

Making sense of doctoral training reforms in the social sciences: Educational development by other means?

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Abstract

Educational reforms are increasingly driven by political and economic forces beyond the university. In this paper I describe how the policy initiatives of the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) have steadily reshaped the length, content and structure of doctoral education in the social sciences. This history of the Council's willingness to respond to national and international policy concerns about the doctorate dates back to the early years of the Thatcher Government in the 1980s. As well as redefining the doctoral student experience, this interventionist policy environment potentially challenges the institutional autonomy of academics and others involved in educational development. In this article I explore the implications of this for doctoral training provision, and for the meaning of educational development itself. I end by pointing to the possibilities for policy 'activism' in responding to these changes.

Introduction: 'Developers' and the national policy landscape

Over the last 25 years, the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has repeatedly sought to influence the pedagogy, purpose and content of research training offered to social science PhD students. Its directive and occasionally punitive approach to generating change (such as the use of sanctions against 'underperforming'

institutions) seems to contravene many of the working principles and beliefs of those who see themselves working as educational developers within higher education. I would argue that few in this latter group regard such policy 'dirigisme' as 'developmental' in the accepted normative sense, despite the ESRC's indisputable influence over the doctoral curriculum. However I suggest that this distinction between 'good' educational development work and 'bad' state intervention may be increasingly unsustainable. All those with a commitment to curriculum development can not escape the interventionist, iterative and fluid policy process within which higher education provision now occurs. As Barnett notes in respect of the undergraduate curriculum, 'academic hegemony is dissolving' and a 'broader array of subjectivities is being urged upon higher education (2000, 258)'.

I illustrate my argument with examples drawn from on my own involvement with doctoral training initiatives and what is now increasingly called 'preparation for academic practice'. I have experienced these reforms in a number of contexts: first as a doctoral student, then as a teacher, next as an assessor, and finally as a researcher. My aim is to situate these experiences within a critical history of funder-driven reforms to doctoral pedagogies, both in the UK and internationally. I assess the impact of the ESRC's interventions, its 'successes', limitations and unintended consequences. Whilst it is not the only external body to have taken on this role, it has been one of the most influential. Because of the changing status and influence of the policy field, I suggest that educational developers and academics alike have to critically engage these national policy environments (be it around doctoral education, e-learning or subject benchmarks) and their implications for institutions, departments and academic practice.

A key aspect of this new policy landscape is that the realms of audit, quality 'assurance' and enhancement increasingly overlap. In

this environment, a normative moral vision for educational development becomes less easy to define or defend. Instead these policy worlds offer new spaces for ‘policy activists’ (Yeatman 1998) within institutions who are prepared to engage, appropriate, reinterpret and subvert these supposed ‘impositions’, sometimes in ways that connect more directly to the political interests of discipline-based academics.

UK-based academics and institutions have responded in different ways to the ESRC’s expectations. Some have kept the reforms at arms-length, legitimating their actions through a discourse of suspicion. Others have taken the opportunity to rethink the provision of research training, using the ESRC’s mandate to initiate internal curriculum reforms. Whilst both are strategic responses, the latter is a form of policy activism that can redefine and shape national discourses and agendas.

What do these developments mean for those working as educational developers within universities? I provide a brief history of this emerging field of academic practice and point to some of the challenges ahead. Within the field of doctoral education, I suggest that these curriculum reforms are often led by senior academic administrators who put their own policy knowledge to good use within their institutions. They tend to have prior experience of working with funding bodies, and use this to develop an understanding of the unfolding national policy dynamics, and the funding implications for their own students and departments. Those working in educational development find their own role being redefined as a result.

‘Were you being developed?’

So who are ‘educational developers’, and where does their work begin and end? As a graduate student in social anthropology, it was not an identity that I was familiar with, nor even one that I particularly aspired to

acquire. When I was first given the label, it came as rather a shock. It was in the Spring of 1997, in a seminar room in the heart of London’s Bloomsbury district. More than a decade later, I remain fascinated with the messy politics of pedagogic reform, but also suspicious of the label and all the normative aspirations it invokes.

