

PGR Open Forum Meeting Summary – 05/03/2021

This document is a summary of the points raised and the actions resulting from the PGR Open Forum meeting held on 5 March 2021, open to reps and all PGR students.

Staff in attendance

- Penny Dinh – VP Education (chair)
- Prof Andrew McRae – Dean of Postgraduate Research and the Exeter Doctoral College (AM)
- Fiona Pac-Soo – Assistant Director, Research Environment and Doctoral College (FPS)
- Elaine Cordy – Head of Postgraduate Research Support, Doctoral College (EC)
- Chris Wood – Head of Researcher Development and Research Culture, Doctoral College (CW)
- Charlotte Juggins – PGR and ECR Experience Officer, Doctoral College (CJ)

Follow-up from January Meeting

- Lots of feedback last time around employability and careers support for PGR students.
- Meetings have been set up with Researcher Development and Career Zone, focused on making it easier for PGR students to access information about career support.
- Created a resource around gaining academic experience during COVID.
- Feedback around wellbeing and loneliness - VP Activities has organised an icebreaker event for PGRs. We can do more of these as part of Get Connected, which has more events coming up: <https://www.exeterguild.org/get-connected/>. Please give us feedback on how to make these more relevant to PGR students.
- Find out more about what has been done as a result of the last meeting in the Actions Updates: <https://www.exeterguild.org/asset/Event/6001/PGR-Open-Forum-Meeting-Action-Update.pdf>

Doctoral College Updates

- Doctoral College plan - discussing wellbeing actions resulting from earlier student feedback.
- Progress check system - this comes in advance of unsatisfactory progress to discuss targets. This should help enhance wellbeing discussions with supervisors and help triage them more quickly.
- Improvements in policy around immigration compliance.
- Looking at improving supervisor training for wellbeing support.
- The Doctoral College Action plan will be published soon, once people have fed into it.

Tuition Fee Refunds

- General consensus was that students are generally happy with the support that had been given, but it should be done on a case-by-case basis.
- Some people have been granted extensions so a refund wouldn't be needed, but that may depend on whether they get an unfunded time extension or a funding extension.
- Some self-funded students have been offered extension scholarships, which also negates the need for a refund.

- Sometimes an extension won't work and a refund may be better, but an extension seems to make more sense generally.
- Some students continue to receive supervision, support, and access to facilities and resources, but a lot of students have lost contact with supervisors.
- Remedial action and support from supervisors (or to connect back up with supervisors) is more important than refund.
- Query around how a refund would work if it's a funded studentship by the Uni or UKRI. Would the refund go back to them?

Supervision

- Supervision is pretty individual so it's hard to summarise.
- Some supervisors have disappeared, but students haven't given further updates on this.
- Supervisors have mixed understanding of what wellbeing support is available for students, and what extensions are available.
- Some people found out from other communications that they were able to access office space even though their supervisors hadn't told them.
- People felt their supervisors were working hard; the issue is more with lockdown and the fact that so many more responsibilities have been put on them, taking away time they can spend on their students.
- Some people are waiting a while for feedback on work.
- Suggestion to extend the amount of staff hours allocated to supervision. Teaching workload has massively increased and so there is less time to take care of PhD students. Some supervisors have too many PhD students. Need to ensure the workload of supervisors is adequately allocated.
- Pastoral tutors – some are not pro-active at reaching out to students, and don't understand their own role.
- Cultural competence in Pastoral Support - some WP and international students, refugees etc, need tailored pastoral support which isn't necessarily provided by their pastoral tutor.
- Doctoral College could investigate how tutors are allocated.

Study Space (Labs, Offices and Access)

- People are generally happy but didn't really know they could book study spaces themselves.
- Most students would prefer to have their own allocated space.
- Some students felt it was quite complicated to get back onto campus, so they decided to stay away, even if they thought it would be better for their productivity and/or mental health to return.
- It is worth pointing out how relatively easy it is to book a study space.
- International students who are living in studios may not have a dedicated workspace or the opportunity to set up a home office. This is also impractical for many other students.
- Not clear how many people are aware of the financial help that the Uni provides, including help for poor wi-fi.

- Some PGRs have been asked back to teach but weren't able to use their PGR office/desk at all, whether for teaching prep or research. Some have been asked to teach in-person in the morning and then have to book out a room to teach a digital session in the afternoon.
- There are continuing issues where students aren't using the desks they've been allocated, even though there's a shortage of desks. Students don't want to give up their desk in case they may need them in the future.
- Students generally didn't feel that the bookable desk solution was particularly useful, as you can't carry your books around, move equipment, etc. Also a bookable desk doesn't make you feel part of the research community and you're still quite isolated.
- Desk space is generally controlled by the departments not the Doctoral College.
- Colleges have been told to prioritise space for PGRs as part of Restart Research.
- DVCs for Research and Education need to talk to each other to ensure there's a balance in terms of how that space is best used, and the impact of teaching priorities on PGR priorities.
- There is a lack of awareness of space available on campus for PGR students. The Old Library PGR study space is still available.
- Room temperature and opening hours are still an issue. Temperature resource: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/temperature/faq.htm>

