

CPD for PGRs? “No thanks, I’m busy!”

‘CPD for PGRs?’ SEDA blog: Supporting and Leading Educational Change
<https://thesedablog.wordpress.com/2019/04/10/danielletran/> (April 2019).

Posted on **April 10, 2019**

Higher Education institutions offer doctoral researchers a variety of provisions designed to support the development of postgraduate researchers (PGRs). These offerings may take the form of compulsory programmes, courses, and/or a range of optional developmental workshops that cover topics such as research skills; technology enhanced learning tools, and presentation skills to name a few. Nevertheless, generating interest among PGRs towards CPD activities can be a hard task. Focus is on their PhD and taking time out to engage in other knowledge and skills training is, for many, not a priority. The task of putting together a developmental programme/course/or workshop is thus a challenging one.

One way of tackling an initial lack of interest among PGRs towards CPD is by emphasising the broad skillset which employers across sectors are now looking for. The Vitae website also emphasises that ‘employers look for researchers who can ‘add value’ to their organisations’ (2019a). It is not enough to have subject knowledge evidenced by a doctorate. Underlining the need for PGRs to possess relevant transferable skills that can then be applied to their own discipline helps to create interest in CPD offerings, turning *need to know* training to things that they *want to know* about. Encouraging PGRs to reflect on their progress using The Vitae Researcher Development Framework can help to pinpoint specific areas for further development (2019b).

When working as part of a team that supports the development of PGRs, colleagues are expected to work with PGRs from across subject areas. Employing subject specific terminology with all students is not possible, nor is trying to ignore the subject differences among them. It is therefore important to bring students together within these developmental training sessions by employing a more universal language, one that is grounded in shared experiences and challenges that all PGRs undergo as part of their academic journey. But rather than asking PGRs to avoid referring to subject specific knowledge, they can be encouraged to reflect on their own disciplinary experiences and discuss these within groups. Doing so not only helps them to feel more comfortable in the CPD sessions but much can be learnt from cross-disciplinary discussions that are focused around the same shared issues. Favouring learner centred workshops will increase levels of engagement and share classroom leadership with the PGRS.

When planning and designing a development programme, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of PGR learning needs and cycles. PGRs come from various routes of entry. For example, an individual may register for a PhD straight after completing an MA, or be a returning student after spending years working in industry. Their experiences mean all have preferred ways of learning and being taught. These differences can be addressed through offering CPD training via a range of modes, such as online, blended, face to face, one to one or group settings. The learning cycles of PGRs mean some are full or part time which may also affect their engagement with development opportunities. Further, the experience of a PGR in year 1 will be dramatically different to a PGR’s journey in year 2

or 3 and so on. We should also consider the longer-term professional development opportunities which we can offer PGRs that may lie outside the immediate remit of a researcher development programme. For example, relevant recognition qualifications that PGRs may be able to work towards.

Doctoral students are often seen as a group, located as part of the research community. But within this PGR group are often experiences of isolation as the PhD journey can be a disconnected one. There is thus a need to encourage the formation of PGR networks around CPD to create a stronger sense of belonging connecting PGRs internally to each-other and the institution. Working with PGRs to co-create the planning, designing, and possibly even delivery of CPD initiatives can also help to break down feelings of PGR isolation by working with them as student partners. This would help to inform a more holistic strategy for approaching the development of doctoral students.

References

Vitae (2019a) 'About the Vitae Researcher Development Framework' Available at: <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework> [Accessed: 5/4/2019].

Vitae (2019b) 'Why focus on professional development?' Available at: <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/why-focus-on-professional-development> [Accessed: 5/4/2019].