

Graduate School Review (Draft) Report
College of Medical Veterinary and Life Sciences
15-17 June 2022

Introduction to the Review

A Review Panel was convened on 15 - 17 June 2022 with staff and students from the College of Medical, Veterinary, and Life Sciences (MVLS) to discuss the submission the Graduate School (GS) made to the Review Panel. Meetings were held separately with senior staff and Postgraduate Convenors, students, and supervisory and administrative staff, culminating in a wrap up meeting with senior staff. The Panel comprised one internal member, two external members (one academic, one professional services), one Senate Assessor, one student member, the Vice Principal (Research) as Chair and the PGR Strategy & Policy Manager as Clerk.

Panel

Professor Chris Pearce	VP (Research & Knowledge Exchange), Chair
Professor Melissa Westwood	University of Manchester, External Panel Member
Ms Emily Feamster	University of St Andrews, External Panel Member
Dr Bethan Wood	School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Senate Assessor
Professor Richard Hartley	School of Chemistry, Internal Member
Dr Kevin Leomo	School of Mathematics & Statistics, Student Member
Ms Mary Beth Kneafsey	PGR Strategy & Policy Manager, Research Services, Clerk

Panel Overview

The panel wished to note that its initial impressions of the Graduate School from the submission were that while its operations were complex across a large College, it was operating effectively and providing a broad range of services to its community. However, the Panel also had a sense that it was somewhat self-contained and wanted to explore how the Graduate School interacted across the College and with the rest of the University.

There would be three substantive sessions to gather information for the Review and a final session with College senior staff to discussion the findings. As a starting point, the Panel set out to review the following:

- The complexity of the Graduate School, its operations and the relationships between the Graduate School and the Schools in the College and with the rest of the University;
- Reflections from staff and students on their pandemic experiences;
- Community building, student engagement and wellbeing;
- Training and development for students and supervisors, - how the training programmes are developed and how are gaps identified and addressed;
- Further exploration of how the College develops strategy related to PGRs and how they evaluate their work and measure success.

Pandemic Reflections

Graduate School / PG Convenors

The Graduate School team highlighted that students were approaching the Graduate School in greater numbers with issues relating to their mental health as result of the pandemic. Supervisors

felt this acutely and expressed the challenge of looking after their own mental health while supporting students. While being able to remain in contact with students online was appreciated, the lack of informal contact with staff and with peers meant that students did not always feel comfortable asking for help. A team of Student Support Officers has been introduced recently by the University to help students link with resources and support and to which supervisors could point students. The College has a robust system for Annual Progress Reviews and students are asked during this process how they are and if they need additional support. Colleagues are now concerned about how to 're-engage' students who have developed different working habits and become accustomed to not being on campus. It was also noted that while online viva examinations have been successful, it will be necessary to ensure that examination convenors and examiners are briefed to deal with any issues related to the pandemic and its challenges if these arise in an examination context.

Students

Students reported that there were challenges with getting timely information during the pandemic although this was not a college issue or even to some extent a University issue. They valued the support for extensions funding and hoped that this would be an option for some time until the effects of the pandemic had receded. The lack of campus participation meant that students needed to be even more resilient and work things out for themselves, especially at the start of their programmes.

Supervisors

Supervisors felt that students who started during the pandemic don't have a sense of 'normal' in terms of on campus participation and have learnt to work at home despite the challenges. There was a general sense that there were increasing mental health challenges for PGRs as well as a sense that students were progressing more slowly than in the past due to pandemic pressures broadly. Where students are working off campus, interactions are scheduled, missing out on informal support and learning.

They viewed part time students as having particular difficulties managing their engagement with their studies and felt that they were more isolated than other students. Events like coffee mornings helped to bring people together and are helpful to build social connections, even online. Supervisors reported their active involvement in helping students to adapt or redesign projects during the pandemic.

Extensions funding and support was very helpful for students. It was never going to be enough, but it was very much appreciated. They'd like to see more funding available for those who faced severe or ongoing disruptions. There are, and have been, supply chain and purchasing issues for students on a number of fronts, causing further delays.

