Evaluation and Review of the Researcher Development Programme for Postgraduate Research Students
The Graduate School, King’s College London

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Executive Summary:
We evaluated the Researcher Development Programme (RDP) after it had run for 2 full academic years. The RDP provides an annual programme of some 300 individual workshops plus additional events and one-to-one sessions for KCL postgraduate research students and postdoctoral research staff on transferable and generic skills. This training is required by the Research Councils and the QAA. An online survey, focus groups and the course feedback form constituted the review of the workshops side of the programme. This report focuses on the postgraduate research student side of the evaluation. Key findings are:

- A very high level of satisfaction amongst the postgraduate research students who attend RDP sessions with all aspects of the course
- The perception that the RDP plays a key role in the PhD process – complementary to and different from that of the supervisor but viewed as being just as important
- Attending RDP sessions is an important part of the support package for a postgraduate research student and helps to provide them with a sense of community and reduce isolation
- A good variety of courses are provided
- The courses make a positive impact on the skills that PhD students develop in order to succeed with their PhD

The review also found areas for improvement and the following action points have been identified:

- Provide more courses of differing levels e.g. introductory, intermediate and advanced
- Provide more guidance for both students and supervisors on identifying learning needs and courses that are appropriate for the student’s individual stage of development
- Investigate the feasibility of “block delivery” of courses at key stages of the PhD – starting, halfway through and finishing and for these to be mandatory or highly recommended (e.g. Imperial College and UCL).
- Improve publicity of the courses, particularly emphasising the important role in supporting students and enhancing their experience as a King’s postgraduate
- Target supervisors with publicity, using evidence from this report to encourage them to support their doctoral students in attending RDP courses

The report makes the overall recommendation that the RDP should continue to receive top-level support from the College as it plays a key role in the postgraduate student experience. It is also a required component for the College to continue receiving Research Council funding. In order to continue expanding numbers of workshops and other activities, the RDP will need funding to replace the Roberts money – the final payment of which is due in October 2010.
Introduction and Background
In 2010 the Researcher Development Unit in the Graduate School carried out a review and evaluation of the Researcher Development Programme which has been running workshops for 2 full academic years. This review consisted of 3 elements:
1. An online survey of postgraduate research students and postdoctoral research staff using the SurveyMonkey tool to gain a broad perspective of how the RDP is regarded across the College and to obtain comments from those who have not attended any courses as well as those who have attended several.
2. 4 focus groups conducted with postgraduate research students who have attended several RDP courses to obtain more depth of information.
3. A review of 3 years’ worth of post-course evaluation forms, completed by all participants at the end of each course in order to provide a macro view of the sessions themselves.

This report focuses on the overall picture of how the RDP is received and its perceived value by postgraduate research students (PGRs). The survey of postdoctoral research staff is being used in conjunction with other initiatives (such as the Concordat mapping and gapping exercise for College Research Committee) to design a programme of training and development more specifically targeted at them as this is a less well-developed area at King’s than the PGR training.

Rationale
There are a number of reasons why it was important to evaluate the RDP in 2010:
1. The mode of funding from ring-fenced Roberts money via the Research Councils, is due to change in 2011. The Research Councils have recommended that individual institutions recover the cost of the training by levying an additional £200 per annum charge on postgraduate research student fees. Before King’s can commit to this, we need to evaluate the impact of the training at an institutional level.
2. The RDP has been running for 2 years which has been enough time for it to become established within the College without it being too firmly entrenched and therefore a good point to check that we are on the right track with the service we provide.
3. Any training programme cannot remain fixed and it is therefore important in terms of the evolution of researcher development at King’s that we are aware of the views of the participants, request their feedback and respond to the suggestions for improvement made. This therefore forms an important part of a cycle of continuous improvement for the RDP. Hereafter the RDO will be evaluated on a regular basis.

Methods
The evaluation project was an attempt to gather information that would be most useful to us, the Researcher Development Unit, in evolving the programme in the future, and to be a dipstick indicator of whether the training is contributing something positive to the development of the researchers at King’s. This was not intended to be a scientific study so the methods of obtaining views are not rigorous in methodological terms. We decided to use a 3-pronged approach in order to gather as good a perspective as possible, but we recognise that there are still some flaws in this approach – we did not, for example, survey supervisors on this occasion and this might be something that we would want to do in the future. The following sections provide an overview of each method of data collection.

Survey Monkey Online Surveys
We designed two, short online surveys: one aimed at postgraduate research students at King’s and the second aimed at postdoctoral research staff. The surveys were intended to find out what understanding researchers had of the Researcher Development Programme and what it offers; how much impact on their current working practices the training has had and what suggestions they have for future improvements of the programme. We also hoped to reach people who had never attended any of our training courses to find out why and their opinions on what we do and how we could improve it.
Focus Groups
We also wanted to find out why some people attend quite a number of our training courses, what we do well and to obtain more depth of information, so we ran 4 focus groups with PGRs on different campuses (Strand, Guys, Waterloo and Denmark Hill). We emailed the top 100 participants on the RDP - those people who have attended the most training courses and asked them to contribute to the focus groups. The numbers in each focus group were fairly small and ranged from 3 to 6, although the information they gave was rich and interesting.

