

NERC Edinburgh Earth and Environment (E3) DTP – Student Advisory Report

13 November 2017

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Purpose: Review of the E3 DTP by cross-cohort student advisory panel upon approaching the completion of the first round of studentships and funding.

Panel Members: Frazer Christie, Warwick Wainwright, Haydn Thomas, Corinne Baulcomb, Roseanne Clement, James Watt, Tom Tyldesley Gina-Maria Geffers, Jamie Hunter, Tomas Liska, Jonathan Scafidi and Jakob Assmann.

Summary

The E3 students view the DTP positively. There is a strong sense that the E3 specific cohort and training add value to the PhD experience, furthering professional and personal development. Particular praise is given to the first-year Firbush residential course (cohort development) and training events such as the “Make Your Research Matter” workshop and the Nature Writing Masterclass. PIPs and Overseas Research Visits Fund are also highly regarded. Our recommendations for improvements are centred around enhancing between-year cohort building, continued strengthening of within-year cohorts from year 2 and beyond, and improving the website with information for current students. For the latter, we suggest adding alumni profiles (when available), listings of training opportunities, reviews of training undertaken by other students, and E3-specific administrative guidance.

Recruitment

Students are happy with how the recruitment has been carried out in the past. The interview panels consisting of academics from a broad background – not experts on the specific projects of the applicant – work well and praise has been given to the accompanying activities of the interview day. The presence of current E3 DTP students to guide the applicants and act as E3 ambassadors has been positively reviewed and is recommended to continue.

Currently, both the written application and interview performance are considered in the final ranking. We recommend making this information available to the applicants to reduce pressure and increase transparency of the application process. In the past applicants thought that decisions are purely based on the interview. Additionally, we suggest considering an extension of the interview time from 20 min to 30-40 min, the former was perceived too short by some students.

Training

Overall, there seems to be an agreement that the amount of training provided is about right and the training itself is generally considered valuable.

Most students perceive that the training becomes less structured after the first year. The core problem is that training needs are highly specific to the individual student and project. Training is provided by multiple sources often with varying quality: the E3’s own courses, workshops run by the Schools and the Institute of Academic Development (IAD), peer-led training such as coding club

and external providers. It is also important to consider the pressures that training activities might create for the students (if not relevant to them), and may be viewed as a “distraction” by the PhD supervisor(s). To assist students in planning their training we recommend: a) Making available a list of courses attended by E3 students in the past on the E3 website – with reviews and/or email addresses to allow contact for questions about the courses; and b) extending the Training Needs Assessment (TNA), creating a student specific training plan that is reviewed annually or twice-annually with the supervisor(s) and/or a member of the E3 management team.

The E3 run courses “Numeracy, Modelling, and Data Management” (NMDM) and “Frontiers in GeoSciences” (FiG) have received mixed reviews, but they are valued for their role in cohort building. Some students enjoy the broad background that NMDM provides, others find that it is too broad and that it does not manage to cater for the different skill levels of the students. It has been suggested that activities for beginner, intermediate and advance levels are provided and that peer-support within the course is encouraged. It has also been suggested to broaden the FiG seminars to non-GeoScience topics. Finally, we recommend that the E3 continues to support and encourage peer-led initiatives for coding and GIS such as the Coding Club. These are highly valuable.

Cohort Building

Students enjoy being part of the E3 cohort. The cohort building aspects of the first-year courses – particularly the residential course at Firbursh - are frequently highlighted. However, there is a general feeling that cohesion in the cohorts lessens after the first year and that there is too little interaction between cohorts across years. We suggest: a) a new E3 “Fun-Talks” series: three 20 min talks by E3 students not on their research topics held twice yearly (mid-term) with drinks and nibbles; b) a year-group event at the beginning of the second year; c) an E3 wide end of PhD/hand-in event; and d) E3 specific writing retreats within and across years.

Professional Preparation

A breadth of opportunities for professional development are available to students in the E3 DTP. PIPs and the Overseas Research Visits Fund are generally positively regarded. A major concern with the PIPs is that even though the funding gets extended there is no extension of the final hand-in deadline. Particularly for students that feel pressured for time due to the nature of their project this is discouraging. We recommend an automatic extension of the final deadline matching the duration of the PIP. The ECCI Innovation Programme has had mixed reviews: many students participating in placements had good experiences, the “Make Your Research Matter” workshop is popular, and the travel grants for the 2016 Carbon Trust Lecture were well received. However, some students expressed that the placements offered through the programme are not relevant to their fields. Finally, we recommend the creation of alumni profiles on the E3 website (once available) to make post PhD career trajectories visible and enhance the cross-cohort network.

Website

During the feedback process, it became clear that there is a strong need for an update of the E3 website to include information for current students, such as listing of training courses and placements available as well as administrative details regarding funding, sick-/parental-leave and assessment. Currently, this information is not accessible to the students in a centralised location.