Open Floor Discussion

Sick Pay Policy

- Brought to the front from the previous Town Hall meeting, but was something the Doctoral College were planning to work on this year anyway.
- Looking to get approval to develop a sick pay policy, based on the existing UKRI policy, which would apply to Uni studentships, stipends etc.
- Approval is needed from numerous University committees because there are financial implications to this.
- Doctoral College Management Group will be consulted to develop the details of the policy over the rest of this academic year. VP Education sits on this group.
- There was a request to set up a working party with students – students will be involved, likely through VP Education and Doctoral College Officer first.
- Some students are entitled to sick pay through UKRI, but the current provision is not useful for people with disabilities or long-term chronic conditions. The Uni policy should be developed in-line with students who know what their needs are, rather than introducing something that doesn't support students with long-term conditions.
- The Doctoral College want to learn from the UKRI experience, as what they want to develop will likely be similar to that by default, but they understand that may not be optimal.
- UKRI students are able to have up to 13 weeks within a 12 month period of paid sick leave, but this doesn't necessarily work for people with recurrent issues which last for less than 1 month. This model is better than nothing, but falls short on some major points and shouldn't be seen as a good model.
- VP Education has been liaising with the Disabled and Chronically Ill Network while working with the Doctoral College to get this policy planning started.
- It is important to consider any students who need the new policy applied

retroactively.

- There is an example of a student who had their visa revoked against their wishes while they were on medical interruption in their home country.
- The Student Absence Policy, which already exists, outlines when you need medical certification etc, how to report absence, and potential impact on Tier 4 sponsorship <http://as.exeter.ac.uk/academic-policy-standards/tqa-manual/its/studentillness/>
- The Sick Pay Policy for Uni-funded students is also related to students being absent due to illness, but not the same thing.

Get Connected

- Initiatives are being put in place for all students to have a social space to meet each other.
- Ice-breaker event for all PGR students set up by VP Activities, let us know if you want any more events like that in the future!

Doctoral College Officer

- The new College Officer has started - this was announced in an email last week, and in yesterday's PG newsletter.
- Please let us know how we can continue to improve transparency to PGRs around progress and what our officers are working on.
- PG Newsletter comes out once a month, but let us know how else we could communicate to PGR students.

Upcoming PGR Events

- International Research Ethics Conference: papers have been submitted from all around the world, and there are cross-discipline workshops. Team of organisers from across the South West and Wales, including doctoral researchers and local organisations. It's free, abstracts are open, closes on 15 March. Using a platform called Hop-In. Scheduled for 25 June but may need to go to two days. <https://www.researchethicsconference.co.uk/>
- Doctoral College events: Research Showcase is in May. 3-Minute Thesis, Tweet your Thesis, etc. All online. Can help build your CV. <http://www.exeter.ac.uk/doctoralcollege/events/research-showcase/>
- PGR Humanities symposium in the last week of term (on Teams), everyone welcome if you want to come along. Themes: love & affection, regeneration & decay, resilience & hope.
- Looking to do a PGR conference on anything to do with Arab and Islamic Studies, open to people from any department who is researching anything relevant.
- Special Interest Groups created for anyone in the University, including Ethics.
- Applications are open for Online Researcher-Led Initiatives Funding Award Scheme - <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/doctoralcollege/researcherdevelopment/initiativeawards/>

Postdoc Opportunities

- Suggestion of possible short-term postdocs being created, e.g. up to 1 year, for people to have opportunities when they finish their PhD and give them time and space to publish.
- Students may be happy to have a reduced pay-rate, e.g. the same as what they get now, and just want that extra time to be able to get something published. Would be an added cost.
- There is an academic policy about no detriment with respect to publishing, in relation to professional development and advancement of staff researchers not being affected by lack of research output, and while the exact thing wouldn't work for PhD students, something else to support students through publications as a result of COVID would be great to help with academic CVs.
- It is unlikely that the University would be able to do anything like this because of the expense, but the Doctoral College are aware of the position that PGR students are in.
- Some external societies are trying to put money into postdocs, so the Doctoral College will try and find out more about what's available and help support students to apply for those.
- There would also be ethical issues around employment rates.
- Your Students' Guild officers can raise these things with UCU.

Actions from the Meeting

- VP Education to share the meeting summary with relevant senior colleagues at University of Exeter.
- VP Education to liaise with UCU about post-doc opportunities for PGR graduates
- PGR reps to identify specific examples of poor supervision and lack of contact from supervisors to raise with FPS

You can contact your VP Education on social media at @ExeEducation and by email on vpeducation@exeterguild.com, and you can contact your Doctoral College Officer on social media at @ExeDCOfficer and by email on doctoralofficer@exeterguild.com.

You can also find your PGR student reps online at <https://www.exeterguild.org/findyourrep/>