



Postgraduate Academic Forum

Minutes

18/11/2024

Attendees:

- **Student Association:** Hitanshi Badani (Director of Education), Callum Irvine (Postgraduate Research President), William Evans (Postgraduate Taught President), Chase Greenfield (Academic Representation Co-ordinator), Daniel Drury (Postgraduate Representation Intern)
- **University leadership:** Clare Peddie (Vice-Principal Education – Proctor), Frank Muller (Assistant Vice-Principal, Dean of Learning and Teaching – Provost), Ros Claase (Director of Student Experience), Jacqueline Rose (Associate Provost Education), Charles Warren (Associate Provost Students), Kostas Zafeiris (Executive Officer to St Leonard’s College), Catriona Wilson (Co-Director of IELLI)

General

Events and Community

15 MINUTES

- **Event-type:** PG Reps in their respective fora offered more insight into how efforts to build community through events should be directed, primarily through variety.
Funding: Most schools do not have a systematized pot of funding that reps or staff can use to organise community-building activities for PGs. There may be merit in defining the St Leonards Funding sources for Community for clarity.
- **Scheduling:** Timing of events was a significant factor in attendance, both in terms of clashing schedules meaning regular events are unattended, but also in terms of working hours being a barrier for staff, commuters, and those with caring responsibilities. Remedial options include more lunchtime activities or making use of Wednesday afternoons more for this.
- **Communication:** PGs asked for better communications regarding events and activities. Some recommendations from Reps included:
 - Shared calendar or similar centralised platform
 - Calendar invites so they can be added to their personal calendars to stay on top of them
 - Variety of stories and posts on social media
 - A frequent digest rather than separate emails for each event
 - The need for PGR-specific spaces and activities continues to be raised



Summary of Discussion:

The two PG Presidents present feedback from Reps which suggest that PG students want more social events that are similar to what UG events have such as evening pub and club events. There is an acknowledgment from the Proctor that events such as the PG Mixer at Beacon Bar went well. The Executive Officer to St Leonard's College says that St Leonards have been making efforts to move in this direction and have been trying to organise both academic and non-academic social events. The Director of Student Experience brings up scheduling as a problem, PG students are more likely to be commuting or have caring responsibilities which means that they can't attend evening activities. PGR President also mentions that where events are designed for PGR students to mix with staff, these would need to be scheduled earlier in the day as most staff leave by 5pm. General agreement that Wednesday afternoons are too busy with other events to be used as a regular slot for PG socials.

PGR President also raises the possibility of having a shared calendar that PGs can subscribe to which would make it easier to keep track of events and which might prevent students receiving multiple emails about the same thing. It would also be a useful way of communicating as more and more students are moving away from social media. The Director of Student Experience says that a project is ongoing to enhance our digital platforms and may present opportunities for better sharing and filtering of events information.

The Executive Officer to St Leonard's asks about the possibility of reviving the PG Society which hasn't existed since the pandemic. PGR President says that it has been difficult to get the same funding for it since the pandemic. The Academic Rep Co-ordinator adds that it was previously funded through the Student Association fund but a lot of the experience and knowledge for how to put on events has now gone and students often don't have the capacity to take it on. The Director of Education adds that it would need students to show initiative to organise and populate the society themselves. Proctor agrees that students need to engage for it to be successful. The Executive Officer to St Leonards says that while they have limited funding, they would be open to working with the Union to try and revive it. PGR President and Director of Education also say in this context that St Leonards funding could be better defined as students are often unaware that they can use it for school specific events.

Actions Agreed:



1. The Director of Student Experience and Reps are going to explore making better use of existing events and calendar functionalities as well as any viable alternatives

2. The PGR President to discuss with Director of IELLI about the possibility of reviving PG Society and then follow up with Executive Officer of St Leonard's College to ensure that is run as a partnership project.

Partnership recalibration

15 MINUTES

- **SSCCs:** Many PG reps have not yet had a Student Staff Consultative Committee (SSCC) in their departments/schools. The Education Executive wishes to discuss how to emphasise staff responsibilities in proactively working with PG Reps on a PG SSCC from their election.
- **Contact:** Many representatives have communicated a lack of preliminary contact with DoPGTs/DoPGRs, making escalation mechanisms quite ineffective.
- **Expectations:** Many representatives have raised that staff place a level of expectation on them to organise event and community-building activities rather than academic feedback work. They have also de-prioritised enabling representatives to fulfil this sort of work. How can we recalibrate this approach?