Review of the Feedback Forms
Every training course uses immediate post-course evaluation forms as standard practice. We redesigned this form about 3 years’ ago and have steadily been collecting hundreds of the completed forms as all participants are asked to complete them at the end of each course. We use these forms in two ways: firstly and immediately after the course, all tutors have a look at the feedback and take note of whether there is anything that needs to be changed; and secondly at an aggregate level they are useful to us in painting a macro picture of how well or badly the RDP courses are received immediately after the sessions have finished. The feedback forms also indicate “distance travelled” on the course – i.e. how much the participant thinks the course has enhanced their knowledge and skills, which is a very important measure of the value of the training. We also obtain feedback on the other practical aspects of running the RDP – the administration, training room, quality of the handouts etc via these sheets and the overall picture of these aspects of running a training programme is useful to have as the aggregate data will flag anything that needs to be changed.

Structure of this Report
As indicated above, the evaluation project has gathered a lot of information and this report pulls this together and identifies key themes and action points. Some background to the RDP is given first, including numbers of courses run and attendances. This is followed by a summary of the review of the feedback forms, a summary of the online survey results and a summary of the focus group data. Key themes are drawn out of these sections and discussed along with some action points. There is then a conclusion and summary of the action points. Throughout the report comments in square parentheses are our responses to issues.

Background to the RDP and the RDU
The Researcher Development Programme (RDP) was introduced in October 2008 as the new generic skills training and development programme of courses for all postgraduate research students and postdoctoral research staff at King’s. The programme was designed to meet the requirements for generic and transferable skills training for researchers as laid down by the Roberts Report, the Research Councils and the QAA. These requirements referred to Sections C – G of the Joint Skills Statement (appended) as defining generic and transferable skills and this was used as the framework for the RDP. It is important to note that the RDP was not originally designed to include research skills and methods training, nor to be discipline-specific as the focus was on the development of generic skills particularly with a view to future employability. In 2010, this situation has changed with the development of the Researcher Development Framework to replace the Joint Skills Statement (http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Researcher%20Development%20Statement_RDS%20July%202010.pdf) and the removal of ringfenced Roberts Funding for transferable skills development. We are now moving into a new era where a more integrated approach to all training for postgraduate research students is likely to be the focus. This is already reflected in the 2010-11 Researcher Development Programme where we are including more research skills training and more workshops tailored for individual disciplines. In 2011, we will be adding a Research Methods Co-ordinator to the RDU team. This job will be key in improving access to research methods training for postgraduate research students at King’s.

The programme has grown substantially over the two years that it has been running to include some 300 individual sessions per year and incorporating over 2,500 individual attendances by PGR students alone over the 2 years. This number reaches over 3,300 when post-doc attendances are taking into account. In the
In the academic years 2008-9 and 2009-10 we ran a total of 278 courses, of which there are several repeat sessions of popular courses.

Preparing, running, administrating and delivering such a large programme is a huge amount of work for a fairly small team comprising 4 full-time and 1 part-time members of staff. Considerable use is made of external trainers who normally have an academic background and postgraduate research qualification, who are recommended (or who we have worked with and know professionally) and are highly experienced at facilitating workshops. Most have worked in universities as trainers (following an academic career) and have then become freelance.

We also make use of academics within King’s who wish to run courses for us and we would like to include more input into courses from colleagues. We do however recognise that colleagues at King’s are already extremely busy and that asking them to do more with their already over-stretched time is often unrealistic.

The Researcher Development Unit itself consists of well-qualified and experienced members of staff. Fiona Denney is a former social science academic who moved into staff development in universities 7 years ago, has 15 years’ experience of working in universities, teaching and supervising students, working with academics and facilitating training. In July 2010 Fiona finally gave up her role as an associate lecturer at Birkbeck where she has taught evening classes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level for several years.

Anna Price and Rachel Blanc both have health science PhDs and several years’ post-doctoral work experience in a variety of research institutions and universities. Terry Jones is a highly experienced careers adviser with many years’ experience of working in universities and with researchers. He is now training other careers advisers to work with researchers. Madeleine House has many years’ experience as a training administrator in a variety of organisations and has also worked on a number of training and development projects in the not-for-profit sector. Later this year, the team will be joined by two further members of staff to work on research methods coordination and provide further administrative support for the RDP.

The Researcher Development Programme encompasses more than just the training courses that are the focus of this report. Colleagues in the RDU also provide one-to-one advice and coaching, and we work with colleagues around the College on a number of other key projects such as the Lion’s Den Business Plan Competition, organised by KCL Business. There is an increasing demand for more small group and one-to-one sessions and we continually have to balance this important source of support for PGRs with the need to provide the central training programme.

The Researcher Development Unit sits within the Graduate School and works closely with colleagues in Registry and Research Ethics. Strategic relationships have been forged with colleagues in the academic Schools and departments and with other central service providers such as ISS, King’s Learning Institute, KCL Business and Human Resources. It is not possible for the RDP to operate in isolation – it is critical that we build these relationships and work collegiately for the benefit of the researchers and the academic community at King’s. Colleagues from ISS, Registry, Research Ethics, KLI, KCL Business and Human Resources all input into courses on the RDP and the RDP funds a portion of IT training specifically for PGRs. We would not be able to run an effective programme without these colleagues.

