

Building communities and professionalism through student-organised conferences: Opportunities and reflections for doctoral education

Construir comunidades e profissionalismo através de conferências organizadas por estudantes:
Oportunidades e reflexões para o ensino de doutoramento

Construire des communautés et du professionnalisme à travers des conférences organisées par les
étudiants: Opportunités et réflexions pour la formation doctorale

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Abstract

Doctoral training operates under the backdrop of a neocolonial relationship in higher education governing universities and their students, as reflected in academic regulations and supervision. When professional and academic standards governing doctoral students dominate academia, this article mediates the affordances institutions can provide and the capabilities students can deliver by organising their learning activities such as doctoral conferences. In the first section, this article frames the contextual and professional imperatives around doctoral students' organisation of their conference. Secondly, the article outlines a range of interdependent activities that have allowed students to facilitate and develop their networks and capabilities in organising doctoral conferences. Preliminary findings from this case study were drawn to understand how student-organised conferences might catalyse the development of communities and solidarities needed to thrive in their studies. Finally, the authors provide reflections on the impact of the neoliberal and multidisciplinary nature of the research that doctoral students encounter during their PhD and the possibilities of a transformative learning experience.

Keywords: doctoral students, symposium, transformative, higher education

Resumo

A formação doutoral funciona no contexto de uma relação neocolonial no ensino superior que rege as universidades e os seus estudantes, e tal como se reflete nos regulamentos e na supervisão académica. Quando os padrões profissionais e académicos que regem os estudantes de doutoramento dominam o meio académico, este artigo medeia as possibilidades que as instituições podem proporcionar e as capacidades que os estudantes podem oferecer através da organização das suas próprias atividades de aprendizagem, tais como conferências de doutoramento. Na primeira secção, este artigo enquadra os imperativos contextuais e profissionais em torno da organização das suas conferências pelos estudantes de doutoramento. Em segundo lugar, o artigo descreve uma série de atividades interdependentes que permitiram aos estudantes facilitar e desenvolver as suas próprias redes e capacidades na organização de conferências de doutoramento. As conclusões preliminares deste estudo de caso foram retiradas para compreender como as conferências organizadas por estudantes podem catalisar o desenvolvimento de comunidades e as solidariedades necessárias para prosperar nos seus estudos. Por fim, os autores trazem reflexões sobre o impacto da natureza neoliberal

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e multidisciplinar da investigação que os doutorandos encontram ao longo do doutoramento e as possibilidades de uma experiência de aprendizagem transformadora.

Palavras-chave: estudantes de doutoramento, simpósio, transformador, ensino superior

Résumé

La formation doctorale s'inscrit dans le contexte d'une relation néocoloniale dans l'enseignement supérieur régissant les universités et leurs étudiants, et comme en témoignent les réglementations et l'encadrement académiques. Alors que les normes professionnelles et académiques régissant les doctorants dominent le monde universitaire, cet article médiatise les moyens que les établissements peuvent offrir et les capacités que les étudiants peuvent offrir en organisant leurs propres activités d'apprentissage telles que des conférences doctorales. Dans une première partie, cet article cadre les impératifs contextuels et professionnels autour de l'organisation par les doctorants de leur colloque. Deuxièmement, l'article décrit une gamme d'activités interdépendantes qui ont permis aux étudiants de faciliter et de développer leurs propres réseaux et capacités dans l'organisation de conférences doctorales. Les résultats préliminaires de cette étude de cas ont été tirés pour comprendre comment les conférences organisées par les étudiants pourraient catalyser le développement des communautés et des solidarités nécessaires pour prospérer dans leurs études. Enfin, les auteurs proposent des réflexions sur l'impact de la nature néolibérale et multidisciplinaire de la recherche que les doctorants rencontrent tout au long de leur doctorat et sur les possibilités d'une expérience d'apprentissage transformatrice.

Mots-clés: doctorants, symposium, transformatif, enseignement supérieur

Introduction

A typical doctoral student would be attending conferences which are organised either by their supervisors, their universities, their research groups or associations. While participation in conferences is aimed at building their engagement towards their research disciplines, it also invites an inquiry into the kinds of actions, communities, skills, and voices which influence and impact one's studies. Against the backdrop of a neocolonial relationship in higher education governing universities and their students, and as reflected in academic regulations and supervision, there is an emerging discourse towards empowering students and exercising agency in their learning. In challenging the notions of a power struggle within doctoral education where research outputs and prescribed learning standards are required to complete the programme, there is an imperative to question the spaces where students curate their learning on how doctoral experiences can be transformative and meaningful. This paper seeks to address the need for an expansive yet critical enquiry about student-led extracurricular activities organised by doctoral students throughout their studies. Specifically, this paper presents a case study of a multidisciplinary symposium organised annually by a community of doctoral students from their University in Scotland.