In the early 1990s, the new research training ‘curriculum’ in the social sciences was still embryonic. In my own field of social anthropology, one’s individual fieldwork experience was (and is) still considered as both a defining initiation rite and the core disciplinary methodology. As a result, our formal methods teaching were very limited. However as a condition of ESRC recognition (the bureaucratic process – explained below - through which departmental provision was vetted against a strict set of ESRC-defined criteria), research students were expected to attend faculty-taught methods courses – of often varying quality - in their first year, giving them a cursory taste of doing an interview or conducting an ethnographic ‘observation’. After that, occasional meetings with a supervisor and presentations at research seminars provided the only required contact with the department.

For many doctoral students in my department at that time, intellectual isolation was a recurring phenomenon. In a non-residential university, with students juggling a variety of other personal and work commitments, many of us knew only a few of our peers. As a result, a colleague and I decided to put together a directory of all anthropology doctoral students, listing our research interests, so at least we would have a chance to find out more about our peers. One thing led to another, and soon enough we were offered the chance to tender for money from a national discipline-based network that supported innovations in teaching. We put together a £10,000 proposal for an experimental year-long, student-led research-training seminar that we entitled ‘Rethinking Ethnography’. The

initiative was resented by some faculty, who saw it as potentially undermining the institution's own research training provision. However, the external funding legitimised our seminar, giving it credibility and status that we would have been unlikely to receive otherwise.

What did we do in this year and why? Several were just beginning their PhD research, others were 'home' from fieldwork or in the last frantic stages of 'writing-up'. We cultivated a deliberately informal atmosphere to the seminar, circulating the biscuit-tin and making cups of tea. Each week a different facilitator led the session. With themes for each session (such as research ethics, the politics of fieldwork, research on-line), we were occasionally joined by visiting speakers or members of the departmental staff. A core group of 15 participants were 'regulars', joined by others who would come if interested in the topic at hand. We conversed together, sharing our own research experiences and dilemmas, trying to challenge what we saw as the academic orthodoxy. The level of engagement and community we experienced – as visible in our termly evaluations – was far removed from peoples' limited expectations of seminar cultures. The funding we'd gained gave us symbolic confidence, enabling us to organise workshops, to send students to conferences around the country, and even to hold the occasional party. At the end of the year, we asked a senior colleague in the department to evaluate the project. In his calm, measured, thoughtful way he asked if the group now considered themselves as 'developees'?

His question was troubling, and got us thinking. Many of us were interested in the anthropology of international development and were strongly critical of 'development' discourses, their moral principles, and normative standpoints. Was the analogy between social development and educational development such a close one? We thought that we were being resourceful, seizing an

institutional space and making it our own. Our intention had been to create an environment in which anthropology research students could rethink and challenge disciplinary practices and institutional presumptions. For all our rhetoric of self-criticism, perhaps our agency was less immediate than it first appeared. Were we willing participants in a discourse of educational management that advocated 'innovation' and 'empowerment'? We were able to construct a coherent critique of policy keywords (Williams 1981) when we encountered them in development discourse (Escobar 1995, Ferguson 1990), but were less able to see how we had made use of them in our own learning practices. The experience showed us that educational development was a fuzzy and unstable category.

We began to realise that the research seminar we had created was a product of, and offered insight into, contested fields of higher education policy on research training. Rather than seeing the classroom as simply a detached place for epistemological debate, it was also an "pedagogic microcosm" in which the dynamic and contradictory effects of policy discourses could be explored. We dedicated several weeks to addressing the political issues facing post-graduate students. Some of us became politicised about the status hierarchies within our own institution, others got more engaged in the debates over provision, especially for international students.

In retrospect, we were too quick to positively value our political agency in opposition to the 'negative' light in which we saw educational developers. At best we were engaged in a form of 'policy activism', practising what Yeatman calls a 'conception of policy which opens it up to the appropriate participation of all those who are involved' at every stage (Yeatman 1998, 34). Rather than seeing ourselves simply as recipients of 'aid', we were working to redefine the debate about research training in the social sciences, within our institution

and the discipline. Yet we were not just seeking to change this policy world, but also to understand it. If educational policy is a social field that is a potential object of analysis (Shore and Wright 1997), then our seminar discussions also sought to make sense of that object. This double movement of understanding and engagement is not new to the social sciences. What is possibly more novel was our use of it to try and influence the way our institution prepared future academics.