Summary of Discussion:

The PGR President raises that some DoPGs have not been reaching out to Reps or inviting them to SSCC meetings. The Director of Education adds that Reps are feeling pressure to do too much in their role in terms of arranging events and building community. The Director of Student Experience suggests using the lunches that academic leadership have with DoPGs would be a good opportunity to talk about the Rep system. The Associate Provost Education says that DoPGs are also not responsible for community building in the school and they are possibly less aware of how the Rep system works than they should be and need to be directed about how to communicate with them. The Academic Representation Coordinator and PG Rep Intern say that they do send emails out to DoPGs with instructions for communicating with Reps but agree that these could be made more specific and sent regularly as reminders. There is also agreement that the Proctor and Provost could co-sign these emails as it might make them more likely to be read and acknowledged.

Actions Agreed:



1. The Proctor, Provost, and Director of Student Experience will use their regular lunches with DoPGT/Rs in each school to promote more contact and discussion with Reps.

2. The Proctor and Provost will co-sign emails to DoPGT/Rs after elections with next steps for communicating with Reps, possibly follow up with similar regular emails throughout the year.

Postgraduate Taught Topics

Assessment Guidance and Feedback

15 MINUTES

Representatives from many schools at the forum (including Psychology, Chemistry, International Relations, Social Anthropology, and Finance) raised a lack of **guidance and clarity in coursework and assessment briefs**. This included:

- **Background, pedagogical rationale, and general format guidance** for non-traditional coursework formats
- Clarity on the **marking criteria** and correlation with the 20-point scale
- Information on **logistical information** on the release of grades and deadlines
- A lack of appreciation for **varying competencies** within the classroom

The volume of complaints around this theme raises significant cause for concern.

Summary of Discussion:

The PGT President reports that a lot of Reps raised issues around poor assessment guidance. There are also particular issues around point-scale translation and criteria for more subjective assessments such as posters. The Provost asks for all examples to be passed on so that they can be raised with the relevant departments. The Proctor asks if these examples have been raised within the school first before being given to the Provost. The Director of Education alludes to the previous point that some Reps have not had SSCCs so haven't been able to raise it. The Associate Provost Education asks for good examples as well which could be used as a benchmark. The PGT President says that the assessment criteria he has seen in the Business School has been excellent.

Action agreed:



The PGT President will ensure that any examples of poor assessment criteria have been raised at the local level through Reps and, if needed, escalated to the Provost who will follow these up on a case-by-case basis.

Digital, Virtual, and Distance-learning Provisions

15 MINUTES

It is important to recognise the diverse demographics that PGTs comprise – including commuters, carers, mature learners, and part-time workers. Various schools expressed ambiguity about both policy and practice on **lecture-capture, access to recordings, asynchronous and synchronous digital resources**. There is inconsistent practice across schools for this. Can we ensure that each module/school's stance on this is clarified and justified at the start of the course – appreciating that some formats of teaching do require in-person engagement.

Summary of Discussion:

The PGT President says that he strongly believes lectures should be recorded as they are a good source of revision material. The Provost says that there is a clear university policy on this and all lectures should be recorded unless there is a technical malfunction. The Associate Provost Education says that the problem may be in distinguishing between lectures and tutorials. Tutorials are not recorded due to students not always wanting their contributions to be recorded. There is general agreement that this is difficult to get around and may be where the issue lies as some tutorials have a lot of important lecture content.

Postgraduate Research Topics

Timely information about teaching responsibilities

10 MINUTES

Postgraduate Researchers that teach in multiple schools raised concerns on **inconsistent and inconvenient practices with regards to disseminating information on teaching responsibilities**. This includes:

- What modules they will be teaching
- What content they will be teaching
- What timings they will be teaching
- Logistical information like class size and location



Can we ensure a generally acceptable level of **guidance and timeline** for releasing this information?

Summary of Discussion:

PGR President says there is an issue with PGR student who teach having little notice of teaching hours, timetabling, or content. The Proctor agrees that this is a problem. The Association Provost Students says it would be a good target to give teachers more chance to plan. The Executive Officer to St Leonard's raises that giving teachers more hours to prepare would need to be fitted in to the payment structure. The Associate Provost Education says that mechanisms such as introducing mini-internships could solve this. This could be raised to DoTs in Semester 2.

Action Agreed:

The University leadership will raise the idea of giving students who teach much longer notice and preparation time for teaching module with Schools.

PGR Input in Module Evaluations

10 MINUTES

Given that the new Module Evaluation Questionnaire system is being revisited, how can we integrate the following concerns in the new system:

- The current provision is that generally, graduate teaching assistants will meet with Directors of Teaching to relay feedback on modules and teaching experiences. However, there is a concern that this lack of anonymity creates a biased system as DoTs will assign future teaching responsibilities for the same GTAs. Can we explore providing **feedback on modules and teaching experiences that is more anonymous?**
- Both **numerical and qualitative evaluations of GTA work** – whether that be in tutorials, seminars, or workshops – received via MEQs are not formally relayed to them.

