"The same but different: researching and enhancing PGR employability and experience in Art & Design"

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Introduction

This paper reflects on the experience of two related projects undertaken through staff-student partnership that aimed to understand and transform the Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) experience in our Faculty. Our research project was undertaken in the 2012/13 academic year at Birmingham Institute of Art & Design (BIAD), now part of the Faculty of Arts, Design and Media at Birmingham City University (BCU). Based on the findings of this first project, we identified the need to enhance provision and in 2013/14 developed a second project, in which we could put this into practice through developing and implementing research peer mentoring for our Art & Design PGRs.

Context

Art & Design encompasses five academic schools within BCU: Architecture and Design, Art, Fashion and Textiles, Jewellery and Visual Communication. Our students are working across a range of disciplines from Fine Art to Typography, Ideas Management to Antiquarian Horology, Landscape Architecture to Art Education, all rooted in a diverse range of cultural, socio-political, philosophical, artistic, professional, practical and theoretical contexts. The research student cohort in Art & Design at BCU is one of the largest in the UK and growing quickly (a 41% increase from 2012/13 to 2013/14). For the staff partner, recently completing a Masters in Education led to the conclusion that the PGR experience was generally missing from discussions about Learning and Teaching in HE. Yet there are increasing external drivers for more explicit consideration of PGR employability by research and funding bodies (RCUK, 2011; Vitae, 2012), as well as the revised QAA Code (2012) requiring both PGRs and HEIs to demonstrate an awareness of employability and to develop relevant skills. Moreover, the growing numbers of 'practice-led' students and practitioners undertaking doctorates might have meant that PGR career aspirations were not necessarily located solely within academia and this possibility did not appear to be sufficiently recognised in PGR provision. For the student partner, a practice-led student approaching the end of her doctorate, considerations of employability were of fundamental importance.

Our institution provides internal funding streams to encourage staff and students to work together in equal partnership to enhance the student experience. This mechanism enabled our partnership of a Researcher and a PGR student to examine employability and the PGR experience with the aim of informing the enhancement of provision. The partners had in common the experience of being a PGR at BCU, though discussion and reflection revealed that their experiences were different – one having completed in 2007, the other due to complete in 2013; one an Art Historian, the other a Fine Artist engaged in practice-led research. Their PGR experiences were the same but different and this informed a partnership where the dynamics were fluid rather than hierarchical.

Pedagogy exists differently at doctoral level; in this programme of study there are few taught elements, no formal curriculum and lots of independent study, culminating in a single point of summative assessment. There appears to be an assumption that supporting the wider student experience beyond the contribution to knowledge is not required, or at least not a priority. This is assumed because those undertaking a PhD have completed a Masters Degree and (particularly the case in Art & Design) students are often established professionals or have held, prior to their study, or hold, whilst undertaking it, senior positions in their field.

We do not believe that the PGR experience has been considered in the same way as it has at Undergraduate or Masters level. In this context, it was our belief that it was strategically important to gain a better understanding of the motivations and aspirations of Art & Design research students. We felt that an awareness of our PGRs' career aspirations and a better understanding of why they undertook doctoral study could both inform how our institution supports their employability skills development and also enhance their student experience more generally. We also believed that it would inform how we might demonstrate meeting the requirements of research and funding bodies.

The first stage – a research project

The research project enabled us to combine our current student and staff member / former student perspectives and function equally as participant-researchers. Entitled 'Investigating and increasing the employability of research students in Art & Design: understanding the student experience', the project was funded through the 2012/13 Student Academic Partners scheme from the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) at BCU. Through this research, we aimed to examine the career aspirations and employment histories of our PGRs in Art & Design. We also wanted to ascertain how former students perceived the impact of their research degree on their careers and how both current and former students viewed their skills development as PGRs.

We carried out qualitative research, using two in-depth questionnaires, one for current students in the 2012/13 cohort and one for former students who had completed their research degree since the year 2000. In designing the questionnaires, we examined other similar surveys, such as the HEA's biennial *Postgraduate Research Experience Survey* (PRES) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) Destinations of Postgraduate Students survey. We did not feel that the PRES had a particularly strong focus on researcher development or professional skills and, interestingly, it has since had a major redesign to address this issue (Bennett and Turner, 2013). The AHRC survey instrument was particularly useful in articulating a list of skills and asking which of them were developed during study, which were important in current employment and which should have been given greater emphasis during study (Innes and Feeney, 2012). This was the model that we adopted. Our final questionnaires were tested using a cognitive interviewing approach in relation to clarity and navigability. We used email as the primary mechanism to contact students (and, where possible, gathered data from the questionnaires online), but also posted hard copies of questionnaires for those who did not have email or expressed the preference. For current students, we asked the 48 students of the 2012/13 cohort and had 16 responses, making a 33% return rate; for former students, we had contact information for 69 of the 71 students who had completed since 2000, and had 21 responses, making a 30% return rate. Although response rates were good, a rigorous statistical and quantitative

analysis was never our primary aim and this level of return has provided substantial qualitative information.

