



Association of  
Higher Education  
Careers Services

Careers Provision for Doctoral Students:  
A Survey of Good Practice in National and  
International Institutions, AHECS Report 2015/16

# **Careers Provision for Doctoral Students: A Survey of Good Practice in National and International Institutions**

AHECS Postgraduate Working Group

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## **Introduction**

In 2015-2016 the AHECS Postgraduate Working Group conducted two surveys to explore career provision for doctoral research students, within Ireland (North and South), UK (mainland) and international higher education institutions. The objective of this research was threefold:

- a) to explore good practice in Ireland and internationally, and apply learning to future practice
- b) to share good practice among AHECS members in relation to career provision for doctoral research students
- c) to explore the option of engaging in collaborative activities on a national and international basis.

In total, 46 respondents across Ireland, UK (mainland), rest of Europe, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand took part in the surveys. Each institution responded to questions relating to career supports for doctoral research students, types of programmes delivered, delivery and impact measurement methods, as well as details of specific career workshops, events and courses for doctoral research students. Full details of the research findings can be found in 'Careers Provision for Doctoral Students: A Survey of National and International Institutions. Study 1: Survey of Good Practice in Ireland; Study 2: A Global Study of Good Practice'.

## **Research Rationale**

There has been a significant rise in postgraduate education over the last decade, prompted in part by the OECD recommendation that Ireland increase its doctoral graduate output (OECD, 2004). This increased output is reflected in the number of doctoral graduates employed in industry which has almost trebled between 2001 and 2007 (HEA, 2011). In the future, demand for doctorate level education is likely to grow further given national policy objectives to invest in research and innovation with resulting benefits to include the creation of 'a cadre of highly trained PhD students' (HEA, 2011:12).

Thus, the two factors of increasing doctoral research student numbers and the move away from academia as an employment route provide the backdrop and context for this current research. This may necessarily result in increased engagement by doctoral research

students with careers services in order to facilitate the development and demonstration of competencies and transferable skills required for their future careers.

## Findings

### Careers support and funding for doctoral research students

The main careers support provided to doctoral research students is by career professionals with funding drawn directly from careers service budgets (63% in Ireland, 85% UK mainland/international services). The majority of career professionals operate within services that are aligned with student support structures (56% Ireland, 74% UK mainland/international), with a minority of services attached to graduate schools or centres for teaching and learning.

In Ireland, career professionals working with doctoral research students were more likely to also be working with postgraduate taught students (75% Ireland, 57% UK mainland/international). A smaller proportion of career professionals working with doctoral research students also worked with postdoctoral research staff (31% Ireland, 43% UK mainland/international).

100% of respondents in both studies indicated that careers support for doctoral research students was provided by a careers professional. In delivering this suite of services to doctoral research students, career professionals engage primarily with academic staff (69% Ireland, 60% UK mainland/international) employers (44% Ireland, 67% UK mainland/international) and alumni (44% Ireland, 67% UK mainland/international).

### Enrolment and Institutional Strategies

While institutions were asked to report on student enrolment figures, the numbers recorded were often estimates and, as a result, can only be of tentative value. However, by way of context, doctoral research students from international respondent institutions accounted for some 57,000 enrolments while institutions in Ireland estimated their enrolments at over 11,000 in total. In both surveys, respondents indicated that the majority of doctoral research

students are registered on a full time basis. The picture of discipline enrolments is similar for national and international institutions with Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) accounting for the highest average enrolment followed by Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS). Less than half the respondents in Ireland indicated their institutions' key strategic objectives in relation to doctoral research students. Conversely, a rich range of strategic objectives was provided by international respondents; with recruitment, retention, first class research, completion, and employability skills being among the many of the cited strategic objectives.

### **Models of Delivery**

In recent years, the Irish model for doctoral research completion is trending toward a structured approach, bringing the traditional strengths of the PhD together with a range of relevant skills, which are highly sought by private and public sector employers. This Irish structured approach incorporates generic as well as discipline specific skills and is regarded by Europe as leading the way (HEA, 2011). This Irish structured approach typically takes 3-4 years to complete a PhD.

Respondents to the International survey indicated that models of delivery do not follow a uniform pattern. UK (mainland) institutions generally follow a 1+3 model, while longer completion rates tend to exist elsewhere, with up to 7-8 years in some international examples.

## Delivery methods

In the majority of cases, services offered are open to all students including doctoral research students. 38% of respondents in Ireland and 47% of UK mainland/international institutions also offer careers workshops specifically for doctoral research students, but the provision of specific career consultancy and careers events was less common in Ireland compared to internationally.