The history of doctoral reforms in the UK social sciences

The ‘Rethinking Ethnography’ seminar was a response, by one small group of doctoral students, in one department, in one university, to this dynamic national policy environment. This larger policy field deserves careful historicisation. One place to start is the increasingly interventionist shape of UK higher education policy since the early 1980s. In 1982, a working party led by the supermarket mogul Peter Swinnerton-Dyer attacked the social sciences ‘poor’ completion rates in relation to the natural sciences (a disputable assertion), the breadth of its PhD and decreasing numbers of research students (Swinnerton-Dyer). As a result, in 1985 ESRC introduced ‘sanctions’ against those departments where over 40% of students fail to complete within 4 years. This led to some departments being ‘blacklisted’ and prevented from applying for further studentships, and forced institutions to be more rigorous in their monitoring and support of students.

The 1987 Winfield report on submission rates (Winfield 1987), commissioned by the ESRC, recommended two types of studentship, each with different levels of training. The ESRC responded with a training-based model for all PhDs it funded. The recommendations were divisive, and seen as discriminating against women and part-time students (Delamont 1989).

Undaunted, in 1991 the ESRC issued training guidelines for each of its subject disciplines. The guidelines were unambiguous – training had to take up at least 60% of the doctoral candidate’s time in the first year of registration. By making the provision of a broad range of qualitative and quantitative research training courses obligatory, the ESRC effectively implemented a significant curriculum restructuring within many graduate schools and departments. As the intended beneficiaries of this new training provision were not just students in receipt of ESRC ‘studentship’ awards but all those in ESRC ‘recognised’ departments, the policy was an effective way for the ESRC to leverage its influence on research training practice.

By introducing what effectively amounted to a ‘national curriculum’ in research methods training, the ESRC forced many institutions to undertake major revisions of their doctoral programmes. This history is told in more depth elsewhere (Hockey 1991), but it marked the beginning of a continuing shift in the nature of the doctorate in the social sciences, away from a humanities model of individual exploration, and more towards what some commentators have described as a competency-based research ‘driving licence’ (Bernstein 1996, 125).

These reforms continued throughout the 1990s, with a growing attention to supervisor training, institutional research cultures and skills training. The 1993 Government White Paper ‘Realising our Potential’ called for better links with industry, leading to the creation of a one-year Research Masters degree, which would combine research with training for both academic and non-academic careers (Spencer 2007). In the White Paper, the ESRC’s own initiatives were singled out and commended to the other research councils. HEFCE’s ‘Review of postgraduate education’ (Harris 1996) focused on the implications of the rapid expansion in taught Masters courses, often aimed at international students. Concerned with the quality of

provision, the review recommended that training funds be concentrated in departments with a 'critical mass' of students. As the older universities tended to have the largest number of research students, this strengthened existing hierarchies between pre-92 and post-92 institutions. In advocating a 'big science' model, it also ignored the very different research cultures and intellectual environments existing across universities and disciplines (Delamont, Atkinson, Parry 1997).

Successive ESRC guidelines were increasingly prescriptive about the content of methods training. In 2001 the department in which I studied as a graduate student lost its 'recognition' status and ability to host new students because its quantitative methods training course was not deemed to meet the ESRC's demanding criteria. The appointment of a new ESRC Chief Executive in 2001, led to tougher core quantitative methods training requirements, posing particular challenges for disciplines with a primarily qualitative focus – such as anthropology. The guidelines also emphasised the importance of transferable and vocational skills, and shifted their focus from process to outputs (Spencer et al 2007), wherein students were expected to demonstrate their practical competencies across a range of research skills. This focus on a year of compulsory research training required funded students to complete a Masters in research before going on to do doctoral research.

In the same year, the ESRC took its reforms one further step, introducing what it called a '1+3' funding model for its PhD students. This sought to combine the funding for the one-year research training masters with the 3 year doctoral award, and was intended to provide continuity of support and more time for research work within the PhD. However as it reduced the number of awards the ESRC offered, and was coupled with the withdrawal of support for Masters training, it led to mounting criticism of the ESRC.

The precise details of these reforms were complex, but the speed with which they were introduced forced many institutions to hurriedly create new Masters programmes to meet the recognition criteria. It also forced many students to apply whilst still undergraduates with no experience of research. Complaints spiralled, both over the allocation and award of studentships, the quality of students, the inflexibility of the guidelines, and the fact that only a small proportion of students actually followed these courses (Spencer 2007).