Academic and graduate student conferences: a brief literature review

Organising and participating in conferences have become traditional academic practices. During COVID-19, academic conferences have taken a 360-degree turn from face-to-face to online, which challenged organisers to rethink conference formats, topic development and alignment, and participants' engagement

(Goebel et al., 2020). The increased popularity of academic conferences can be attributed to increased competition in knowledge production in academia, as reflected in credentials and publications (Ralston, 2021). Social media is also considered to be largely responsible for the proliferation and popularity of conference participation (Henderson & Burford, 2020). This ‘signalling’ presented by academics through conferences is ultimately passed down to their students, which leads to the development of an identity informed by their status as *student-scholar-researchers*. With the tightened competition in the academic job market, doctoral students are encouraged to begin documenting credentials for their CVs, including evidence of conference organisation and participation (Lightfoot et al., 2021).

Conferences: a site for knowledge production? Or a site of exclusion?

It can be argued that academic conferences remain sites of power struggle in terms of representation, participation, and purpose. Not surprisingly, there is still an imbalanced representation of women and marginalised groups in conference panels and speakers (Heggie et al., 2021; Henderson & Burford, 2020). Middle and lower-class researchers, professors and students, including those coming from underfunded schools, consider expensive fees and inadequate support for conference participation, travel and accommodation as barriers towards meaningful participation, knowledge production and exchange (Henderson & Burford, 2020). Some conferences, while projecting themselves as academic, are being criticised for their ‘quasi-touristic’ intentions and interests, where travelling locally or overseas for conference participation is seen as an incentive rather than a fulfilment of professional duty.

The issue of funding also becomes detrimental, as conference participation fees could be unaffordable, especially for self-funded doctoral students. Evidence suggests from both academics and students at universities that fees remain a primary consideration or barrier to attending conferences (Arend & Bruijns, 2019; Falk & Hagsten, 2022; Kim et al., 2020; Rowe, 2019). Evidence from the United States showed that certain PhD students receive lesser conference travel funds than other doctoral students, especially those in the professional doctorate pathways (Lee et al., 2023). These perspectives coming from students themselves demonstrate that structural and discipline-related inequalities exist, even in the context of doctoral student participation in academic conferences primarily aimed at bolstering their academic and research profiles and networks.

Where do graduate student conferences fill the gap?

Graduate student conferences provide cost-efficient and economical ways to drive doctoral student engagement and increase opportunities for presenting their current or completed work (Hawthorne & Fyfe, 2015). Some universities allocate annual or periodic funding for research activities, including activities for doctoral students, in-house graduate student conferences provide the opportunity to experience first-hand

how conference organisation and participation can be a professionalised and professionalising experience. While these arrangements respond to the instability of timing, priorities and budgets, graduate student conferences prompt the development of a more inclusive approach to learning and participation. This is because students acknowledge the limitations of funding, as well as their personal and academic schedules when planning for student-led conferences.

A critical look at doctoral student-led conference funding was deemed necessary by the authors. This is because there appears to be finite and mostly limited funding for all students attending conferences. The reason for this sits at the discretion and support provided by universities during one's doctoral formation. An informal survey revealed that conference funding for students is only applicable for first-time attendance, with more than 50% covering their conference participation fees and related expenses in part or full (Time Scavengers, n.d.). Therefore, a prudent cost-effective, yet inclusive approach to increase doctoral student participation in these conferences should not in any way be seen in isolation with the different barriers and funding challenges universities experience, which are impacting the students, doctoral students in particular.

Professionalism in graduate student conferences

From the beginning of their studies, doctoral students are expected to design, investigate and implement their proposed research study. The research proposals submitted to different universities and potential supervisors become a living document that demonstrates their abilities to grasp the existing and related studies and their proposed methodologies within their respective domains. Throughout their lived experiences, participation in several supervision meetings, dialogues, research circles and conferences allow them to articulate the evolution of their thinking, the frameworks, and strategies that they adopted and what has changed or has been revisited. In these platforms, the students' work becomes their prompt to share their knowledge and demonstrate a greater understanding of their field. Given this first-hand knowledge of students regardless of academic levels, they should not only become mere participants but should take active leadership in these learning activities (Hackmann et al., 1998).

One can also identify the discourse of professionalism in how standards and staff development have been used to produce the kind of professionals able to lead and adapt to their professions such as teaching (Cottle, 2014; Forde & McMahon, 2019; Sachs, 2003a, 2003b). Similarly, doctoral training has also been patterned to develop the standards and ideals required for doctoral students to thrive in their studies. Conference organisation and participation provide evidence that extracurricular activities have an impact on one's academic study, professional skills development, and career development. Just as teachers who were required to learn different skills to cope with learning during the pandemic (Ngai et al., 2022), doctoral students are also encouraged to develop these aspects as well as attitudes throughout their studies in preparation for their potential future work within and outside academia.