**Table 1: Type of careers services delivered for Doctoral Research students**

	Open only to Doctoral Research students		Open to all students including Doctoral Research students	
	Ireland	UK mainland/ international	Ireland	UK mainland/ international
<b>Individual careers consultancy/advice</b>	13%	40%	75%	83%
<b>Drop in sessions (CV, advice, other)</b>	6%	22%	69%	93%
<b>Careers workshops</b>	38%	47%	69%	87%
<b>Careers events</b>	6%	45%	75%	90%
<b>Employer events</b>	13%	31%	69%	90%
<b>Graduate/alumni insight events</b>	19%	38%	31%	92%
<b>Networking sessions</b>	13%	35%	38%	92%
<b>Career mentoring</b>	0	25%	13%	85%

62% of respondents in both studies delivered career support to the whole cohort as part of orientation/induction. The international research also explored the provision of careers support for domestic and international students, and 69% of participating institutions did not make any distinction in the provision. Respondents identified a number of challenges for international students seeking work, including language and cultural barriers and work sponsorship restrictions.

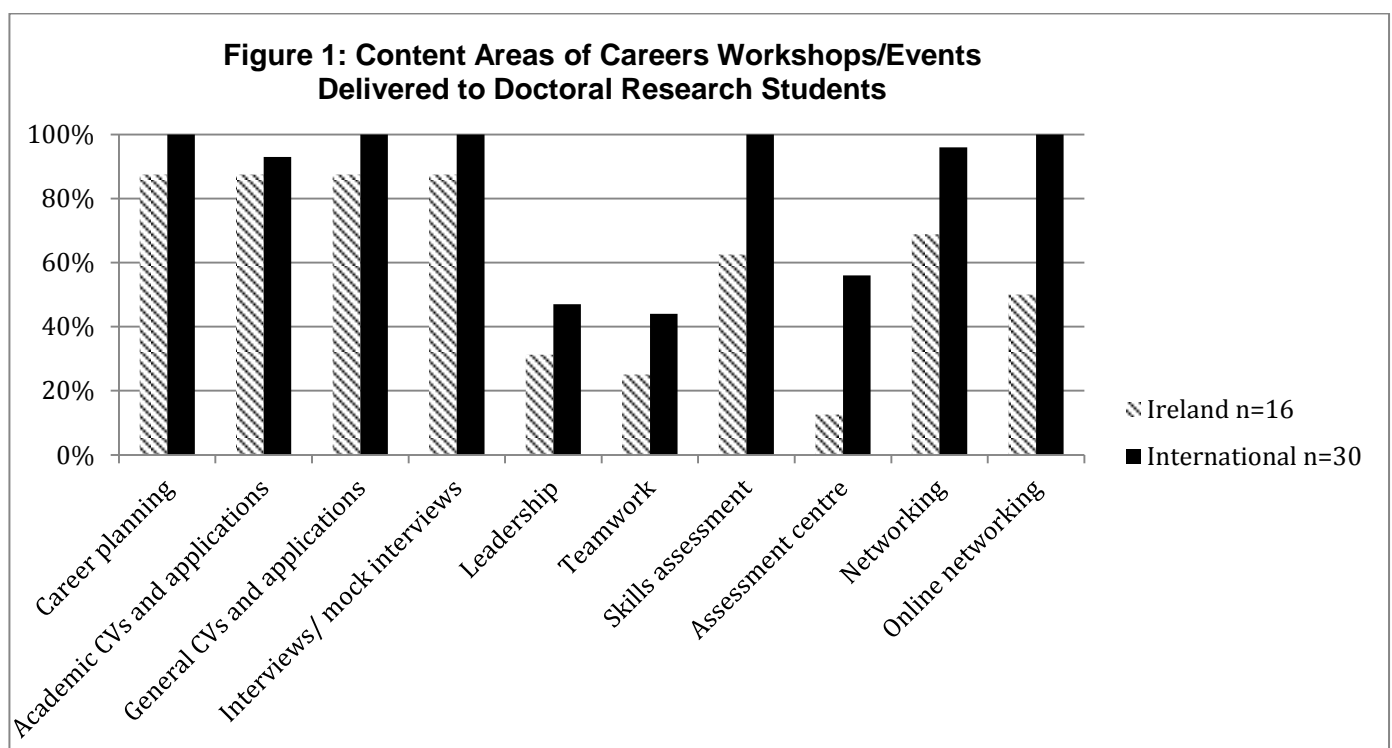
Where institutions have pre-registration for careers events or workshops, most estimated that 50-75% of those who register attend. A number of institutions highlighted challenges in engaging students. Although over 50% of Ireland respondents offer virtual careers consultancy, international institutions are more likely to offer a wider range of virtual

provision. Skype was the most commonly cited software used, with others including Blackboard and Google Hangouts.

