

Report by the E3/4 Student Advisory Board, following meeting 9th Dec 2021

In attendance	Richard Essery, Emma Cunningham, Kyle Dexter, Stephanie Robin, Alice Drinkwater, Helen Hughes, Georgia Lambert, Aideliz Montiel Alvarez, Christine Gaebel, Alice Farrelly, Julie Grosse-Sommer
Apologies	Chris Holdworth, Dana Druka, Nadia Jogee, Corinne Baulcomb, Lizzie Telford, Joe Everest

Agenda items

1. Revisit actions from last meeting: management response
2. Student feedback to management
 - a. Training decision tool
 - b. Extended frontiers
 - c. Second year writing workshop
 - d. First year training
 - e. Other
3. SAB membership

1. Revisit actions from last meeting: management response

The SAB acknowledges and appreciates the actions undertaken by DTP management since the last report.

Increasing diversity in the applicant pool

The SAB understands that the DTP management's efforts to increase diversity of recruited cohorts through improvements to the recruitment process appears to be working as hoped. However, there is a lack of diversity in those applying to the DTP in the first place (and therefore participating in the improved recruitment process). DTP management flagged a £50k fund opened by NERC to try to tackle this and invited ideas from the SAB/ current PhDs.

Recommendation(s):

- PhD student videos to demonstrate the variety of students that partake in the DTP (e.g. how mature students balance life, work, and study).
- PhD student videos to demonstrate day-to-day PhD life to dispel "PhD myths"
- Advertising more over a variety of internet sources- including less academic sites.
- Regardless of the advertising site, use plain language rather than jargon to widen comprehension of how a PhD/DTP works.
- Engaging with school children to spark their interest in environmental science and future PhD study

- The SAB was supportive of the development of best practice interview guidelines and the goal of strengthening signposting to support for current PhD students (e.g. for learning differences).

2. Student / SAB feedback to management

Training Decision Tool

The SAB raised the following points regarding the Training Decision Tool:

- Some training opportunities are not generally available to E4 students. Consider the option of updating the training log template so that students can signpost the topic of training and whether it would be available to others.
- The data input step may become cumbersome each year. Consider an option of students providing more input directly, either through updating the training log, or directly into the decision tool. This would also enable a wider breadth of activities (e.g. social science training) to be included.
- Consider sharing a more high-level list of where to look for trainings (e.g. institute websites or helpful twitter accounts) along with the training decision tool

Extended Frontiers

It was noted that the idea behind the Extended Frontiers sessions was well received. The SAB agreed that there should be a diversity in guests (i.e. that represent the various disciplines and Schools involved in the DTP). It was noted that very little response was received for this year's sessions. Discussions on the Extended Frontiers sessions focused on several different options:

- Continue with the current structure, where students propose guests to give lectures.
- Grand challenges: A 'grand challenge' topic is selected by students and relevant expert/s are invited.
- A panel: scientists/experts from across disciplines discuss and present on a single topic, but from different viewpoints. The topic could be voted on/suggested by students. Students would have the opportunity to run and facilitate the panel event, creating a development opportunity.
- One 'star' scientist for a multiple-day event.
- Practically, it was agreed that some of these options would lead to few(er) sessions.
- The SAB was supportive of the option to have Extended Frontiers throughout the academic year- not restricted to Semester 1 (since first year students in particular have a busy Sem1 schedule). The SAB saw benefits including continued cohort building and collaboration with other E4 students across years, as well as an opportunity for particularly focused engagement with a particular issue: bringing student experts from a variety of areas into the discussion.

Second year Writing Workshop

Students had some immediate feedback regarding the writing workshop:

- The 2-hour lecture on the workshop's first day largely repeated content from the first year RPMG course.

- The content of the 4-hour practical part of the workshop was too basic to be useful for the target audience. For example, most students felt the inclusion of mind map training was unnecessary.
- The speaker focused on popular science writing, while the attendees are primarily writing papers for peer review. These have specific technical and formal requirements which were not broached in the workshop and are in some cases incompatible with the workshop content. For example, at various points the speaker suggested splitting the abstract into two paragraphs, formatting lists with bullet points, omitting the publication year from in-text citations, and putting additional information in footnotes.
- In total, the workshop came to 6 hours spent online, including one 4-hour block with only short breaks, but did not convey new content or skills to the attendees. Most of this time was spent passively listening to speakers.

Constructive suggestions for future years:

- Compress the review of general technical writing recommendations to an hour or less or remove it entirely.
- Replace the other content with information specific to scientific publication and collaborative writing. This could involve splitting into breakout rooms to discuss topics that attendees are most interested in. Topics that students would find useful include: structuring a paper, submission processes for major journals in different fields, integrating conflicting feedback from multiple paper co-authors, credit and co-authorship order etiquette, use of tools like Overleaf, Zotero, Google Docs.
- Minimise speaker time and increase time spent working in small groups or breakout rooms. Attendees could submit longer writing samples for peer feedback or demonstrate the use of publishing and writing software to other cohort members. This would also be a cohort building opportunity.

First year training feedback

- The 1st year cohort raised some concerns with the diversity and inclusion training that was offered. It was noted that these sessions should be in person (where possible) and that a different speaker be invited to lead the session for the next year.
- The 1st year cohort raised some concerns about the RPMG's required research plan for GeoScience students. It was suggested that a slightly different research plan and timeframe be proposed.
- Recommendation: start NMDM with a short 15-30 minute presentation about the topic at hand

Other

- Students raised an interest in having more qualitative methods sessions included in the DTP training (e.g. introductions to using surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc., as a research tool).
- The 2nd year cohort suggested some additional training topics they would be interested in: how to make the most of a conference, guidance for applying to grants and funding as a PhD student (such as for access to HPC facilities), public speaking, structuring

conference talks, networking within your field, finding collaborators for specific projects to fill skills and knowledge gaps, and more team/cohort building exercises.

- Concerns have been raised that there is no official compassionate or bereavement leave scheme offered to PhD students. This means that compassionate or bereavement leave is taken as unpaid leave, annual leave (however these are only options if paperwork can be faced) or eats into funding. Due to the nature of a PhD program (a limited salary and time constraints) these can feel like limited options. It is worth noting that members of staff receive up to 10 days paid leave for the loss of an immediate family member and 5 days for other circumstances.
- All the students would like to thank Stephanie and DTP management for their continuing clear and timely communication, particularly during the ongoing pandemic.