A considerable amount of work therefore goes into the programme including liaising with tutors, designing workshops, networking to build the appropriate relationships in order to run training sessions that cover the required areas for researchers and publicity and promotions. We also recognise that PGRs come from a wide variety of backgrounds and a central programme of training may not be appropriate to everyone’s needs. We therefore wanted the review to show areas for improvement. The following section reviews the results of the SurveyMonkey PGR survey, followed by the results of the feedback forms and then the focus groups. Finally there is a discussion of key elements accompanied by a list of action points and a conclusion to the report.
Survey Results

1. Participants and Non-Participants
We wanted to get a sense of the reach of the programme which included investigating why students had not participated. The completed questionnaires numbered almost 300, which gives an approximate response rate of 15% if we take the total PGR student number to be around 2000.

Researcher Development Programme Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you attended one or more workshops in the Researcher Development Programme (RDP)?</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer Options</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The non-participants did provide some useful information. The fact that a third of the non-participants had not heard of the RDP was surprising - although that was only 39 individuals. The topics in the programme, the timing and the difficulty of attending course because of heavy workload all featured as reasons for non-participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If 'no' what were your reasons for not attending?</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer Options</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The topics were not relevant to me.</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The timing of the courses was inconvenient.</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The location of the courses was inconvenient.</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor did not give permission.</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My workload is too heavy.</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was not aware of the RDP.</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other.</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Frequency of Attendance
The vast majority of participants had attended up to 5 courses though there was a small group of ‘heavy attenders’. It is possible that some of this group may be final-year students who have accumulated larger numbers of courses during the entire length of their PhD programme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If 'Yes', please list the number of sessions you attended</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer Options</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

answered question 293  
skipped question 8

answered question 116  
skipped question 185
3. Recommended Course
We felt it would be useful to ask participants to name courses they would recommend to colleagues. The range of nominations included pretty much every course on the programme. This was pleasing as the programme is very diverse and we aim to address a wide range of learning needs and learning styles.

4. Impact
This was an important question. We wanted to know if the programme had made a measurable difference to the effectiveness of the researcher’s work. Did these courses in a tangible way ‘develop’ our researchers with an immediate effect? Similar numbers felt either helped a lot or not helped at all. Those 38 students who felt they were not helped are a concern. Nevertheless if one looks at the comments made by the majority of students it is very clear that significant learning was going on in the sessions and this is backed up by the information gained from the feedback forms (see page 16 onwards).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To what extent have the courses helped you in your doctoral studies?

We wanted specifics on how the courses helped and below is a representative sample of what we received in response to this prompt: Please give examples of how the courses have helped.

a) Immediately useful knowledge
Students reported instrumental benefits. The IT courses were identified frequently in this context. The benefits of a command of technology were described in detail. IT courses are provided by ISS but funded by, and form an important part of, the RDP. But these were by no means the only courses viewed in this way.

- I managed to get a manuscript out of the course
- The excel course in particular has allowed me to utilise more advanced features of excel and get more out of the program
- The long documents course was essential for putting my thesis together in a single document ready for printing/binding.
- I have used the Endnote program extensively, feel more confident in my use of Word, and have made progress in my literature review.
- Shown me other available databases for finding papers. ways to use my reading time more efficiently
- Now I am more independent and efficient when doing a literature review, because it became less time-consuming

b) Planning and Thinking
The more strategic skills of planning and thinking were also valued

- Creating a reading strategy
- I found the writing courses very useful for helping me to plan work and to take a project approach to my PhD
- Thinking about how to structure your time, what is important, what isn't, etc.
- I have learnt to prioritise my workload.
- Courses helped me in planning my day, writing my first literature review
• Giving me an idea of what might be useful in the future (i.e. when trying to publish later) so I can start taking steps now
• They gave me an idea of what I would be expected to do in the next few years as a PhD student.
• Offered the opportunity to reflect upon my research and research practice by approaching it from a different, distanced perspective
• Implementing some of the time management strategies in prioritizing my work. Also looking at problems in a different way in order to solve them.

c) Regulations and Requirements
Clarity about the ‘official’ processes of a Research Degree was also achieved for many
• The guidelines from the college for writing up your thesis are very unclear and not well-defined at all. So the course was necessary to get an idea
• Outlined key points that the thesis needed to cover, where to find out about the governing rules and regulations, as well as strategies for writing itself.
• Provide invaluable guidance on scope, limitations, aims, methods, pitfalls, skills etc. required for a PhD which nobody else has told me.
• Clearer idea of what to expect in the viva / what is expected from a PhD thesis.

d) Timely Interventions
Sometimes course were timely preparations for imminent critical moments in the PhD
• I found the viva course very helpful. It gave me a good idea of what the viva would be like, what specific areas I would be examined on, and some sample questions I could practice.
• Preparing for the viva: gaining confidence
• I was able to secure funding from two sources to help with my write-up year, after having attended the course on alternative funding.
• The presentation course was brilliant at preparing me for an upcoming presentation for which I was crippled with nerves.

