

PGR Town Hall Meeting Summary – 08/01/2021

This document is a summary of the points raised and the actions resulting from the PGR Town Hall meeting held on 8 January 2021, open to reps and all PGR students.

Dedicated PGR Representation

- New Doctoral College Officer will be starting soon – unavoidable delays.
- All full-time officers represent all students, including PGR.

PGR Wellbeing

- Wellbeing week in first week of February, all online, looking at different themes within student wellbeing. Would love to hear how PGR issues could feed into all the days rather than have a PGR-specific day, but would be great to have feedback now.
- Efforts made by the Uni are pretty good, but mental wellbeing has still taken a hit.
- PGRs can apply for funding extensions, but it would be useful to know how much student wellbeing impacts that application, since the application is based directly on impact of lockdown on research progression. The main concern is how much mental wellbeing will go into consideration.
- Interruptions – some people need to take an interruption but can't afford to, particularly if funded by the College.
- Internships – Would be good to link people up with alternative options of income if they take an interruption.
- Anxiety and frustration as all of the things that you can do out of labs were already done in first lockdown.
- UKRI – In other research sectors, people are being given extensions of funding and time, but PhD students aren't. Funding bodies don't appear to be looking out for students in the same way as other sectors are looking out for their researchers.
- Research participants also don't want to participate at this time as they have their own concerns.
- Students buried in a constant stream of emails – makes it harder to find the key information and adds extra stress. Would be useful to summarise and also have a schedule of dates that can be checked.
- PGR Welfare officer is overworked.
- Library access is a concern – can't access physical books where there is no digital equivalent.
- Financial concerns about finishing PhDs and where to go next.
- Isolation and self-doubt are amplified. Peer support connects people together.
- Current provisions – Departments are running online social sessions to catch up and discuss work, including WIP and Shut Up and Write.
- Guild Advice running a "come and chat" open session.
- Distance learners – never identified with the University before, but now there is more focus on online provision, they feel more connected. This should be continued.
- PG students working from home, potentially shielding, but needing to come into an office for their own wellbeing, which needs additional support.

- International students particularly affected by isolation – should think about special provision and focus on supporting international students.
- International students need visa extensions – no reply from Admissions. Would be useful for the University and Guild to work together on providing more clarification.
- Students who are not in their final year and haven't been guaranteed an extension don't know if their visas will be extended to cover the rest of their studies.
- MP can help lobby the government to guarantee something for international students to guarantee that if they get an extension, they won't be removed from the country.
- Everything to do with student experience is a wellbeing concern right now.

Access to Facilities and Resources

- Where research all online, haven't been directly affected by the inability to continue, but there are issues with accessing datasets from home as approval can take up to 3 weeks.
- Help and support requests with external partners, e.g. Met Office, have to go through online helpdesks which can take a few days to reply to, which all adds up.
- The ability to get a direct response to solve an issue by just going to someone's office isn't there.
- Major issue with communication in finding out when people were allowed to access certain facilities. Some buildings like IAIS had an even longer delay on returning than the others.
- Cumulative effect of not being able to access labs, particularly with live projects, and some of those having to be reset or changed, further delaying additional work.
- Training and experiments also impacted due to COVID restrictions on social distancing, room capacity, etc.
- Disparity between departments on provision of IT facilities and office space – there needs to be more parity on what students are given.
- Biosciences is a good model for how office space is shared – some staff have left their offices open for students to use if student offices reach capacity. The University should look into distributing offices more fairly. There are corridors of offices sitting empty.
- There are also desks going unused in other buildings – have PGR students who live in other locations been allocated desks that they have never asked for and will never use?
- Fieldwork and human participation research is highly affected. Ethics approval is also delayed. Guild President sits on University Ethics board.
- Government guidance does not include what spaces PGR students are allowed to access. This can be taken to the NUS to put national pressure on the government to provide this guidance.
- In Metamaterials someone had decided to reduce an office capacity to 8 seemingly without any guidance to do so, even though capacity had already been reduced from the maximum in line with social distancing guidance and already had a booking system and tracing. Rationale for this decision needs to be given as it is not in line with current guidance.
- There is new guidance on the new variant, but we can make sure decisions aren't being made without justification and a risk assessment. You have a right to ask to see the risk assessment that affects your working area.

- Every building should have a Restart Coordinator who can be contacted. It would be good to put PGR Reps and Restart Coordinators in touch with each other.
- Advice and communication on facilities from the University seems to focus on either taught students or staff – PGRs are not considered.

