

Appendix 6. Scenarios as future contexts for A&H doctoral provision

Introduction to the scenarios

Exploring possible futures for doctoral provision in the arts and humanities (A&H) involves uncertainty, and scenarios are tools which can be used to address this uncertainty. They represent a wide range of possible futures and are not predictions but instead are plausible combinations of factors. Four qualitative scenarios have been developed by RAND Europe as possible contexts for the future of doctoral provision using a structured approach to reflect uncertainties across the societal, political and economic landscape. These scenarios are set in the year 2035. Table A6.1 provides a summary of the four future scenarios.

Scenario	Title	Short description
Scenario 1	Inclusive and flexible	Positive attitudes towards A&H research and a society focused on inclusivity
Scenario 2	Market driven	Market driven focus on skills and employability opportunities for A&H doctoral graduates
Scenario 3	High prestige	Changing attitudes to the A&H degree, coupled with increased funding and focus on skills and employability
Scenario 4	Declining focus	Declining political support and an unstable economic environment

Table A6.1 List of scenarios

The scenarios are built around a set of factors that cover doctoral provision and its interactions with the societal, political and economic landscape. Each scenario is characterised by a combination of future values (projections) for these factors that reflect different ways in which the future could evolve. The factors and their descriptions are listed in Table A6.2, and the possible projections are listed in Figure A6.1.

The scenario narratives elaborate on the factors and their possible projections. The four 1-page narratives are written from the perspective of the future (i.e. they are set in 2035) and explore how these factors have shaped a potential future world. These four narratives, which are presented below, were used as tools with which to test the strength and applicability of the various policy options developed during the validation process within this study.

Theme	Factor	Definition
Societal	Social justice	Relates to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) considerations regarding access to A&H (A&H) doctoral provision, including for example recruitment requirements and cost. Current AHRC recruitment requirements tend to focus on 'academic excellence' and many specialist Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are based in London (and are expensive to attend).
	Societal value	This refers to attitudes towards research (within and outside academia) in the UK, including the economic and instrumental benefits of research. It takes into consideration

Theme	Factor	Definition
		the impact agenda and focuses on the public value of research. This also relates to the focus on societal priorities, global challenges and the rise of challenge-led research, and the requirement for A&H researchers to work within multidisciplinary groups. It also refers to increased globalisation, the global nature of research, and potential for increased international collaboration.
	Attitudes and expectations from doctoral students	This refers to student expectations around their doctoral education. This includes aspects such as careers support, access to wellbeing services as well as the personalisation of doctoral education (i.e. ensuring it takes a more customer-focused approach).
Strategic priorities	Strategic policy drivers	Political support (for the A&H sector across changing ministers, PMs and governments). Relates to value for money for Government, and relevant policy, such as the industrial strategy/innovation policy.
	Digitalisation	Refers to the trend towards increasing digitalisation and use of digital technologies (e.g. AI, automation and digital communications) and how this changes research disciplines.
Skills and Employment	Employability	This refers to employability of individual doctoral students' post-graduation, relating to the (changing) role of the doctorate as a way to progress in an existing career outside academia rather than getting an academic position.
	Changes in the A&H employment market	The changing focus of the A&H employment market (both academic versus non-academic) and its impact on the level / type of skill requirements for a range of occupational roles (i.e. need for fusion skills / T shaped researchers), and the (changing) demand for skills from employers.
	Value of PhD (non-academic employers)	This refers to the perceived 'investment value' of a UK higher education degree to the employer.
Pipeline	Personal value of the doctorate	This refers to the perceived 'investment value' of a UK higher education degree to the individual doctoral student. This also relates to the (changing) motivations behind why doctoral students pursue doctoral education.
	Supply (UK and international)	This refers to the pipeline of UK and international students for A&H doctoral degrees in the UK. This considers the number of students applying for A&H doctoral degrees, their motivation to pursue A&H research, and for international students, considerations such as the post-Brexit economy and visa provision / immigration policy.
Funding constraints	Length of funding for HEI programmes	This refers to the length of funding provided for PhD programmes. The suitability of the current 3-year funding model has been questioned, given the increased time needed for professional development. This assumes the total pot of funding remains the same, and therefore where doctoral education is increased in length, there will be fewer students undertaking it.
Future of work	Ways of working (including remote /online)	Refers to changing patterns of working, with less centralised employment and more distributed research and businesses. This also includes remote / online working and attitudes to work, with fewer jobs for life, more mobility and portfolio employment, with increasing career changes and reduced 9-5 working.