Most institutions reported that they communicated via email (81% Ireland, 97% UK mainland/international), with student mailing lists and communication through a graduate school also being common across all. International organisations were more likely to use social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

### Careers Content

Similar core careers content is delivered at both a national and international level as seen from Table 2. A higher percentage of UK mainland/international institutions deliver across a range of topics. Other examples of content delivered by international institutions include 'Innovation and Creativity, Consultancy and Writing a Grant Bid' by University of South Australia, enterprise and entrepreneurial development themes at Newcastle University and 'Negotiating my Salary' at ABG Intelli'agence, France. Vincent Mignotte, Executive Director, ABG Intelli'agence, highlighted that 'doctoral students want to perceive concretely the kind of help they will get from the workshop'.





### Careers Resources and Materials Used

A wide variety of careers resources were detailed by the participating institutions in both studies. The resources shared included a range of credit bearing and non-credit bearing courses/modules and included both free and subscription based materials. A core number of resources were mentioned as being used across all geographic areas.

Resources that were identified included blogs, websites, self-assessment and psychometric tools, career management systems and a range of reflective tools developed in-house. In particular, the international contributors shared a myriad of resources from books, websites and other online resources. A selection of resources used by international institutions is detailed overleaf.

#### Resources Common to Ireland, UK Mainland and International Institutions

Epigeum- [www.epigeum.com](http://www.epigeum.com)

Vault- [www.vault.com](http://www.vault.com)

Jobs.ac.uk- [www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk)

Profiling for Success

Graduate First- [www.graduatesfirst.com](http://www.graduatesfirst.com)

Prospects Planner- [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

Adult Directions- [www.cascaid.co.uk/adultdirections](http://www.cascaid.co.uk/adultdirections)

Vitae UK- [www.vitae.ac.uk](http://www.vitae.ac.uk) including RDF

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## Example: Workshops & Resources Delivered to Doctoral Students by International Universities

### Sample Workshop Material: *provided at University of Washington, USA*

- Mapping Past Experiences for Future Ideas (90min)
- Identifying Transferable Skills from PhD Work (90min)
- Building A Sustainable Career Exploration Plan (90min)
- Exploring Options: Values as Job Search Criteria (90min)
- Working the Room - Networking Practice (90min)
- Career Symposium for Grad Students & Postdocs - Panel of Employers and Networking Reception (3hr)
- Internships & Experiential Learning Options for Grad Students (90min)
- Academic Careers: Salary Negotiations (90min)
- Dependable Strengths (1 - Day)

### Example Workshop Provision – *at Aarhus University, Denmark*

Competency mapping (2.5 hours) targeted to all PhD students. Dos and don'ts of salary negotiation (2.5 hours): last year PhD students. LinkedIn Seminar (2.5 hours): all PhD students. What do PhDs from X do? (2 hours), all PhD students. PhD Horizons: e.g. Communication (2 hours), all PhD students. Company visits: (2 hours) all PhD students International PhDs finding Work in DK (2 hours) all PhD Students

### In-House Resources from

- 'Dummy CVs, mock interview questions, mock job adverts, etc.' (Newcastle University)
- 'I have designed and developed all of the above courses with various materials customised for them. I have also authored e-books for jobs.ac.uk for PhDs and post-doctoral staff' (University of Nottingham)
- 'Online Career Management module (created in-house on VLE). Career Route Planner (paper and on-line versions)' (UK (mainland) institution)

### Workshop duration

- Workshop duration varies by institution, e.g. from 1 hour seminars to 2 or 3 hour workshops. A 6 hour long event was mentioned by one UK (mainland) institution while another, reported delivery of a range of 3 hour workshops 2-3 times per year that are open to any year of study and are non-credit bearing.
- University of Wollongong mentioned 'Careers Lounge', a series of hour 4 weekly lunchtime sessions provided within 6 months or 12 months after completion of the doctorate

### Example Career Resources

- Work PhDs at Work - <http://phdsatwork.com/>
- From PhD to Life - <http://fromphdtolife.com/>
- Beyond the Tenure Track - <http://beyondthetenuretrack.com/>
- Beyond Academe - <http://www.beyondacademe.com/>
- VersatilePhD - <http://versatilephd.com/#alt-academy>
- Strengths Quest - <http://www.strengthsquest.com/>
- myFuture (McGill University)
- GradSquare - (job search platform) <https://www.gradsquare.com>
- Blogs such as <http://jobsontoast.com> and <http://cheekyscientist.com/blog/>
- 'From PhD to Life' - <http://fromphdtolife.com>; 'Branching Points' - <http://www.branchingpoints.com>
- HuskyJobs (UW based jobs database)
- Strength Interest Inventory <https://www.cpp.com/products/strong/index.aspx>
- Strengths Finder by Gallup <https://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com/>
- FutureSelves - <http://www.futureselves.com>
- ePortfolio

