

PGR Let's Talk Summary – 29/10/2021

This document is a summary of the points raised and the actions resulting from the PGR Let's Talk meeting held on 29 October 2021, open to reps and all PGR students.

Sickness Absence

- As part of the PGR Wellbeing Action Plan, the Doctoral College have a Sickness Absence Steering Group this year to look at policy and processes around health and wellbeing support, and how sickness absence and annual leave are recorded and supported.
- The new Sickness Absence Stipend Policy aligns University-funded studentships with UKRI-funded. Allows for a continuation of stipend and a corresponding extension in relation to any medical absence for up to 13 weeks in any 12-month period. The full policy can be found on the [Doctoral College website](#).
- The Doctoral College are also looking at how to adapt the policy to support students with underlying health conditions which may result in short absences outside of interruption. The Policy will be updated again once the wider review is completed.
- Where external funders have their own policy, that one will take precedence. The new Uni one aligns with the UKRI policy and offers the same level of provision – the UKRI policy should be linked alongside the University policy.
- Part-time students should have pro-rata equivalents, but that will need to be checked against the UKRI policy and clarified.
- There doesn't appear to be a longer pro-rata extension (or mode of study change) if a student has a phased return. This provision isn't currently clear but will be picked up by the Steering Group, again based on the UKRI policy.
- This policy only applies to the student themselves being sick, but interruptions and changes to mode of attendance are available for students who need to take time off to care for others. A conversation about flexibility of attendance would be useful.
- Sickness leave request approval is linked to the existing policy on applying for interruption based on medical grounds.
- The wording regarding sick pay if you're also a PTA will be looked at again to make it clearer.

Return to Campus and Remote Working

- Lots of good things around inclusion for remote workers have come from Covid. Concerns were raised that some of this will be lost in the excitement to come back to campus.
- A Yammer group has been set up for distance-based students:
<https://web.yammer.com/main/groups/eyJfdHlwZSI6Ikdya3VwliwiaWQiOiI4MjQ2OTk4NjMwNCJ9/all>
- Concerns were raised over seminars, core sessions that are part of the course, and other events not including remote access options.
- There is no central control over meeting and seminar organisation, but conversations are happening with department Directors of Postgraduate Research about how blended sessions can be facilitated.

- Distance-based courses would have been designed with a distance-based approach from the start, but for other courses where that was never the design – there is an expectation that this is a temporary arrangement and that these students will revert to normal attendance.

Pastoral Tutors and Supervisors

- Pastoral tutors are valuable as a sounding board for issues within academia, but particularly in small departments they are likely to also be close to your supervisor which could be problematic.
- There will be discussions at department level as part of this year's Quality Review to find out what works in different departments so the Doctoral College can put in place steps to make things better and share best practice, as well as making sure departments are keeping up with their responsibilities.
- The Business School now allow students to request a Pastoral Tutor from different departments – the policy can be found [online](#).
- Doctoral College should support students - if people don't fill in their MyPGR what's supposed to happen? There are automatic emails but nobody checks in. It could/should have more oversight, possibly external.
- There have been discussions with College DPGRs over how use of MyPGR could be improved. There are automatic emails sent when a contact point is but nobody external checks up on this. It should have more oversight.
- There is potentially a systems issue (this may not be possible, but a case could be made), and a resource issue (this would be a significant amount of work and probably wouldn't be appropriate for most of PGR Support to get involved).

Industrial Action

- Two sides – PGRs as students affected by staff going on strike, and PGRs who are working as PTAs and/or are members of UCU themselves.
- There are issues between wanting to support the Union, and not wanting to stop teaching their students if they specifically don't have any of the issues around what the current ballots are about.
- Ongoing debate around the "four fights" – [UCU - Four fights dispute FAQs](#); [UCU - Our Four Fights](#).

Open Floor Discussion

- Some students have a loyalty to their supervisor but there may be something they're not completely satisfied with - how do we deal with that without negatively impacting supervisors' standing? Pastoral tutors in other departments might help this, and the new "Working with your Supervisor" training may cover this.
- Ethics is a problem - there is a new system and there isn't a clear transfer of data from the old system. If you can't get past Ethics Committee, how do you proceed with trying to meet your deadline? Ethics system is very different in different colleges.

Actions from the Meeting

- Investigate whether the concept of pastoral tutors in other departments is something that could be viably extended across the University, and if so, how students would be able to take this up.
- Investigate whether a specific distance-based PGR rep is viable.

You can contact your VP Education on social media at @ExeVPEducation and by email on vpeducation@exeterguild.com, your VP Liberation and Equality at @ExeVPLiberation and by email on vpliberation@exeterguild.com, and 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/>