e) Interpersonal skills
Many students commented on the development of their interpersonal skills. Some of this was the mere fact of training with a diverse group of peers, sometimes the course directly addressed interpersonal relationships
• Supervisor-Student relationship course also helped me to look at my problems in different ways
• Reassurance by spending time with other students
• Opportunities for reflection on behaviours and habits. Useful insights and advice from workshop facilitators

f) Confidence and well-being:
A related benefit was the less tangible growth in confidence, a sense of being reassured.
• Good forum to meet and network and discuss problems that other researchers also face
• Improved my skills that I use in my day to day work
• Inspired me to get on with my work.
• The two courses mentioned above have been really helpful in giving extra direction and guidance.
• Feeling more confident, planning my work, improving my communication skills
• Small groups with plenty of opportunities to ask questions.
• They were good for meeting people and for feeling less isolated. The information was helpful too!
• I am now more prepared to face any problems dealt with in the courses attended.
• I realised I was not alone!

g) Personal and Intellectual Growth:
Some students recorded major shifts in understanding and perception
• NLP( Neuro-Linguistic Programming): changed my life
• NLP was useful because I learned about something I did not know much about before and the lecturer was extremely well prepared and professional.
• A PhD is very different to undergrad study so it is useful to understand how I will need to work differently.
• Mind-mapping has been giving me some new ideas.
• Strategies to handle daunting tasks
• Writing skills: a lot of useful and encouraging ideas
• Furthering Interdisciplinary study; encouraging curiosity-based research and the pursuit of knowledge
• Get exposed to other method of researching rather than stick to what usually done in the department, especially the discussion among the participants from various backgrounds.
• Highlighting deficits in my knowledge, learning skills necessary for the research

5. Shortcomings of the RDP
We wanted to find out the flaws in what was offered. Only 129 students chose to answer this question – 70 fewer than for our question on the positive benefits which can be interpreted as a positive endorsement.

What follows is a representative sample of what was received.

a) Access and availability:
There was clearly an issue about getting on to popular courses, as well as location and timings
• More frequent scheduling of the more popular courses, plus more statistics courses. [Both of these points have been addressed in the 2010/11 programme]
• I did have some trouble with availability, so I would say keep up with the good work of making more courses available, and also would suggest designing more programmes catering to the skills researchers need for PhDs (upgrading, ethics proposals, tools like Endnote, writing up methodology/analysis descriptions, how to be clear and efficient in writing, how to write good abstracts/justify your research (back yourself) etc [Most of these courses have been included in the 2010/11 programme]
• Running sessions of the same course on different days so that someone who cannot attend e.g. a Friday morning might be able to attend a different time and is not prevented from attending the course every time it runs. [This is dependent on tutor and room availability and sometimes beyond our control, although we do try to vary the dates / times for every course]
• If booking onto courses would be possible earlier, rather then on a term by term basis only [We tried this and abandoned it due to problems with high levels of non-attendance with courses booked too far in advance]
• Could not book in the last minute, as some of the courses very popular, and have to wait few more months before the next one available [We try to put on as many additional runs of popular courses as possible. It is difficult to predict popularity in advance and we do try to be as responsive as possible. We are also dependent on tutor availability]
• More sessions available at Guy's and Denmark Hill campuses [More sessions on these campuses provided in 2010/11 but also dependent on room availability]
• Saturday courses (I live some distance away) [We are considering this as an option]
• More evening provision; some training on the world of academic publishing; a creche. [More evening sessions provided in 2010/11]

b) Advertising and Information
Some felt that advertising could be improved
• Like to be able to see what courses are running in advance i.e. the next term. good for planning especially with courses related to the stage of PhD such as preparing for your viva. [Courses are scheduled by June for the coming academic year and the entire year’s programme is available to
view in the brochure from the autumn of each year. We’re also trying to get a system setup where you can view the courses online a year ahead but bookings are only taken on a term-by-term basis]

- a bit more advertising of the offered courses
- I get confused what is available. Otherwise I am very impressed with trainers etc. You feel very supported as a PhD student at King’s, almost nurtured.
- It would be helpful if more detailed description of courses can be made available so a better decision can be made whether to attend or not [We have tried to improve this in the 2010/11 course information]
- I think the provision of courses is good and I can’t think of any additions. But it can be confusing finding courses, and working out who can go to which ones.
- It would be nice to see the programme better publicised and made available to a larger variety of people.

c) Generic versus Discipline-specific training
The balance between departmental and discipline specific training caused problems. The RDP is about general transferrable skills but this was not understood or appreciated by some participants

- More divisional based courses? So you can learn techniques useful specifically for your field (e.g. flow cytometry analysis, qPCR etc.)
- Some of the courses could be more beneficial if they are more specific & tailored towards certain disciplines
- Make courses more specific to students in different schools. I attended a course where most students were from the sciences (I am SSPP) - referencing systems was one thing discussed and this was totally inapplicable to me and could be very confusing to a beginning student. I think it would be far better in training was run ‘in-house’ with preferably each department (or at least each school) running training that is relevant and specific to the needs of their students rather than providing generic and irrelevant material.
- Perhaps to make them more school/theme specific. It is hard to cover everything needed when the people attending have such a diverse range of backgrounds. I think this means that the sessions are less useful than they could be.