Amidst the market-based orientation exemplified by conference participation, it can be noted that there are still benefits for participating doctoral students. A graduate student conference held inside the university fills the gap in terms of opportunities and skills development, especially for doctoral students. Skills developed from presenting one's work, extension and outreach, establishing partnerships, building collegial relations, and applying for funds can translate into longer-term professional skills that doctoral students can apply into their professional careers (Hawthorne & Fyfe, 2015; Lightfoot et al., 2021). Hawthorne & Fyfe cited that informal professional development seminars, graduate student conferences, community outreach and service learning can enhance student's professional development (p. 175). In the United Kingdom, these attributes and behaviours of doctoral student professionalism are reflected in the researcher development framework developed and widely implemented across different universities (VITAE, n.d.).

Another gap it fills is being able to present one's research, even if it is in the preliminary stage, without the abstract or information being made available externally. Interaction with academics and researchers provides certain input that helps students improve or reframe their research (Haus, 2020; Lightfoot et al., 2021). This ensures that a doctoral student's work is protected until it is already developed and completed. Therefore, internal conferences can be regarded as safe spaces for students to develop and hone their presentations and practice skills. They can then take themselves out of their comfort zones without fear of reprisal in the form of experienced academics being very critical and ultimately transforming their doctoral experience.

Anchoring social capital theory in doctoral studies

We appropriate the Social Capital theory to understand how connections, relationships and opportunities were developed because of the interactive dynamics involved in organising doctoral student conferences. Bourdieu (1986) posited social capital to be an accumulation of resources made available for anyone who is part of any group. Such capital can be determined by the size of the network and the various resources they possess. The actors who make up these groups and the resources they possess play a role in identifying the kind of interactions that might potentially take place, including the norms and values every member of the group is expected to demonstrate (Coleman, 1988). For Coleman, there are three dimensions of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels and social norms.

Plagens & Stapleton (2011) acknowledged that there are conceptual differences in what Bourdieu and Coleman offered. For Bourdieu, the centrality of social capital is the resources of these networks. On the other hand, Coleman emphasises the networks and the emerging norms and relationships surrounding them. In the context of this article, however, the authors argue that social capital in the context of doctoral training does sit on both frames. Universities, to a certain extent, made some of these resources available to students to enable them to build their social capital through their research study and doctoral student life. The provisions of research supervisors, libraries, funding grants and facilities to conduct research enhance the

tangible and intangible resources of doctoral students in completing their research. On the other hand, these resources and privileges given to students must be utilised judiciously to ensure that the research project is completed and complies with certain disciplinary and ethical prerequisites of the study. In the case of doctoral student-run conferences, funding from the Universities is allocated to enable students to organise it on their own while building their networks and refining their research. However, it is still expected that students ensure compliance with the spending of these resources and different regulations and standards set by the University or the funding bodies.

Significantly, it is important to understand how social capital grows beyond individual interactions and how the community can benefit from the interaction of those within it. Putnam (1995) suggests that “life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital” (p. 67). The networks created through doctoral student conferences can pave the way for meaningful interactions, cross-fertilisation of ideas, development collaboration, and expanded engagement within the community of doctoral students within and outside the university. In the UK, it has been widely acknowledged in both policy and practice that those skills developed throughout their doctoral studies, along with the outputs, are important components of one’s doctoral training (Pilbeam et al., 2013). The development of one’s social capital, in the context of one’s doctoral training, is deeply embedded in the researcher development activities, supporting students in anchoring both their research and their skills development. Akala and Akala (2023) call for more dedicated participation and leadership of academics in providing opportunities to improve doctoral student experiences. They suggested that the establishment of seminars, small and large group engagements, and the widening of social capital are essential in improving a student’s doctoral journey, as well as the institution’s completion rate of doctoral students. Tyndall et al. (2019) highlighted the strong benefit of social activities such as writing groups, which enhanced students’ accountability and commitment to their research. These studies suggest that when university leaders and managers give sufficient support and emphasis on doctoral training anchored on socialisation and network building, doctoral students’ experience becomes highly enriching, motivating and rewarding.

Alluding to these perspectives, this article seeks to understand how doctoral student conferences are still able to operate despite limited funding to build doctoral students’ social capital through communities, resources and skills development. It is also important to highlight how, in the process of organising and attending these conferences, doctoral students are given more opportunities to share knowledge, interact and build personal networks that may potentially be useful for their studies.

