

RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (RPDP) FOR PHD STUDENTS

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Biographical Note

Emer Cunningham is Project Manager for the Structured PhD in University College Dublin (UCD), working in the Graduate Studies Office. She has worked in the implementation of the UCD Research and Professional Development Plan (RPDP). Emer graduated with a BSc (1986) and MSc (1988) in Pharmacology from University College Dublin and has a PhD in cellular biology from University College London, and also carried out her postdoctoral work there. Emer has ten years experience working as a researcher in the biotechnology industry in Ireland and the UK. More recently, she has worked for the Higher Education Authority of Ireland (Research Programmes) as a Project Manager.

Janet Carton currently works at University College Dublin as Graduate Programmes Manager. Her main focus is supporting and facilitating the development of third and fourth level education in the university. She previously headed up the Strategic Research Initiatives Unit in the Directorate of Research and Enterprise, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). Having completed a PhD and postdoctoral fellowship in Biomedical Research, she has worked in graduate research education for more than ten years. She was responsible for the design and implementation of the first *Research Supervisor Support and Development Programme* in an Irish HEI.

Claire Rosten worked in the Graduate Studies Office at University College Dublin (UCD) as Project Manager for the Structured PhD. She was responsible for the assessment, revision and re-launch of the Research and Professional Development Plan (RPDP) between October 2006 and September 2008. Claire graduated with a BA (2000) from the University of Oxford in Psychology and Philosophy and has a PhD in Psychology from the University of Southampton, where she researched the cognitive and psychophysiological aspects of anxiety disorders. Claire currently works as a Research Fellow at the University of Brighton for the Research Design Service, an advisory organisation funded by the National Institute of Health Research.

KEYWORDS

UCD Research; professional development; graduate education.

ABSTRACT

The University College Dublin (UCD) Research and Professional Development Plan (RPDP) is a set of tools to aid in the planning and progress of a PhD student's research and professional skills. It is an integral part of the Structured PhD programme at UCD and has been specifically designed to aid students in the planning, monitoring and completion of their PhD. It is primarily owned by the PhD student, but is intended to be beneficial to both the student and the supervisor. The RPDP potentially has great benefits for the management and timely completion of a student's PhD and in directing the acquisition of both research and professional skills. The UCD RPDP was included as an integral part of the UCD PhD Regulations, which were approved by the Academic Council in October 2006.

The UCD RPDP was initially developed under license from University College London Graduate School. The RPDP was piloted with a group of eighty-five UCD students in September 2006, was monitored and reviewed throughout 2006/7 and was updated for 2007/8 using feedback from the students and their supervisors. Feedback was elicited from an online survey, student coffee mornings and supervisor feedback sessions.

The findings showed that the RPDP was popular amongst the students who felt they benefited from the structure of the RPDP and the momentum it generated. The majority of the supervisors were supportive of the RPDP, in particular, the formalised meetings element. It was felt that the structure of the meetings ensured the student was well prepared and had thought about the main issues for discussion. There were criticisms of the 2006 RPDP but these were mainly concerned with the style and this has since been changed based on their input. There was consensus amongst students and supervisors that it is imperative that Supervisors are informed of, and engaged with, the RPDP from the outset of the PhD.

INTRODUCTION

A Structured PhD programme was introduced to UCD in September 2006 with the aim of enabling UCD PhD students to achieve the best possible experience of graduate research and training and in parallel support the student in their career development. While making a substantial and original contribution to knowledge, normally leading to peer-reviewed publications, remains the core objective of doctoral studies, the UCD Structured PhD includes several innovative measures designed to support the student in achieving their academic and professional objectives. In particular, a Research and Professional Development Plan is compulsory for all students admitted after 31 August 2007.

UCD RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (RPDP)

Research and professional development planning is an integral part of the Structured PhD Programme at UCD. The purpose of such planning is to ensure that the student's work is clearly focused on achieving their research and professional development goals. The RPDP is designed to play a major part in informing the trajectory of the student's PhD research and in their training and development as a researcher.

WHAT IS THE UCD RPDP?

