

# Review of literature on the doctoral experience

By Institute of Education and  
UKGRAD Programme

for the Higher Education Academy

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## 5 reviews commissioned in summer 2005

- **The impact of working context and support on the postgraduate research student learning experience**  
(Institute of Education and UK GRAD, Diana Leonard)
- **Student experience of blended learning** (ie combining F2F and ICT approaches)  
(Oxford Brookes, Rhona Sharpe)
- **The first year experience**  
(Sheffield Hallam, Lee Harvey)
- **Role and critical analysis of the effectiveness of reflective practice in programmes for new academic staff**  
(Manchester University, Peter Kahn)
- **Impact of libraries, information resources and associated technologies on the student learning experience**  
(Sheffield University, Sheila Webber)

# What our report provides

- An account of producing a literature review in collaboration with the EPPI-Centre: following its guidelines, with advice from its staff, and using its software
- A map of the literature on the experience of doctoral research students in the UK designed to help practitioners and policy makers to build on the existing evidence and to focus more effectively on relevant questions, issues and sources to inform their own future practice
- A more in-depth analysis of studies focusing on the viva
- An indication of implications for policy and practice and areas for future research.
- An annotated bibliography of the key literature on research students' experiences and outcomes in the UK; and
- A searchable bibliography on Endnote for future use by researchers

# Systematic Review Methodology

## The approaches used by the EPPI-Centre (Centre for Evidence Informed Policy and Practice in Education) at the Institute of Education

- Wide-ranging and explicit strategies for searching for studies, including 'grey literature' and unpublished reports
- Using clear criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of studies from the review
- Monitoring of systematic coding
- Specialist software
- Including assessments of methodological quality

# Our procedures

- Within the timeframe available, we located and entered into an Endnote file 1135 references, consisting of 415 UK studies, 334 Australian studies, 103 USA studies, 11 New Zealand studies, 10 South African studies, and 7 Canadian studies. The other 255 studies focused on (non-UK) Europe
- Following an initial screening, the 120 UK studies classified as eligible were down-loaded into a customised version of the specially developed EPPI-Centre systematic review software.
- These were then key-worded using a set of keywords developed for the review
- A map was produced based on the keywording
- A subset of 19 studies was subsequently identified from the key-wording, which addressed a more specific review question, developed in consultation with our advisory group.

# Screening criteria studies were included in the overall map if they were:

- Published in or after 1985
- About doctoral level studies (including the MRes)
- About the research student experience or short term outcomes after completion
- Focused on the working/studying/researching/financial context
- Referring to doctoral studies in UK
- Written in English
- Research-based: that is to say, not merely reflective, theoretical, conceptual or philosophical, but providing some kind of empirical evidence or data – which can be quantitative or qualitative, an evaluation, or secondary analysis of data.

## Map of the impact of working context and support on the postgraduate research student learning experience in the UK (1)

- The majority of studies have focused on the PhD, or the PhD together with other doctorates but without exploring the differences between them
- Research usually notes the disciplinary area(s), but tends to focus disproportionately on the social sciences and (especially) on Education
- All 120 studies included students studying in universities, but a few also included research students outside HEIs
- The majority of studies give little information on the mode of study (whether full or part-time), how students were funded or whether the mode of study was face-to-face or distance learning
- The gender of students is noted in the majority of studies, but not their ages, 'race'/ethnicity or social class, and very little analysis is carried out comparing students across these attributes.

## Map of the impact of working context and support on the postgraduate research student learning experience in the UK (2)

- **Just over half** of the studies focused on the working/studying context in terms of **institutional provision**
- **One third** focussed on **pedagogy**, the majority of these concerned supervision.
- **Peer support** was a focus of **one third** of the studies.
- **The viva and other forms of assessment** was a focus in **a quarter** of the studies.
- **One third** of the studies were concerned with **outcomes**, such as drop out, completion times and rates, and employment patterns
  
- The majority of the studies were **not based on any discernible theoretical framework**, and the majority presented mainly qualitative data
- **Generally, there has been very little research done on the students' perspective and giving students' views of the doctoral experience.**

## In-depth review

A subset of 17 papers (from 12 separate studies) was subsequently identified from the key-wording, which addressed a more specific review question. This had been identified in consultation with our advisory group:

*What is the impact on research students of the process of examination of a doctoral thesis by viva voce?*

We did not, however, have time to do a thorough assessment of the methodological quality of the studies.

# Findings from the in-depth review on the viva voce

- There is a lack of clarity (and lack of agreement) on the part of examiners, supervisors and candidates about the purposes of the viva
- The viva is perceived by both supervisors and candidates as an unpredictable process and difficult to prepare for
- 'Mock' or practice vivas are relatively rare, although candidates who experienced them reported that they were useful
- Mismatches between the research paradigms of the student and the examiner can lead to disagreement about the validity of a thesis
- The attitude and personal conduct of examiners is a key factor in whether the viva is perceived as a positive experience, even among successful candidates.

# Recommendations: review methodology

- HE researchers should specify fully the details of the sampling frame and of the individuals in their studies
- HEIs and official bodies should ensure theses and publications are recorded on BEI and made available electronically
- The HE Academy should consider the EPPI-Centre methodology and particularly the EPPI-Reviewer tool as a future mechanism for literature reviews
- We recommend that this Report is made available through the EPPI-centre site as well as from the Academy.

# Recommendations: policy and practice

- This review to be the start of an on-going database of the literature relating to doctoral education for the use of researchers in this field and policymakers
- The Academy should consider ways to update the literature map for doctoral education periodically through the EPPI-Centre
- The HE Academy, or other funding bodies, should consider extending this literature review using the same methodology to other aspects of doctoral education
- The current Report should be reworked into a number of forms appropriate for different audiences and purposes.