

## **PGR Communities & Experience Event Report**

24th August 2017

RSIO

The following report details the main discussion points and suggestions recorded at the above event held on 24/08/2017 by RSIO at the Senate Room, University of Glasgow. There was enthusiastic participation from colleagues across the University willing to share their experiences and offer meaningful suggestions to improve the lives of our PGR students.

### **Delegates**

There were around 70 delegates in attendance on the day which is an improvement from the June event and a strong contingency of PG convenors which was very much welcomed. As before, there was a strong turnout from professional services and most Schools/Institutes had a representative from either academic or administrative staff. There were around 10-15 PGR students in attendance.

### **Speakers**

**Building a multi-institutional community**, Prof Dee Heddon, Dean of the Scottish Graduate School of Arts & Humanities

- Professor Heddon discussed the diverse facets of and challenges of building a large multi-institutional community from scratch in the SGSAH. This has required inter-institutional collaboration across Scotland and sensitivity to geographical challenges in making this succeed. While students and the student experience are the core consideration, the community extends beyond this to include, among others, staff, supervisors and external partners. An understanding of the nature of community / communities is helpful to understand the multiple, overlapping and diverse communities that students participate in and how this changes over time as well as that communities can exclude as well as include.

**Building a postgrad community at the University of Warwick**, Gemma Marakas, University of Warwick

- Dr. Gemma Marakas, Postgraduate Community Development Manager, described her work leading a team at the University of Warwick Library that focuses on building community for PG students. Their position in the Library is helpful as it is additional to as well as alternative to communities found in academic units giving students another outlet or place where they feel they belong. They have worked to create spaces and activities that students value, to improve induction processes and online support for students, support the development of student-led cultural activities and develop resources for wellbeing and peer mentoring. While this work has only been in progress for a couple of years, it has been measurably successful in making a positive impact on the PG student experience.

**Emerging themes from the PG Research Experience Survey**, Sian Collins, Ambitious Futures, Graduate Project Officer

- Sian outlined trends and key areas for attention within the PRES survey conducted from February – May 2017. Overall student satisfaction at Glasgow is high in comparison to Russell Group and national averages (84% agree they are satisfied

with their research degree here) but scores have fallen from 2013. This is a similar pattern seen across the rest of the survey. A significant trend emerging was that we are seeing a steady decline in response rates from students paired with a dissatisfaction from students as to how the University handles feedback. There must be a concerted effort at all levels to ensure students are aware we take their feedback seriously and there is a visible impact from such feedback. In addition, Sian highlighted a number of areas where we need to improve our performance. Most notably, only 62% (and 52% of PT researchers) agree that they have the opportunity to become involved in the wider research community beyond their department. Further, 57% of researchers feel they have access to adequate PG social spaces – something that we may see in further decline through the campus redevelopment.

### **PGR Experience in Dumfries**, Elisabeth Loose, Postgraduate Researcher in Interdisciplinary Studies

- Elisabeth spoke about her experiences as part of a very small community of PGRs at the campus in Dumfries. It has been very difficult to build a sense of community or belonging where the numbers are small and students work in quite different disciplines. It can be difficult to combat feelings of isolation. While they have their own dedicated workspaces, there are generally few students present and it is located away from staff which makes connecting with them informally quite difficult.

### **Discussion**

Areas of the PGR Experience discussed:

- How the University deals with feedback;
- Supervisors identifying training needs;
- Social spaces;
- 'I want to quit my PhD';
- Stressed out students;
- Community building;
- Seminar Programmes.

Below are some of the main discussion points and suggestions offered by delegates on the day:

- **How the University deals with feedback**
  - Some students felt that the tone of official communication from Schools/Research Institutes can lack 'inclusivity' and reinforce the idea that you are alone as a researcher. Are we aware of our diverse audience of students when we communicate with them and of the language and tone we deploy?
  - Are students aware of the roles and responsibilities of staff in their department who can help them and where feedback should be directed next?
  - There was a sense that a dedicated webpage or directory might be useful for students or supervisors to provide more of a one-stop shop for information. The work that colleagues in Students Services have done on their webpages is probably not widely known, especially amongst staff. This is still a work in progress but is worth looking at:

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/students/> at the top level, or more specifically: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/students/wellbeing/>

- **Supervisors identifying training needs**
  - There must be a cultural recognition that the QAA guidelines indicate that students are supported by supervisory *teams* and that as a sector we are moving away from the 'apprentice model' to one where students are embedded in a broader system of support;
  - Are supervisors aware of the support networks available to them and are they prepared to undergo specific training to develop their skills? Supervisors express interest in specific training to meet specific needs but resist generic 'supervisor training'.
  - Supervisors would benefit from the existence of peer networks of supervisors in and out of their disciplines;
  - PD&R currently only asks about whether supervisors enable their students to submit on time but doesn't cover quality of supervision – there is no way to formally assess the quality of supervision provided or censure poor performance;
  - Development of researchers can depend on the individual relationship with their supervisor and we should encourage students to seek advice in when things are not going well. PG Convenors or local administrators are a good place to start.
  - It was noted that staff were insufficiently aware of the range of training opportunities available for their students and that a portal of some sort would be useful. However, **this exists here:** <http://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/rsio/researcherdevelopment/> and this includes links through to Graduate School pages.
  - While there were comments that centralised provision for researcher development might be preferable, it was noted that it has long been agreed that students should see this as coming from their Graduate School and RSIO works to support this conception.
  