Context of the study

The study is situated at the University of Strathclyde, a university located in Glasgow, Scotland. The University traces its origins to the Andersonian Institution, founded in 1796 (Strathclyde Archives, 2014).

The University received its Royal Charter in 1964. Within the University, the Doctoral Researchers Group (DRG) was founded in 2018 as a response to a growing demand for representation among doctoral students throughout the university. The organisation collaborates with the Strathclyde Doctoral School, an administrative office responsible for matters related to doctoral training and researcher development of the university's doctoral students. One of the key thrusts of the DRG is to organise doctoral students-focused events, which include regular general meetings, casual socialisation events, and the annual conference: the Doctoral Students Multidisciplinary Symposium (DSMS)¹.

DSMS - the doctoral student-led conference

The DSMS is an annual conference organised by the DRG since 2018 to provide opportunities for doctoral students to present their ongoing or forthcoming work. As the conference is not automatically funded, each of the schools and some offices within the university allocates financial support for the DSMS. The DRG committee members pitch the conference to the school's budget offices to secure funding to organise this conference. While the DSMS is sponsored, funded, and endorsed by the university's Doctoral School, faculties, and relevant offices, the development and organisation of the conference entirely sits on the shoulders of the DRG.

The leadership of the DSMS sits within the DRG Executive Committee. Under it, the organising committee is comprised of doctoral student volunteers. Along with the conference chair, the committee is supported by volunteers – doctoral students who are assigned to different committees. The committee structure varies every year, with only the conference chair and finance lead being the definitive positions. This is partly due to the variety of skill sets doctoral student volunteers possess, which allows them to work in any capacity and on committees that were formed to which they can devote their time and skills. Given funding restrictions, the organising committee for DSMS 2023 was tasked to hold the conference within the university's premises and availed of the university-managed services such as facilities booking, catering and technical support.

Around 150 doctoral students presented their research projects annually through presentations done in panel format and research posters. In 2023, 70 abstracts were submitted for oral presentations during the conference, while 33 posters were presented. For a university as diverse and globally orientated as Strathclyde, a multidisciplinary conference provided the opportunity to bring together doctoral students from across different faculties and subject disciplines. This means that presenters are confronted with a challenge presenting their research to researchers outside of their discipline. However, this challenge opens an opportunity to enhance researchers' presentation skills by using simpler and more understandable

¹ The term 'symposium' is used as the official event name of the DRG-organised academic conference. For purposes of clarity, the word 'conference' will be used frequently while the 'symposium' pertains to the DSMS.

terminologies and discussions to a non-specialist audience.

University communication platforms were used to communicate with the doctoral students. Emails were sent out inviting them to attend and to submit their abstract for peer review. Interested students pursuing Master' degrees were also welcomed to provide them with an experience of the university's doctoral student life. For 2023, there were 31 participants from the Business School; 40 from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences; 31 from the Faculty of Science; and 98 from the Faculty of Engineering. In 2023, around 200 attendees have registered to attend the conference. The number of attendees is debatable and assumed to have reached beyond the actual count since several participants have also signed up to attend the conference online or have attended without registering.

Methodology

Selection of the case study method

The study appropriates the case method which allows for comparisons to be made with other universities to uncover similarities and/or differences between them. The authors, upon realising that the DSMS can be a potential case study to be explored, have to rely on existing data about the participant demographics, post-conference feedback and from the workshop conducted for doctoral students during the programme.

The main data collection method was using a post-event questionnaire which students volunteered to fill out. Participation in this survey was done anonymously. Of the 200 registered participants, 70 participants completed the form, with 69 of them identifying as doctoral students and one other. The unique question that was asked of them was what department they studied in to gauge what departments were being represented in the questionnaire.

Anonymous participant feedback was exported to an Excel file. Descriptive statistics were provided during the writing of the report. Thematic analysis was made from the qualitative feedback provided to the students. The feedback provided insights on their opinions, experiences and potential recommendations for future hosting of the DSMS. A workshop was also organised during the conference, allowing students to openly air their views on their current doctoral journey. Data collected from the stick-on notepads participants provided during the workshop were also used and referred to in this article. No demographic or personal data were collected from the participants during the workshop. The stick-on notepads were added under four headings, which were shaped as questions. The questions were:

- How is your PhD journey so far?
- How do I (referring to the organising committee) make sure things are better organised?
- What else is missing (in the conference)?
- What can we (the DRG committee) do more of?

The answers were used to sense-check the main source of data collection described above and to capture any interesting information that could be analysed then and in the future.

A book of abstracts was prepared from student submissions to present at the conference. The book of abstracts was used for the data collection to uncover the research that is currently being undertaken within the university and the mix of students who presented at the conference.