Graduate School – Strategy and Operations

The Graduate School recognised the centrality of its operations to the whole PGR experience but also recognised that strategic development could be more structured and that the College restructuring was an opportunity to integrate and reinvigorate a College approach to PGR strategy. There was a focus on supporting big bids, larger funding streams and cohorts, building industry

partnerships, and providing a broad portfolio of PGR training opportunities that recognised the diversity of the PGR cohort, from clinical fellows through to molecular biologists, biochemist and ecologists. They acknowledge that strategic thinking about PGRs across the colleges, rather than in individual Schools/ Institutes/ Centres/ Units, is a work in progress and they are not talking enough at college level about the size and shape of their PGR community. It was noted that there was often an absence of distinct local strategy as well. A new College structure (reorganising academic units), being introduced for 1 August 2022, will be a chance to embed new ways of working, facilitate support for funding bids, bring programmes together, build community amongst convenors, and enhance strategic thinking across the College.

The Graduate School has a central coordinating role and provides signposting on its website to significant amounts of information. Colleagues recognised that it would be beneficial for everyone if more two-way interactions were fostered across the College. However, budgets and significant decision-making rests with Schools who can have quite independent operations. Admissions targets are coordinated centrally by the College marketing manager, working with the Dean of Postgraduate Research and other colleagues in Schools, Institutes and the College finance team. There are no central College EDI targets, but there is a focus on promoting and sharing good practice, especially where it was being developed and delivered innovatively in DTP/ CDT programmes. Staff and PGRs were also encouraged to take up available training on EDI, unconscious bias, supporting neurodiverse students, etc. In relation to EDI, the Graduate School highlighted that they have high numbers of female students in contrast with other part of the University where attracting significant numbers of female doctoral students is more difficult. This is not a Glasgow-only issue but rather something observed when comparing life sciences to other disciplines.

Supervisory staff were asked about their knowledge of College strategy. They were aware of marketing strategies and financial incentives to recruit students but no broader strategies or where this would happen. They did note that the Dean of Postgraduate Research was engaged with schools and doctoral training programmes across the college through meeting with academic leadership teams, being a member or leading DTP steering committees, and in both developing and advising on external DTP bids, including coordination of matched funding requests with the College. They also felt that funding opportunities for international students can be limited and clear support and strategy on this would be welcome. There was a specific issue raised about students from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) where the College has significant partnerships and noted that it would be helpful if College or University could address this via lower fees or fee waivers. It was noted from the Graduate School submission that such a policy had recently been developed and agreed at CMG suggesting that effective communication of the policy was yet to be disseminated.

Graduate School and School Structures

There was a sense that there was a need to work more across units and understand the distributed roles and responsibilities. Some staff noted that the Graduate School used to seem somewhat 'impenetrable', and this has improved significantly. Students however are not always clear, about where to go for support, and they can get mixed messages across units. The Graduate School measures engagement via a number of mechanisms such as Q&A sessions, PGR surveys, Athena Swan work, Annual Progress Reviews (APR) data, and the online 'PGR Den'. The [PGR Den](#) was launched by the Graduate School as a dedicated online space to support students through the PGR

journey and features information on building skills, connecting with peers, and accessing support services and other resources.

The role of the PG Convenor was discussed, and it was accepted that this role could vary widely across different Schools, including in terms of the number of students supported and the support for the convenor in the role. There is 0.2 FTE allocated to the role but no reduction in existing work, so it was hard to balance this role on top of other work. These time pressures meant that convenors might often be reactive rather than proactive. There is also usually little or no administrative support directly associated with the role. Those Convenors who were in Schools/ Institutes who did provide dedicated administrative support with sufficient time allocated to the role felt that this was key.