d) The level of the courses
The level was not right for some participants

- Even though all courses were fun to attend, most courses were too basic and only moved little or only moderately far beyond teaching the obvious. Many of the training offered covers skills that PhD students already have (or should already have) when they start a PhD.
- The career courses are too vague; there needs to be more tangible, practical information. For example: where to apply for jobs, funding, etc,
- Courses with greater relevance for those in the middle period of their degrees - I have found that many of the courses are targeted towards new students and those near to completion
- I think that there are lots of courses that are really helpful at the start of your PhD, but the more general ones are not so helpful as you progress since you need more specific information. Replacing some of the more generic ones for 2nd and 3rd year PhD students with ones aimed at e.g. literature students only (rather than all of humanities), would be better - you could still run the same amount of days that way, just split the people up differently.
- More concrete subjects. Topics seem to be too ambiguous and generic, which makes them not so useful. For example, in the sessions I’ve attended insights have been drawn from Covey or Transactional Analysis, which can be very helpful, but within a one-day training session this type of material can only be superficially approached. What would help is directly applicable ‘how to courses' for PhD students, such as conducting a literature review thoroughly. When I did this course it was more about approaches and principles rather than an overview of the different KCL databases and search strategies from a library expert, or different types of review - systematic, critical, structured etc... using academic papers.
e) Pedagogy and learning styles
Some students felt that the style of the courses was not suited to their preferred learning styles:

- Some courses would benefit from greater creativity in delivery and content; some have, on occasion, also veered toward an unhelpful level of simplicity
- more practical oriented
- More student led engagement
- In general, a greater focus on practical research methods training rather than general skills development would make the courses much more useful.
- Some of the courses, such as 'writing a thesis' or 'preparing for the viva' are too abstract.
- We are asked to speak about how we feel, what we expect, etc., and I am always frustrated that we are not given tangible and practical information in bullet points about what EXACTLY is expected of us...It felt more like an AA meeting or group therapy session than a practical workshop intended to de-mystify the PhD writing procedure. I've been to several courses now, and still have no idea, for example, as to when I should apply to submit my thesis, what forms are required, how exactly I nominate examiners, etc.

f) Gaps in provision
What did students think we needed more of?

- Additional courses on qualitative data analysis would have been good.
- Courses on Emotional Intelligence
- A course on how to conduct research interviews (eg how to structure them, how to deal with sensitive material etc) for research students who interview policy makers and professionals is lacking, even though there is great demand in SSPP for such training.
- There should be more courses that are of specific use to researchers in their fields. The courses are far too general in nature. Provision for training is important for graduate students but this should be in the form of specific training tailored to individual needs. For example, as a history student, I would have benefited from courses on languages, the use of databases, social network analysis, geographical information systems. All areas that I have very little knowledge of, and for which I have had to pay to do outside the college
- An introduction to graduate teaching would be useful (a briefer and less formal one perhaps than the King's Learning Institute two-day course)

But some students chose this question to declare their overall satisfaction:

- I am just amazed and really appreciate the number of available development courses at our disposal.
- None, I think all the courses have been run really well, notification of course availability has been easily accessible and the content of each course has been tailored well to suit the topics needing to be covered. I think the people running the course have been well briefed about what they need to cover and they have always been helpful in covering additional topics if the group have desired.

6 Characteristics of the Student Sample
We thought that it would be useful to collect some demographics about the student sample. What we received was in some ways puzzling and might merit some comparison with the total student population. The total number of students over 31 years old was nearly the same as those under the age of 30 which could provide some explanation behind the comments that the courses are too basic. In terms of discipline, Social Sciences accounted for a large slice of the population and when combined with Humanities respondents they constituted over half of the survey. This could be a factor in explaining the comments that the courses seemed more focused on science. The numbers of respondents from Biomedical and Health Sciences seemed lower than might have been expected from the anecdotal reports of the RDP tutors.
Key
This table shows the respondents from all 9 Schools in alphabetical order from left:
Arts and Humanities
Biomedical and Health Sciences
Dental Institute
Institute of Psychiatry
Law
Medicine
Nursing and Midwifery
Physical Sciences and Engineering
Social Sciences and Public Policy
Conclusions
The data gathered in this survey suggests a high level of satisfaction and clearly defined positive impacts on the developing skills of our student researchers. The range and size of the programme means that it caters for a diverse student body with diverse needs which inevitably means that we cannot please everyone.

The survey results also suggest some confusion in the minds of students about the original purpose of the programme: the development of generic transferable skills. The responsibility for this confusion must lie in part with the RDU as it is our job to explain the relevance and scope of what we offer. This clearly should have been clarified with both students and supervisors as some comments mentioned the lack of engagement of some supervisors. Although it is also true to say that the development of employability skills is habitually undervalued by students throughout the sector, right up to the point where they need to demonstrate them in order to gain and maintain employment.