Preliminary findings

Building social capital through positive participation experiences

97% of the respondents who filled in the survey agreed that their DSMS was a positive experience.

This was evidenced by a variety of opportunities created for students to take part by volunteering for positions on the organising committee and by the organising committee seeking to meet the needs of the students to be allowed to participate.

Perspective from the participants

Several themes related to building social capital were reflected in the responses provided by the students after the conference.

Themes emerged from the Survey:
Engagement with other Doctoral Students
Learning about other people's research through the presentations
Presenting my project
Everything

Engagement with fellow doctoral students became the highlight of their participation at the DSMS. Given that more than 100 presented their projects, the participants were able to learn about the different research areas through the student presentations. In presenting the project, the students were able to interact and exchange insights with their fellow students. These include broader perspectives on their areas of research, the methodologies, and the proposed impact of the study. Students who submitted abstract proposals were peer-reviewed by their fellow doctoral students. The feedback provided was useful in improving their research and presentation material before their scheduled presentation. Like many conferences, participants who attended in person have had the opportunity to ask questions and inquire about the research topic

and the personal motivation of their fellow students in doing such research. These conversations can catalyse potential opportunities to articulate their research and develop interactions with fellow doctoral students.

When asked what could be done better, there were some useful suggestions, but there were a few comments along the theme based on the following comments:

On providing recognitions

Excellent performance in every aspect of the DSMS should be awarded. This will motivate the participants.

The above quote refers to providing recognition to the best abstracts, presentations, posters and volunteers during the conference.

On the timing and scheduling of the conference

I can't think of anything, it was all great. I was sorry not to attend more but was up against a hard deadline the same week.

Given that doctoral students are largely pressed with commitments, especially during summer when they attend conferences on top of their writing, scheduling student-run conferences at periods where it does not clash with major activities can be considered.

Perspectives from committee members and volunteers

Interaction between doctoral students from different levels has also expanded. Some of the committee members have organised DSMS more than once. Some of the volunteers were in their first year of studies. Organising the conference has allowed both junior and senior doctoral students to work together. The time between the initial meetings in August 2022 and the symposium in June 2023 afforded time for these interactions to develop, providing volunteers with the opportunity to brainstorm the themes and the discussion tracks. As a result, 98% of students who completed the survey agreed the theme for this year was relevant and celebrated multidisciplinary during the conference.

Leadership and decision-making dynamics

Understanding how social capital is built through networks can also be seen in how flexible organising the event is to accommodate various schedules. Although the 2023 committee roles were derived from the committee format in the previous years, the varying deadlines and priorities of the doctoral students made it

difficult to bring all the volunteers together. As such, leadership, though centred mostly among the lead organisers, provided flexibility in accommodating volunteers at different stages of the organisation. Some of those who initially sat as committee members have begged off from participating. Yet, other interested doctoral students, especially the new entrants, have accepted the committee roles and continued volunteering until the end of the conference. The committee roles were set by the previous committee, and these had been the same for a few years. After the experience of running the DSMS in 2023, the committee proposed the potential and reporting structure and set this up for the committee for 2024. This reconfiguration took place from discussions based on what worked and what could be done more effectively.

Opportunities were available to volunteer for positions at the event and they varied in terms of time commitment and preparation required. This gave students ways to try out diverse roles that they will require during and after their PhD journey. This also allowed them to try out roles in a safe place where the ethos was one of nurturing and encouragement. There were numerous various roles, including conference and session chairs, who introduced presenters and timekeepers. They ensured that the session ran on time, that the post-presentation question and answer session went smoothly, and that they stepped in and asked questions if no questions were forthcoming by the audience. The reason for ensuring that questions were asked was to simulate what would happen at an external conference. This helped the presenter develop skills in answering questions from both specialist and non-specialist audience. Even though the audience may not necessarily be comprised of people who have expertise in the area the presenter is talking about, it is still a useful introduction to the art of articulating answers to questions.

Development of professional skills useful for doctoral and post-doctoral life

Anchored on VITAE's Researcher Professional Development Framework (n.d.), the University has required most doctoral students to complete a Postgraduate Certificate in Researcher Professional Development (RPD). The PGCert in RPD consists of 60 units drawn from a doctoral student's participation and involvement in different activities recognised and supported by the Doctoral School. There are no specific curricula as to what kind of courses each student should take. In some cases, most of the student's professional skills gained from current or previous employment are eligible to receive PGCert credits. To validate these credits, reflective essays for each of the five researcher development areas² must be submitted detailing the courses/workshops/conferences attended, skills gained, and their usefulness in one's doctoral or post-doctoral career.