Overall, can we explore a new systematic approach to garnering feedback on modules themselves, as well as teaching experiences to reduce potential biases and promote openness?

Summary of Discussion:



The PGR President says that PGR students who teach may be concerned about giving honest feedback to module convenors as it could affect their chances of teaching in the department if DoT's receive negative feedback from them. The Director of Student Experience adds that although DoTs would hopefully take feedback in the spirit intended, students are concerned that there may be unconscious bias. The Associate Provost Students acknowledges that it would be difficult to give feedback anonymously as there are very few students who teach in a lot of departments. PGR President suggests giving teaching allocation responsibilities to someone other than the DoT, alternatively creating a peer review system where DoTs receive feedback from other departments. Could also filter the feedback so it is delivered in a sensitive way.

Action agreed:

The PGR President will work with senior staff members about how best to handle students who teach giving feedback to module convenors (e.g. anonymous feedback, feedback to different module convenor peer-review style)

[PGCAP Feedback Mechanisms](#)

10 MINUTES

The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, though largely a welcomed provision, runs into issues due to under-resourcing. Though we are aware that work on improving it is ongoing, the following areas of concerns are being raised to flag potential areas of priority:

- The PGCAP was found not to be very well-suited for current teaching provisions for PGRs
- The time and resource cost for PGCAP is very high relative to its benefits to skill-building and professional development.
- There is ambiguity around MEQ or similar **feedback mechanisms for the PGCAP**; as well as general **monitoring processes**. Does it fall within the central MEQ system? Who has oversight? Is feedback gathered through the course as well as from those that might choose to drop out?

Summary of Discussion:

The PGR President raises that PGCAP is not always well-suited for students, for example, there is a requirement to do modules that aren't related to each other in some departments. It also doesn't always match what the job market requires so it



isn't a qualification for jobs in academia. The Co-Director of IELLI agrees that the PGCAP isn't always designed for students as it is something available to all staff. While it can't be made into a qualification, they are now working on providing training specifically for PGR students that sits between mandatory teacher training and the PGCAP. It is also like any other module in terms of the feedback process. The Proctor adds that a lot of Universities are now looking for the PGCAP when recruiting.

Action agreed:

The Director of IELLI to keep PGR President in the loop about PGCAP progress and how it affects PGRs

School-specific Training

10 MINUTES

Representatives felt there was an **imbalance in where they should seek out skills development**; between the generalised offering with IELLI, and the specialised, sometimes ad hoc training offered by schools.

Is this a matter of resource or transparency/coordination between schools and units like IELLI?

Summary of Discussion:

The PGR President raises that some Reps haven't been sure where to go for specialised skills training such as statistics. The Co-Director of IELLI agrees that stats training only covers master's level or below and that high level skills training beyond that needs to come from the schools. The Executive Officer to St Leonards College says that St Leonards have been organising stats training courses with CREEM. They have recently added Statistics for Humanities. They are open to exploring more skills based courses like this and would be keen to see more take up from students.

Action agreed:

Staff in St Leonards Posgraduate College and IELLI are coordinating around various study skills programmes available at the university in schools and centrally so that Reps can better communicate them to PGRs.

Academic Skills Projects

10 MINUTES



Academic Skills Project workshops were specifically raised as possibly slipping through the cracks as non-traditional teaching responsibilities.

- What is the current system for **evaluating and enhancing these**? Is there a need for systematised way of doing so?
- If feedback is collected from attendees, it is not usually shared with the PGR tutor for pedagogical development.
- A few of them have sessions for sharing good-practice and reflections that tend to run over several hours and are not paid, making engagement sub-par.

Summary of Discussion:

The Director of Education raises that there is not a systematic way of measuring the success of academic skills projects and the timing of them often doesn't make sense. The Co-Director of IELLI says there has been a staff changeover and they haven't been issuing their fortnightly report, this will now be reinstated. The way feedback usually works is that everyone delivering workshops is asked to observe themselves on their training techniques.

Any Other Business (AOB):

Summary of Discussion:

The Director of Student Experience raises that there has been a reduction in Library weekend opening hours. Due to a combination of factors, the library is operating reduced opening hours (closing at 9:30). Students should be reminded of other study spaces in the meantime. Provost request that Butts Wynd be accessible for all students after 21:30 and is properly heated with access to tea and coffee making facilities. The Director of Student Experience says that there will be an email going out to all students with these details.

Action agreed:

Reps are working with staff to ensure that alternative spaces, such as Butts Wynd, are heated and have additional facilities for studying while these closures are in effect. All Library Hours are available on their blog: <https://library.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2024/11/21/libraries-opening-hours-for-winter/>

The Forum concluded and adjourned from this point.





