School. PhD programme directors are also encouraged to approach TLC to discuss ideas they have for training students within their own discipline. We already work with a number of

departments helping students with communication skills through one-to-one feedback on videoed presentations. More projects are coming on stream all the time, so the key message is to watch this space! If you have any ideas or comments, do please get in touch.

Rhiannon Thompson
Development Adviser, TLC



Participants get their creative juices flowing using LEGO at the workshops for new students in October

TLC has funds available for departments who wish to develop their own skills-related projects for PhD students. For more details and an application form, or to discuss preliminary ideas, please contact Rhiannon Thompson (r.thompson@lse.ac.uk).

Teaching Accreditation for LSE PhD students

This year the LSE Teaching Learning Centre is running a Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education for the first time. This programme is a formal qualification validated by the LSE. We will be seeking accreditation from the national Higher Education Academy later this year. The PG Cert. HE is tailored to the needs and interests of all those directly involved in teaching at the LSE. It is open to PhD students with teaching responsibilities, as well as new and experienced staff who are interested in developing their teaching and who wish to become eligible for "registered practitioner status" with the Higher Education Academy (the HEA is a professional association for university teachers in the UK). The programme offers



Neil McLean

considerable choice and flexibility of approach within a framework that makes clear what learning has to be achieved and demonstrated in order to qualify for the Certificate.

The broad aims of the programme are:

- to enable participants to develop skills, insight and understanding of teaching and learning in higher education
- to bring together personal experience with the theory and the practice of others
- to encourage people to question, challenge and experiment with their own ways of working and the practices of others, in order to ensure that their teaching practice is based on careful thought and insight into practice, rather than the unquestioning acceptance of current practice

For those new to teaching, the programme should increase confidence and save some of the time and anxiety many new teachers face, plus build a firm foundation, on which to base teaching and educational development in the future. For those who would like recognition for their teaching but do not wish to take the certificate, there is the LSE Teaching Record. This involves having an observation and writing about your teaching philosophy, followed by an interview about this with the Director of TLC.

Neil McLean
Educational Developer, TLC

PhD Supervision training: opportunities for new academics and for departments

For several years, TLC has offered training to new PhD supervisors. Timing has always proved problematic, and has led to lower levels of take-up than we



Liz Barnett

would wish. That said, the majority of staff who have attended training have found it useful. We have put considerable effort into updating the training materials, making them "LSE-context" specific. We have integrated many of the findings of recent investigations we have undertaken into departmental practices and supervisor, research programme coordinator and PhD student views. In the past two years, we have also been experimenting with some new approaches. We have split the one day workshop

into a series of shorter sessions, at different times of day. This has had limited success - such that we believe the one-day slot may actually still be more effective.

We have also offered tailored sessions within departments, in conjunction with Simeon Underwood (Academic Registrar). These have achieved good take up, and provide an excellent forum for disseminating good practice across the School. Any department interested in having such a session should contact Liz Barnett (l.barnett@lse.ac.uk) in the first instance.

TLC has also funded staff to attend external supervisor training. A benefit here is the opportunity to gain from practices in other institutions. The downside is that such sessions may be too generic, and fail to focus in on the specific issues most appropriate to the LSE context, which is somewhat atypical.

Looking to the future, TLC is about to embark on two new approaches. First, we are putting together a guide to supervision at the LSE – aimed primarily but not exclusively at new supervisors. This will be a hard copy document, with web-based "companion" - with the latter providing quick electronic links to necessary materials. Our second approach will be to contact research programme coordinators to work more closely with them to identify and support supervisor training needs. We are of course also very open to other suggestions from colleagues!

Liz Barnett
Director, TLC



Networking and peer feedback form an important part of TLC sessions

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