Some convenors have undertaken this role for many years and others in the session were quite new to the role and still finding their way. Sometimes convenors also act as deputy convenors first to learn about the role. Newer convenors felt that it had been hard to start in role and to understand existing structures. There was no handbook or guidance, and it was described as being 'down to oral history' to find their way. It was also observed that the term 'PGR director' was becoming more common, rather than 'convenor' and there was a feeling that this better reflected the role. It was queried whether convenors across schools shared information with each other, but convenors felt that they didn't do this. It was noted though that the Dean attended a lot of school level meetings to share information. The Graduate School noted that they bring PGR Convenors together for exactly this purpose as well as instituted drop-in sessions to further support them.

Students can also find the structures and processes hard to understand and navigate and highlighted instances where it was challenging to get a response from the busy Graduate School. Sick leave is a particularly confusing issue and supervisors sometimes lack understanding and provide conflicting information. There is also confusion about the process for sick leave as it relates to MyCampus. These comments are not isolated to the experience of students in this College, and this is something that is being considered more widely across the University.

Community Building

Graduate School

The Graduate School delivers a range of academic and social activities as do Schools and as do student representatives. The Graduate School uses the PGR Den to reach out to PGRs and to advertise training and events. However, it's not clear that this is viewed holistically anywhere to make the most of resources and to ensure that efforts are reaching all students.

The Dean highlighted a lack of central physical PGR space to date on campus, noting that this makes local spaces and local communities more meaningful. The challenge was noted regarding the geographic spread of college – different buildings and different campus locations, making it hard to build one community. It was also noted that there are challenges with the number of PGRs with clinical commitments being part of the community with basic science/ non lab-based students with more flexible timetables.

Students pointed out that those not based on the main campus can feel forgotten, even where research areas are shared. Similarly, basic science and non-lab-based students can feel left out as

they are a smaller group overall. The general feeling is that the Garscube and Gilmorehill sites are separate communities, and it would improve the student experience if they were more integrated. Not all PGRs in the session were aware of the PGR Den and some that were did not think it was up to date / still in use.

Some students were not clear on who their local Student Representative Council (SRC) representatives were. However, they also referenced how helpful their PG Convenors are in supporting them and taking issues forward. The current PGR representative in the College has set up an almost 'student council' like structure which was seen as a good model. However, the student representative changes each year so positive innovations may not be sustained.

Training and Development

Graduate School

The Graduate was keen to highlight that a project has recently been agreed to refresh their training programme through a new working group. An issue they were keen to look at was their use of 'credits' which could feel arbitrary and added additional bureaucracy to the training programme. A mechanism under consideration is the development of a Graduate School award for training and development completion that is less focused on credit accumulation. Further consultation will be done as plans develop to ensure that PGRs and colleagues across the College are consulted.

Supervisor training is stated as mandatory and administered by the Graduate School. Centrally provided general supervisor training run by Research Services is required plus additional college level scenario-based training. Records are kept to chase those who are reluctant and data on this is shared with schools. There are usually checks when someone is recruiting a new student to ensure they've done the training, but this was not felt to be done consistently everywhere in the College. It was noted that more could be done to support and mentor new supervisors, especially helping them to learn to be APR reviewers. There is, however, local good practice in the Schools, for example to pair less experienced staff with more experienced supervisors.

PGRs complete a Training Needs Assessment form to ensure that they are seeking out appropriate training and support throughout their programmes. This is kept under review as part of the APR process. The helps students keep the balance right (not too much or too little) and to help them to plan ahead. This is supported by ongoing further discussion with supervisors.

The Graduate School was asked about support and training for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). They noted that support and training were distributed and not a responsibility of the Graduate School. PGRs were, however, encouraged to discuss their GTA work with their supervisors. This is common across the University with GTAs being affiliated with learning and teaching operations, rather than Graduate Schools.

Students

The overall impression of the training programme was that it was beneficial to them and of good quality. Key challenges are course availability, including access to required courses, and navigating the credits system. It should be noted that from the student perspective, it will not always be clear whether training and development opportunities are provided by the Graduate School or by other

areas in the University and advertised by the Graduate School. Some suggestions for ways of improving the programme from their perspective are:

- recording more training and making the recordings available, especially for high demand courses;
- improved communications about courses on offer and clear advice about requirements. They felt that the training handbook was not always easy to use;
- notifications related to openings and course availability would be useful as blanket emails advertising the programme were not as useful;
- more frequent offerings of popular courses would be helpful as it can be challenging to get onto desired courses, especially IT courses. Waiting lists were confusing and long.