Our findings highlighted a requirement for a holistic view of the doctoral student experience beyond the research project and of the complexities of identity for PGRs in Art & Design. We produced a seventy-page formal report, with twelve recommendations for enhancing provision that we disseminated to senior management within our Faculty. We also produced a more succinct Executive Summary document, which we disseminated to staff currently supervising PGRs in Art & Design and also distributed more widely across the University.

Our research confirmed that not only are the numbers of PGRs in Art & Design growing at BCU, but that the demographics of these students are also changing. There is significant increase in numbers of predominantly full-time students and students seem to be embarking on doctoral study at a younger age. It is difficult to draw general conclusions about our PGRs' aspirations on the basis of age, mode of study or discipline, as both current and former students identified a highly-individualised mix of personal, financial, strategic and opportunistic motivations for study. For example, somewhat paradoxically, youth, maturity and having/not having children are all cited as deciding factors in the timing of undertaking a PhD. However, overall, the majority of reasons provided by both current and former students for undertaking doctoral study were strongly career-related and focused on academic work.

The growth in practice-led PhDs does not seem to have led to more explicit aspirations for careers outside HE, but rather to careers that combine different roles inside and outside academia. This reflects the concept of the portfolio career path recognised as distinctive in the career trajectories of graduates in Art & Design (Ball, Pollard and Stanley, 2010) and the practitioner-lecturer as a common model in Art & Design HE (increasingly employed through fractional posts). Our students do not perceive that different skill sets are developed or used in and out of academia. The skills they recognised and used are generally similar and thus by implication transferable.

A key recommendation from our report was that our Faculty should support the wider PGR experience by increasing opportunities for students to share experiences with peers. As participant-researchers, we have discussed together the personal benefits derived from having reflected on our own doctoral experiences as a result of undertaking this research. Respondents providing additional comment outside their formal questionnaire answers have also been positive about the personal and professional development benefits they have gained from reflecting on and sharing their doctoral student experience. In particular, current students have expressed a desire for more opportunities to share experiences with peers and socialise as a community.

The second stage – implementing peer mentoring for PGRs

Through the research project, we identified a need to enhance provision by enabling more opportunities for peer-support and sharing of experiences. In response, we developed in 2013/14 a second project, the Research Mentoring Initiative (RMI), within which we could develop and implement research peer mentoring for our Art & Design PGRs. This project was again funded by CELT, this time through the larger Interdisciplinary Projects scheme. We thus continued our collaboration and, additionally, brought in a third partner, the

Research Training Co-ordinator for our Faculty, in order to link our work to and embed it within strategic planning and provision for our PGRs.

The project piloted peer mentoring between Art & Design PGRs at different stages, ranging from recently-completed MA students and a BCU staff member contemplating a PhD to those nearing completion and recently-completed early career researchers (ECRs). The RMI aimed both to provide PGRs and ECRs with personal and professional development support (complementing existing skills training and the supervisory relationship) and to enhance the employability of participants through knowledge exchange.

Having advertised the RMI, we formed from the applications nine cross-disciplinary partnerships across the Faculty's five academic Schools, paired according to researchers' reasons for wanting to be part of the scheme, their career aspirations, their skills and their experience, rather than their subject specialisms. Mentors were each given a small honorarium and participated in the mentoring ethics training that we developed. Each partnership received twenty pounds in vouchers for an independent café in Birmingham city centre to facilitate off-campus meetings. Apart from this, mentors and mentees were encouraged to develop and document their partnerships as they best saw fit, reflexively and organically in response to their needs.

In line with our aims, we attempted to engage our participants as co-researchers in the RMI as a pilot scheme and as an action research project that would test the potential of mentoring for PGRs and could inform the development of a continuing and embedded peer mentoring scheme. We were frank with them about our intentions and deliberately non-directive as to the format and operation of the mentoring partnerships, so as to allow them both to individualise and test out experiences of mentoring.

To foster a closer-knit and more visible PGR community, we set up a Professional Development Network as an online platform that included blog posts by PGRs, ECRs and staff and an active Twitter profile. We also ran four events across the academic year, including a cross-faculty symposium examining 'spaces for doctorateness'. These events were well-attended. We had a range of participants, including PGRs, research support staff, academic staff, senior Faculty management from our own and other Faculties, and external partners from cultural organisations and creative industries. We explicitly framed these events as networking, training and learning opportunities for all attendees.

