PGR Let's Talk Summary – 11/03/2022

This document is a summary of the points raised and the actions resulting from the PGR Let's Talk meeting held on 11 March 2022, open to reps and all PGR students.

Updates from the Doctoral College

- Ukraine – All Ukrainian and Russian students have been identified and communicated with by the University to advise on the support available, including students and staff in surrounding countries on fieldwork. Also discussing wider impacts with funding bodies around impact of travel restrictions and projects with Russian partners.
- Faculty Restructure – The new University structure has been approved by Senate. The Doctoral College is "Out of Scope", meaning very few changes are expected to PGR support. Management of PGRs within the new Faculties and Departments will change but that won't directly impact students' supervision arrangements etc. Some students may be part of disciplines that will be combined with other departments.
- Review of AMR (Annual Monitoring Review) process to make sure it's efficient. There is a questionnaire open until 1 April – click here to access.
- Temporary arrangements for remote study due to Covid will be ending soon. Survey soon to find out where students are – UKVI may remove visas from students not in the UK.
- Improvements have been made to the medical interruption process and sickness absence stipend policy. Now working on a general student absence policy, going for approval in June. Looking to see how students can log their own sickness and other absence, possibly in Trent.
- Pastoral Tutor Review – This is a major theme of the Quality Review process this year as it has come up from students as a concern in the past. The aim to review good practice in different colleges, and any feedback from students.
- Researcher Development – starting to phase back in hybrid and face-to-face events alongside online resources, plus some opportunities for paid PGR work to develop those. "Shut Up and Write" on Teams continues to be active – this is a good way for PGRs to connect. Funding to deliver Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion and Equality (DICE) training for supervisors.

Future of Work

- Future of Work aims to formalise and build on the changes to ways of working that have evolved over the last two years.
- Focus groups with reps last term.
- Most of the work currently affects PGRs who are PTAs (or employed by the University in another capacity), rather than all PGRs.
- Feasibility review to enable optimal use of University space, but don't expect any short-term changes for PGRs; space will continue to be managed locally.
- (View the slides here?)

Registration Status of PGR Students after Submission

- Concern over whether PGRs are still considered "students" after they have submitted their theses before they have their viva, and after their viva if they have amendments. This includes access to resources and support from supervisors.
- Yes, in both instances they are considered to be current students.
- Supervisors don't receive any allocated hours after submission, but are still expected to support students in the leadup to their viva and through their amendments.
- If Resubmission is required, a PGR returns to full student status.
- Library access should continue, but there may be local college restrictions.
- As they are current students, representation continues.
- Students with specific concerns over their registration status can contact PGR Support.

Upgrade Referrals and Deferrals

- Some students are concerned that Upgrade is too early; this is mostly from students who are specifically expected to have conducted some research, but have been slowed down by ethical approval and flaws in the project design that they have not had chance to troubleshoot – 9 months is not enough time to encounter problems and resolve them.
- The formalities seem to be such that anyone who has encountered challenges during the first year are penalised by the strict upgrade criteria. Reps spoke to someone who had to resubmit (and deal with the stress of a 'fail') because the examiners said the project itself was flawed – why did the supervisors not pick this up earlier?
- Students have also suggested that Upgrade should have an independent Chair like the viva.
- Timings of Upgrade were standardised in the Periods of Study Review a couple of years ago; Upgrade was being held at different times in different colleges, which was not consistent or particularly effective.
- There's no 'right time' for upgrade, but there are benefits to an early upgrade including being able to flag a 'flawed project'; better to pick that up earlier rather than later. There are also benefits for international students having earlier upgrades to avoid funding issues later.
- It is up to the departments to be setting the nature of the task for Upgrade aligned with where the student is expected to be at 9 months – department Directors of PGR need to know if expectations are too high.
- More clarification and guidance would be useful on what is required for the Upgrade in terms of original research, e.g. synthesising existing literature can also be a significant part of the documentation. Doctoral College will review guidance documents around Upgrade.
- There are options to request one delay to Upgrade with evidence – deferral procedures available online.
- Students can speak to the PGR Education Welfare Advisor to talk about managing deadlines alongside any health or personal concerns.
- If Minor Amendments to Upgrade is 2 months work, and Referral has an expectation of considerably more work needed, why is Referral only 3 months and not 6?
- Neither a referral or deferral automatically results in an extension to the final deadline, so delaying the deadline further may put them too far into their full degree period.

Open Floor Discussion

- Constructive discussion with PGR Reps last week around PGR representation within the new faculty structure – we will use that insight to come up with a proposal for a best rep system, which we will share when we have done some more work on that topic.
- PGR Rep Role is understood as a signposting role. Can we provide signposting training?
- PGR Reps don't want to do the "social secretary" role that some Colleges seem to expect of them – can we facilitate a separate social role, since PGRs generally don't get involved with existing societies (as they are heavily UG)? This could be done with PG Societies, like PG Life Sciences Society.
- PGR/DC Officer role was also discussed – general support from reps for there to be two paid officers rather than one to split the responsibilities and workload, potentially with different starting dates for each one (January and July) to ensure continuity.
- Paternity and maternity leave update – extension to funding and/or final deadline is always possible, uncertain if it's automatic. More updates expected after next week's meeting.

Actions from the Meeting

- Follow up with Head of PGR Support about student registration status in the Guild database.
- Follow up with Head of PGR Support regarding guidance documents for Upgrade.
- Put together signposting training to help reps direct students to the right place.

Reminders

The PGR Hub is open 10:00-15:00 Monday to Friday in the Old Library (on Streatham campus) and Info @ St Luke's.

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) opened on 21 March and is open until 9 May. This is useful for your reps, as well as your departments, to help identify areas for improvement in your student experience, so please do remember to complete it! More information is available on the Doctoral College website.

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/