The DSMS is a recognised activity by the Strathclyde Doctoral School. This means that participating and taking part in organising the conference entitles doctoral students (except for some like the EdDs) to PGCert credits.

² These areas are: 1. Knowledge and Intellectual Abilities (20 credits); 2. Personal Effectiveness (10 credits); 3. Research Governance and Organisation (10 credits); 4. Engagement, Influence and Impact (10 credits); and 5. Elective (10 credits) covering the first 4 development areas.

Most importantly, the variety of tasks involved in organising the conference provided opportunities for volunteers to contribute to areas that allowed them to use their talents and skills or develop new ones. Having developed these professional skills during their doctoral studies is believed, will allow them to confidently foray into any academic or non-academic careers after completing their PhD. From the survey, 92% of the students who completed the survey felt that the DSMS structure and sessions were properly organised.

Public speaking and knowledge sharing through briefings and poster sessions

With several doctoral students being unfamiliar with the process involving conference volunteering, abstract writing, peer review, and panelling conference sessions, the 2023 Committee decided to organise information and mentoring sessions to support the prospective submitters and presenters. The first session was organised and targeted at students who were interested in being volunteers and stewards during the conference. The second session was targeted at students interested in becoming session chairs. The DSMS chair, along with other previous volunteers provided short briefings and experience sharing about their participation in the previous DSMS events. These sessions provided an opportunity to get to know doctoral students more, as well as provide knowledge that is useful for the current volunteers. By understanding how to volunteer at the DSMS, the knowledge and experiences shared, plus the new contacts gained, helped establish some social capital and resources volunteers can use during the event. Additionally, these provided opportunities for committee members to gain experience in presenting and answering questions and communicating information.

Another opportunity for students at the university to present was to submit research posters. Doing a poster for a conference is popular in external conferences. Big UK international conferences like the British Academy of Management (BAM) have a poster section which they recommend that first-year PhD students submit. The skills in designing a poster involve IT skills, such as being able to use software that is suitable for poster presentations. Other skills required are firstly incorporating a design that works well for the research and in making it stand out. Knowing how many words to incorporate onto a one-page poster when students may have written thousands of words that then need to be summarised onto one page. Summarising concisely and making sure key points are incorporated in a poster can be treated as essential skills in poster development. The students also benefited from presenting their posters to specialist and non-specialist audiences who were eager to ask questions and inquire more about their study and methodologies.

Academic skills in peer reviewing

As in most academic conferences, peer reviewing is an important step in determining who can participate in the conference. Abstracts were evaluated by peer reviewers using prescribed guidelines set by the

organisers and following the conference theme. Similarly, abstracts submitted for the DSMS 2023 were peer-reviewed by doctoral students under specific guidelines around how feedback should be provided. Unlike other academic conferences, all abstracts submitted for the DSMS were accepted to be presented. The focus on peer reviewing for research conferences such as the DSMS is for reviewers to provide feedback mostly on how their presentation can be better understood by researchers from other disciplines. Some feedback also included writing and grammar and how abstracts can be compellingly written for bigger academic conferences. This exercise removed any anxiety doctoral students may have about participating in conferences and, therefore, orientated them to the conference culture in academia. This also broadens the democratic spaces of participation within the doctoral students and ensures they are allowed and empowered to participate. Unlike in other major conferences where filtering abstracts is a norm, doctoral student conferences have become welcoming of these submissions.

The peer reviewers are volunteers and from different disciplines, so they are unlikely to have the same specialist knowledge as the student submitting the abstract. The feedback will then be based on the reviewer trying to understand what the abstract tried to convey. The peer reviewers were given guidelines on how to review so that the feedback was more positive and constructive than in earlier years. This was based on previous feedback, where some reviews were not based on the actual requirements of the abstract, such as the word count. Reviewers were encouraged to read the guidelines before submitting their feedback.

As a skills development platform, both submitters and student peer reviewers gain insights into the peer review process and prepare them to participate in the bigger conference throughout their studies by practising their peer reviewing skills. Those who completed the survey were just over a third of the 200 students who attended, with some of these 200 students attending all three days of the DSMS event. 84% of those who attended the DSMS 2023 had a supportive experience with the peer review process. 99% of those students who completed the survey felt the project presented by the doctoral students was interesting and engaging.

Networking and inviting keynote speakers

Another role of the organising committee was to find keynote speakers and organise for them to fill the slot times on the three days of the event, one for each day. This proved to be a challenging task because the keynote speakers were often busy and booked up well in advance of the dates that they were required. A draft email was compiled so that people could send it to speakers who had inspired them. In the end, and due to time constraints, the easiest way identified was to request faculty speakers from the university. 86% of the students who completed the survey said that the keynote sessions and speakers were interesting.

