It seems no time at all since I was introducing the first edition of this Bulletin and now here I am welcoming you to the second. It has been a busy time for the Graduate School over the past six months.

Attendance at our RRDP training sessions has continued to rise and we have extended the programme to include several new courses. In collaboration with Henley Business School, we are running our first Leadership Programme specifically for doctoral research students. Our termly Breakfast Clubs remain popular and offer a great opportunity for students to meet with those from other Schools and Departments and to fill up on various healthy and unhealthy treats to start the day. This term, we have experimented with holding a ‘Breakfast Club @ 1’ for those who are not able to make early morning sessions. We have held the first round of our Travel Bursary and Student-led Events schemes and are currently receiving applications for the second round.

We are particularly looking forward to holding our first annual PhD Research Conference on Friday 14 June. It promises to be an exciting afternoon, featuring presentations from those short-listed for our new PhD Researcher of the Year award and Three-Minute Thesis competition, as well as a poster display and competition, followed by a wine reception. Over 200 PhD students have registered for the event so far, but there is still space for more. You can sign up via the RRDP booking pages on RISIS.

Further details about the conference and associated competitions can be found in the pages that follow, together with a range of other articles and useful information for research students and those who support them.

Wishing you a productive and successful summer term.

Dianne Berry, Director of Postgraduate Research Studies & Researcher Development
A postcard from...
Ros Kennerley in the Dominican Republic

For most people the mention of the Dominican Republic conjures up images of holiday resorts, sunshine and beautiful white Caribbean beaches. However, for me it’s the rural south-west corner of the country (seldom visited by tourists), right next to the border with Haiti, which was the location for my PhD fieldwork for over a year and a half. Pressure on the forest from charcoal production and slash and burn agriculture in this region is huge, so it provides an ideal site for me to investigate the ecology of two unusual and endangered mammals: the Hispaniolan solenodon and hutia, in both native forest and agricultural ecosystems. I have been collecting spatial and ecological data using a range of techniques including radio telemetry, GPS tracking and camera-trapping in order to determine home ranges and study patterns of habitat use. The information gathered, particularly within agricultural landscapes, will help to target future conservation effort and focus resources to where they will provide the highest level of benefit. Species Action Planning workshops were held in October of last year and I presented my research to a wide audience including various non-governmental organisations, conservationists and members of the Dominican Ministry for Environment and Natural Resources. This is proving to be extremely applied research which is giving me opportunities to learn skills above and beyond the remit of most doctoral studies. Learning Spanish and being able to communicate science to local people has been a real high point of time spent away. I have had at least one Dominican fieldworker with me throughout my field work and training them in various research methods has been enormously rewarding. I have also been able to take part in activities as part of a wider Darwin-Initiative funded project within the Dominican Republic for the two species. These include participating in island-wide surveys, educational talks in rural schools and media work.

Ros Kennerley is in the third year of her PhD within the Centre for Agri-Environmental Research. The study is funded by a BBSRC-DTG and by the Zoological Society of London and the Durrell Wildlife and Conservation Trust.

Travel Bursary Scheme – visit to Barcelona

Damian Gonzalez Salzberg, a second year PhD student in the School of Law received £100 from the Graduate School Travel Bursary Scheme to attend the third European conference on Politics and Gender in March 2013 held in Barcelona, Spain. He presented a paper entitled ‘A queer analysis of the regulation of sex and gender by the European Court of Human Rights’. On his return from the conference, Damian stated, ‘I am extremely pleased with the outcome of the conference and, in particular, with my presentation. The paper presented is part of my doctoral research, and is based on the second chapter of my thesis. The very positive feedback received from the other delegates at the conference helped to confirm (and also to re-think) some of the ideas developed throughout my thesis chapter. In summary, I believe that the presentation of my research within an expert international auditorium will have a very positive influence in the continuing development of my research.’

