E3/E4 DTP Management Team response to the Student Advisory Board Report

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With reference to the Student Advisory Board report submitted 22 January 2020 (attached)

Summary

1	**You said:** "*Overall the feedback received from DTP students is again very positive. Students particularly appreciate the writing retreats, socials, the interactive Frontiers in GeoSciences sessions, the Overseas Research Visit Fund that is now available for international conferences and the efforts to build a cohort in the first year. All students have extremely positive feedback about the hard work that Stephanie puts into her role. She is approachable, quick to respond and works very hard for the DTP, and it does not go unnoticed.*" [p.1]
	We are glad of this overall positive feedback. Stephanie would like to thank all the DTP students for being so nice and easy to support!

2	**You said:** "*Broadly, our suggestions for improvements are: 1) widening the breadth of training opportunities (both for careers in and outside academia),*" [p.1]
	a) With the start of E4, we have introduced a Training Management Board with student and partner representation to review training provision and opportunities. We aim to run any training session proposed by 10 or more students, but we have not yet had any proposals; we will continue to emphasise and advertise that process (see item 6 below).
	b) The DTP "Introduction to Career Pathways" training has been successfully hold online in April 2020 and will be repeated each year. Although designed within E4 and primarily aimed at first year students, this training is open to all DTP and PhD students in all years (first come first served, within space limit). It provides an insight of careers both in and outside academia. Its recording is available via the E4 website.

3	**You said:** "[…] *2) more cross-year socials to exchange ideas […]*" [p.1]
	See item 18 below

4	**You said:** *"3) making improvements to the current E3/E4 DTP websites."* [p.1]
	a) We think the E4 DTP website is now looking good and contains comprehensive information in the administration section, accessible to DTP students across all Schools (needs Ease login). Students can refer to those pages at any time during their PhD to find information on their DTP funding, training, publications, Advisory Board etc. There is now a DTP handbook for E4 students (but most of it is relevant to E3 students too) which we hope is also useful.
	b) We believe one thing that could be improved is the students' profiles, but this depends on the School where a student is registered. The School of GeoSciences is soon to release a new version of the profiles where students can tailor the content as they wish. We have been asking for this for some time and we are delighted that this will soon be published. For non-GeoSciences DTP students with a student profile on their School website, the link from the E4 DTP website profile page will lead to it. If their School does not offer student profile pages, they can either refer to their school PGR office to ask why and/or give Stephanie a link to a personal website or blog they want their profile to link to.
	c) We are also delighted that some alumni publicly share their PhD experiences; we find these alumni profiles really interesting. We encourage everyone to complete their own Student Case Study once they have submitted (Stephanie will be in touch then with more information).
	d) If you have specific suggestions for the website, we would be happy to hear them. We do not control the student profiles but text and links in the E4 pages can be modified. For more technical changes, we may have limited ability to change the website because changes must be made within the rules of EdWeb, our University controlled content management system.

Training

5	**You said:** *"Although it is recognised that students have varying capabilities in the NMDM module, it is appreciated that there are more challenging tasks for those who have prior experience. This could possibly be extended further to challenge these students even more in these sessions so that the time feels valuable."* [p.2]
	The Python classes in NMDM this year were run on five levels: taster session, beginner course, real research challenges, an expert hackathon, and class access to advanced DataCamp courses. Preparing and running so many options simultaneously is quite a lot of work, but we will encourage our tutors to continue to seek tasks that are useful and challenging to all students.

6	**You said:** *"We suggested previously that an email is sent out to remind people that they can also suggest training sessions, and that information should also be on the DTP page in the PGR Hub on Learn."* [p.2]
	a) This information is on the admin section of the E4 DTP website, within the [current students' section](), which now contains extensive information on the funding and training aspects of the E3/4 studentships. As you note, students from other Schools don't have access to the PGR Hub on the Learn pages, and hence we decided to move the E4 info to the E4 website. Please refer to these online webpages whenever you have a query on funding, training, stipend extension schemes, publications etc. as you will usually find the reply to your question there. b) We will also continue to remind students that they can suggest training through email, during training courses and whenever relevant.

7	**You said:** *"The annual review process is not consistent from person to person and is a relatively long-winded process if completed 'properly'. Similarly (although we recognise that this is not a DTP-specific issue), the Confirmation process is not consistent. Students in similar positions had wildly different experiences in terms of feedback, follow up and panel experiences. This will hopefully be taken care of with the changing approach to advisors this upcoming year. We recommend that the yearly review process is clearly communicated to supervisors and students, or ideally streamlined."* [p.2]
	This is feedback for the wider PGR office in the School of GeoSciences and is not within the purview of the DTP, but we will bring these comments to the attention of the PGR Committee. Please also report those comments through the student reps and the annual focus groups (in GeoSciences). The new advisor system introduced this year in the School of GeoSciences should indeed bring more consistency in the Confirmation and Annual Review processes.

