

ESRC Doctoral Training Framework: No more PhDs in Post-1992 Universities

As Senior Managers responsible for social science research in the key post-1992 universities in England hitherto supported by ESRC, we are posting this report as a formal protest about the outcome of the process relating to the announcement of the new ESRC Postgraduate Training Framework. We recognise the severe financial constraints under which ESRC must operate, but the approach taken to the DTC and DTU applications has produced an outcome that runs counter to the interests of the disciplines covered by ESRC and is damaging for the HE sector as a whole.

We wish specifically to protest at the total exclusion of all post-1992 universities from the new Framework. Under the existing system of ESRC recognition for training purposes, 25 post-1992 institutions achieved recognition as doctoral outlets. Not one of these is now eligible for the receipt of ESRC doctoral awards in the proposed DTC system. This was, no doubt, inadvertent, but the announced decisions show a complete disregard for the research capacity of these institutions and a failure to recognise their strengths and contributions within the social sciences.

Some of the post-1992 institutions were approved by the ESRC Training and Skills Committee for DTU status (as noted in the Committee Minutes provided to applicants), but this status was subsequently lost for financial reasons. Institutions in this situation have the capacity to provide advanced doctoral training, yet this capacity is not recognised and institutions will have to withdraw staff from involvement in this activity. These institutions will suffer from the abolition of Open Competition and CASE awards and will no longer be able to obtain Research Grant Linked Studentships. In other words, the door has been firmly slammed shut on the post-92's.

The FAQs posted by the ESRC misrepresent this situation, claiming that non-accredited institutions fell below a quality threshold, rather than a financial threshold. This misrepresentation is strengthened by the suggestion that funds will be available to allow non-accredited institutions to buy-in training support from DTCs: in effect, a suggestion that they close down their existing training systems and apply for funding to buy in similar training from a DTC. This is no way to develop the social sciences.

The consequences of the Council's decisions can be illustrated from some basic facts and figures. The 25 institutions recognised for 1+3 funding were represented in all subject areas covered by the Council. Many had recognition in only one or two subjects, some had recognition in 3 subjects, but seven institutions had recognition in four or more subject areas:

University	Number of subjects recognised
Plymouth	7
Sheffield Hallam	6
Oxford Brookes	5
UWE	5
Brighton	4
Middlesex	4
Portsmouth	4

These institutions were especially strongly represented in some subject areas, where they constituted a major feature of doctoral support in particular subjects:

Discipline	Number of recognised post-1992 universities
Social Policy	12
Management and Business	11
Sociology	7
Psychology	7
Politics	6
Environment and Planning	5
Education	5
Social Work	4
Geography	4

This strength of quality and breadth of expertise is in danger of being completely lost to the doctoral training system in the UK. Furthermore it appears that a total of 38 quota awards currently received by these institutions have now been lost, and a number of strong institutions are major losers:

University	Number of Quota awards lost
Plymouth	6
Sheffield Hallam	6
Manchester Metropolitan	4
De Montfort	4
Huddersfield	4
Portsmouth	2
UWE	2
South Bank	2

While it may be true that the DTCs are larger and more diverse units where doctoral training can be provided, the currently recognised post-1992 institutions all have the capacity to provide training in particular subject areas, and in some subjects their provision is stronger than that available within some of the DTCs.

We urge ESRC to publicly acknowledge the disastrous consequences of its policy and to consider appropriate rectification of the policy at the earliest possible date.

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Professor Waqar Ahmad, Deputy Vice Chancellor Research and Enterprise Executive, Middlesex University

Dr David Arrell, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Portsmouth University

Professor Andrew Ball, Pro Vice-Chancellor Research and Enterprise, Huddersfield University

Anne-Marie Kilday, Acting Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research), Oxford Brookes University