Spring is well and truly here, which means that it is time for another Graduate School Bulletin. Our postgraduate research community continues to thrive and to impress us with their research achievements, their commitment to professional and personal development, and their contribution to the wider University.

In Reading, we benefit from attracting research students from a broad range of backgrounds, countries and disciplinary areas. For example, we have over 50 doctoral students who are lecturers or seniors lecturers in their home (overseas) institutions. In March, the Graduate School held an event for these overseas academics, and you can read more about this on our inside pages.

We are currently busily preparing for our second Doctoral Research Conference. Given the success of last year’s event, we are really looking forward to this. We will again be featuring the popular Three Minute Thesis Competition, for which we will have a ‘People’s Choice’ vote as well as a ‘judges’ vote. We will also be showcasing the four finalists of the PhD Researcher of the Year Award, as well as the shortlisted candidates for our poster and image competitions. It promises to be an exciting afternoon.

We have also recently held our inaugural Fairbrother Lecture, which was delivered by Isabelle Pérès (pictured above with the Vice-Chancellor), a research student from the Departments of Pharmacy and Psychology. She talked on the intriguing topic of whether cannabis can be used to treat epilepsy.

This issue of the Bulletin also brings you news about what some of our other research students have been up to, or where they are going next, as well as information about some of the services and resources that the Graduate School provides.

I hope you enjoy reading it.

Dianne Berry, Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies
Travel Bursary Scheme – visit to Blankenberge, Belgium

Mai Uchida, a second year doctoral researcher in the School of Biological Sciences, received £400 from the Graduate School Travel Bursary Scheme to attend the eighteenth European Study Group on Molecular Biology of Picornviruses (EUROPIC) meeting in Blankenberge, Belgium, 9–14 March 2014.

At the study group, Mai presented a research poster entitled ‘Recombinant empty poliovirus particles assembled in insect cells’. This poster session enabled her to discuss results with fellow researchers in the picornavirus field and hone her communication skills. As well as enhancing her picornavirus knowledge, attendance at the conference also provided her with the opportunity to meet with fellow research collaborators to discuss new directions for her research. The networking aspect of the conference was also hugely beneficial and discussions with fellow doctoral researchers and new Post-docs have enabled Mai to consider the variety of opportunities available to her in her future career. Further information about the Travel Bursary Scheme can be found on the Graduate School website www.reading.ac.uk/gs-travelbursary.aspx.

Student-Led Event – The Maladies, Miracles and Medicine of the Middle Ages

Ruth Salter, a third year doctoral researcher in the Department of History received £400 from the Student-led Events Scheme to organise a postgraduate conference on ‘The Maladies, Miracles and Medicine of the Middle Ages’. This workshop considered the issues of health and healing (both secular and spiritual) in the Middle Ages. This area of research is growing in popularity with interests ranging from the practical side of health and healing, to concepts on affections such as madness and demonic possession.

Here’s her post-award report:

‘The initial idea for this workshop was to bring together postgraduate and early career researchers working on health and healing during the medieval period to allow networking, an exchange of ideas and the chance to learn about the wide variety of research topics currently being undertaken within this subject area. Running across two days in mid-March, with twenty-three speakers (including international delegates) and over thirty-five academics in attendance it was a very successful event. Papers ranged from the very early centuries to the late middle ages and covered a range of topics; from miracle cures to medical treatise, and from anatomical understanding to literary depictions of health. The conference attracted a wide range of researchers and has laid the foundations for a strong research network to be established. Selected papers from the conference will be published as an online journal in spring 2015.’

Further information about the scheme can be found on the Graduate School website www.reading.ac.uk/gs-studentled events.aspx

Graduate School and Henley Business School Leadership Programme 2014

This year’s Graduate School Leadership Programme attracted a wide range of doctoral researchers from a number of different Schools and Departments from across the University. However, all the participants shared an interest in developing their understanding of leadership styles and improving their leadership skills in relation to their own professional ambitions.