Table A6.2 List of factors

		Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
		Increase	Decrease	No Change	
		Slight Increase	Slight Decrease		
Theme	Factor	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
Societal	Social justice				
	Societal value				
	Attitudes and expectations from doctoral students				
Strategic priorities	Digitalisation				
	Strategic policy drivers				
Skills and employment	Employability				
	Changes in the A&H employment market				
	Value of PhD (non-academic employers)				
Pipeline	Personal value of the doctorate				
	Supply (UK and international)				
Funding	Length of funding for HEI programmes				
Future of work	Ways of working (including remote/online)				

Figure A6.1 Projections by each scenario

Scenario 1: Inclusive and flexible

In 2035, society is focused on inclusivity and recognises the value of A&H research. There is an increased focus on utilising interdisciplinary research to tackle societal grand challenges. There is a strong emphasis on EDI and wellbeing agendas for A&H doctoral students and early career researchers.

Societal

Throughout the 2020's and early 2030's, society has increasingly recognised the importance of research and its potential impacts on the economy and society more widely. Following the publication of a new 2030 Industrial Strategy, the UK government has continued its political focus on addressing societal Grand Challenges such as climate change and clean growth. This focus on mission-oriented and challenge-led research and innovation has driven interdisciplinary working and the need to bring together researchers across disciplines to address these wider issues facing society. Because of this, the importance of researchers across all disciplines – including A&H – is valued across society.

Following the success of the levelling-up agenda, EDI has continued to be an increasingly important topic. This had led to scrutiny across all areas of society including the higher education sector. Fair recruitment processes and the need to ensure equitable access to doctoral provision are of the utmost importance.

Pipeline

Across the last decade there has been an increase in the number of students motivated to pursue a doctoral degree in A&H, with students perceiving doctorates as a good investment opportunity. The reputation of the UK's research sector has continued to flourish and greater numbers of students are applying for A&H doctoral degrees from the UK but also internationally, resulting in high levels of competition for places. Alongside this, significant efforts have been made to ensure access to A&H doctoral education for all, meaning a more diverse population is able to participate.

Doctoral students now demand more from their education. This includes increased support for their wellbeing, as well as in other aspects of their personal and professional development, including career development, mentoring, and training in research, but also in relation to transferable skills.

Skills and employment

Throughout the 2020's and early 2030's, the increased focus on the need for doctoral students to develop transferable skills has continued. Following the success of the Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTP) programmes, and to support students with their personal and professional development, funders have continued efforts to offer more personal support to students and the students have a stronger personal sense of the value of their doctoral education.

Future of work

Workplaces offer greater flexibility around ways of working with high demand for remote working and flexible working opportunities. This has led to less centralised employment and distribution of remote workers across the UK, with remote working opportunities being offered by the public and private sector. This has been accompanied by more flexible job hours

(moving away from 9 to 5 working), greater levels of job mobility, and increased career changes for individuals. Greater numbers of employed people wish to engage in doctoral study part-time, within the portfolio of their activities.

For A&H doctoral provision, this includes more opportunities to utilise online learning provision. This includes students sometimes attending virtual meetings with their supervisor or joining doctoral training provision remotely. This also gives students flexibility to take on extra work to boost their income, if they wish. However, departments continue to encourage A&H doctoral students to commit to their studies full-time and attend in-person meetings on campus whenever possible.

Scenario 2: Market driven

In 2035, labour market trends drive a focus on skills and employability opportunities for A&H doctoral graduates. Employability of A&H doctoral graduates is greater now compared with ten years ago, and non-academic employers are more likely to see A&H doctoral graduates as good investments.

