

UKCGE (UK Council for Graduate Education) Annual Conference Reports from Royal Holloway PGR attendees

30th June-1st July 2022, University of Birmingham

Polly Hember, PhD Media Arts @[pollyhember](#)

Having only attended conferences closely related to my research field or ones that have been specifically designed for postgraduates, I had very little idea of what to expect going into the UK Council for Graduate Education's Annual Conference, this year hosted by the University of Birmingham. What I found was two-days packed with valuable conversations attuned to supporting the HE sector. They reflected on the challenges arising from the pandemic and also looked forward to the future of postgraduate research and how best to support those working within this challenging and changing landscape.

The conference provided valuable insight into the current research and projects working to improve the postgraduate space, focusing on fairness, inclusivity, equity and diversity. For example, [Louise Banahene](#)'s work within [NEON](#) emphasised the importance of collaboration for widening access, and work presented by [Rachel van Krimpen](#) highlighted the practical steps that have been implemented to increase EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) in PGR recruitment within the BBSRC DTP. Her work demonstrated how targeted actions including: anonymisation of name, gender, age and (from 2021) the name of previous educational institutions on applications; a focus on motivation within assessment criteria; revising advertising materials to eliminate academic jargon from websites created positive impact within the BBSRC's recruitment for home applicants from Black and Black mixed ethnic backgrounds. She also reflected on the challenges and institutional resistance to such changes, and the importance of prioritising EDI within doctoral admissions processes.

We also heard about a [new project](#) at the University of Warwick led by [James Burford](#), [Emily Henderson](#), [Ahmad Akkad](#), [Dr. Dangen](#)i and [Sophia Kier-Byfield](#) which investigates pre-application processes within doctoral admissions and the danger of these moments (emails sent to prospective supervisors; information on university websites about applications) operating as 'gatekeeping moments', and spoke about the importance of ensuring fairness and inclusivity aligned judgements within these informal processes. Conversations on strengthening EDI were at the heart of this conference, which intersected with discussions around funding, resources, providing adequate training, access, and the cost of living crisis.

Another interesting thread running throughout the conference was discussion around the purpose of the viva within the PhD journey. These debates questioned where the final examination stood within a research landscape that has undergone so much change within recent years, and whether it is—to use [Gill Houston](#)'s phrase—'fit for purpose'. Her [recent research](#) found the viva to be a helpful mechanism to measure a wider range of attributes. In another session, [Stan Taylor](#) heavily critiqued the ambiguity and inconsistency in viva's in institutions across the UK and between the UK and other countries (for example, only the UK, New Zealand and Malaysia have closed examinations not open to the public). He raised concern about the closed nature of the exam, the fact that the presence of an independent chair is not a mandatory requirement for many institutions, the varying ways in which examiners are selected and how much experience they may have, along with the inconsistency around when candidates are notified of their result, highlighting the considerable room for improvement and clarification within frameworks of assessment.

I hope this brief summary offers a glimpse into the vital conversations that took place at the UKCGE 2022 Conference (packed with various parallel sessions, the full programme is available [here](#) to look through). These discussions were conducted in a supportive, welcoming and friendly space where it was heartening to witness the many ways in which the UKCGE is advocating for postgraduates.

Christos Dexiades, PhD Media Arts

At the end of June, myself and two other PhD students from Royal Holloway were fortunate enough to be funded by the Doctoral School to attend the UKCGE Annual Conference at the University of Birmingham. The UKCGE was founded by Robert Burgess in 1994 after he realised that there was no organisation that catered for staff who were engaged in postgraduate education. The organisation works with and represents everyone involved in postgraduate education and research including university staff, postgraduate students, and funding bodies to enhance postgraduate education and research. Therefore, this conference was a perfect opportunity to meet people who are involved in postgraduate education in varying capacities.

