What is this booklet about?

This booklet has been produced by the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) to provide staff and students with information on the Robert Skills Training programme available to PhD students through the LTU.

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The UK research councils have published a set of skills (the Joint Skills Statement or JSS, 2001) which they expect students to develop over the course of a PhD programme. Some of these skills are quite specific to academic research, whilst others might be described as transferable skills. More detail on the JSS is provided later in the booklet (pages 4-5), together with an illustration of how the courses run by the LTU contribute to their development (page 9).

In 2002 SET for Success, now widely referred to as the Roberts review, was published. This was an investigation into the supply of science and engineering skills in the UK and considered entrants at all levels including PhD graduates. One of its conclusions was that there was a mismatch between the skills sought by employers and those typically possessed by PhD graduates. The Roberts recommendation that PhD students should spend at least 10 days per year on the development of transferable skills was endorsed by all of the research councils and by the UK government – which made ring-fenced funding available in order to enhance the provision of such training by universities (‘Roberts Funding’).

The Roberts funding is intended to provide training in transferable skills that is additional to that already offered by institutions. The University has used its Roberts funding to develop a substantial programme of training courses for PhD students, coordinated by a small team of staff in the Learning and Teaching Unit. The University’s Roberts Skills Training Steering Group decided that the central programme should provide 3 days training per year for each first- and second-year PhD student and 1½ days per year for third years. It recognised that the balance of the recommended 10 days training was already provided in and through departments.

The programme run by the LTU concentrates on transferable skills, often using themes with which research students can readily identify. Thus, whilst Getting the Most From Your Supervisor is designed to have immediate appeal to students, the emphasis of the course is on developing communication skills that in fact can be transferred to many other contexts.

The skills training programme is a valuable resource in supporting the broad professional development of PhD students, whatever their eventual career direction might be. The programme also enables students to make contact with their peers from across the University and to develop support networks. We hope you will support and recommend it.
Introduction

This document sets out a joint statement of the skills that doctoral research students funded by the Research Councils would be expected to develop during their research training.

These skills may be present on commencement, explicitly taught, or developed during the course of the research. It is expected that different mechanisms will be used to support learning as appropriate, including self-direction, supervisor support and mentoring, departmental support, workshops, conferences, elective training courses, formally assessed courses and informal opportunities.

The Research Councils would also want to re-emphasise their belief that training in research skills and techniques is the key element in the development of a research student, and that PhD students are expected to make a substantial, original contribution to knowledge in their area, normally leading to published work. The development of wider employment-related skills should not detract from that core objective.

The purpose of this statement is to give a common view of the skills and experience of a typical research student thereby providing universities with a clear and consistent message aimed at helping them to ensure that all research training was of the highest standard, across all disciplines. It is not the intention of this document to provide assessment criteria for research training.

It is expected that each Council will have additional requirements specific to their field of interest and will continue to have their own measures for the evaluation of research training within institutions.

A) Research Skills and Techniques - to be able to demonstrate:
1. The ability to recognise and validate problems
2. Original, independent and critical thinking, and the ability to develop theoretical concepts
3. A knowledge of recent advances within one’s field and in related areas
4. An understanding of relevant research methodologies and techniques and their appropriate application within one’s research field
5. The ability to critically analyse and evaluate one’s findings and those of others
6. An ability to summarise, document, report and reflect on progress

B) Research Environment - to be able to:
1. Show a broad understanding of the context, at the national and international level, in which research takes place
2. Demonstrate awareness of issues relating to the rights of other researchers, of research subjects, and of others who may be affected by the research, e.g. confidentiality, ethical issues, attribution, copyright, malpractice, ownership of data and the requirements of the Data Protection Act
3. Demonstrate appreciation of standards of good research practice in their institution and/or discipline
4. Understand relevant health and safety issues and demonstrate responsible working practices
5. Understand the processes for funding and evaluation of research
6. Justify the principles and experimental techniques used in one's own research
7. Understand the process of academic or commercial exploitation of research results

C) Research Management - to be able to:
1. Apply effective project management through the setting of research goals, intermediate milestones and prioritisation of activities
2. Design and execute systems for the acquisition and collation of information through the effective use of appropriate resources and equipment
3. Identify and access appropriate bibliographical resources, archives, and other sources of relevant information
4. Use information technology appropriately for database management, recording and presenting information

