



Case Study: Strand A: Research Culture and Community – SOCIAL SCIENCE Faculty PGR Placement

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Setting the scene

Strand A of the Courage Project focused on research culture and community across each of the four faculties at UEA, across the Norwich Bioscience Institutes and at the University of Suffolk. A PGR (or multiple PGRs) was employed as paid placement holders through the project to understand and address research culture and community in their respective faculties. The projects were PGR-led and responsive to the specific needs of PGRs within each of the respective general discipline areas.

This was a part-time paid placement, over a period of 8 months. The placement was PGR-led and the PGR-led proposal for the project was focused around interventions to improve research culture and community. There were two key areas to the project:

1. Understanding the meaning of research culture and community workshop
2. Publication Development Training Sessions

Action taken

Research Culture Workshop

The two-hour research culture workshop was set up as a part-focus group, part-workshop. A series of activities and prompts were used to facilitate a discussion and debate about what research culture meant for PGRs. The workshop involved six people and was represented by postdoctoral researchers across three of the four UEA faculties. Each participant was given £10 their time, provided refreshments and offered a chance to have further conversations over lunch.

The lack of clarity about research culture

The question of research culture has received little attention in the social sciences and humanities. Reviewing the literature, the sciences have started to work through what a “good” research culture looks like for its profession. Much of this has been spearheaded by the *Royal Society* which refers to the ‘behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities’ (Royal Society, 2019). This is a useful starting point with some tangible elements to work with. It does, however, leave contextual data at the door, especially in its discussion of the way institutions reshape these tangible elements.

Outside the Sciences, it is possible to point to texts such as Mikhail Epstein’s *The Transformative Humanities*, which describes how the Humanities currently cuts itself from a ‘practical branch that would correspond to the role of technologies in relation to the natural sciences and politics in relation to the social sciences’ (2012, 283. Continuing to not engage with others (practice-based creatives or other disciplines) means it is ‘doomed to stagnation’ or overly focused on the past (2012, 284).

On research community, work between the University of Glasgow and QAA Scotland provides a view from students and staff (QAA Scotland, 2017a) as well as policy and practice (QAA Scotland, 2017b). Across focus groups and interviews, the report drew attention to the importance of institutions ‘encouraging activity at all levels (institution-wide, graduate school, subject area, student-centred), of all types (training, pastoral support, special interest) to meet postgraduate researchers’ varied and changing needs throughout their PhD experience’ (QAA Scotland, 2017a, 13).

The session, which was broken into three parts:

- 1) Discussion about how “research community” and “research culture” is communicated on the university’s website, using extracts from the way various faculties communicate research community and culture.
- 2) Discussion about how postgraduate researchers fit into or navigate “research communities” and “research culture” within UEA.
- 3) Discussion about how “research community” and “research culture” might be improved broadly (and for PGRs), using the prompt of the Royal Society’s “Museum of Extraordinary objects¹”. To think about the PGR community more broadly. How might PGRs discuss their work outside of their own Schools?

Publication Development Workshops

Three sessions themed around publishing during postgraduate research degrees, with academic involvement at each session to share experiences of publishing and answer questions. There was good interest from across the university, with over 40 staff and PGRs expressing an interest in the sessions. However, attendance on the day was low with three academics and two students attending across two sessions, with the final session being a 1:1 interview with a PGR to understand the experiences of academic publishing whilst writing a thesis.

The publication development workshops had three stages:

- 1) Session 1: a forum where PGRs can discuss “publication pressures”, where PGRs could discuss their perceptions, expectations and anxieties around the publishing process.
- 2) Session 2: a forum where PGRs could discuss the ins and outs of the peer review process, including how to deal with rejections, the current perceived practices and expectations around peer-review process for PGRs, across disciplines. I shared a review comments of the first paper I tried to publish. Other participants were invited to bring along their own, including staff members.
- 3) A focus group tying together themes brought up during the previous two sessions. Because of low turnout, this ended up becoming an interview of around an hour long.

Key Impacts and Outcomes

A number of key areas arose as part of this PGR placement and the pilot sessions that were held. These included: “the lack of clarity about research community and culture”; “different needs between schools”, “researcher identity and transition”, and “the central role of supervisors”.

Ultimately, the state of any research culture and community is contingent on individuals having the time and the motivation to continue with initiatives. These individuals include staff members as well as doctoral researchers. Too many examples were given where an initiative had been started but soon folded once it could no longer be driven forward because of time commitments or other incentives. In many ways, this is a lesson for those that have seen potential in the Courage Project and other similar initiatives as part of the Catalyst funds and would like it to carry these lessons forward.

The research culture workshop provided an important space for participants to think about the current state of research culture in their Schools and disciplines. There were regular instances where

researchers from different Schools remarked how they “hadn’t thought about it like that”, or “you’ve had a different experience to me”. These comments highlight the virtue of working through “universal” aspects of what a doctoral researcher may do throughout their time at UEA but it points to how those tasks and activities are completed is often drastically different. During the workshop, others asked about how they might look to set up protected time and space to do activities they considered a part of the process of being a researcher. It also highlighted gulfs in expectation, including around having time away from the desk to do Courage activities, holiday, and authorship of journals. What one student might think as normal could strike another as not. Sharing these stories can be empowering in resetting expectations and working with their Schools to improve the research culture for themselves and their peer.

The publishing sessions had a disappointing turnout despite the initial expression of interest from PGRs. It did, however, set in motion discussion across academics in HUM and SSF about how supervisors should approach the subject and what guidance should be provided. One academic referred to the approach as “fruitful”. One of the attendees of the sessions expressed increased ‘awareness of the ethical issues related to publishing’, as this came up throughout.

Given this was a pilot programme, the themes *indicate* potential pathways for further reflection by universities, the PGR community, training directors and those carrying forward the Courage Programme or equivalent at other institutions. More generally, there is a basis for considering particular sessions (through the way they are organised and their content) can foster connections with students across different Schools and Faculties in a University, as well as provide an important insight into the lived experiences of PGRs.