Information about the Travel Bursary Scheme can be found at www.reading.ac.uk/gs-travelbursary.aspx
Student-Led Event – Medieval Marriage Conference

Charlotte Pickard, a third year PhD student in the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies was awarded £400 from the Student-led Events Scheme to organize a mini-conference on medieval marriage. Here’s her post award report:

‘The conference on 16 March 2013 proved to be a thoroughly enjoyable and informative day. Our keynote speaker, Neil Cartlidge opened the conference with an excellent, thought-provoking paper focusing on courtly love vs marriage. There were ten papers given, ranging from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries and exploring historical, literary and art historical material from medieval Ireland, Wales, France and England, provoking lively and stimulating discussions.

Fourteen out of the twenty-three attendees were based at the University of Reading, giving Reading postgraduate students the opportunity to present papers and chair sessions, as well as contributing to discussion. For those who gave a paper they gained valuable experience, while receiving feedback from other academics, many of whom are working in different disciplines with alternative approaches. The conference also provided an excellent opportunity for networking.

Overall, the event proved to be a great success and we hope to produce a peer-reviewed publication based on the outcome of the conference.’

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

Congratulations Chris!

Well done to Chris Robson, Head of Postgraduate Research Support and Development for completing the Paris Marathon on Sunday 7 April in 4 hours 19 minutes. He raised over £1,400 for the British Heart Foundation.

Green Impact Gold Award

The Graduate School was delighted to receive the Gold Award for its contribution in helping the University to meet its 35% carbon reduction target this year.

We will continue to look at ways of saving energy within the Graduate School and would love to receive suggestions on how to do this, however quirky they may be!

(left to right) Vice-Chancellor Sir David Bell, Helen Apter & Chris Robson

(left to right) Carys Gadsden, Neil Cartlidge & Charlotte Pickard
Summer time on campus

We are very fortunate in having a 130 hectare campus at Whiteknights which consists of open meadows, woodland and lake. The campus was recognised as one of the most beautiful green spaces in England in the 2012 Green Flag Awards. Here is our selection of the best outdoor spaces on campus to visit.

Whiteknights Tree Walk
Students are encouraged to enjoy the campus by taking part in a Whiteknights tree walk, which includes 25 unusual, old and beautiful trees. The Tree Walk Guide is available at www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/fmd/Grounds_Tree_Walk_Brochure.pdf

Harris Garden
The Harris Garden is a five hectare botanic garden created by the Marquis of Blandford on the main Whiteknights campus. The garden is open between 9.00am and dusk. Further information can be found at www.friendsoftheharrisgarden.org.uk

Whiteknights Lake
Whiteknights Lake sits at the heart of the Whiteknights campus and is surrounded by a woodland border. You can walk around the lake and feed the resident ducks or watch bats feeding over the water at dusk.

Graduate School social events

On 6 December the Graduate School hosted its annual Seasonal Celebration. This included the now legendary Graduate School team quiz, plenty of mulled wine, and a glorious array of savoury and sweet snacks.

The Breakfast Club provided croissants, pastries and fruit for students on their way to their departments on a cold 7 February morning. Everyone agreed it was an excellent way to start the day.

We look forward to seeing you at the PhD Research Conference on 14 June. Details are posted at www.reading.ac.uk/gs-phdconference.aspx
Listening to our part-time students

Did you know that 25% of our PhD students are studying on a part-time basis?

We are aware that part-time study can bring its own challenges, and so we decided to survey our part-time students to ask them to identify key issues associated with their part-time status, and then followed this up with focus group discussions. What we heard was very revealing.

The key messages that came out of the survey and group discussions were:

• Many expressed a lack of sense of belonging or community.
• The Graduate School welcome events do not make explicit reference to part-time students.
• Our requirements and guidance are often ‘fuzzy’, with the phrase ‘or part-time equivalent’ being used all too frequently.
• Many part-time students at the early stages of their research would value the opportunity to have advice from more experienced students who have found ways of meeting part-time challenges.
• Some found it difficult to attend currently scheduled RRDP sessions and would welcome more twilight sessions and more online material.
• Some have found it difficult to access desk space, either in their home Schools or the Graduate School.
• Several raised issues relating to the Library.
• Several felt it would be useful to have a named student representative for part-time students and / or a named member of the Graduate School staff who could be contacted specifically about issues relating to part-time students.