The history of curriculum interventions raised larger issues in the sociology of knowledge. Were these developments evidence of the instrumentalisation of doctoral pedagogies to fit the needs of the so-called 'knowledge economy'? Some argue that the ESRC's expectations represented an irreversible shift from 'disciplinary pedagogy to perpetual training' (Rose 1999, 160), and stand as proof that the UK was now a 'totally pedagogised society' (Bernstein 2001). Others noted that this development conformed to the ESRC's original (if controversial) commitment to producing socially relevant and 'useful' knowledge (King 1997). These negative readings overlook the positive aspects of the ESRC's interventions. Successive reforms had meant that there was now far better monitoring and support of students and supervisors, students now left with a broader set of research skills, and were being encouraged to think about how these skills could be transferred into other domains to develop careers within and beyond the university.

Is this history unique to doctoral training? Not entirely. Whilst the extent of the ESRC's influence over the doctoral curriculum may be unusual, there are parallels in other fields. Another example in the UK would include the Quality Assurance Agency's decision to create undergraduate disciplinary 'subject benchmarks', in the expectation that institutional 'programme specifications' would show how their

courses met these national benchmarks. Higher education policy, like schools policy in the 1980s, is increasingly taking a pedagogic turn.

How relevant is this history of funder-led doctoral training reforms to higher education systems outside the United Kingdom? The US policy environment is very different, with its huge plurality of institutions, the diversity of its doctoral student communities, and very limited funder influence over the content of research training. Instead, debate over the doctorates (such as those being led by national Council of Graduate Schools) focus on the time taken to completion and the high percentage of non-completers. The focus is on sharing ideas and practices, rather than on a top-down approach to change.

The European higher education policy environment is more comparable to that of the UK. For example, there have been a number of reforms of French doctoral programmes in the last two decades, as France has sought to align its degree structure closely to the tri-partite 'European model'. It has sought to create closer collaborations between the universities, the research laboratories and the Ecoles Normales. Yet the speed with which many of these innovations have been introduced has led to a good deal of resistance, and major reforms to university governance are currently bogged down in controversy. Cuts in the education budget have not helped matters. In Germany, the original home of the doctorate, reforms have focused on the academic career trajectories open to post-doctoral candidates, and on developing international collaborations and centres of excellence.

Every European country (and many beyond Europe's borders) is being affected by the Bologna process. In 2003, the PhD degree was included within the Bologna remit, and a raft of policy principles were launched, many of which echoed UK policy agendas. These include a recognition of the 'need for

structured doctoral programmes and the need for transparent supervision and assessment', ensuring that 'doctoral programmes promote interdisciplinary training and the development of transferable skills, thus meeting the needs of the wider employment market', whilst noting that 'over-regulation of doctoral programmes must be avoided' (Bergen communiqué, 2005). The social science PhD continues its drift away from the so-called 'Humboldtian model' to one more attuned to vocational and professional concerns. In this regard, European reforms mirror those implemented in the UK, both in the social sciences and across the natural sciences.

The image of an increasingly dirigiste ESRC needs to be qualified. To its credit, it has responded to growing criticism about the inflexibility of a centralist approach to reform. This message about the risks of 'over-regulation' was also emphasized in the Demographic Review of the Social Sciences (Mills et al, 2006), commissioned by the ESRC. It concluded that 'there can be no one-size-fits-all solution to training and capacity building in the social sciences', and that given the heterogeneity of the social sciences, 'different responses are needed for different kinds of problem'. It went on to recommend that the ESRC's responses should be 'evidence-based, implemented in consultation, with disciplinary communities and tailored to particular circumstances' (ibid, 11). Such comments reflected a growing consensus that the 2001 'Recognition guidelines' may have been a step too far. Since that time, the ESRC's Training and Development Board has sought to work much more closely with the social science communities through a series of 'town-hall' style consultations and collaborations, developing collaborative solutions to discipline-specific training and funding issues.

Historicising debates in educational development

Fledgling intellectual and disciplinary communities often spend a good deal of time in sometimes anxious internal debate, seeking to clarify, define and legitimate their practice. The profession of academic developers is no exception, and there is a growing international debate about the nature, content and purpose of their work (see for example, the special issue of the *International Journal of Academic Development* edited by Holmes and Grant (2007)). Amongst UK practitioners, the literature highlights almost as many ways of working within institutions as there are academic developers, a diversity that emerges from very different histories of practice across the sector. Land (2004) identifies more than thirteen different orientations to educational development, from 'managerial' to 'romantic'. Others exemplify particular approaches – Knight (2002) argues for the importance of individuals developing their own unique teaching identity, whilst Walker (2001) describes her work fostering a critically reflective dialogue amongst a group of new academics about their work. D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) suggest that developers foster disciplinary and institutional 'learning', whilst Eggins and MacDonald (2003) stress the importance of developing a scholarly and research-informed approach to development practice.