Nevertheless the balance between discipline specific training and wider skills training is something that merits attention and indeed is a priority for the RDP’s future development. It is clear from consistent feedback from students that they are not receiving the discipline specific training from their Schools and departments and this needs to be urgently remedied. It is important to note here that the changes in funding will help this situation. The original Roberts funding from the Research Councils was not intended for discipline specific research methods training, as the Research Councils took the view that universities would be providing this for their PGRs already. As the RDP was wholly funded by this money (and not by any other College funding) it was not possible to invest in courses that fell outside of this remit. With the removal of this ringfenced funding and the emphasis on integrating the view that this is now a College priority, we are recruiting a Research Methods Co-ordinator whose job will be to facilitate better access to research skills training in the College.

The final question posed by this data is how we ensure that the right students get to the right courses. If a student attends a course that is at the wrong level for them then that is a waste of everyone’s resources. There are two possible explanations for this: the first is that the student has not correctly assessed their own learning needs and identified appropriate development opportunities; the second is that we don’t offer enough courses at a high enough level. Both are probably correct. In spite of best efforts over the past 2 years, we don’t seem to have communicated well enough to the College that an individual’s requirements for training may not be catered for by the RDP. With over 3,000 people in the “researcher” category at King’s it is simply not possible for the RDP to provide all things for all people given that each person will be at a different stage and have different requirements for training and development. It is perhaps the case that we need to put more effort and resource into the Learning Needs Analysis section and work with researchers on identifying their individual training needs and sourcing those – including from outside of King’s.

Focus Group Results
Background Information
Four focus groups ran; they included students at various stages of the PhDs and across the following Schools: BHS, Medicine, Humanities, SS and PP and the IoP.

Even though the focus group numbers were relatively small, we felt that the groups represented different disciplines and stages of the PhD well. The focus groups were run with students who had attended a number of the RDP courses and the responses have been aggregated and combined under key themes below.

General Comments about the Programme
The general views about the RDP were extremely positive and the following are a selection of quotes:

- Attended a lot and found most extremely useful
- Most of the programmes were very useful
• I particularly found helpful – Starting Your PhD, also Time Management, Creativity and how to structure your own work. These are particularly problematic for Social Science students
• I’m actually surprised how directly related to our PhD these “transferable” courses are
• Creativity and problem solving and NLP and project management were all really good.
• There is a bit of variability.
• I lacked technical know-how about formulating the research question – this was addressed through Creativity and Craft which should be a mandatory course
• I would just like to highlight how good this programme is. [Another named research intensive HEI] has nothing and the PGRs there are very frustrated.
• I’ve really enjoyed the courses I’ve attended and found them to be very useful – particularly in terms of orientating where I am and because of networking
• I’ve enjoyed the range of things
• I attended a lot of sessions and my overall experiences was good
• I think it’s quite good. You offer lots of courses focusing on different abilities and skills development
• I’ve found it very useful in several aspects as the PhD was a new thing and several topics were useful in terms of how to manage the research particularly in terms of the student-supervisor relationship
• Handouts etc were good and the instructors were good

Overall there was a high level of satisfaction with the RDP from the focus groups, although this is partly to be expected given that these students were from the top-attending numbers. The students also commented on the role that they see the RDP as playing.

The role of the RDP

• Sessions were very helpful in mentally calming me down and meeting other people going through the same things
• Not a lot of support is coming from supervisors
• Supervisor support not up to expectations and RDP is needed for basic know-how
• Supervisors by virtue of being quite senior become quite detached from the initial steps
• RDP provides emotional support to help people deal with sense of being alone
• Induction is brilliant to get to know about the place
• Feeling that the courses are about being better employees when we leave here and can go into any field
• Presentation skills was much more useful – not least because you realise that you’re not the only one who is terrified
• The good ones are open to discussion and it’s a great way to meet other students
• I really like courses as a discussion forum – you get just as much from the other people who are attending
• The single sessions were not a panacea but collectively gave me confidence and an arena to share my problems with the instructor and the participants and by doing that you have the sense that you are not really alone in this “tragedy”
• I think I feel the bond with some of the tutors and people I recognise from the training
• It’s useful to meet other students but it would makes sense to have groups based on disciplines especially for things like time management
• I see this programme as complementing the role of my supervisor. My supervisor does a brilliant job but he is interested in the outcome not the process so I am left alone...There are 2 different roles: the graduate training programme helps me with the process and then the supervisor.
• These courses fulfil that sort of need for support

The focus group participants reported a clear perception in their minds of the role of the RDP. The RDP does not replace supervision but plays an important and complementary role for students by providing them with emotional support, an opportunity to meet other students going through similar experiences, the
development of confidence and networking and guidance during the process of the research project. The students also recognised and reported the importance of developing wider employability skills for when they finish their PhD.