The Leadership Programme was again delivered by Dr Claire Collins and Dr Bernd Vogel of the Henley Business School. Claire and Bernd designed the programme specifically for reading doctoral researchers and their expertise and engaging style is well-received: ‘Bernd and Claire are fantastic presenters’ commented one participant, ‘they have a real enthusiasm for teaching these skills.’

This three-day programme is split between the Greenlands and Whiteknights campuses and is free to attend. Applications are invited from all 2nd, 3rd year full-time and 3rd, 4th, 5th year part-time students. Details of the 2015 programme will become available in the new academic year.

Online training courses

The Graduate School has recently installed new and updated online training courses that are available free of charge to all doctoral researchers at Reading. There are 17 titles in total and these include subjects such as research methods; research ethics; working with your supervisor; managing your research project; career planning and entrepreneurship. These revised courses now feature a variety of pedagogical tools such as interactive activities, case studies and video interviews. All the courses are available via the Graduate School’s Blackboard pages.

The courses have been designed specifically for doctoral researchers and early-career researchers by Epigeum, a company which specializes in developing online training for universities and colleges.

In the summer, we will be extending our online provision further, adding a brand new Epigeum course on statistical methods for research. Further details will be posted on the Graduate School webpage.
News

Fairbrother Lecture

The Graduate School inaugural Fairbrother Lecture took place on 15 May 2014 and was delivered by doctoral researcher Isabelle Pérès (School of Pharmacy / School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences).

The title of Isabelle’s lecture was ‘Can cannabis be used to treat epilepsy?’ and discussed the research that Isabelle has been involved in at Reading to develop an epilepsy treatment from non-psychoactive components of cannabis. This exciting work has resulted in clinical trials and the treatment of children with severe and drug-resistant epilepsy. Isabelle’s PhD is part of a larger research project which is funded by GW Pharmaceuticals.

After a fascinating 45 minute talk, the Vice-Chancellor, Sir David Bell KCB, then chaired a lively question and answer session. This was followed by a post-lecture reception which offered people the opportunity to talk to Isabelle in more detail about her work.

‘Doing the lecture was a fantastic opportunity’ commented Isabelle, ‘the response I’ve had from it has been quite overwhelming and unexpected. I think it’s a great way to finish my PhD’.

Isabelle is in the final year of her PhD and is supervised by Dr Ben Whalley (Pharmacy) and Dr Claire Williams (Psychology). After completing her studies she hopes to pursue a career working with clinical trials, either with patients or involved in study design.

The Graduate School established the Fairbrother Lecture in order to showcase the important contribution made by postgraduate research at Reading and bring it to the attention of a wider audience. The lecture is named after Jack Fairbrother, who was the University’s first PhD graduate in 1939. Information regarding the 2015 Fairbrother Lecture will be available in the next academic year.

Doctoral Overseas Academics at Reading

Around 40% of Reading doctoral researchers are from overseas, and many of these hold important jobs in their own countries. Over 50 are lecturers or senior lecturers in their home universities, which gives them an interesting perspective on PhD study.

On 24 March, the Graduate School hosted an event specifically aimed at PhD students who are academics in overseas institutions. The event kicked off with a presentation by Professor Matthew Almond on innovations in teaching and learning, which was followed by an open discussion of how the University might better support these overseas academics and how they might help the University with our recruitment efforts. Tea and photographs with the Vice-Chancellor rounded off the event.

We the humanities

Krissie West and Jessica Sage are two doctoral researchers in the Department of English Literature who are using social media to develop a network that goes beyond the confines of seminars and conferences and that brings wider attention to research taking place within the humanities.

@WetheHumanities is a rotation curation twitter account (every week a different person tweets from the account) that aims to highlight the wide variety of activity taking place within the humanities and to make connections between those working within the humanities and a non-academic audience. The idea for the account came from Jessica (@jessisreading80), who was looking for a humanities equivalent to @realscientists (a rotation twitter account for scientists). As none seemed to exist, Jessica and Krissie (@krisreadsbooks) thought the best thing to do was to set one up themselves!

Although both Jessica and Krissie are based in the English Department, they were determined that @WetheHumanities would be wide ranging in the disciplines and approaches it embraced. So far account curators have included a Medievalist based in Norway, an Egyptologist working in museums in Birmingham and a Cultural Studies Lecturer in New Zealand.