Within this growing literature, the changing policy drivers and the way that these shape and constrain opportunities for development and reform tend not to be a primary focus of attention. This is partly the result of a lack of attention to history within the field of educational development (Weimer 2007). For example, educational development practice in the UK has been partly driven by externally funded enhancement projects (the Enterprise in Higher Education or the Computers in Teaching initiatives of the early 1990s are just two examples). Much of this funding was aimed at fostering

innovation within the undergraduate curriculum, an enhancement carrot to complement and balance the 'audit' stick. One reason for the reticence of developers to spell out this political compromise may well be a wish to downplay the impact of this increasingly interventionist policy environment, given its implications for conceptions of academic agency. This in turn may be because academic teachers have associated these units (rightly or wrongly) with university managements. Gosling and D'Andrea are amongst the few authors who acknowledge this concern. They dispute the conventional academic wisdom that 'educational development is necessarily implicated in advancing the goals of neo-liberalism', and instead 'hold on to the hope that improving teaching and learning can be taken seriously as an institutional priority and in ways that mean educational development is not simply the servant of managerialist goals' (Gosling and D'Andrea 2005, 160).

Practitioner histories of educational development in the UK (Gosling 1996) and the US (Lewis 1996) tend to measure progress in terms of the numbers of educational development units. Back in the 1960s, the original focus of these units was on helping individuals reflect upon (and change) their own academic practice through training courses and workshops. Sometimes the focus was on the social and psychological power relations in the classroom, and the importance of student autonomy (Boud 1981), sometimes on the pragmatics of teaching, as exemplified by the 'teaching tips' approach (eg McKeachie 1988).

Two decades later, both policy makers and developers no longer have the same focus on developing individual academic practice. There is growing self-critical awareness of the contradictions faced by educational developers. Rowland suggests that developers, cognisant of the 'regimes of accountability' that academics work within, should also be cultivating a 'recognition of

uncertainty and contradiction' (Rowland 2007, 13). Most now recognise that pedagogic change is a complex, conflictual and gradual process, occurring through collective reflection and action, whether at the level of the department, institution or the discipline (eg McAlpine et al 2005).

Within the UK, this recognition has led the higher education funding council to support a sophisticated tri-partite 'quality enhancement' policy, with initiatives at the individual, disciplinary and institutional level. Increasingly discipline-based communities are seen by many as key sites where academic practice is negotiated and developed. A number of discipline-based learning and teaching networks in the UK in the mid 1990s were created in the mid 1990s, a priority that has continued since 2000 with the funding of 24 discipline-based 'subject centres' along with a series of 'Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning'. Despite the increasingly influential roles held by some senior educational developers, little has been written about the possibilities for critically engaging and shaping policy at the national and institutional level.

I would argue that educational development now faces a further step-shift in its role. The changing nature of the higher educational policy landscape creates a new pedagogic stage on which to engage. National and international policies (such as the so-called 'Roberts funding' to support transferable skills training for doctoral students (Roberts 2002)) have become pedagogic interventions and forms of educational development in their own right. Whilst developers have sought to understand and classify institutional policies and organisational cultures and their implications for their style of work (eg Land 2004, Biggs 2001), few have written about the importance of understanding or influencing national policy developments, unless they have been specifically tasked or employed to lead initiatives at a national level. It requires a rather different set of skills and experience,

such as a close familiarity with policy trajectories, an ability to make sense of the implications of these trajectories for disciplinary futures, and a willingness to engage and shape the policy process at every level. This combination of professional expertise, policy literacy, and communication skills is one that is expected of academics representing their disciplines on RAE panels, ESRC committees or professional bodies.