What we have done in response

• We have amended the Graduate School welcome presentations to include more specific reference to part-time students and their needs.
• We are developing a new section on our website specifically aimed at part-time students.
• We are moving the start-time of some of the morning RRDP sessions so that they start at 11am rather than at 10am, and we are also offering some twilight sessions.
• We are moving the timing of one of our regular early morning Breakfast Club sessions to a lunchtime slot, and holding a separate afternoon tea just for part-time students.
• We are setting up an email network list for part-time students.
• We have identified a member of Graduate School staff (Pam Stuart) as the named contact for part-time student matters, and we are encouraging our students to come forward with a suggested student representative.
• We have amended the training presentations that we run for new supervisors to make them aware of the issues that part-time students typically face.
• We have written to the University Librarian outlining the main issues raised, and have received a helpful response which we have disseminated.

The full report can be found on the Graduate School Blackboard site.
Features

Spotlight on surviving the viva

The viva is often described as the defining moment in the doctoral experience. It is the final assessment of the thesis, the research and the student. However, for even the calmest student, the viva can seem like a daunting prospect. Here are a few tips to help you to understand the process better and to survive, and even enjoy, the experience.

Who will examine me?
You will normally be examined by one member of staff who is external to the University and one who is a member of staff, usually from within your own School or Department.

What are their main responsibilities?
Their main responsibilities are to:
• Judge whether the work is of an appropriate amount and standard;
• Check that it is presented and discussed appropriately in the thesis;
• Reassure themselves that the thesis is the student’s own work.

What happens once my thesis is submitted?
Your thesis is sent to the examiners who will arrange a date for the viva, which normally takes place within three to four months of submission. Once the examiners have read the thesis, they exchange pre-viva reports that set out their initial views on the work and what, in particular, needs to be addressed in the viva.

So what happens during the viva itself?
Most vivas last between two and three hours. The examiners will not ask you questions about every detailed aspect of your work. The usual approach is to ask a few initial general questions and then work through the thesis, chapter by chapter, picking up on specific points of interest or concern. Some students are asked to give a short presentation of their research at the start of the viva, but if this is to happen you will be informed in advance so that you can prepare.

At the end of it, you are likely to be asked to wait in a nearby room whilst your examiners have a brief discussion about the recommended outcome. You will then be called back into the room to hear the result.

How can I best prepare in advance?
You can never predict exactly what you will be asked during your viva. However, it is useful to do some advanced preparation. A good way to prepare is to have a mock viva, where you are questioned by two willing members of staff from your School. If a mock viva is not possible or appropriate, you can arrange a supervisory session where you discuss potential areas of questioning and how you should respond to particular questions. During the week or two leading up to your viva you should read through your thesis two or three times. Whilst reading through the chapters, think about your particular lines of argument and how you would justify these, as well as the use of particular techniques or methods, and where the research could be taken next.

What are the possible outcomes of the viva?
In Reading, the outcome takes one of four forms:
• The degree be awarded
• The degree be awarded subject to minor amendments (to be completed within three months)
• The student is required to make major amendments (to be completed within 12 months)
• The student not be awarded the degree for which the thesis was submitted. In the case of PhD degrees, the examiners may recommend the award of an MPhil.
The most common outcome is for the degree to be awarded subject to minor amendments.

The Graduate School Guide to Surviving the Viva can be found at www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/graduateschool/GSG_SurvivingTheViva.pdf
A PhD…but what comes next?

Until September 2012, Daniel Steed was a PhD student in the Department of Politics and International Relations. Daniel did a Master’s in Strategic Studies at Reading and then held a studentship as part of the Leverhulme-funded Liberal Way of War Programme. His thesis examined strategy, intelligence and British performance during the 1956 Suez crisis.

Can you tell us a little about what you’ve been doing since you submitted your thesis last September?

