



Postgraduate Student Engagement  
with Professional Development

Joint Executive Statement from the  
Imperial College London  
Roundtable Debate on  
27 October 2016

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## Introduction

This joint statement is the outcome of the roundtable debate on postgraduate student engagement with professional development held on 27 October 2016 at Imperial College London. The roundtable debate brought together representatives from industry, learned societies and professional bodies, the Higher Education Academy (HEA), VITAE, the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE), and higher education institutions. The full list of contributors is documented at the end.

The aim of this debate was to discuss student engagement with professional skills training during their postgraduate (PG) studies and how institutions can incentivise the provision to maximise the value to the PG student. To set the scene, Professor Ken Wann, Former Deputy Dean, University Graduate College, Cardiff University, gave a presentation highlighting why PG student engagement with professional development is important and how Cardiff University increased student and supervisor engagement. Following this introduction, contributors discussed the role of industry, professional bodies, institutions, PG students and supervisors.



Professor Ken Wann, Former Deputy Dean, Cardiff University

## Executive Summary

The roundtable identified a number of key themes:

- Universities should draw on the good practice demonstrated by industry in terms of embedding a culture of self-driven professional development. This would empower students with responsibility whilst in a supportive education environment.
- There should be parity of learning opportunities provided to all PG students by their universities, in particular those who are not able to undertake internships as part of their research training.
- To maximise the value of skills training to PG students, there is significant value in aligning university PG professional development programmes with professional body Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requirements. The Professional Bodies have developed these requirements to align with industry requirements.
- Ensuring that professional development is a key part of the PG student-supervisor partnership is paramount.
- Universities should ensure that supervisors have support and development so that they in turn can engage with their PG students' professional and career development.

## Discussion

The destinations of PG students are extremely diverse and the challenge for Higher Education Institutions is to provide professional development that enables them to make successful transitions. There is acceptance that research degrees need to prepare PG students for a wide range of careers, including research careers in industry as well as in academia. The Higher Education sector acknowledges that there are many more research degree graduates than there are academic positions available. The roles of those responsible for postgraduate student development, including researcher developers and supervisors and their institutions, is to ensure there are opportunities for PG students to develop both research skills and professional skills. Furthermore there is the need to help PG students articulate how these skills are translated into a range of work environments.

Building on this, the debate considered “what can institutions do to increase both PG student and academic engagement with the professional skills agenda and what can be learned from industry and professional bodies?”

### Learning from Industry

Employers are looking for individuals with a broad range of skills as well as technical skills. In particular, industry highly values the ability to work well in teams and be resilient.

PG students who undertake internships as part of their PG training, for example those registered with Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) or Doctoral Training Programmes (DTPs) or those studying for the award of EngD, gain valuable skills and experience which are highly valued by industry and employers. For those PG students who are not able to have this opportunity, it is essential that they develop a broad range of skills whilst at university. Although it is important for universities to support internships, it is also important for universities to provide parity of experience for non CDT or DTP registered PG students. One way to achieve this is to work closely with employers to ensure university professional skills training programmes develop attributes which are valued by industry. The appointment of industry representatives on advisory boards and review panels is helpful in this regard. Graduate Schools, or their equivalents, can further strengthen links with alumni in support of this agenda, encouraging debate between current and past PG students.

Employers who place a high value on professional development have graduate scheme and others have a culture of self-driven self-development, which is encouraged and supported. Innovative approaches can be highlighted in industry, for example Google which encourages peer-to-peer led development.

### Learning from Professional Bodies

Professional Bodies’ CPD competencies are purposely aligned with industry requirements. Industry and Professional bodies have worked together to ensure this. Hence universities whose professional skills development programmes are aligned with professional body CPD requirements can highlight these relationships and this added value to PG students. Imperial College has, so far, aligned its programme to the requirements of the Royal Society of Chemistry which has resulted in significant interest from the departments PG students. Imperial is currently working with the Royal Society of Biology and the Institute of Physics to do the same. Imperial College is disseminating this work via the website indicated here, through conferences, and the graduate school can be contacted directly <http://www.imperial.ac.uk/study/pg/graduate-school/quality-assurance/impact-and-influence/professional-body-alignment/>.

Professional bodies also require records of professional development to be kept by individuals; this is best practice and PG students should be encouraged by their universities to mirror this practice.

## Learning from Sector Agencies

The sector agencies have a key role in supporting and sharing effective practice in professional development. In particular, VITAE mapped their Researcher Development Framework to the Engineering Council's requirements (<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework-planner>). The Higher Education Academy has undertaken influential work on embedding employability into HE programmes and provides an excellent toolkit and framework that are useful to both UG and PG (<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhancement/frameworks/framework-embedding-employability-higher-education>). The UKCGE coordinates a range of PG Masters and Research events which provide a valuable opportunity to discuss the challenges and share good practice.

## Learning from and for Higher Education Institutions

There are some excellent examples of academic staff-student engagement arising from embedding professional development into postgraduate assessment. Some institutions now require professional development discussion as part of their key progression milestones. This has helped to improve engagement but researcher developers should also clearly demonstrate how professional skills are extremely useful for research practice.

In terms of engaging PG students with the professional skills agenda, researcher developers should ensure that processes are in place to collect student feedback on courses and to use this information to shape the development of skills programmes. Institutions should seek ways in which to assess the impact of their skills programmes which can be used as a key performance indicator and driver for engagement.

## The Role of the Supervisor

The primary role of the supervisor is to guide the student successfully through their research, both masters and doctoral, to completion and publication. However, there is an increasing need for supervisors to engage with PG students about their professional skills development choices, including which opportunities are relevant to their student's potential career path. Although many supervisors have a wide range of experiences, for example in industry, companies, charities, and public bodies, others have had dedicated academic career pathways. Therefore, it is important that universities have support and development opportunities for supervisors to enable them to advise PG students. Developing supervisors' knowledge and understanding of the professional skills agenda facilitates more open conversations between PG students and supervisors on the range of career options. A career outside university should not be seen negatively, for example.

## Conclusions

There is significant value in sharing knowledge of professional development between sector agencies, professional bodies and industry. Enabling debate and exchange on key priorities provides an excellent opportunity for reflection and development for all involved.

## Contributors to the debate, 27 October 2016

### Higher Education Institutions

- University of Cardiff
- Brunel University
- King's College London
- University College London

Professor Kenneth Wann (keynote)  
Dr Inmaculada Andres  
Dr Ross English  
Dr Rochelle Rowe

### Higher Education Sector

- Higher Education Academy
- VITAE
- UK Council for Graduate Education

Kay Hack  
Professor Clare Viney  
Professor Kenneth Wann  
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### Industry

- Thales UK
- Wellcome Trust
- Google

Professor Chris Firth  
Dr Jonathan Best  
Peter Lewis

### Professional Bodies

- Royal Society of Biology
- Royal Society of Chemistry
- Institute of Physics
- Science Council
- Engineering Council

Joanna Needham  
Dr Jonelle Harvey  
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### Imperial College London

- Director of the Graduate School
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