D) Personal Effectiveness - to be able to:
1. Demonstrate a willingness and ability to learn and acquire knowledge
2. Be creative, innovative and original in one’s approach to research
3. Demonstrate flexibility and open-mindedness
4. Demonstrate self-awareness and the ability to identify own training needs
5. Demonstrate self-discipline, motivation, and thoroughness
6. Recognise boundaries and draw upon/use sources of support as appropriate
7. Show initiative, work independently and be self-reliant

E) Communication Skills - to be able to:
1. Write clearly and in a style appropriate to purpose, e.g. progress reports, published documents, thesis
2. Construct coherent arguments and articulate ideas clearly to a range of audiences, formally and informally through a variety of techniques
3. Constructively defend research outcomes at seminars and viva examination
4. Contribute to promoting the public understanding of one’s research field
5. Effectively support the learning of others when involved in teaching, mentoring or demonstrating activities

F) Networking and Teamworking - to be able to:
1. Develop and maintain co-operative networks and working relationships with supervisors, colleagues and peers, within the institution and the wider research community
2. Understand one’s behaviours and impact on others when working in and contributing to the success of formal and informal teams
3. Listen, give and receive feedback and respond perceptively to others

G) Career Management - to be able to:
1. Appreciate the need for and show commitment to continued professional development
2. Take ownership for and manage one’s career progression, set realistic and achievable career goals, and identify and develop ways to improve employability
3. Demonstrate an insight into the transferable nature of research skills to other work environments and the range of career opportunities within and outside academia
4. Present one’s skills, personal attributes and experiences through effective CVs, applications and interviews
Students from a variety of disciplines talk about how the LTU programme has contributed to their professional development.

Case Study 1: Sustaining Your Motivation

“I attended the Sustaining Your Motivation course, part of the programme run by the Learning and Teaching Unit, not long after I began my PhD. The course included a talk from someone who had completed his PhD quite recently. The talk illustrated a number of ways in which that student had sustained his motivation.

I was particularly struck by the fact that writing articles for publication had been such a motivating experience for the speaker. Writing articles gave him a break from his usual research activities and getting things published had been both an immediate boost to his motivation and a longer term benefit – by adding to his academic profile. I realised from the talk that it was possible to write an article for publication even as early as the first year of my PhD.

I discussed writing an article with my supervisor the next time I saw him. It can take a long time for an article to appear in print, so I am glad I raised the question then. I wrote my article, which appeared in a journal one year and one month after the Sustaining Your Motivation course.

A further message from this course was to build variety into your work as a research student in order to sustain your motivation. As a result I have enrolled on the University’s Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice and Frontrunners programmes. I am also a member of the University’s Dignity & Respect Working Group.

Looking back, I feel that the course I attended was very valuable. It alerted me to the possibility of getting some of my work published. The varied things I have become involved with have added greatly to my experience and as well as sustaining my motivation, they will hopefully enhance my career prospects too.”

PhD Student, Health and Human Sciences

Case Study 2: Presentation Skills

“I am a first year PhD student. This year I have attended a number of workshops organized by the Learning and Teaching Unit, but the most useful ones, and the ones with skills that I have been able to practice right away, have been Presentation Skills and Advanced Presentation Skills workshops.

I knew from the start that I have a problem with public speaking as I have encountered difficulties related to stress management during a presentation before while being a student and later presenting at conferences in my home country. This is why I initially decided to attend the courses, but later had an even greater motivation, as I was to present at a conference in Cambridge on the 22nd of March this year.

I found the classes to be very useful. While being able to practice my skills, I received very valuable structured feedback from other participants. This helped me realise that what I had initially considered to be my problem was in reality not something I should worry about and that I should concentrate instead on other
aspects of presenting, such as pace and voice levels. Without the feedback I would have never realised the mistakes I had been making previously. The workshop also helped me a lot to be more open in communicating with the audience and making eye-contact.

My Cambridge presentation went very well and the whole conference turned out to be one of the highlights of the term. I am very grateful to everyone from the Learning and Teaching Unit for their dedicated and highly professional work with the students.