The theme for this year's conference was Innovations and Developments in Postgraduate Education, which involved a number of exciting papers being presented. My two favourite sessions were titled 'The UK Doctoral Examination: Fit for Purpose?' and 'Developments in the Doctoral Examination in the UK'. The first discussed whether the viva was still a suitable way to assess doctoral candidates to determine whether they should be awarded a PhD while the second examined how the doctoral examination process has changed over the last twenty years. During this session, I learnt that the UK is one of less than five countries in the world where candidates do not get feedback from examiners between the submission and the viva to allow time to prepare a defence.

While the above two sessions focussed on issues facing doctoral researchers, a number of papers presented also highlighted important issues faced by other people involved in postgraduate education. For example, there was a workshop about pre-application communications made by potential doctoral applicants with a university and how the contents of these communications can impact on whether supervisory staff respond. During this workshop, participants were divided into two groups where one analysed emails sent to supervisors and the other concentrated on three admissions webpages from a university's website. The email group found that supervisors who receive too many applicant emails do not have time to write a full response and so they redirect them to the university website. I was in the group analysing the webpages and found that a lot of information, such as entry requirements for applicants whose qualifications do not follow the UK grading system, were missing. We found that it is important to ensure that university websites are updated regularly and have all the information that applicants may need, to avoid disproportionately affecting applicants who are unfamiliar with a university's or department's processes.

Of course, conferences are about more than just learning about the latest innovations in the field. They are also about meeting new people. It was really great to attend this conference with two other PhD students from Royal Holloway. None of us had met before so it was nice to talk about and compare our PhD experiences over the two days.

Due to the pandemic, this was my first in-person conference to attend and it was a fascinating and eye-opening one. I would like to thank the Doctoral School for giving me the opportunity to attend.

Sarah Richardson, PhD English

Since the aim of the UK Council for Graduate Education is to explore and improve the experience of the postgraduate researcher, attending the 2022 UKCGE Conference as a PGR was both enlightening and reassuring. Aside from the conference being an excellent networking opportunity for early career researchers and more established academics alike, the content of the presentations and the resulting discussions felt very personal to me as a PGR. Having attended, I now have a deeper understanding of my own experience as a PGR, and also a better understanding of the efforts of those within UK academia who work to enhance the postgraduate experience.

While the needs of the supervisor were not ignored, the concerns and well-being of the typical PGR student were at the centre of discourse from the outset of the conference. The tone was established straight away with a keynote discussion panel comprised of postgraduate researchers, who discussed issues including but not limited to: the transition from taught to research, studying when English is your second language, the impact of the pandemic, and methods of reflection for PGRs. These concerns and insights were mirrored in the research presented over the two days.

Many of the presented papers placed great emphasis on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). Early in the conference research initiated by GuildHE, aimed at understanding the lived experience of PGR ethnic minority students, made several insightful and much needed recommendations, such as the creation of a functioning system for reporting discrimination. There were also examples of EDI research being put into action: Ms Katie Stripe introduced the idea of 'developing personas' to increase inclusion in curricula (a strategy which has been successfully implemented at Imperial College,) and research at the University of Nottingham proposed innovative practices in postgraduate provision, acknowledging the challenges of inclusion in HE but offering workable recommendations, such as 'the guaranteed interview scheme.'

PGR mental health was also emphasised in tandem with these ideas. I was particularly pleased with the attention paid to the current cost of living crisis and the expected consequences for students: the UKCGE as a whole clearly has its fingers on the pulse. Being introduced to research dedicated to understanding and improving the more emotional aspects of the PGR experience was heartening, and no doubt this is the main reason why I as a PGR felt welcome and included at the conference. Overall, I found the conference to be a well-balanced enquiry into the PGR experience, and I am grateful for the work the UKCGE has done and continues to do.

I would like to conclude by highlighting a presentation that stood out to me personally. Delivered (and co-authored) by Dr Gill Houston, her soon to be published paper discusses the mechanics of the UK doctoral examination, the knowledge economy, and the evolving demographic of the PGR. What distinguished her presentation was her assertion that the viva should be an enjoyable and fulfilling experience rather than something to be dreaded, since it is the culmination of a (hopefully) much loved passion project. This is the most positive assessment of the viva process I have come across, and it has been a very optimistic takeaway.