Volunteer deployment and engagement

On-site volunteers were asked to steward during the event. This involved showing people where to go to see the presentations and where the tea and coffee were to chat with the attendees and answer questions they may have about the symposium and or their doctoral journey. Also, part of this role involved taking a turn in registration and in welcoming people to the event. This role was popular with doctoral students who didn't want to commit too much time to the event but wanted to be a help in some way. The experience gained from this was very useful in terms of being more organised further in advance with dates.

Securing funding from donors and university offices

Fundraising for DSMS was another role for the organising committee. Even though it was funded generally by the university, committee members have done presentations to different faculty and departments to obtain the funding required. This came with a stipulation that the conference would be held inside the university's premises and that university-approved suppliers would be used. Not all universities may have available funds to support student-run conferences. Therefore, in organising such conferences annually, it would be hoped that schools and offices include some buffer funds in their budget to support student-organised conferences.

Facilitation and listening skills from the in-person workshops

A workshop was also organised during the DSMS 2023 to probe students on how their doctoral journey is going and how they could be helped more at the DSMS. Inputs were provided by students using post-its and pinned on boards. The four questions mentioned earlier were asked. This style of workshop had not been tried before during any previous DSMS. However, this presented a timely opportunity for all doctoral students who attended to reflect collectively on their experiences, including what the DRG can do more to advance and forward their interests to the university's decision-makers. The responses were noted for the committee to use for future ideas and suggestions to improve the DRG presence and their respective doctoral experiences.

Another workshop was organised for the university's postgraduate master's students who were interested in exploring PhD studies at the university. The PhD taster workshop was designed for students considering a PhD to hear first-hand experiences of PhD life. During the workshop, six doctoral students from different faculties and at various stages of completion presented their journeys and insights into their doctoral lives. The second objective was aimed at providing insights on how to land a PhD position at the university. The topics covered this year were 'Choosing the right supervisor', 'Industrial PhDs', 'Research Paths to a PhD', 'Marketing your PhD', and finally 'Industry-sponsored PhD'. The variety of presentations and speakers

sharing different techniques were instrumental in assisting the prospective doctoral students in determining what kinds of skills or attributes they may consider developing to write good proposals and pitch them to the appropriate supervisors and funding agencies. The final objective was for students considering the PhD journey to find out how to overcome potential barriers. A discussion session allowed the students to openly ask questions that they think are useful in navigating the tough and sometimes complex processes of applying for PhD programmes, funding and the logistics. This opportunity gave students another chance to present and a different type of presentation to deliver and build up their confidence.

Facilitating these workshops, on top of the conventional presentation panels, can certainly inject relevant skills such as facilitating, listening, collaborative communication and even marketing, especially as the doctoral students also become ambassadors of the university to the prospective students. Such skills are important given that academics working in the university are also being tapped to speak at such workshops or even asked to present on admissions open days to give insights to students seeking to be admitted to the university or the desired programme.

Participation certificates and evidence as credentials

As the university requires most PhD students to complete the PGCert course before their viva, evidence such as pictures, a book of abstracts and certificates were needed to be submitted. Participating in this conference allocates specific points based on the type of contribution made. Volunteers and presenters requested certificates as proofs. In many ways, some of the students even used social media to amplify their participation. Some students even invited their supervisors and funders to watch them. Participation necessitates that students are rewarded. These credentials, however, should not only be regarded for participation points. Ultimately, beyond the credentials earned, the social capital, the communities, the new friendships, and the relationships forged will also be used to help the students thrive in their doctoral journey.

Some certificates were provided by the DSMS committee for tasks that were done by students. These could be used as points towards the PG Certification that students in some departments apply for, which is the equivalent of a master's certificate. Certificates were issued to students who stewarded, peer-reviewed, chaired a session, presented a study or proposed thesis, or presented a poster.

Potential transformational impact on doctoral student life

Community support and understanding of contextually diverse PhD studies

The development, organisation and implementation of doctoral student conferences such as the DSMS fostered community building, inter- and multidisciplinary exchanges and collaborations. Allowing the

students to design and develop the conference will potentially have the potential to translate into their professional practice. In obtaining credits for their PGCert, students are required to write a reflective essay which indicates how these skills might be useful in their current and future professional careers. In addressing the transformative potential of these student-driven activities, one must also recognise the influence of the 'global' nature of these events, where perspectives coming from different countries and cultures are celebrated and nurtured. As such, reflecting on narratives and experiences where students themselves are at the forefront of their learning takes into consideration the application of the skills one has gained through their studies and a commitment to challenge the barriers to make learning accessible and transformative.