Societal

There is more emphasis on privatisation of key government services. To keep up with the times and research funding structures, AHRC considers the intersections between its work, A&H disciplines and the private sector. Research continues to be an under-utilised tool to support a variety of social challenges. A&H is recognised as a disciplinary area which could support emerging social and economic challenges but, without wider recognition of the value of research, A&H continues to be an undervalued discipline and most of the government's focus remains on STEM subjects.

Skills and employment

A&H doctoral students are better prepared for a variety of careers after graduation than in 2022. During their doctoral degrees A&H doctoral students are made aware of labour market trends and the skills they need to undertake an academic or non-academic job role. A&H doctoral students acknowledge there is a high likelihood that life after graduation may include working in a non-academic environment. Students are therefore taking steps to ensure their skillset and expertise match employer expectations. This includes focusing on developing their digital skills and adapting to remote working. There are also more interdisciplinary research projects, there is more team/group working, and upskilling to match labour market demand.

Employers and the wider non-academic labour market highly value A&H doctoral graduates. Employers need skills and expertise to navigate global challenges and work in an increasingly globalised and digitalised working environment, which A&H doctoral graduates can offer through their critical thinking and leadership and bringing fresh approaches to solve problems. These employers are looking to hire A&H doctoral graduates to help them navigate this new working world and to use their expertise to inform company strategies and deliver projects. Employers who do hire A&H doctoral graduates consider them to be 'good investments' for their companies and are happy to invest the resources to recruit and retain these graduates.

Pipeline

There is a slight uptick in number of students interested in applying for A&H doctoral degrees, seeing it as an avenue to address a wide array of social and economic challenges. These students are more aware that these doctoral degrees are investments, in terms of monetary value and time spent studying, but are willing to join an A&H doctoral degree programme and take on their own research projects. With increased competition to receive A&H doctoral funding and be competitive for A&H doctoral degree places, the issue of student wellbeing remains pertinent. Those students who do enter A&H doctoral degrees on the whole are satisfied with their A&H doctoral education, but they continue to advocate for more career development opportunities.

Future of research work

Digitalisation of the economy has continued, which includes some integration of digital technologies within A&H doctoral provision. This includes the use of digital platforms to facilitate education, continued use of video conferencing technologies to facilitate doctoral training provision and doctoral cohort activities, and use of digital technologies to support A&H doctoral theses (e.g. a virtual thesis). Doctoral theses are now more likely to be related to digital humanities than they were 10 years ago. However, further integration of digital technologies is needed to ready A&H doctoral studies to meet these new (potential) digitalisation opportunities.

During their degrees, some students are taking part in zero-hour contract work, within academic research teams or private sector consultancy teams. This allows them to build relationships with future employers while also developing their skills. The structure of the A&H doctoral degree allows them to do this while also studying full time, leaving students responsible for their time management and own workload.

Scenario 3: High prestige

In 2035, A&H doctoral provision is aligned with wider government agenda and funding structures and highly valued by the government, employers and students. In line, degrees are extended to four years, but without an increase in overall funding envelope, and with no additional efforts to increase access, A&H doctoral studies are high prestige but only accessible to a few.

Societal

2035 sees significant shifts in social attitudes towards the value of research as the government pushes forward with its plans to make the UK a Global Innovation Hub. As the government continues its focus on societal Grand Challenges, laid out in the 2030 Industrial Strategy, there is an increased recognition that research will be needed to address critical issues like climate change and clean growth. In 2035, there are already examples of interdisciplinary research being particularly successful in managing flooding effects, managing mental health and wellbeing, offsetting the cost of living crisis and more. Within these examples, A&H research is recognised – across government and industry – as a key contributor to these successes, and it is recognised that A&H research, alongside other expertise, will be needed to address future challenges.

Funding

In line with this recognition, doctoral programmes are now four years long, with more funding available for each of the four years. This extra time is granted to match other doctoral degree lengths. This allows students to have more time to build their skills, longer time to work on developing their publications or seek out work experience.

