Monitoring the Progress of Doctoral Students

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Doctoral students, graduate students, or postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are those students who undertake a research degree culminating in a thesis of original work. In this entry-level paper, they will generally be referred to as PGRs, as this demonstrates the importance of their contribution to the global research culture. In the UK, doctorates, usually a PhD but also professional doctorates, are typically three to four years in length full-time or six years part-time and are undertaken as an individual study. Research degrees are therefore unlike undergraduate and master's programmes as they are not taught in a classroom with other students. PGRs can therefore suffer from an isolating student experience. Student monitoring refers to systems which track PGR engagement, progress and attendance. They can therefore be used to ensure that the PGR is present on the programme and submitting work, often in accordance with pre-set deadlines. Although doctorates internationally do have many similarities, there are also significant differences. This entry manuscript will be focused on UK doctoral study, although references will be made to the international stage as appropriate.

monitoring progress | doctoral students | PhD | PGRs | successful progression

In the nineteenth century, British scholars began to travel to Germany to access the research degree opportunities which were being created there, most specifically the PhD [1]. It was not until the early twentieth century that British universities began to offer the same chances to study at this level. Postgraduate degrees of all descriptions in the UK have been available for the past 100 years [2]. Oxford University established its first DPhil in 1917 [3]. This early doctoral degree included a thesis, oral examination and sometimes a written examination. The universities of Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool and Sheffield followed suit quickly and established PhD programmes in 1918 and University College London developed their first PhDs in 1921 [3]. Yet as late as 1963, the Robbins Report into the state of higher education in the UK hoped that 'the notion that to hold a doctorate is an essential qualification for every applicant for a university post will never become established in this country' [4] (p. 101). Criticisms of PhDs continued for the next twenty years or so. Burgess et al. argued that until the 1980s, most postgraduate studies in the UK had been 'bolted on' [5] (p. 145). It was only in the 1990s, they continued, that organisational structures were instituted to support doctoral students. These support structures were influenced by the rise in student numbers as the need for research to create wealth and prosperity became a reality. Indeed, the attitude, which Clark has called the 'undergraduate fixation' pervaded British academic institutions until the latter decades of the twentieth century [6].

Thus, whilst doctoral study did become increasingly popular throughout the twentieth century, the figures remained relatively low. The number of people who earned doctoral degrees in OECD countries rose by 38% from 154,000 new graduates in 2000 to 213,000 new doctoral graduates in 2009 [7] (p. 6). A more recent study, which delineated PhD production across the globe, identified 8000 PhDs awarded in the UK in 1991. By 2016, this figure had risen

to 27,366 [8] (p. 20). Whatever the arguments for or against administrative monitoring systems, in an environment with large numbers of PGRs, it is virtually impossible to keep track without effective schemes [9]. Furthermore, as the PGR student body expanded, supervisors have needed to increase the pedagogical nature of postgraduate study and provide more structured support and learning [10]. To ensure parity of research skills and understanding, these taught elements need to be monitored.

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