

## Executive Summary of Business for Senate



Title	<b>Proposal for the establishment of the Sussex Doctoral School</b>
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Type	Progress Report
Date	11 March 2008
Strategic context	Senate, at its last meeting, agreed to establish, in principle, the Sussex Doctoral School.
Summary	The paper proposes the core activities of the Sussex Doctoral School.
Future activities	It is proposed that a more detailed consultation take place during the Summer Term with Schools and relevant officers within the Professional Services
Effective date of introduction	During 2008
Recommendation	<b>Senate is asked to CONSIDER the paper</b>

## UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

### Proposal for the establishment of the Sussex Doctoral School

#### **Context**

A proposal, in principle, to establish the Sussex Doctoral School was approved by Senate at its 215<sup>th</sup> meeting held on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> December 2007. At its 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of 6<sup>th</sup> February 2008, the Doctoral School Committee gave extended consideration to the proposals set out in the Senate paper, and to the potential range of activities that might be undertaken by a Doctoral School.

The Committee endorsed the broad proposals set out in the cover paper (DSC/2/2) which described the envisaged focus of the Sussex Doctoral School.

It was noted that in the initial phase the School would be a virtual entity and would be responsible for developing consistent and appropriate mechanisms to optimise the experience for postgraduate research students across the University. In particular it was intended that the creation of a Doctoral School would help better create a coherent sense of identity among postgraduate research students, and encourage and support cross-disciplinary engagement in line with the broader research strategy of the University.

#### **Specific areas identified where the Doctoral School might have a useful role**

The following were among the areas identified where it was suggested the Sussex Doctoral School might make a useful contribution:

- oversight of skills training intended to equip research students with generic transferable skills;
- co-ordination of training events designed to support research student supervisors;
- advertising and promotion of opportunities for research students, including co-ordination of those related to funding;
- centrally-located induction for international students focused upon equipping them with preparatory training/guidance in study skills and cultural orientation etc;
- auditing of access to facilities across schools in order to ascertain where provision needs to be improved (e.g. with respect to desk space, computer access etc);
- augmenting and consolidating the centrally collected and published quantitative profiles of school performance used for planning purposes.

The research student representation on the Doctoral School Committee suggested that there is clear majority support (among D.Phil. students who have expressed a view) for an overarching Doctoral School at institutional level. In particular there is a role for the Doctoral School in auditing access of research students to basic facilities. Beyond the matter of general resource provision there also advantage to be gained from the spreading of good practice, which is at present not uniform across the University.

The very positive feedback from the recent Transferable Skills Training sessions give some indication as to the potential benefits that might be gained from centralised forums in terms of 'networking' and contact among students across disciplines. This was also strongly supported by the research student representatives on Doctoral School Committee. The initial

preparatory induction session for international students suggested above might also serve a similar purpose<sup>1</sup>.

### **Some areas of concern**

#### *General presumption in favour of academic competence*

There was general agreement among members of the Doctoral School Committee that there should be a presumption in favour of decisions being made at more local (disciplinary or in some case School) level in cases where these require subject-specific knowledge or awareness of the wider facilities/staff resource available to support the student's research. Although there might be benefit in certain processes such as those relating to admissions and assessment and examination being centrally co-ordinated and administered, decisions with respect to whether a particular student should be admitted, whether they should be allowed to progress and whether their thesis is of the required standard are best located in the hands of those with the requisite subject competence and/or familiarity with the local context.

#### *Maintaining established good practice*

It was emphasised by Directors of Doctoral Studies that in many areas – including those which might potentially form part of the remit of the Sussex Doctoral School – good practice was already in evidence, and in some cases had been carefully built up since the establishment of structures at School level comparable to those now envisaged at University level. It was suggested in particular that valuable progress had been made *inter alia* with respect to admissions, induction and annual review processes, and that any contribution from a Doctoral School in these areas could only be justified on the basis of identification of some clear added value.

#### *Balancing the contribution between local, School / Faculty and University levels*

There was general agreement that careful consideration would need to be given as to how precisely responsibility should be divided among disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and institutional levels. With respect to skills training, for instance, it was noted that for some elements good practice was already in evidence via the collaboration between the Schools of Life Sciences and Science and Technology (and there might be potential for something similar bridging the Arts and Humanities), and that in the case of some other elements of skills training these were most appropriately provided at discipline level. There was general agreement, however, that in the case of genuinely generic cross-disciplinary transferable skills, these could usefully be provided at institutional level (as had been successfully piloted at the recent centrally-run training events).

### **Proposal**

Based on discussion thus far, it is proposed that the following form the core of the activities with which the Sussex Doctoral School would be expected to engage.

- Providing an impetus and structure for the co-ordination of administrative colleagues within the professional services in order to promote key institutional targets (e.g. boosting the recruitment and retention of research students).

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<sup>1</sup> Feedback from the 2006-7 internal Sussex survey of recently completed research students indicated that the need for an improved research community and more opportunities to interact with other researchers/students was the most commonly cited area of concern. Likewise, the PRES survey suggested that providing research students with a sense of 'belonging' and integration within a vibrant research community was one of three specific areas identified where there was scope for improvement (See minutes 7.2 and 8.4 from the first meeting of the Doctoral School Committee).

- Monitoring of provision for research students across Schools in order to ensure consistency in standards and access to facilities, and dissemination of good practice.
- Identification of matters for strategic priority/initiative, or where resource is best focused, especially in areas that traverse school or discipline-level boundaries (e.g. advertisement and publicising of generic funding opportunities for research students and liaison with relevant external bodies such as Research Councils, UK Grad and the UK Council for Graduate Education).
- Oversight and co-ordination of University-level events that help to foster a sense of community and identity among postgraduate research students.

It is proposed further that a more detailed consultation take place during the Summer Term with Schools and relevant officers within the Professional Services, co-ordinated by the Secretary of Doctoral School Committee.

The consultation should focus in particular on ascertaining what is most appropriately decided at local levels/School level and where there might be scope for useful contributions on the part of the Sussex Doctoral School. This should take place within the framework of the following headings, following which a more detailed proposal will be brought back to Senate for final consideration: advertisement and recruitment; admissions; monitoring of progress; assessment and examination; monitoring of provision; skills training of research students; training of research student supervisors.

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