When this Bulletin went to press, @WetheHumanities had posted over five thousand tweets and has over twelve hundred followers. Follow on Twitter: @WetheHumanities and read the We the Humanities blog: wethehumanities.wordpress.com
Features

Spotlight on the Doctoral Research Office

The Doctoral Research Office (DRO) is responsible for most matters relating to Postgraduate Research Student (PGR) administration and support within the University. It was set up in October 2011 and can be found on the ground floor of the Graduate School in Old Whiteknights House. It provides a single point of advice for current research students and for supervisors and other PGR-related staff.

What sort of advice and support does it provide?

Many research students need proof of their registration status, either for Council Tax or some other purpose. Others may need advice if they are leaving the country to go to a conference or on a fieldwork trip. Others may have fee queries or need letters to their sponsors confirming fee levels, or need information relating to their scholarships. Some want to change their registration status from full-time to part-time or move to working away. Whatever the need, the DRO should be the first point of contact.

What about more general pastoral support?

Given that research students tend to be older than undergraduates and taught postgraduates, with many having families, and/or coming from overseas, they are more likely to experience health, personal or financial difficulties during the course of their studies. The staff in the office are very experienced at helping research students with a wide range of problems. They offer a friendly, confidential service. So, whether a student needs to suspend their studies, or seek an extension, or is concerned about their supervisory arrangements or some other issue that is affecting their studies then, again, the DRO is the place to come.

What about immigration information?

The DRO staff work closely with the Immigration Advice Service in the Carrington Building to ensure that research students receive the appropriate information and to ensure compliance with current legislation. They are responsible for producing CAS for Tier 4 PGR visa extensions, and work with School staff in relation to monitoring and reporting.

How else does the office support Schools and Departments?

The DRO is responsible for the management and maintenance of PGR student records in RISIS and for the monitoring of research student progress. It also provides administrative support to various University, Research Council, and other PGR studentship competitions, and it is responsible for reporting externally on Research Council studentships.

How should I contact the DRO?

Enquiries can be made by email, telephone or in person. The office offers a walk-in service from 9am to 3.30pm every weekday. Contact us on 0118 378 4741 or email dro@reading.ac.uk

Meet the team

The team is headed by Jon Lloyd, with Sylvia Jerome, Jackie Hughes and Elaine Harris running the main DRO office.

News

Success for Reading in AHRC partnerships

Working in partnership with two consortia of UK Universities, Reading has won substantial arts and humanities funding for postgraduate research. These partnerships, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), will deliver research training to the next generation of arts and humanities researchers; they also provide a good indication of the important role that alliances with other Universities and with external organisations play in securing funding for postgraduate research.

The South, West and Wales Consortium, involving Reading and seven other universities – Aberystwyth, Bath, Bath Spa, Bristol, Exeter, Cardiff and Southamptom, has been awarded £4.2 million funding over the next five years (2014–2019) to deliver postgraduate supervision and training. Working across a broad range of disciplines, there will also be significant collaboration with a range of external partner organisations including the National Trust, English Heritage and the BBC. It is expected that, as well as funding a number of new PhD students (around 200 in total), there will also be significant collaboration.

Features

A PhD...but what comes next?

Norma Rossi and Malte Riemann are final year PhD students in the Department of Politics and International Relations. They are currently in the process of completing their theses while both undertaking Senior Lectureship positions in the Department of Defence and International Affairs at the Royal Military Academy. Although there are only temporary contracts, they are an incredible and exciting opportunity for them both at the start of their academic careers.

Can you tell us what you are doing now?

Norma: At the moment I am concentrating all my energies into the transition from being a PhD student to my first academic job. For this reason, I am focused on finishing my thesis and publishing parts of it.

Malte: For me it is very similar. Doing well in my new job as well as finishing my PhD are two challenging and rewarding tasks.

What were your biggest challenges during your PhD research?