"PhD Student, Literature, Film and Theatre Studies"

**Case Study 3: Poster Presentation**

“I took part in a poster competition organised by the Learning and Teaching Unit. My poster was chosen to go forward to the Regional Poster Competition which was held in Cambridge.

This was a meaningful experience which motivated me as a novice researcher. Approximately 60 PhD students from different universities participated in the competition and experts in various areas were invited as judges of the poster presentation.

The first step in making a poster was difficult as it was necessary to consider how to show my research on a limited space effectively. I was not only asked to present the poster orally but also to judge other posters as a peer evaluation. It was challenging for me to talk about my research to people who are not familiar with my research topic. I needed to simplify the contents as much as possible to ensure that the audience would understand. Although some of the audience gave me unexpected questions, I received useful and encouraging comments on my presentation. I was glad to hear that my poster was interesting and easy to follow.

Through this experience I became confident in talking about my research and I think that my presentation and communication skills were improved. Furthermore, I learned how my poster presentations can be better by evaluating other posters objectively and critically, which is beneficial to my future poster presentation.

"PhD Student, Language and Linguistics"
Case Study 4: Surviving the Viva

“In the final year of my PhD, I attended the Surviving the Viva course. The thought of sitting the Viva was a relatively stressful one, and I was keen to get as much information as I could before I sat down across from my examiners. The session was exactly what I'd hoped for.

The session was included presentations by a professor who had served many times as an internal and external examiner, and a recent viva 'survivor'. I found this especially useful, as it gave me a direct look at what happens in the viva – arguably one of the most mysterious aspects of doctoral study!

We also worked in groups to enact mock vivas – one person acting as the examiner, the other being examined. I was surprised at how useful this exercise was in streamlining my ideas, even if my 'examiner' had limited familiarity with my subject – a skill I've put to use in countless academic and non-academic situations since. The atmosphere was collegial, and it was interesting to imagine oneself in both roles. To assist in the process, we were primed with a list of common viva questions prepared by examiners. I put these to use after the session in my preparation for the real thing.

There is nothing that brings quite the same feeling of confidence as knowing you are prepared. After Surviving the Viva, I felt much better both about how to prepare for the viva, and also about what it was that was expected of me on the day. I would recommend it – and have done so – to anyone preparing to defend their thesis.”

PhD Student, Art History and Theory

Case Study 5: The Programme

“I started attending courses from the Learning and Teaching Unit programme in the first year of my PhD. At first I was attracted by the chance to get expert advice and to work with students from other departments. When I started my PhD, I was aware that I was skilled in a number of areas, such as practical laboratory skills and academic writing. I came to realise that to strengthen my career position, I needed to add other skills to these. I began to use the Joint Skills Statement plan the areas that I needed to develop.

One area that I knew I needed to improve on was presentation skills. I was not a confident presenter and I thought that my accent was an obstacle for many listeners. I found the course I attended on presentation skills was helpful: it gave me hints and tips that I could use to communicate effectively with an audience. I later attended the advanced presentation skills course which involved making two presentations and getting in-depth feedback on them. It helped a lot by pointing out that I was good at a number of aspects of presenting and by identifying areas that I could improve upon. I then took any opportunities I could to practise those areas. I am now in my completion year and as I have presented now at more than 20 conferences, I would say that I am quite a confident presenter.

Overall I would say that taking part in the LTU programme has made me much more confident and also more optimistic: I have seen how my skills compare with those of other PhD students at the University and how I develop further.”

PhD student, Biological Sciences
Courses for PhD Students Mapped Against the JSS

The LTU runs approximately 50 courses each year on its programme for PhD students. In addition the LTU provides training for PhD students who are going to work as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs).

Participants in the latter training can take Module 1 of the University’s Certificate in Higher Education Practice, which in turn makes them eligible for Associate Status with the Higher Education Academy (UK Professional Standards Framework Standard 1).