8	**You said:** *"The writing retreats were very well-received and we encourage more of them as they are scheduled when some students are always away on field work"* [p.2]
	a) We offer Writing Retreats four times a year, usually for two days during Creative Learning Week in February and two in early July. Dates outside the undergraduate teaching and examination periods have to be chosen so that we can book the room in Appleton Tower for the whole day (which is impossible for the rest of the year). We have looked into booking external rooms but the cost is too great for the number of people involved. b) These sessions generally need reminder emails to be fully booked and there are always a few last minute cancellations, meaning that they never run at capacity. c) Both the Research office in the School of GeoSciences and IAD run writing retreats too. https://www.ed.ac.uk/geosciences/research/research-events?page=1 https://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/research-roles/research-only-staff/writing/writing#proxy_2%20Day%20Writing%20Retreat Such events can also be organised by students themselves.

9	**You said:** "*In later years, people need to have the time to focus on their studies so it's right that regular training is focussed in first year - however, this also means that cohort togetherness is lost, which could be remedied by introducing more frequent socials.*" [p.2]
	See item 18 below

10	**You said:** "*The most popular sessions in FiG were again those that included an interactive element. Because people don't have expertise in the frontiers topics, having an interactive element is good to keep people engaged. Our ideas from last year do not appear to have been incorporated into the speakers plan. The ideas put forward for possible interactive sessions were: 1) debate on a set reading, 2) discussion on a 'controversial' topic, 3) brainstorming session (in groups or as a whole) to tackle challenges in geosciences, 4) asking open-ended questions to the group, 5) anonymous Q&A (people write questions on a card, they're shuffled and are answered by the instructor or discussed in groups). Concerns were raised regarding the lack of speaker gender and ethnic diversity.*" [p.3]
	We do tell speakers that Frontiers in Environmental Sciences is an interactive session and we make suggestions for interactive elements, but we do not impose a format. With a new programme of speakers every year the level of engagement is variable, although we do invite back a few speakers who have had particularly good feedback. We now track and report equality and diversity statistics and aim to have a more diverse series of speakers next year. We will also aim for a greater diversity of subject matter.

11	**You said:** "*Some people had problems with NMDM as they didn't feel engaged – either the sessions were not relevant to their research, or people with expertise in the technique didn't feel challenged, or the sessions were too short to learn an entirely new skill. The problem (as we discussed) is fitting the sessions to people at different levels of experience. Could there possibly be two different sets of tasks set, one for beginners and one for advanced students, giving students the option of which to choose?* [p.3]
	We are now trying to provide a range of tasks in NMDM on which beginners and more advanced programmers can work on in parallel. The sessions are certainly too short to learn an entirely new skill; rather, the aim of NMDM is to give exposure to a range of methods and to help people to identify their further training needs.

12	**You said:** "*Though by now students are relatively well-aware of Coding Club and Coding Club was very well-attended this year, another way to improve communication about the training opportunities available would be to explicitly list some of the sessions on the DTP website in the PGR Hub, with the links to the online tutorials for people that cannot attend sessions in full.* [p.3]
	There is a link to the Coding Club programme and tutorials from the E4 DTP website (training section).

13	**You said:** "*As with previous years, some people thought that the R sessions were too easy (though there were challenges provided) and perhaps the content of the R sessions can be updated to reflect more recent developments in R.*" [p.3]
	The tutor for the R sessions is very happy to adjust them to meet people's requirements but needs some guidance on which of the many recent developments to cover. We will refer this question to the Student Advisory Board for discussion.

14	**You said:** "*The Research Planning and Management course was well received, particularly because it's a good way to check-in with the other students in the course and other related programs, and because Isla does a good job of demystifying a lot of aspects of postgrad study to a group of students who may be feeling nervous. The time management session had mixed reviews. […].* [p.3]
	This is feedback for the wider PGR office in the School of GeoSciences and we will bring these comments to the attention of the PGR Committee. Please also report these comments through the student reps and the annual focus groups (in GeoSciences). Isla is developing an in-house replacement for the poorly-received time management course.