Comments on Specific Courses
The focus groups produced some information on courses that the students felt were particularly good or bad. This also covered courses from other providers in the College which the students tended to see as being part of the RDP:

- Creativity and Craft...should be a mandatory course...John Hands had a hands-on approach to get to the research questions. Absolutely brilliant.
- Couple of introductory sessions done by Helen Lawrence were superb.
- Cara Owens on Creativity – session was great
- Rachel Blanc – Starting Your PhD in the Sciences was a very good induction
- Excel course was very good, excellent
- Best course by far was the introductory statistics course run by Derek Cooper... Derek is an excellent facilitator
- Time management and stress management were brilliant courses
- Microsoft Word was brilliant
- EndNote course is also absolutely crucial
- Writing the lit review – I didn’t take anything useful from that except that I should get cracking...there was nothing that I could take away from it and apply to my own experience of writing my lit review
- Practical tips from presentation skills which was more useful than lit review
- Managing the supervisor relationship was really useful and taught us many skills to maintain the relationship really well and many tips
- I went to the upgrade and I knew more about the upgrade from the handbook that my School gave out than from the course...the instructor had to take a general stance and this was not very useful
- I went on the Preparing for the Viva course which is excellent
- PGCAP...that is very transferable skills orientated but not something I need right now but I am doing it as I enjoy being taught – I find it more enjoyable than being alone and doing research
- The literature review session was kind of off the topic – was not really helpful.
- ISS courses – some of these are VERY long – all day long. And this length makes you very tired and it is very difficult to take out one day of your schedule
- I particularly found helpful: Starting Your PhD, also Time Management, Creativity and how to structure your own work.

How students selected their courses
We also asked students about how they came to know about the courses and select the ones that they booked on. Most reported that they thought about what they wanted and needed and sought out courses accordingly:

- I chose the skills I think I really need. There are some skills that I think already have so I don’t choose those ones

Some reported encouragement from their supervisor to use Skills Forge to identify courses:

- Supervisor suggested that I went to Skills Forge and identify courses that I want to attend

And a few mentioned the impact of other PGRs on their choices:

- I was aware in part if the other PhD students came back from courses enthusiastic or not
- I discuss courses with PhD colleagues

There was, however, general widespread disappointment with the questionnaire on Skills Forge in helping them to identify their training needs. Some reported that this was because there was no defined “outcome” and others found that it was not useful because they did not feel that they were particularly good judges of
their own abilities. It is clear from this that the learning needs analysis aspect of the process needs some work on the part of the RDU – probably with both supervisors and students.

**Suggestions for improvement**

We also asked the students to suggest ideas for improvements. A lot of the comments we received centred around research methods training which appears to be a massive gap in the College’s provision of support for PGRs. Suggestions included:

- *Speed reading* [we have put this on the programme in 2010/11]
- *Photoshop and Illustrator*
- *Interview skills*
- *Statistics – logistic progression*
- *Ethnography*
- *Online language training for free* [I believe the Modern Languages Centre is launching something along these lines in September 2010]
- *The bureaucracy of ethics and R&D*
- *Need to have courses on motivation to finish up and move on*
- *Need a course to deal with emotional dips in motivation* [there will be 3 courses on motivation on the 2010/11 programme]

In two focus groups there were discussions on whether there should be core or mandatory courses. In the debates that ensued, the students came quite firmly down on the side of having:

- "a sequential string of courses which build on one another”

which would differ depending on discipline. Whilst this seems like an excellent idea in theory, the resources that this would command would be significant and to some extent would impose an element of taught practice in the PhD. In the 2010/11 programme we have taken this view into account and more clearly highlighted highly recommended courses for students at different stages of their PhD and in different disciplines, which may go part-way to addressing this issue.

There were opposing views on expanding the current provision of online courses as most of the focus group participants highlighted the importance of meeting other students and gaining support in attending courses. We posed the question of podcasting our sessions and this was generally seen as something that would be useful.

The students also requested a greater variety in the timings and locations of courses and this is something that we have responded to in the 2010/11 programme with a large number of shorter, “hints and tips” courses running at lunchtimes and in the early evenings at Guys, Waterloo and Denmark Hill.

**Conclusion**

The focus groups produced a lot of interesting information, particularly with regards to the way in which the RDP is perceived by the students. The participants were overwhelmingly positive about the courses and their experiences and even more so about the role that the RDP plays in their overall PhD experience. This is particularly useful information for us as it gives us an angle for promotional material and a direction for further development. This comment from one participant sums it up:

- *It would be good if you gave more information to the supervisors about how good the courses are. Many PhD students attend but don’t tell their supervisors because they’re spending time away from their PhD*

The following section summarises the data from the feedback forms.
Review of Feedback Forms

Background
This was a difficult part of the evaluation project. Given the numbers of courses run over the past few years and the numbers of participants we have dealt with, we had accumulated a large quantity of data. We felt it was important to take a look at the bigger picture messages that these forms might be conveying. As already mentioned, individual tutors read through the forms after each course to identify any specific problems with that course, but we felt that if we aggregated the data and looked at it from a macro level then it would give us another perspective on the RDP.

Although the branded Researcher Development Programme started in October 2008, a small number of feedback forms related to courses in academic year 2007-8 and these were included in the review.

Main Findings
“Distance Travelled” on the Course
45% of participants come on our courses with a fair amount of existing knowledge and 35% come with not much. At the end of the course, 40% feel that they have improved their skills or knowledge a great deal and just over 40% feel that they have improved their skills / knowledge a fair amount.