As a pilot, the RMI has had beneficial impacts for its participants and beyond. Evaluation reports from all nine of the partnerships were positive; they articulate the benefits and impact that participants perceived. In particular, we received very positive feedback from participants in relation to the psychosocial benefits on their PGR experience and their professional development. One mentee went as far as to say: "I don't know what I would have done without the mentoring scheme." The events and online platform have fostered an enhanced sense of community across the PGR cohort in Art & Design, something a colleague has described as "developing a necessary 'connectedness'." It has also had an impact more widely across BCU: it has created an opportunity not just for PGRs but also for research-active staff and PhD supervisors to hear about PGR experiences and professional development in the different Faculties. This sharing of experiences prompts reflection and opportunities to learn from each other's academic practice as part of a shared endeavour. As with the former project, we are currently in the process of finalising a Project Report with

recommendations to be distributed across the University. We are also engaged in discussions with Faculty Management on how to sustain and extend our pilot project to a larger cohort.

The RMI pilot has not been without its challenges. Matching potential mentors and mentees is akin to facilitating a dating service: making matches depends on shrewd consideration of a variety of factors, but the success of any individual match is not guaranteed, as that depends on a certain chemistry or spark between those involved; mentoring relationships can and do become difficult if attitudes and values do not match (Berk, 2010; Bell-Ellison and Dedrick, 2008; Fletcher and Mullen, 2012). As with romantic match-making, however, there is always an underlying hope that the match might be a life-changing experience.

Reflections on the staff-student relationship

Undertaking these two projects within the framework of a staff-student partnership has been crucial to their success. We are fortunate that our institution funds and embeds a partnership approach to working with students to enhance provision (Millard *et al*, 2013). Throughout these two projects, we have used our staff-student partnership to develop and apply institutional research, thereby securing the engagement of the wider PGR student body as well as having an inside view of current student experience. Establishing a non-hierarchical ethos, in which the experiences and ideas of both partners have been equally valued, enabled us to foster a positive and productive dynamic. In both projects, our non-hierarchical partnership visibly demonstrated, and thus facilitated, a sense that PGRs were important and equal members of an academic research community. However, with the addition in the second stage of a third partner, a staff member, the established dynamic within the initial collaborative relationship was challenged and the incomer also found it challenging. The different levels of seniority of the two staff (and thus an inherent sense of hierarchy between them) and the fact that the incomer was part of the student partner's supervisory team rendered the staff-student partnership more complex and difficult to navigate. The process of staff-student partnership is a process of experiential learning in which mutual, reflexive knowledge exchange enables innovation. As with any form of learning, it is a practice that requires practising. The challenges notwithstanding, we have enthusiastically self-identified ourselves as change agents and participant-researchers.

Conclusions

Drawing on our experience of both projects, there seems to be a clear requirement to foster a more holistic approach to the PGR experience beyond the production of the individual research project. Traditionally, PGR provision has focused primarily on the role of the supervisory team to support academic progression strategically and on additional research skills training, which may or may not include professional development and career management, depending on the subject discipline and institutional practice. Our research into our PGRs' career aspirations has shown that employability is not an additional consideration and that professional development should not be assumed to be targeted at either the inside or outside of academia. Rather, our research indicates that provision needs to take into account the fact that our PGRs have much more nuanced aspirations both in and out, something we have identified as para-academic and more akin to a portfolio career path.

This reflects the complexity and multiplicity of PGR identity in Art & Design in which academic, industry and practitioner roles are often entwined and PGRs may have multiple and yet conflicting identities which must be negotiated - student, staff, practitioner, researcher, creative. This complexity can be troublesome to navigate, compounding the problems of isolation and trepidation that characterise the PGR experience, regardless of discipline. Such difficulty is exacerbated by the implicit assumption that, because our PGRs are often highly-regarded creative professionals and the majority have a Masters degree and can therefore be viewed as experienced students, support is not a priority. That fact raises questions about the potential misapplication of andragogy when dealing with PGRs and the need to employ emotional intelligence in holistically considering their experiences (Knowles, 1984; Mortiboys 2005). The positive response to the psychosocial benefits of the RMI suggests a need for greater attention to wellbeing and the PGR experience.

The complexity of Art & Design PGR identity and their nuanced professional aspirations means that our PGRs are an extremely individualised group who cannot easily be categorised. The challenge is in enabling individualised provision within a supportive cohort identity and 'community of research practice' (Wilson, 2014). We were able to pilot this and put it into practice through the reflexive mentoring partnerships facilitated by the RMI. Establishing peer mentoring as non-hierarchical, organic and shared, allowing for mutual concerns, can benefit both partners in a process more equally collaborative than the traditional concept of the mentor as guide/adviser. Together with events that foster a wider research community, it can increase opportunities for students to exchange knowledge/experience with peers and to socialise; it also facilitates learning within the partnership and the research community. The benefits to staff and students derive from the recognition that they are the same but different: enabling both elements of this non-dichotomous duality can create positive change.

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