Norma: A PhD presents you with different challenges at different stages. I think that the most challenging thing for me has been focusing my research, finding the angle from which I wanted to tackle my problem and staying focused on this. Doing research is so exciting, and so many interesting possibilities often emerge in the process, that the risk is to lose track of one’s own central issue.

Malte: I totally agree with Norma on that. A PhD is a journey and you do not know in which direction it will actually take you in the end. I would also add that it is extremely challenging to face the ‘fraud syndrome’. You often feel that the more you read and study the less you think you know, and the more you start feeling like a fraud who should not have been admitted to the PhD programme in the first place! I think the only advice I have regarding this, is that everyone will face this moment and one has just to see it through and stick in there.

What did you enjoy about studying at Reading?

Malte: First of all the people. I made a lot of really good friends here and the atmosphere among the PhD students was a great remedy to this.

Norma: I was lucky enough to find an amazing group of friends and colleagues. The life of a PhD student can be lonely but the social and friendly atmosphere among the PhD students in my Department and the Graduate School was a great remedy to this.

Knowing what you know now what advice would you give a new 1st year student?

Norma: Take time to read as widely as possible in order to have a clear idea not only of the specific research topic but also of the different possible ways to look at the topic.

Malte: Yes, being aware of the different vantage points from which to view the research one undertakes is definitely something I would have benefitted from during my first year. Added to this I would say that one should try to get into a writing routine right from the start. Even if it’s just rough drafts, getting into writing is in my opinion the most important thing.

How were you when starting your PhD?

Norma: I think the only advice I have regarding this, is that everyone will face this moment and one has just to see it through and stick in there.

Malte: I totally agree with Norma on that. A PhD is a journey and you do not know in which direction it will actually take you in the end. I would also add that it is extremely challenging to face the ‘fraud syndrome’. You often feel that the more you read and study the less you think you know, and the more you start feeling like a fraud who should not have been admitted to the PhD programme in the first place! I think the only advice I have regarding this, is that everyone will face this moment and one has just to see it through and stick in there.

What did you enjoy about studying at Reading?

Malte: First of all the people. I made a lot of really good friends here and the Graduate School was greatly responsible for my meeting them. Furthermore, I really enjoyed the thriving research environment with lots of conferences and talks to go to. Lastly, I think the Whiteknights campus is great, with all its wide green spaces in which one can take a break from all the hard work.
Coming up

**Doctoral Research Conference – 1 July**

Following on the success of last year’s PhD Research Conference, the Graduate School is pleased to announce that this year’s conference will take place on the afternoon of Tuesday 1 July. All competitions are now closed.

Four Faculty winners have been shortlisted from a list of School nominees for the 2014 PhD Researcher of the Year Award. Samuel Groth (Science), Rosalind Fallaize (Life Sciences), Birte Julia Gippert (Arts, Humanities and Social Science) and Dimitra Kavarnou (Henley Business School) will each deliver a presentation on their research and experience at Reading during their studies. The winner of this prestigious award will receive £250.

After the highly successful Three Minute Thesis Competition last year, we have increased the number of competition finalists allocated in this fun feature within the conference programme. 16 presentations will be delivered on the day, and we look forward to seeing if the presenters can describe their thesis in an engaging way in just three minutes!

31 posters were submitted to the Research Poster Competition and all have been selected to be displayed at the conference. The wide range of poster topics submitted truly captures the breadth of research being undertaken by our doctoral research community.

The Research Image Competition has been introduced into the conference programme to demonstrate that images can offer a visual perspective on doctoral research and can help explain complex research theories and issues. Eight images have been selected to be displayed on the day.

Charlotte Hill, a doctoral researcher from the School of Pharmacy will deliver her Science SLAM presentation entitled ‘How cannabis can treat the epileptic brain’. Charlotte won Reading’s first ever Science SLAM event on 22 March. A SLAM combines science communication skills with entertainment, and unlike the Three Minute Thesis Competition participants are not allowed to use Powerpoint slides but can use props, costumes and audience participation to present their research in six minutes.

New for this year, conference delegates will be asked to choose their favourite Three Minute Thesis talk and Research Image. The People’s Choice Award for each competition will be announced after the conference and the winners will be awarded £50.