Organising doctoral education: how to enhance quality of experience and output within an Institution.

Prof Mick Fuller

Professor of Plant Physiology

University of Plymouth, UK

UNICA Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe

PRIDE Network ASSOCIATION FOR PROFESSIONALS IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION

University of Zagreb

UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH Sustainable Earth Institute

What defines quality of experience for the candidate, the supervisors and the institution

- The candidate
  - Supervisor support
  - Peer support
  - Institutional recognition – at Faculty/Dept/Institution level
  - Gets a research degree without too much difficulty
  - Leads to a job

What defines quality of experience for the candidate, the supervisors and the institution

- The supervisors
  - Stimulating candidates
  - Getting the Research done
  - Diligent candidates
  - Papers published
  - Conference attendance

What defines quality of experience for the candidate, the supervisors and the institution

- The institution
  - Reputation building
    - Papers – citations and impact
    - Theses submitted in good time
    - Graduates do well
    - No failures
    - No Appeals
    - No hidden dark arts

How can an Institution organise its doctoral education model to maintain or improve quality ?

- Depends on critical mass

- Depends on organisational structure and facilities
    - Some of the highest quality models are from small Institutions

How can an Institution set incentives and rewards to enhance quality ?

- Need to recognise what Candidates and Supervisors value
    - Recognition?
    - Feeling valued
    - Money?
- Travel Grants/Allocations
- Support Conference Attendance
- Provide facilities that enable good research to be carried out

The challenge of maintaining quality of experience and output in a culture of expanding numbers.

- Many institutions are trying to increase numbers because:
  - Higher numbers linked to more research output and more reputation
  - Leads to cost efficiencies
  - Attracts better academic staff
  - Justifies expenditure on facilities and systems
- Often linked to increased internationalisation of Doctoral Candidates
  - Challenges the Institution to pay attention to these candidates and their needs

---

- All candidates want to be valued first and foremost
  - Need a desk
  - Need a computer
  - Need a recreational area
  - Need to feel that they are special
  - Need Admin support and Admin facilities
    - (printer/photocopier)
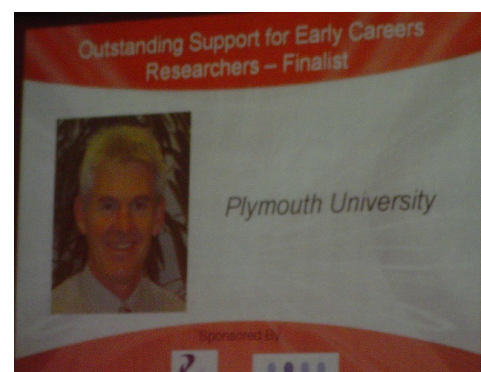
A quality experience includes

- An exciting topic at the forefront of the subject area
- Good attentive supervisors with research reputation – role models
- An organisational structure (Graduate School) that deals with Administration efficiently and with empathy and understanding
- Structured sessions that are valuable and assist personal development
- A desk/office space with Kitchen/Tea & Coffee space and some informal break out space
- A Budget for consumables, travel and conferences!
- Careers advisory service that works for doctoral graduates!

Quality Input = Quality Output

"To structure or Not to structure" that is the question!

If decide that some structure is good then -
"what level of structure is optimal?"

Fully structured systems

- The whole doctorate is credit rated
  - Phase 1 credits (first year if Full-Time)
    - Research Methods
    - Taught Modules with learning outcomes
    - Process credits – structured reporting and checking
    - Credits for skills training
  - Phase 2 credits (second year if Full-Time)
    - Taught Modules
    - Process credits – including credits for outputs (conferences & papers)
    - Credits for skills training
  - Phase 3 credits (third year if Full-Time)
    - Process credits
    - Thesis preparation and submission

What do academics(supervisors) think of structure?

- Most accept Research Methods as being essential

- Most accept that some Factual Taught modules can be useful but this will depend on the candidate and their pre-entry qualifications

- Most despise too much structure and constraints on what they consider to be their "job" or "responsibility to supervise"
  - that is until it all goes wrong!

Can you incentivise good supervision?

- Telling/Insisting supervisors go on a course can be counter-productive
- If you do insist – then you must make sure the course is good and worth it!!

- Better to encourage a Forum where supervisors share their experiences and facilitate discussions around issues which give cause for concern.

- Identify your champions within each Department and use them

What are the consequences of rising numbers?

- The "authorities" will recognise rising doctoral numbers as a sign of success
- They may also recognise short average completion times as success and keep League Tables of supervisor completions.

- As numbers rise then good active researchers will get a disproportionate number of candidates
- But there will also be a rise across the board – more academics become involved in doctoral supervision.
- Both of these challenge the institution!

Consequences!

- Inexperienced supervisors will need support and training

- Experienced supervisors will need relief from other duties (teaching)

- A workload model that acknowledges supervision is desirable

- Other incentives can encourage supervisors e.g. a conference budget

- The administration system will need to be optimised, digitised and helpful

Online supervision Logs

- GradBook – University of Plymouth

Consequences for candidates

- Rising numbers often means less individual physical space (smaller desks or "hot-desking", less dedicated lab space etc)

- May mean either, less time with your supervisors (if they become heavily loaded) or, being supervised by someone with little experience – most candidates would see both of these scenarios as less desirable

- In contrast, more Peer support is available and big cohorts of candidates leads to more bargaining power for the cohort

- More competition begins to arise and this normally rises academic expectation and performance