Open Floor Discussion

COVID – No Detriment Policy, Extensions and Job Opportunities

- Undergraduates have a No Detriment Policy and there's also something similar for staff, in terms of not being penalised if they don't hit their target for number of publications they are expected to put out in the year. The only thing that PGR students have is they can submit a statement saying how their research has been affected, there is no similar consideration for lack of publications. What is the University doing to support post-research employment opportunities for PGR students who do not have the expected publications?
- What would an equivalent policy look like for PGR students?
- Some PGRs were granted a 6-month extension on the basis of being back in September (even though some weren't allowed back on campus until November).
- There needs to be another review of financial support and extensions.
- Would be good if the University could offer some part-time jobs for finishing PGR students, e.g. assisting professors, to help fill the gap in academic CVs.
- The University should also set the bar lower for required publications and experience.
- Would be good for the University to also extend post-PhD support for graduating students, e.g. publication and employment support.
- Career Zone employment support seems to be tailored to undergraduates – would be useful to encourage them to offer more post-PhD support for researchers.
- If a student is really suffering with their wellbeing and are therefore unable to express how that is impacting their research, how would they get a funding extension? People who are suffering but with less-obvious outward symptoms may be less likely to get an extension.
- There is uncertainty about applying for extensions in the current unpredictable climate. Someone who doesn't need an extension now also doesn't necessarily want to leave it until next year and realise they do actually need one, but by then having missed any chance to apply for one. This can be raised with the Doctoral College and DVC Research to see what future support will be like both from the University and external funders.
- The waiting list for a professional diagnosis is long. Extension forms should be framed to get support where it's needed, not to provide a diagnosis.

COVID – Support for PGRs from the University

- Supervisor role is very important – Supervisors should be given more guidance and support on how to help their students, listen to their problems and diagnose what their specific issues are.
- The University and the Guild should work together on reminding students about their Pastoral Tutors as somewhere to go for support if it's needed.
- It would be interesting to know how many PGRs use their Pastoral Tutors – the system in IAIS and Physics hasn't worked for years.

Doctoral College Support

- It would be good if the Doctoral College would hold a Q and A session so PGR students can ask specific questions about funding extensions, career support etc.

Accommodation

- Uni accommodation contract ends in the middle of July and some students won't be able to return home over the summer. Should students be applying now, or a bit later, and should they be applying for July accommodation or September accommodation?
- The University do usually provide accommodation over the summer – <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/accommodation/students/currentstudents/summer/>.
- University needs to provide reassurance that students will not be homeless if they stay.
- Students' Guild Advice service can provide support and advice on accommodation – <https://www.exeterguild.org/advice/>.
- Guild Accommodation Fair in February. This is not too late as the landlords and estate agents try to drive the market early (November / December) to secure their own revenue. There is enough accommodation for the number of students we have in the city. Students are encouraged to wait to make sure they're not paying more than the value of the accommodation or moving into sub-standard accommodation. There will also be contract checking and housemate finder services available from February.
- We can look up Acorn, the tenants' union, and see what joint activity we may be able to do. They now have an Exeter branch.

Self-Funded Student Fees

- Self-funded students who have fees, accommodation and other expenses – some have jobs but can't work and aren't furloughed. Some of these are also students with children. Are there any waivers for self-funded student fees?
- There is always a focus on undergraduate fees, but the NUS have brought this up to the Universities Minister before with emphasis on international, self-funded and part-time students.
- Current Government position is that any student who wants a refund will have to file an independent claim or complaint to the University to say why they want their money back. This may get escalated to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.
- Campaigns do exist in some universities about student fees, but these are usually around undergraduate fees. If something similar would be useful here for PGRs, your Students' Guild can help make that happen, and we can also raise these conversations with senior managers.

New PGR Reps and Handover

- New Reps now have access to Guild website.
- All students being told who their Reps are this evening.
- PGR Rep Handover is next week.

Students' Guild and UCU

- A lot of PGRs are also employed by the University, mostly as Postgraduate Teaching Assistants (PTAs).
- It's important to make the distinction that the Guild represents PGRs in their capacity as students, and UCU represent PGRs in their capacity as employed members of staff.
- UCU is free to join for PhD students so they can represent you when you teach alongside your PhD and have any concerns about teaching as members of staff.
- Issues about your staff role, employment, and your PTA contract can go to UCU.
- Information about Exeter's UCU PGR Officer can be found [online](#).

Actions from the Meeting

- All officers to raise these concerns in the fortnightly meeting with the Deputy Registrar. (19/01/2021)
- VP Education to raise these concerns to the Doctoral College. (19/01/2021)
- VP Education to meet with the Head of Student Employability and Academic Success to discuss employability initiatives tailored for PGR students. (Meeting scheduled for 29/01/2021)
- Guild President to take concerns about delays in and disruptions in Ethics Approval process to the Ethics Board.
- VP Welfare and Diversity to incorporate feedback about wellbeing in the organisation of Wellbeing so that it incorporates the needs of PGR students.