Pipeline

However, this increased length of funding means there are fewer AHRC-funded places on these doctoral degree programmes. It is incredibly competitive to receive one of the AHRC-funded doctoral degrees, with cohorts mainly coming from highly-ranked UK university undergraduate and Masters degrees. This has led to some increases in the number of self-funded doctoral students, but the increased cost of living and length of the doctoral degree programme makes this route increasingly difficult. Furthermore, little progress has been made to widen cohorts of doctoral students. The EDI efforts of the early 2020's made some progress, but efforts died out in the 2030's as focus shifted to other areas. Overall, there has not been a significant increase in the supply of students applying for doctoral degrees in the A&H disciplines since 2025, and diversity in access has not increased.

Skills and employment

Students that do enter the A&H doctoral degree are more likely to see this degree as an investment. This is both an investment of time (to build up their skills and experiences) and money (either because they are self-funded, or because they are losing out on potential income/pension contributions they could be earning). Students' expectations of their doctoral degrees are therefore high, and they are proactive in seeking out opportunities to increase their employability. They often talk to their supervisors for career advice. This often results in supervisors connecting them with academic or non-academic experts with whom they can

build a relationship, in addition to students creating their own networks of experts to build mentoring relationships with.

Doctoral students entering A&H degrees are more strategic throughout their degrees, seeking out opportunities to improve their employability. Since 2030, 'improving my career prospects' is the strongest motivation doctoral students have to take a research degree programme. A&H students enter the doctoral degree aware of labour market trends and demands, choosing their research degrees to match these wider trends. This is coupled with a focus on investment in skills within their doctoral degrees. Academic and non-academic employers are therefore more likely to see A&H doctoral students as good investments, and students graduate with the skills and experience needed to contribute across a range of roles.

Scenario 4: Declining focus

In 2035, there is declining political support for A&H research and an unstable economic environment. A period of political and economic uncertainty has meant that investment in the research sector is no longer a priority, leading to a stagnant job market, and a decline in the value placed on doctoral education.

Societal

Following a period of upheaval in the 2020's, the global economy was plunged into a recession and, although recovering, there has continued to be both political and economic uncertainty. There has been a small but significant rise in misinformation, with society increasingly distrustful of facts and evidence. As a result, there has been a decline in recognition of the value – and potential impacts – of academic research.

The increasing political and economic uncertainty has resulted in a more divided society, with less attention to globalisation and multiculturalism. There has been a gradual decline in considerations of EDI over time. As a result, equal access to opportunities both in education and the workplace is no longer a high priority. Instead, government and civil society focuses on strengthening and rebuilding sections of the economy.

Funding

The UK Government has re-prioritised funds away from the UK higher education sector in order to support other sectors of the economy. There is still some research funding available to support specific R&D projects, but this funding is only available for projects which can directly support the labour market or economy. Decreased political support and reduced research budgets have hit A&H subjects particularly hard as the smaller pots of funding have been more targeted towards STEM subjects. In turn, A&H research departments have looked for funding through private sector avenues, international grants, or attraction of international students to support A&H doctoral provision.

Skills and employment

As a result of the stagnant job market, there has been a decline in the employability of A&H doctoral students following graduation. Employers, working within a challenging economic environment, place more emphasis on STEM skills than the skills developed within an A&H doctoral degree. Employers recognise that A&H doctoral graduates are critical thinkers and can work in multinational environments, but there are few jobs where these skills are in demand.

Pipeline

Across the last decade there has been a decrease in the number of students motivated to pursue a doctoral degree in A&H. The UK's reputation for being a global centre for excellent research is waning. The UK still produces top quality research but mostly in the STEM disciplines where funding has been directed. The UK's A&H disciplines are attracting a number of international students at the undergraduate and Master's level, but many of these international students do not progress to the doctoral level in the UK due to funding uncertainties and post-graduation employment concerns.

Strong candidates who could undertake an A&H doctoral degree no longer see it as a good investment. With lack of funding/uncertainty around funding an A&H doctoral degree, and no certain job prospects post-graduation, students are choosing instead to enter the job market quickly to gain the skills they need for their careers. Among those students who do undertake an A&H doctoral degree, there is a high proportion of self-funded A&H doctoral students who struggle with the cost of living, while funded A&H doctoral students find their funding insufficient to cover their daily costs. This drives up the number of part-time A&H doctoral students and students take on other virtual or in-person opportunities to work through their degrees. This also drives increases the length of studying and leads to higher dropout rates.