

## NERC Edinburgh Earth and Environment (E3/4) DTP – Student Advisory Report

5th December 2019

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**Purpose: Review of the E3/E4 DTP through a cross-cohort student advisory panel**

Panel Members:

<b>In attendance</b>	Richard Essery, Simon Mudd, Tomas Liska, Alice Drinkwater, Marina Ruiz Sanchez-Oro, Helen Hughes, Chris Holdsworth, Nadia Jogee, Gergana Daskalova, Lizzie Telford, Jamie Hunter
<b>Excused</b>	Stephanie Robin, James Watt, Corinne Baulcomb, Emma Cunningham

### Summary

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.

Broadly, our suggestions for improvements are: 1) widening the breadth of training opportunities (both for careers in and outside academia), 2) more cross-year socials to exchange ideas and 3) making improvements to the current E3/E4 DTP websites.

## **Training**

Overall, the training is considered valuable. 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.

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. It was highlighted that this may cause some issues for students in schools other than Geosciences. We therefore recommend that lines of communication to all students in the DTP are checked.

The session on the admin side of handing in your thesis and organising the viva was useful and informative.

The PDS scheme was considered very helpful because it allowed people to apply for jobs while still finishing up.

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.

### *Writing retreats and additional training*

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. Very positive comments for the Firbush trip again this year from first year students.

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.

### *First year training*

The E4-run courses “Numeracy, Modelling, and Data Management” (NMDM) and “Frontiers in GeoSciences” (FiG) have received mixed reviews.

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.

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?

Another solution would be to have the NMDM staff and tutors remind the DTP students that they can get that statistics training by attending Coding Club that is partly supported by the DTP. For example, there was an introduction to Bayesian statistics session on the 21<sup>st</sup> Nov. 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. Gergana is also happy to send an email summarising and linking to the most popular statistics sessions to highlight the places from where students can get help. 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.

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. One student's comment was *'the speaker suggested we make our office spaces as uncomfortable as possible so people don't get comfy and waste our time chatting. This was apparently serious advice.'* Whilst other students found the session useful to learn skills like 'it's ok to say no' and to not check their emails in their personal time. Especially as new students often feel pressure to work around the clock.

### *List of training and funding opportunities*

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.

We suggest that students are reminded half way through the year to fill in their training record. Not only is this useful for students, it will greatly help Simon and Stephanie when compiling training and achievements. The SAB recognise that these records are a really vital piece of information to the DTP managers and we will actively remind and encourage our cohorts to fill these in.

### **Cohort Building**

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 lead 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.

### **Payment Issues**

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.

There has been an issue with the way we have been treated by the department as tutors. Communication has suggested that we did not get paid on time because we didn't submit timesheets by the deadline. We were not told that even if you don't have a contract (which a lot of people didn't have until November), you should still submit timesheets. The process of obtaining a contract was not clear to all students, but even students who have contract and handed in timesheets on time were not all paid. The email we received from Head of School did little in the way of apologising saying:

*'This is to reassure you that we're working as quickly as possible to sort out contracts and payments to tutors and demonstrators and to apologize for having taken so long.*

*We have put a member of professional staff on this full-time and she is working hard to sort out all the delays/issues. The majority of T&D's will receive payment in the November pay run. For those who don't, it will be due either to missing documentation or as a result of the slowness of HR processes which have delayed their contract.'*

Many students felt offended and undervalued by putting in hard work teaching students only to not be paid. PhD students often rely on the extra income they receive for T & D, with some students having dependants at home. It was unfair to simply be told we'd just have to wait.