The UCD Research and Professional Development Plan (RPDP) is a set of tools to aid in the planning and progress of a PhD student's research and professional skills. It has been specifically designed to aid students in the planning, monitoring and completion of their PhD. The RPDP is primarily owned by the PhD student, but is intended to be beneficial to both the student and the supervisor. It potentially has great benefits for the management and timely completion of a student's PhD and in directing the acquisition of both research and professional skills. The UCD RPDP was introduced into UCD's academic PhD Regulations and supports existing quality assurance mechanisms.

"For all students admitted after 31 August 2007, the student, supported by the Doctoral Studies Panel, shall document their educational, training and personal and professional development needs, which, along with the proposed programme of research, will inform the development of a Research and Professional Development Plan (RPDP)" (Section 18.15, UCD Regulations for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy http://www.ucd.ie/registry/academicsecretariat/pol_regs.htm).

STRUCTURE OF RPDP

The UCD RPDP is structured around three focus areas:

- 1) **Research Plan:** Basic guidelines for preparing a research plan and using it as a road map during the graduate experience.
- 2) **Professional Development Plan:** A skills self assessment and prompts as to skills that may be beneficial to progress the research and promote career development
- 3) **Meeting Records:** Formal record of the research and professional development plans and progress to date signed by the student and members of the Doctoral Studies Panel, thereby providing a framework for constructive engagement of the student and quality supervision.

As mentioned above, the UCD RPDP was first established under licence from the Graduate School, University College London, and piloted in UCD with a group of eighty-five Ad Astra Scholarship-funded scholars in September 2006. As mentioned, feedback was positive, with most supervisors expressing support for the scheme. Students also broadly expressed satisfaction with the scheme. Any criticisms of the scheme have since been addressed.

There was consensus amongst students and supervisors that it is imperative that supervisors are informed of, and engaged with, the RPDP from the outset of the PhD. Research supervisors face an ever growing challenge in meeting academic quality assurance standards and supporting skills acquisition for their students. UCD offers a wide range of doctoral level discipline-specific modules as well as transferable skills modules available to PhD students.

The introduction of the RPDP has been an important tool in supporting the supervisor's role in this respect. However the professionalisation of supervisory practice will further embed the effectiveness of research planning and professional development in its broadest capacity.

OTHER ELEMENTS OF THE UCD STRUCTURED PHD

Doctoral Studies Panel: The School appoints a Doctoral Studies panel for each student normally early in their first year. The purpose of the Doctoral Studies panel is to support and enhance the supervisor-student relationship, to monitor student progress during the course of their doctoral studies and to provide advice and support both to the student and the supervisor.

Transferable Skills Training: The skill-set of a UCD PhD student will naturally include the advanced research and analytical techniques required to undertake high level research in their field. It is also expected that the PhD graduate will possess a range of transferable skills, relevant to the successful completion of their research project and to broader career development. Taught modules, online modules and workshops covering a wide range of transferable skills and research topics which are in line with international best practice have been made available.

Credits and Modules: The UCD Structured PhD operates within a credit-based framework, with one credit corresponding to twenty to twenty-five hours of total student effort. If a student is on a four-year PhD programme, a maximum of ninety credits can be accumulated. The minimum credits that can be accrued over the course of the students PhD programme is determined by the relevant Graduate School.

Progression: Doctoral studies, which are normally completed by full-time students within three to

four years, comprise two stages: **Stage 1** is a period when the research plan is defined; the student develops their research skills, and initiates original research work for their doctorate. **Stage 2** is primarily dedicated to continuing the original doctoral research but may also include some advanced education and training.

FUTURE

The main challenge to the success of the RPDP is consistency of use across the university graduate layer. This requires 'buy in' from university management and supervisors as well as students. If the RPDP is seen as an additional layer of bureaucracy, it will be difficult to cement into the graduate planning culture. Highlighting the benefits of engaging in this planning process is something which should be factored into Supervisor Development and Support Programmes.

A pivotal aim of graduate, fourth-level Ireland is to equip graduates with the appropriate skills required to help secure Ireland's economic success in the twenty-first century. The development of the structured PhD and UCD's Graduate School framework supports the creation of structured, relevant, generic transferable and professional skills training, enabling PhD graduates to develop careers in diverse sectors of the economy. UCD's RPDP is seen as playing a vital role in this endeavour.

REFERENCES

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