It’s been very hectic! I’m now a Lecturer in Strategy and Defence at Exeter’s new Strategy and Security Institute. I submitted, quite literally, my thesis on the Friday and started the lectureship on the Monday. My role at Exeter is to help establish this brand new institute, and conceive, design and develop the institute’s teaching programme for its launch in October 2013.

Was there anything you did at Reading that you feel has helped you in your new position?

I worked as an ASK adviser* which is a service run by Study Advice. It offers undergraduate students a bridge between their Department and Study Advice by using a PhD student from the Department who undergraduates could go to with any concerns related to academic practice such as essay writing and note taking.

I always thought this was a superb initiative and it really helped the students. I think the experience of being an ASK adviser has really helped me in dealing with students at Exeter and I have a much better insight into the problems and concerns undergraduates might have.

What unexpected challenges did you encounter whilst undertaking your PhD and how did you overcome them?

The PhD does become a solitary affair, particularly in the second year, when you’re off doing research and truly on your own. Maintaining discipline, organisation and above all momentum in your work is the biggest challenge, because in some ways you haven’t fully cracked your PhD at that stage and you just have to keep faith.

I had a desk in the Graduate School in my third year and I think that was a crucial component in me finishing in three years. It gave me a base and my writing speed increased hugely in my third year.

It also helps having other PhD students around, to have some peer support. When you see another student submitting, you know what it’s going to be like, and they can give you good advice. The Graduate School is a very good working environment.

What did you enjoy most about doing your PhD?

I think it ended up being the writing. I got into a monthly working routine and that became very enjoyable – you know you’re winning.

What advice could you give a final year PhD student?

Make sure you have a really good working place, like a desk in the Graduate School. Know yourself and know your own working routines and patterns. Develop momentum and don’t let it go.

*The Academic Skills Know-how (ASK) Advice service is designed to provide students with expert peer advice on quick study queries. Ideally, ASK advisers should have studied as an undergraduate or master’s student at Reading.

There are currently four departments with ASK Advisers: Classics; Food and Nutritional Sciences; Philosophy; Politics and International Relations and one ASK adviser per department. PhD students who would like to find out more should contact their Head of Department or the Director of Teaching and Learning.
Coming up

PhD Research Conference – 14 June

On 14 June we will be holding our first PhD Research Conference to bring together students from across the University.

Twenty-eight research posters have been selected to be displayed at the research poster competition. The winning poster will be announced on the day and will receive an award of £100 presented by Professor Christine Williams, Pro-Vice-Chancellor.

Due to the number of entries we received for the Three Minute Thesis competition, the Graduate School held four qualification heats in April to shortlist the conference finalists. The judging panel was extremely impressed with the breadth and quality of the research being undertaken by doctoral researchers from across the University and found it extremely difficult to shortlist 12 presentations for delivery at the conference. The winner will receive an award of £100 presented by Professor Dianne Berry.

Each School within the University was asked to nominate one candidate for the award of PhD Researcher of the Year. School nominations were judged at Faculty level in order to select a winner for each Faculty. Katherine Livingstone (Life Sciences), Chimene Daleu (Science), Jasmine Tehrani (Henley Business School) and Richard Rowland (Arts, Humanities and Social Science) were selected to represent their respective Faculties. Each will give a short presentation on their research and experience at Reading at the conference. The overall winner of the PhD Researcher of the Year will receive a certificate and an award of £250 presented by the Vice-Chancellor, Sir David Bell.

Congratulations to the other School nominees: Maria Teresa Buenavista, Aaron Acton, Anna Alkozei, Rahul Kala, Chris Yates, Mark Downey, Martin O’Brien, Zdislava Siskova, Ugo Guarnacci, Jessica Sage, Yingying Wu.

PhD Researcher of the Year

Congratulations to the Faculty winners:

Katherine Livingstone
Chimene Daleu
Jasmine Tehrani
Richard Rowland

Some of the exciting entries for this year’s research poster competition

Graduate School Bulletin

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