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Precarious transitions? Doctoral students negotiating the shift to academic positions

Guidance and Recommendations

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About this briefing

This briefing provides an overview of findings from research led by Professor Marie-Pierre Moreau (Principal Investigator), Dr Kate Hoskins (Co-Investigator) and Dr Ellen McHugh. The research was funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grants programme. The aim of the research was to understand how students who have recently submitted their PhD thesis (less than 18 months ago at the time of the interview) negotiate access to an academic position, with specific consideration of the role of the doctoral supervisor in this process.

This policy briefing focuses on the transition from a PhD to an academic position. The briefing presents key findings and recommendations for national key stakeholders, higher education institutions (HEIs) and doctoral supervisors to support early career researchers in building an academic career during their studies and at post-doctoral stage.

Background and key findings

The current UK higher education context is characterised by an increasing level of financial and political uncertainty, with changes to the funding mechanisms of higher education, growing competition for students, and the UK's exit from the European Union. Moreover, the returns of a PhD and the transition to a permanent academic position have been uncertain due to the increased precarity of academic jobs, with implications for the career prospects and well-being of doctoral and early career researchers (ECRs).

Why is this an important issue?

- Academic careers have become more precarious over the past decades. The 'returns' of a doctoral degree, once a guarantee of an academic career, are more uncertain as well as gendered, classed and 'raced'.
- These uncertainties and the rise in the costs of higher education borne by doctoral students have well-identified effects on the career prospects and well-being of doctoral and early career researchers.
- Institutions and supervisory teams can influence the future trajectories of doctoral and early career researchers depending on the nature and extent of the support provided.
- Our research highlights deep inequalities in terms of the support doctoral and early career researchers receive from their institution and supervisory team.

The research draws on a qualitative approach, with interviews conducted with early career researchers and PhD supervisors across the UK.

The research shows inconsistencies and inequalities in terms of the nature and extent of the support provided to ECRs who make the transition to an academic post. This raises equity issues as the study shows that the support provided by the supervisor, as well as by the department and institution, is crucial in the outcomes experienced by ECRs.

The extent and nature of the support provided through the supervisory relationship is also mediated by gender, ethnicity and social class. Overall, the way supervisory teams and institutions work tend to accrue privileges, with White, middle-class, male students most likely to benefit from extensive and relevant support in negotiating access to an academic position. As a result, we argue that the supervisory team represents a crucial, yet understudied, mechanism in challenging or reproducing inequalities in terms of access to academic and other jobs constructed as desirable by doctoral students and ECRs.

Contact the research team

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This Briefing Paper was developed by Dr Samson M. Tsegay, Research Fellow, ARU, in collaboration with the research team and in consultation with HE stakeholders.

Recommendations for supporting doctoral students' transition to academic positions

The research has generated recommendations for doctoral supervisors, higher education institutions and national stakeholders to support students enrolled on a PhD programme to build up to an academic career. The key finding from the research is the need to ensure equity in the support and opportunities provided to doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers, which can be achieved through a 'minimum offer' provided by institutions and supported by supervisory teams. These guiding principles will support and enable more equitable practices and provision for PhD students.

For national stakeholders:

- National stakeholders need to consider and monitor how access to resources varies across institutions.
- They should consider a coordinated strategy to grow awareness and address the inequities experienced by PhD students and ECRs in relation to the support they receive from their institutions and supervisory teams.
- They should be encouraged to create a repository of practices which support the fair and transparent allocation of resources and support to PhD students and ECRs.

For HEIs:

- HEIs should consider implementing a 'minimum offer' that clearly states the research methods training, access to professional networks and support with developing a publication profile made available to post graduate students.
- The institutional offer should also indicate undergraduate teaching and/or dissertation supervision opportunities available.
- There should be a clear indication of the support and opportunities that will be provided throughout the PhD at a department and institutional level.
- The HEI offer should indicate the number of doctoral supervision meetings that should take place in an academic year and expectations for the provision of written feedback prior to each meeting.

- The opportunities open to students during their PhDs and their destinations should be monitored at national and institutional level so as to address any form of inequity.
- HEIs should encourage doctoral students to consider non-academic and academic careers, for example through events involving guest speakers working in rewarding research-informed careers.
- Support with applications should be provided by HEIs to minoritised groups.

For doctoral supervisors:

- Supervisory teams should be made aware of the institutional minimum offer to ensure that they support doctoral students in all areas of career development in equitable ways.
- Supervisory teams should be given access to material and training emphasising the need for inclusive supervisory practices, which meet the needs of a diverse population of PhD students, linking with the protected characteristics identified in the Equality Act and with other characteristics impacting on students' experiences (e.g. being a carer).
- Areas for specific consideration include opportunities for teaching and undergraduate supervision; access to and support with conference presentations and knowledge exchange activities; support with developing publications.



Reference:

This policy briefing draws on the following report: Moreau, M., Hoskins, K., & McHugh, E. (2022). *Precarious transitions? Doctoral students negotiating the shift to academic positions*. London: British Academy. Available online: https://figshare.com/articles/book/Precarious_Transitions_report_FINAL_20092022_pdf/22269874.