

Understanding PGR research culture: helping research degree students to maximise their opportunity for a positive experience

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A Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) is a student who is undertaking a university research degree. The first known doctoral degree was awarded in Paris circa 1150 after which time the qualification was adopted across Europe. Whilst there are various types of research degrees offered across the Higher Education (HE) sector, the most commonly awarded is the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). The PhD is in fact a nineteenth century adaptation of the original doctorate, which evolved to address the growing need for universities to undertake research. In the UK, there are over 100,000 PGRs in Higher Education Institutions, accounting for 4% of the total UK HE student population.

When first launched, the PhD was originally intended as a mechanism for training people enroute to becoming an academic. Research was undertaken in a relatively unregulated environment, with a single supervisor taking the senior role in a master-apprentice style relationship. Development and learning followed a process of osmosis, with the student assimilating knowledge from their supervisor. The gentle one to one relationship of this original PhD model is largely impossible now due to the pressure for completion within 4 years, and this presents many issues, especially related to the PGR's experience and sometimes their wellbeing.

Doctoral research is inherently conducted in isolation, and with expectations on outputs continually increasing, and the corresponding financial pressures of continued study growing, it is little wonder that more and more doctoral students are experiencing poor mental health. In this context, the research culture and environment in which a PGR undertakes their research degree has become increasingly important.

This research study has been undertaken by a University Business School and considers the role of PGR research culture, and the key drivers which are pivotal for the successful support and experience of PGRs. Whilst this study has been focussed upon the UK, the findings are applicable to other countries seeking to better support their own PGR communities.