A key aspect of this new policy landscape is that the realms of audit, quality 'assurance' and enhancement increasingly overlap and slide into each other. Committees assessing the quality of provision are often urged to identify and share good practice within the discipline. In this environment, a normative moral vision for educational development becomes less easy to define. If funders and governments promote policy reforms through an appeal to professional 'values', it is no longer sufficient for developers to adopt a value-based rhetoric to justify change. Nor are developers always best placed to understand these changes, especially in a specialist sphere such as doctoral education. In the final section, I go on to explore the implications of these changes for academic practice in the disciplines and the role of academic developers.

Everyday policy activism

In working to translate and implement institutional, national or international guidelines, academics become an active part of the higher education policy field. Relatively few of those involved write about the experience in a reflective vein. The first thing that strikes the dedicated observer is that this policy process consumes impressive quantities of trees and time. Each shift in policy or change to training policy is first presaged by the commissioning of reviews and consultation exercises. Given the importance of being seen to be even-handed across the disciplines, it is important to seek

the opinions of all those potentially affected. This can be a ponderous process, as the following example shows.

In 1995, the ESRC decided to review its 'recognition policy'. A task group was set up, a major consultation exercise was planned and three review teams were commissioned. The task of one team was simply to analyse the 304 responses (out of 1250 documents sent out to institutions and disciplines and professional associations) received back by the ESRC. Much of this effort was designed to demonstrate the Council's transparency in its distribution of resources. Three voluminous reports were produced, one of which pointed to 'apprehension' about 'growing interference and control by the ESRC'. One of the historical paradoxes of the ESRC is that the original vision of its founders to create a Council that promoted inter-disciplinary and applied social research, has constantly been tempered by its 'capture' by articulate and influential disciplinary lobbies. The energy put into contributing to these consultation exercises varied widely. It was often the smaller, 'older' and more established social science disciplines that were most engaged and influential. Colleagues would consult amongst themselves in order to ensure that their responses reiterated points of major disciplinary concern.

In 2001 I became involved in a discipline-based panel revising social anthropology's postgraduate training guidelines for the ESRC. This involved creating an authoritative and strategic 300 word representation of the 'nature of the area', its 'subject-specific domains of expertise' and its research methods. The ESRC's training guidelines contained 18 such disciplinary accounts, each written by a separate subject panel. A further round of consultations and meetings accompanied the publication of the revised training guidelines. Those academics involved in their creation or in assessing applications for studentships would often be invited to brief others about the revisions. This all took a good deal of time, but it was

often time well spent. Those 'on the inside' got to understand the everyday workings of the ESRC, and could develop the confidence to ensure that their own interpretations of policy were both robust and often influential. They would be able to help their own students fill in application forms effectively, and would know which aspects of the training requirements to prioritise.

I went on to act as an ESRC peer-assessor in three successive 'recognition' exercises, through which discipline-based panels approved the training provision offered by departments. The exercise begins (and ends) with form-filling. Departments usually allocate one person to this task, sometimes with the support of a central graduate school. For the less well connected, and those unfamiliar with the process, a fear of rejection meant that this was often a time-consuming task, collecting information from different parts of their institution. The process of assessing these applications was equally exhaustive. Again, there are 18 such panels, with each consisting of up to five or six panel members. Each panel would meet on at least two occasions, discussing the ESRC's assessment criteria and agreeing their interpretations.

At one level this is all a necessary aspect of any quality assurance bureaucracy. At the same time, this process of peer-review served to enhance practice. Panel members were urged to highlight examples of innovative training and good practice. In the process of reading the different submissions, members would find themselves reflecting on their own disciplinary provision, discussing and comparing their own expectations, and identifying particular problems or strengths.

Apart from the benefits (and costs) to those involved, what are the wider consequences of the ESRC's directive approach to developing doctoral training? A recent ESRC review evaluating the 2001 reforms to doctoral training provision and funding (Spencer 2007) and the changing

demographic profile of the social sciences (Mills et al 2006) offer some pointers. For some, the picture is undoubtedly positive. Despite the form-filling involved in applying for ESRC 'recognition', many UK social science departments now have a more structured and comprehensive training provision, some of which can be directly attributed to ESRC policy, as well as to 'Roberts' funding. Many of the institutions recognised by the ESRC feel that it has boosted the overall quality of PhD training (Spencer 2007). The benefits have been particularly appreciated within newer fields, such as Management and Business Studies, with less of a research training tradition. For others, frustration over opaque funding decisions by the ESRC tend to cloud their assessment of the changes.