### Sample Qualitative Commentaries from international institutions

- 'A great resource for STEM folks is MyIDP on the Science Careers website, it is free for students to use. Some colleagues of mine are creating a similar site for Humanities and Social Sciences and it will also be free' (USA)
- 'Our Resource Centre contains over 2500 items in our library of books and DVDs, online subscriptions to databases and magazines or journals. Examples of resources that are specifically for graduate students and postdocs include: 4 major online employment bulletins such as Artsboard, Current Jobs for Graduates, International Career Employment Weekly, The International Educator; 68 books specifically for PhDs. 50+ DVDs of relevant events; Subscriptions to The Chronical of Higher Education and University Affairs; careers databases (in addition to myFuture): Bridge, Career Cruising, GoingGlobal, MyWorldAbroad, Vault Career Insider. We are also proud to offer students access to myFuture, an online career management system....' (McGill University, Canada)

### Events:

University of Wollongong, Australia organises a biennial Graduate Researcher Careers Conference & Edinburgh University organises The PhD Horizons Careers Conference.

For more details on resources see: 'Careers Provision for Doctoral Students: A Survey of National and International Institutions. Study 1: Survey of Good Practice in Ireland; Study 2: A Global Study of Good Practice' pages 35-42.



## **Internships**

An additional area explored in the international survey is the area of internship opportunities with the majority of 83% of international institutions reported that doctoral research students have an internship or placement opportunity available to them. The sourcing and management of these internship systems varies between international institutions, but many doctoral research students use their careers service for support in identifying opportunities, making contact with organisations, as well as for support on their internship application process.

## **Evaluation**

The international report also explored evaluation methods and 89% of institutions evaluate/monitor the impact of the careers provision to doctoral research students. The majority of institutions measure immediate impact and a smaller number conducted follow-up evaluation. For example, University of Washington uses a six - monthly feedback approach and the University of Nottingham reports the use of Careers Service Evaluation Weeks.

## **Recommendations and Way Forward**

A number of key insights into priority areas for development have been identified from the research findings:

### **1. Career planning:**

Career planning was identified as a priority area for development by Ireland respondents. Respondents to the international survey outlined a number of relevant workshops and resources that could be of value for good practice - sharing in this area. The merit of careers consultants with professional counselling skills was also highlighted in the international survey.

### **2. Virtual provision/social media:**

The use of virtual provision and social media was not as common in Ireland as it was internationally, indicating the need for sharing of best practice in this respect.

### **3. International mobility:**

Given the competitive job market particularly within research-related careers and additional challenges faced by international students and jobseekers, the need for careers services to

support students to engage internationally is increasing. International mobility was identified as a priority development area by the respondents to the Ireland survey.

#### **4. Internship opportunities:**

83% of international respondents offered internships to doctoral research students. Going forward, doctoral internships are likely to become a hot topic for careers services in Ireland and the experiences of some of the international respondents could be valuable to AHECS and individual members as they deal with doctoral research students.

#### **5. Options outside of academia:**

It was reported that the expectations of doctoral research students to pursue an academic career are in contrast to the limited job opportunities, demonstrating the importance of considering options outside of academia. Identifying doctoral graduate outcomes poses a significant challenge as stated in international findings. This topic was also one of the key areas of support required by respondents in Ireland.

#### **6. Evaluation methods:**

A range of evaluation methods were identified and best practice sharing could be of value within and beyond doctoral research student careers provision.

#### **7. Strategy:**

While some respondents in Ireland indicated that their institutional strategies were under review, it is important to note the broad range of strategic objectives from international respondents. The data from these institutions could benefit AHECS and its members in the development of their strategic statement of support for work with doctoral research students.

#### **8. Career Support & Funding:**

Funding for doctoral research student career support comes primarily from institutional careers services operating within tight budgetary parameters. Possible ways in which institutions in Ireland might increase funding could be explored through some of the initiatives outlined by international survey respondents. 67% of international respondents reported having a dedicated careers professional, and UK mainland/international institutions were more likely to deliver targeted careers provision delivered specifically to doctoral research students.

## 9. Engaging doctoral research students:

The research identified limited attendance at careers programmes and events, and a number of institutions identified challenges in engaging students. Potential ideas to increase engagement included offering targeted provision, fostering collaboration, understanding needs, developing a peer network, working with research directors, employers, recruiters and alumni.

## 10. Collaboration:

In order to facilitate collaboration and sharing of best practice, it is recommended that:

- Members working with doctoral research students take time to further explore the rich range of resources identified in the international report.
- A virtual network is established by the AHECS PGR Working group to facilitate collaboration and sharing of best practice with international institutions.
- A training programme is organised to address priority areas for development.

## References

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, (2004) Review of National Policies for Education: Review of Higher Education in Ireland, Examiners' Report, Paris: OECD

HEA (2011). National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Department of Education and Skills, Dublin: Stationery Office