15	**You said:** "*PhD students are still keen to have one place where they can find opportunities for training and funding, although Stephanie does a great job of notifying students when opportunities do arise. Students are wanting to know if/when NERC will update their training opportunities. It was suggested by Richard that if there are courses run by any DTP partners then there may be an opportunity to ask for a discounted price. It would be useful if this could be communicated to students across the DTP so that they are aware of this.* [p.4]
	a) GeoSciences training opportunities are posted on the Learn pages noticeboard (PGR Student Hub - this is accessible via MyEd) and students receive automatic updates from the system every day when a new item is published. DTP training or training exclusively for UKRI-funded students are generally emailed by Stephanie to all DTP students directly when she is notified. We are trying to limit the number of emails sent to students as we notice that those which require a reply often need a lot of chase up. b) The new NERC website for postgraduate training opportunities is https://reg.nerc.ac.uk/postgrad-training/. There are also NERC Industrial Strategy training courses open to all UKRI-funded students in 2020 listed at https://nerc.ukri.org/funding/available/postgrad/advanced/istc/ c) CEH offers discounts on their courses for DTP students. The cost information is generally included in the emails that Stephanie forwards, but it is also worth asking Ingo Schuder (ingsch@ceh.ac.uk) who runs the CEH training when registering, if there are doubts about the cost. Discounts might vary depending on the course, hence it is best to ask CEH directly.

16	**You said:** *"We suggest that students are reminded half way through the year to fill in their training record."* [p.4]
	Yes we can do that. From now on, the training logs will be required at the end of August (with reminders throughout September as necessary) for an October deadline (the DTP annual report is now due in October rather than in August). We hope this new timing, post Summer holidays, will help students to provide it on time. Thank you for your support with this.

Cohort Building

17	**You said:** *"The socials were very well-received. There is still a general feeling that the hard work put into building a cohort in the first semester of Year 1 dissipates quickly once the core training ends. Students would therefore like more cross-year networking opportunities. The SAB agree that this could be a student-led activity and going forward more events will be organised for DTP students, by DTP students. To improve the socials, it was suggested last year that inviting supervisors and co-supervisors along would be a good idea, especially as some students feel they have very little contact or opportunity to build relationships with their co-supervisors. Especially, people would like to see informal social events that aren't necessarily based around drinking.* [p.3]
	a) There are two formal DTP social events per year, one in December and one in June. We suggested during the SAB meeting that additional cross-year socials could be organised as student-led events, and we are delighted to hear that this is already happening. The DTP could also support costs for student-led cohort building activities, so please feel free to gather ideas and present a proposal and budget for us to consider. b) Networking opportunities also occur during cross-year transferable skills training, for example the writing workshop in January, the ECCI training courses in November, February and March, and the writing retreats in February and July. c) We formally invite all primary supervisors to our socials. Secondary supervisors are also most welcome to join when space allows (first come first served but so far we have never refused anyone). Students can help to spread the word and invite their secondary supervisors too. d) We have never had an event based around drinking, except for a whisky tasting session we did 4 years ago. Our events include catering, but there is always both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks available at evening events.

Tutors and Demonstrators payment issues

18	**You said:** *"The SAB recognise that this is a school issue, but we would appreciate the support of the DTP in the following matters regarding payment for T & D."* [p.4-5]
	This is feedback for the wider PGR office in the School of GeoSciences and we will bring these comments to the attention of the PGR Committee. Please also report those comments through the student reps and the annual focus groups (in GeoSciences). We are sorry these problems have happened and acknowledge the fact that the response from the T&D and School management was not appropriate. Unfortunately, the T&D team is now out with the PGR office and there was nothing the PGR team could do about this at the time, and neither were they made aware of problems before students started to complain. Feedback received by the PGR office was reported to the T&D team and we believe that payment issues have now been solved. The T&D system is being looked at again so that such contract and payment delays do not occur again, and potential changes will be communicated in due course. We agree that this affects many DTP students and will keep an eye on things as much as we can.

Summary of Proposed Actions

item	Action	Timeframe / when	How
6	Remind students they can suggest training (for organisation and funding by the DTP)	Regularly throughout the academic year	Website, email, face-to-face
10	Increase diversity in Frontiers in Environmental Sciences	Ahead of semester 1, 2020-2021	Consider diversity across the whole programme when selecting speakers
10	Increase engagement in Frontiers in Environmental Sciences	Semester 1, 2020-2021	Encourage and guide speakers with suggestions of interactive elements
5; 11; 13	Increase engagement in Numeracy, Modelling and Data Management	Semester 1, 2020-2021	Encourage tutors to consider the range of experience when designing exercises
16	Remind students half way through the year to fill in their training record	Jan-Feb	Email

If you have any questions on this document, please email the E3/E4 DTP Manager stephanie.robin@ed.ac.uk or the E3/E4 DTP Director: simon.m.mudd@ed.ac.uk.