Defining the characteristics of the UK doctoral degree

Institute of Physics response to a Quality Assurance Agency consultation

A full list of the Institute’s submissions to consultations and inquiries can be viewed at www.iop.org

15 April 2011
Dear Sir/Madam,

Defining the characteristics of the UK doctoral degree

The Institute of Physics is a leading scientific society promoting physics and bringing physicists together for the benefit of all. It has a worldwide membership of around 40,000 comprising physicists from all sectors, as well as those with an interest in physics. It works to advance physics research, application and education; and engages with policy makers and the public to develop awareness and understanding of physics. Its publishing company, IOP Publishing, is a world leader in professional scientific communications.

The Institute welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Quality Assurance Agency’s draft documents helping to define the characteristics of the UK doctoral degree.

The ‘Rough Guide to the UK doctorate’ is an excellent, informative document, which will be beneficial to both UK-based students and also to overseas candidates helping to explain what they can expect from a doctorate. We have a few suggestions on additional issues that could be included:

i) Managing relationships with the supervisor(s): not all supervisor/student relationships are the same and, unfortunately, disagreements can arise. Hence, the choice of supervisor is at least as important as the area of research and the institution. Advice on the importance of meeting and getting on with a potential supervisor when deciding where to go is very important. For instance, finding out whether one will be able to get along with the supervisor’s style of supervision is paramount. This can vary widely between supervisors, for example, whether a student will have formal meetings a few times a month or an informal relationship when the supervisor just drops in when they have a few minutes. A section dealing with this issue and suggestions for how to manage the 3/4 year relationship may be helpful for potential PhD students.

ii) General troubleshooting when things go wrong; problems could include broad issues such as personal circumstances, financial issues, problems with the research/data, difficulties within the department/faculty, etc. The types of support services (e.g. university/student union/local authority, etc.) and their roles should be highlighted.
The ‘Doctoral degree characteristics’ document appears to be a good publication that is not prescriptive and which explains the standards and practices in UK doctorates rather well. However, it would be helpful to include an executive summary along with a table of contents, and a figure highlighting the Bologna Process framework illustrating the 10-levels and how the UK doctoral degrees fit.

If you need any further information on the points raised, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

Professor Peter Main,
Director, Education and Science
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