This indicates that over 80% of participants on our courses have a worthwhile learning experience and have “travelled” some distance.

![Graph showing the percentage of participants who feel they have improved their knowledge and skills](chart.png)
Administration and Learning Environment
The feedback forms ask about the pre-course administration and organisation and the quality of the training room and equipment.

Over 80% of participants on our courses rate the pre-course administration and organisation as being “good” or “very good” with no ratings of it being “poor”.

Over 80% of participants on our courses rate the training room and equipment (the learning environment) as being “very good” or “good” with no ratings of “poor”.

The Course Itself
The final part of the feedback sheet asks for information on overall course content, quality of handouts, the relevance of the course, quality of the presentation / instruction, ways in which questions were dealt with by the tutor and the overall learning experience on the course.

Overall Course Content:
Over 80% rated the overall course content as being very good or good.

Quality of the Handouts:
Nearly 80% rated the quality of the handouts as being very good or good.

Relevance of the Course to Your Needs:
Over 80% rated the relevance as being very good or good.

Quality of the Presentation of and/or Instruction
Nearly 90% rated this as being very good or good.

Ways in Which the Questions were Dealt with by the Tutor
Nearly 90% rated this as being very good or good.

Your Overall Learning Experience on this Course:
Nearly 90% rated this as being very good or good.
Conclusions

The overall picture from the feedback forms is very positive. The vast majority of participants are having a positive learning experience on our courses and rate the quality of them in all aspects very highly. Around 80% have improved their knowledge and skills on the RDP courses which indicates that this is an appropriate use of their time. In spite of comments in the survey about some courses being too basic for some PGRs, the fact that over 80% of participants rate the relevance of the course to their needs as being very good or good indicates that most courses are hitting the right mark most of the time. The feedback forms indicate that we do provide worthwhile experiences for most participants most of the time.

The following section discusses the key findings and outlines action points.
Discussion, Action Points and Conclusions

The purpose of the evaluation of the RDP was to assess how well we are doing in providing worthwhile training courses and development activities for the PGRs at King’s. The results indicate that overwhelmingly the courses are providing positive experiences and play a key role in the PGR student experience at King’s. The students were clear that the RDP occupies a role that is complementary to that of the supervisor and that in addition to transferable skills development, the networking and emotional support that they obtain from the training courses are very important. The analysis of the feedback forms indicates a high quality learning experience and that both the administration and the tutors are working well.

There were a number of issues raised for improvement and these are listed below with some discussion and actions points:

- Some courses too basic for PGRs
- Lack of direction in identifying learning needs

It is possible that the first two items are linked. The RDP has never intended to be everything to everyone and it is important that individual identify their own learning needs and seek out activities that are at the right level for them. There are two actions that emerge from this:

**Action Point 1:** Provide courses of differing levels e.g. introductory, intermediate and advanced

**Action Point 2:** Provide more guidance for both students and supervisors on identifying learning needs and courses that are appropriate for the student’s individual stage of development

**Additional Note:** The RDP also provides an annual opportunity for Schools / departments and individual researchers to bid for funds for development activities that the College does not currently provide. This may be more suited to students in more advanced stages of professional and career development.

- Lack of research methods courses available
- Lack of discipline-specific courses available
- No mandatory / core courses

**Action Point 3:** Investigate the feasibility of “block delivery” of courses at key stages of the PhD – starting, halfway through and finishing up and for these to be mandatory or highly recommended. It is likely that this will have significant resource implications, particularly in terms of staffing.

- More variety in timings and locations of delivery needed
- Better publicity of courses needed – particularly with supervisors

**Action Point 4:** Improve publicity of the courses, particularly emphasising the important role in support and enhancing of the PGR student experience.

**Action Point 5:** Target supervisors with publicity, using evidence from this report to encourage them to support PGRs in attending RDP courses.

**Conclusion**

This evaluation of the Researcher Development Programme has been very useful in confirming that fundamentally we do a good job of providing worthwhile learning and support experiences for PGRs at King’s. The overwhelming views are positive and the majority of students are grateful for the opportunities provided. There are clearly some areas for improvement and we look forward to actioning these in the coming year. We are planning on re-evaluating the RDP on a regular basis so the next evaluation report will enable us to benchmark progression.

The overall recommendation that this report makes is to continue to provide and enhance provision under the RDP banner for PGR students at King’s. The RDP plays an important and complementary role to that of
the supervisor in the PhD process and provides access to a community and helps to reduce feelings of isolation that are often prevalent in the PhD. This is part of the PGR student experience at King’s and we can improve further. We are however, at a dangerous time when the Roberts ring-fenced funding is coming to an end and we need top level College commitment to replacing this by other means. The Research Councils suggest the additional levy of £200 per PGR per year and this would certainly enable us to continue as we are at the moment. It may not, however provide enough resource for expansion of the programme, particularly into specialised research methods training and the College needs to consider what role it wants the RDP to play in the future – particularly if postgraduate numbers increase significantly, bearing in mind the requirements for this training placed by the Research Councils and the QAA.