The requirement to reflect on existing provision has led to the generation of many new ideas, opening up policy spaces within universities for innovative approaches to doctoral education. Departments and sometimes institutions have collaborated in the delivery of social science research training, making for fertile connections and collaborations. One university developed a range of short training modules, available for students at any point in their doctoral study, rather than placing it all within the first year. As a result of the focus on developing a range of skills, there is an increasing diversity of PhD-training routes, shaped partly by students' future academic and career expectations.

Inevitably there are also drawbacks to the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to research methods training adopted by the ESRC during the 1990s. It reduced the ability of discipline-based academics to make their own professional judgements about what was appropriate. Comments from Politics respondents to a survey of attitudes to the 1+3 programme give a flavour of the tensions over first-year training 'requirements'. One notes that *'our programme is too much for those who will not use it, and not enough for those who will*

use a specific method'. Another added that *'Students have a very superficial understanding of quantitative methods'* and a third bemoaned a *'High degree of tokenism, in which students tick boxes for attending classes but without clear and lasting gains in learning'*.

Some are more forceful still, and reveal a visceral resentment amongst some students and staff to ESRC expectations: *'The requirements of the programme look fine on paper. The problem is that it is a bureaucratic nightmare by the time they are translated into a specific programme. The students hate it and the staff are reduced to fulfilling what is essentially a national curriculum'* (cited in Spencer 2007, 11). This antipathy is not helped by the ESRC's use of what some critics see as an unhelpful language of research 'training' (as opposed, for example, to researcher development or doctoral education). Sometimes student hostility to 'training' is fostered by supervisors who (wrongly, in my opinion) see it as a distraction from a focus on the doctorate itself.

I have made much of the ESRC's influence over the doctoral curriculum. Yet this influence is increasingly being challenged by the changing profile of research students. With the growing importance of the international student market, especially for the research universities, UK students holding ESRC studentships are rare birds indeed. During the 1990s, the number of full-time UK domiciled students remained static, whilst the numbers of part-time and international social science students grew dramatically. If only a very small proportion of the students in a department (sometimes as few as one or two) hold ESRC studentships, these institutions have less inducement to make the 'full' training provision a requirement for all students. Having growing numbers of part-time and international doctoral students also places particular challenges upon provision originally designed around the needs of full-time UK studentship holders.

For the doctoral students, holding a studentship may be a curse in disguise. Depending on the quality of provision, it can mean having to sit through onerous compulsory training courses that bear little relevance to one's own research interests. In some cases it is only the UK ESRC-funded students who are forced to follow the full research training programme, and may feel disadvantaged as a result. As one commentator put it, 'can the ESRC 'tail' continue to wag the PhD dog?'

There is a final twist in this policy history. The ESRC issued a new set of guidelines in 2005 that responded to criticism about the overly prescriptive nature of earlier training guidelines and the bureaucracy they had generated. This time the new Chief Executive, Ian Diamond, emphasised that the ESRC wished to encourage outlets to 'enjoy maximum flexibility in organising and delivering training in ways which best suit their own needs and requirements', and twice underlined the importance of 'continuous innovation' (Diamond 2005, 2). The debate moves on.

Conclusion: Educational development a contested political space

Conventional understandings of academic practice are changing, within and beyond the social sciences. No longer simply responsible for teaching, research and disciplinary service, many academics and students find themselves positioned between their discipline and an interventionist policy environment. Academics serve on an increasing variety of national and international committees convened by funders, research councils, and peer-review panels. Students are given the opportunity to edit journals, run conferences and lead reforms. Both groups potentially find themselves in a position to interpret, subvert and enact changes that will affect their own academic futures and those of their disciplinary communities.

The speed of 'pedagogic drift' in the nature of the doctorate has taken many by surprise. The debate about doctoral training is increasingly a global one, and there is a growing convergence within and between systems of higher education, partly driven by competition for the best students. As student mobility and awareness of the demands of different doctoral programmes develops, institutional practices will be affected as much by considerations of international competitive 'positioning' as of national policy.

As higher education funders seek to both audit and to 'develop' practice, they blur the lines between assurance and enhancement. As a result, the meaning and purpose of educational development also begins to diffuse, both internally within the university and externally across a range of national and international policy stages. Funders, institutions, departments, individual academics and even students are all now involved, opening up unpredictable new possibilities for 'policy activism'. Educational development becomes a contested political space rather than a job description.

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