Skills development and competency-focused doctoral training

Through this event, students can develop their confidence in various areas, including computer and digital skills for individual presenters and hybrid working. Presentation skills can be developed. Feedback to presenters is given. And the skill of being able to answer difficult questions directed by an audience who have little to no knowledge of their discipline becomes available. This is the unique attraction of the context of a multidisciplinary event. Developing flexible communication and presentation skills to adapt the presentation to a multidisciplinary audience have catalysed conversations useful for facing different researchers and academics within and outside of the doctoral school environment.

The writing skills and reading skills required of the abstract presentations and conversations which were crystallised during the conference can also develop communication skills and language skills especially if English is their second language. The confidence to try it out in a safe community space can build up the doctoral student's skills to prepare them to transform into the next years and phases of their study.

If students had taken all the opportunities that were available throughout the three-day event, then a large variety of skill development could have been supported. These included actual presentation about their work (oral presentation), the poster presentation, and presentations during the PhD taster. This was also a chance to meet people in their line of research and establish academic conversations. By having this networking opportunities, it is hoped that it could lead to multidisciplinary research and or cross collaborations in the future. Building student's competencies has been part of higher education for a decade and has been embraced by academics and educators alike (Bacigalupo et al., 2016; Lans et al., 2014). Academics support such conferences as training which enhances the doctoral student's ability to view themselves and their study within a bigger picture.

Possible impact on UK doctoral education

UK universities are dealing with the impact of Brexit, as well as the recent COVID crisis. These universities

grapple with increasing international student enrolments due to tight competition with European counterparts. Therefore, there may be a potential concern about providing creative, innovative and engaging activities to profile the UK as a destination of choice for doctoral studies. The presence of doctoral schools in UK universities has added layers of participation to involve not just local but also non-local doctoral students coming to the UK. While limited funding remains, internal doctoral student-organised conferences can potentially fill the need for students to be actively engaged during their studies while developing academic and professional skills along with their research.

UK doctoral education will have to take a dialogical approach to ensure university and students' voices are represented and celebrated. Currently, the UK's educational system classifies doctoral students as 'students' where professional training is prioritised over 'research excellence'³. Despite that, the achievements of the DSMS, particularly the activities organised in 2023, were recognised, leading to the committee being awarded the Student Partnership Impact Award 2024⁴ by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) in collaboration with the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), a UK-based educational non-profit organisation. The DSMS, as an example of a ground-up approach initiated by students, can provide visibility and representation of students' research and outputs of professional training in academia.

Conclusion

The case of the DSMS is one of the many initiatives of doctoral students to be immersed deeply into the academic environment characterised by conferences, research presentations and networked research communities. As such, the skills developed in participating and organising this conference open the opportunity for students to expand their social capital while gaining professional skills to succeed in their doctoral studies. In an environment that prioritises skills and networks to succeed, doctoral students learn to develop these skills using their previous skills and through networking and relationship-building with fellow doctoral students. Although the conference may lack the pomp and grandness mostly featured in global academic conferences due to limited funding and resources, the interactions taking place in organising and during the conference itself necessitate more critical introspection and reflection. Where students are not given opportunities either because they have no experience or confidence, doctoral student conferences may perhaps provide them exposure to write compelling abstracts or participate more engagingly in the future conferences they will attend, with a chance to secure funding because of the skills they have gained.

Limitations and possible avenues for future research

³ A majority of those consulted in the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029 were against the inclusion of PhD outputs (including thesis). The debate and discussion can be followed through this link: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/publication/analysis-of-responses-to-initial-decisions-consultation/>

⁴ The DSMS 2023 Committee, through its chair, was awarded one of the team awards. Refer to this link: <https://www.seda.ac.uk/news/seda-jisc-student-partnership-impact-award/>

In this article using the single case study approach was felt to be justifiable as it seeks to uncover what Yin (2018) described as revealing certain insights that may be useful for other cases. An argument against this type of case study is that the group of students may not be a representative cohort of the student population, so the feedback they give may not be representative in different situations. The main contribution of this article was the narrative it provided on how doctoral student conferences can be conceptualised, developed, funded, and implemented based on an actual university-level student conference which exists in the UK. Furthermore, while the case of DSMS is not a uniquely conceptualised event compared from other doctoral student conferences, documenting this narrative is important to encourage more doctoral students to reflect, evaluate and form critical perspectives on their own experiences. Particularly since this is taking place in a university in the UK, and with the growing impression that the UK doctoral training is now marked with an emphasis on skills development (Blaj-Ward, 2011; McGloin & Wynne, 2015), it would be interesting to explore further how country-specific standards in doctoral training affect one's lived experiences and choices on what kind of doctoral-related experiences to participate.

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