A number of the courses are offered at several times during the year, offering flexibility for students. The programme is evaluated each year and suggestions for new courses from students and staff are welcome. Typical course titles from the PhD training programme include:

- Advanced Presentation Skills
- Applying for a Lectureship
- Applying for a Postdoctoral Post
- Assertive Communication
- Beyond Bullet Points
- Building an Academic Profile
- Career Planning
- Communicating & Learning
- Communicating Your Research
- Effective Use of Voice
- FirstSteps
- Getting the Most from Your Supervisor
- Getting Published
- Hitting the Job Market
- Interviews for Lectureships
- Moving On
- Networking & Influencing
- Preparing for Supervisory Boards
- Presentation Skills
- Presenting a Poster
- Presenting at Conferences
- Project Management in Academia
- SecondSteps
- Stress Management
- Surviving the Viva
- Sustaining Your Motivation Throughout a PhD
- Time Management Skills
- Understanding Yourself and Others: Myers Briggs Workshop
- Working Collaboratively
- Writing for Publication

An up-to-date schedule of courses is available on the LTU web pages; www.essex.ac.uk/ltu
Snapshots of the Roberts Skills Training Programme

FirstSteps and SecondSteps
FirstSteps and SecondSteps are designed to provide students with development opportunities that are particularly relevant to them at the beginning of the first and second years of a PhD. These courses also provide valuable opportunities to meet students from other departments.

FirstSteps
A two-day course for students beginning doctoral research programmes, FirstSteps provides an overview of the PhD and covers planning and project management skills, time management, networking, getting the most from the supervisor, and planning professional development.

SecondSteps
A one-day follow-on course, SecondSteps covers presenting research, making progress with the PhD, sustaining motivation, and planning professional development.

GRADschool
In July of each year, the University hosts a nationally-approved GRADschool. Aimed at PhD students in the second year and beyond, the GRADschool provides students with the opportunity to take time out from their research to consider what they would like to do when they complete their PhDs and how they will develop the skills and experience that they will need in order to achieve their goals.

The GRADschool provides participants with the opportunity to work in teams and to increase their understanding of team dynamics. It is also an excellent opportunity to network and share experiences with other PhD students from Essex and other institutions in the East of England.

“Team tasks were very revealing. It was great to give and receive continuous feedback on tasks. There were lots of opportunities to give presentations which was very useful for my development.”

“FirstSteps involved a lot of engagement from participants, not just passive listening. It provided an opportunity to make contacts and friends. I gained skills in planning and managing my time well.”

“SecondSteps was a good start to the second year, nice to meet new people and to plan what I will do this year.”
Applying for a Postdoc
This course is designed to explore what makes an application stand out from the crowd in order to help participants to make the interview shortlist. Participants are placed in the role of selectors as they work in groups to evaluate applications for a postdoc position at the University and decide who will make it through to the interview.

Interviews for Lectureships
This course is aimed at PhD students in Arts, Humanities and Social Science, where it is feasible to secure a lectureship after a PhD. For science students aiming for an academic career, the Applying for a Postdoc course is likely to be more relevant.

The Interviews for Lectureships course begins with a briefing from an experienced interviewer on what universities are looking for, followed by a talk by a recently appointed lecturer about the interview process from an applicant’s point of view. Participants have a mini interview with a panel and receive feedback on their performance. They also experience interviews ‘from the other side of the desk,’ by acting as a member of the interview panel.

“Very useful course. It made me think more about the selection process and the necessity of targeting applications.”

“Very helpful presentation and interview practise. Excellent presenters.”
Useful Resources and Contact Details

You may find the following books and resources interesting:

### Background Documents

- SET for Success (The Roberts Review)
  www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Documents/Enterprise_and_Productivity/Research_and_Enterprise/ent_res_roberts.cfm

- Joint Statement of Skills Training Requirements of Research Students
  www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/researchcareers/jsstrainingrequirements.pdf

### Contact details

If you would like to discuss the programme, contact the Professional Development Manager (Research), Terry Barry: terryb@essex.ac.uk.

### Training Information

- Skills Training for PhD Students at Essex
  www.essex.ac.uk/ltu/pd/PGR.shtm

- National Training and Support for PhD Students
  www.vitae.ac.uk

- University of Essex PG CHEP
  www.essex.ac.uk/ltu/pd/PGCHEP.shtm
  www.heacademy.ac.uk