- **Social Spaces**
  - It is hotly debated where spaces for PGRs are more effective – local or central - although it is suggested that providing a balance between these two would be desirable;
  - It was also noted that spaces needed to be both useful and flexible.
  - Physical space won't be successful merely on its own. There needs to be facilitation and support for events and opportunities to use social spaces;
  - Gemma Marakas noted that experience from Warwick suggested that students like both staff-led and student-led activities and we should be prepared to accommodate this;
  - Introduction of 'Research Garden' into new campus rebuild and opportunity for us to use outside spaces.
  
- **'I want to quit my PhD...'**
  - There should be a consideration as to whether or not a student 'quitting' is necessarily the wrong decision for them. The term 'quit' indicates a failure and

there are many legitimate and even positive reasons for students to discontinue their studies;

- Staff should think about how to manage the expectations of students at early stages in their doctoral work to avoid issues later on. This is also a consideration for recruitment and selection of students in the first place;
  - Are staff aware of the peer networks available to students and is there a place for them to speak to other students about their worries?
  - PG Convenors must be better supported in understanding how to signpost and facilitate students in this position through more targeted training;
  - Can PGR Convenors and supervisors be trained in mediation?
  - Reasons for leaving: health, personal circumstances, financial reasons, breakdown of trust in supervisor relationship, job offers, loss of interest.
- **Stressed out students**
    - Signposting issues exist and whether or not provision should be held locally or centrally. If there are better provisions in certain local areas this could lead to an 'internal postcode lottery' for support;
    - One Institute has their own handbook for wellbeing – is this something that could be produced centrally to avoid reinventing this in various ways across the institution;
    - Enrolment is one of the first experiences students have with is and this is a frustrating and impersonal process. More effort should be made to ensure students are aware of who they can go to for support;
    - It would be useful to identify and combat specific stressors that students experience as well as find ways to reduce stress overall.
    - The University needs to improve the resources that it puts into this to relieve pressure on Services such as the Counselling and Psychological Services team.
    - Do students know how to identify stress and help each other, especially as stress is infectious? **RSIO piloting identifying stress courses in October 2017.**
  - **Community Building**
    - Coherent effort by staff and students to facilitate social events and spaces would support the development of networks and communities.
    - Warwick's idea of weekly coffee and cake for PGRs as an opportunity for students to build trust with staff and create their own networks has been quite successful;
    - Buddying system for students previously set up by SRC was short-lived but viewed positively. A possible initiative that Schools/RI's could organise locally so that incoming PGRs have someone further along in their career to talk to;
    - We should be showcasing best practices of community building. [PGR Development Blog](#) is a great space to do this and we would welcome examples of best practice to showcase.

- **Seminar Programmes**

- Some Schools have seen success in asking staff to attend a certain number of sessions a year to encourage uptake from all members of the department. This is supported by, crucially, providing engaging content that all want to attend;
- If students are required to attend seminar purely as a mechanism to gain credits to progress, does it encourage meaningful engagement or development?
- One issue often raised is that it is difficult to know what is happening outside of your local area to attend seminars that are of broader interest. Further, efforts to encourage this have met with resistance.
- There is a sense that sessions are not always accessible to the full range of students, e.g. part time or distance students, and thought should be given to how to make these more inclusive.

**Points to take away:**

- There is tension between what is provided centrally and what is provided locally. There are varying opinions as to what is done best where and by whom. Where provision is provided locally it can be targeted and relevant but this puts potential barriers in place to share provision and not waste energy constantly reinventing the wheel. How to resolve this is challenging as our culture as an institution is highly decentralised. Consideration might be given as to how our institutional boundaries might become more permeable.
- Student wellbeing is a key and ongoing concern for staff and students. Continuing this institutional dialogue is extremely important. RSIO will continue to coordinate with Graduate Schools, pilot activities such as the lunchtime walks and gardening sessions and champion this across the university. **A resource is beginning to take shape here:** <http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/postgraduateresearch/pgrwellbeing/> and feedback is welcome.
- Communication and information provision is a recurring theme across all of these discussions. Where staff and students find information when they need it is of continuing concern.
- Development and training for supervisors is another strong theme from the discussions. There are a number of things that supervisors directly express interest in knowing more about or needing support in. This is contrast to the sentiments expressed when the issue of 'supervisor training' is raised. There is a persistent notion that supervisor training is training on how to be a supervisor and that this isn't useful. How more effective, targeted and meaningful support could be delivered to supervisors needs to be considered.

**Next Steps:**

- We are still carrying out a review as to how we should feedback to researchers and would ask you to **ask researchers** in your department/area how they would like to see feedback delivered back to them;
- You will also have **ongoing practices** in your department that we would like for you to **share** with us so we can disseminate and showcase best practice;

- Please feedback to us by the **25<sup>th</sup> September 2017** so this can feed into our review and help decide how we interact with researchers.

RSIO welcome any further discussion on any of the points raised and contact details can be found below:

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