A few criticisms of the programme were noted, such as gaps in the provision or the general nature of the courses where more advanced training was unavailable. For example, those present noted that more courses on statistics at a higher level would be beneficial. Students would also like to be able to take a broader range of courses, in some cases from UG/PGT offerings. While this is possible, it is not as straightforward as signing up to training courses.

The Training Needs Assessment (TNA) process was seen as generally helpful but for some it was taken as just a formality or encouraged a view that focused on meeting requirements rather than genuine training needs. Some supervisors were also not particularly aware of the process, meaning that students needed to guide their supervisors through this.

The use of credits was not seen as flexible, in particular when students engaged with broader, non-training course, development activities. Some students admitted to taking 'fluff' credits just to acquire needed credits. Where they had done significant development activity, some noted that it was sometimes easier to take 'fluff' credits to meet their minimum requirement rather than try to get credits for what they had done.

Students were asked specifically about GTA support. They noted that much support is informal but also generally helpful, such as getting to sit in on other tutorials, being invited to information sessions about each course when they join the course team or informal support for marking. There is a mandatory training course for GTAs which most had taken although at least one student said that they had received no training prior to being given teaching work. Some were aware of the DAT (Developing as a Teacher) courses and those that were, were complementary of the programme.

Supervisors

Supervisors were asked about the training that they participate in as supervisors. There is mandatory central training, additional mandatory College training, and additional non-mandatory resources and support to tap into. Supervisors know that they could be prevented from supervision if they didn't complete the training. Some noted that they would appreciate more training, especially as new supervisors. It was highlighted that some additional training and support on managing APRs would be useful to ensure that they were done consistently.

Supervisors thought the training programme for students was generally good and noted the usefulness of the TNA process to frame discussions of training needs. Some did perceive gaps though

where students wanted less mainstream or more bespoke training. They also perceived that there was some box ticking with students taking some courses as they just needed to get credits. Some also questioned the value of some of the mandatory courses and these are also fairly general in terms of what they cover.

Wellbeing

Students

From the student perspective, there is a lack of awareness of what is available to them to support their wellbeing. They felt that more signposting to the range of college and University resources would be beneficial for both students and supervisors. Where students had accessed support, they felt that what is available is often not enough, with just a few counselling sessions on offer. They also acknowledged that PGRs often don't speak up or ask for help when they are struggling with their wellbeing.

Supervisors

There was a general sense that there were increasing mental health challenges for PGRs, especially international students. They also highlighted that it can be difficult to find information to support students when needed, expressing similar challenges to students with navigating the resources available. The University webpages are complex and not all paths lead to the same information, so it is easy to feel frustrated or to find out of date or incorrect information.

Careers

Careers support for PGRs was discussed with supervisors. They felt that more careers support was needed, including more internships and a more integrated system of support. Career destination information was frequently sought but this was hard to collect and manage locally. They did find central careers support in the Careers Service helpful but appreciate the value of local and more discipline targeted local support. Supervisors admitted to struggling with providing support about careers directly to students as they were only familiar with their personal career paths in academia. It was agreed as important for supervisors to set expectations with their students about their future careers and that not all students will ultimately work in academic jobs but that this should in no way be seen as a failure.

Summary of Panel Comments

- There often seemed to be a disconnect between what the Graduate School was trying to do and what was perceived by staff and students. Two key issues were perceived: (1) that more signposting, improved communications, and development of additional communications channels would benefit their community; and (2) their operations, policy, training, etc. would benefit from more evaluation to understand what they can do better as well as to enable sharing of good practice.
- Training is largely felt to be good but there were issues with the bureaucracy around training and the flexibility and availability of training. It was unclear who owned the programme and who was responsible for its development. It was noted by the Panel that this was currently under review in the Graduate School
- More standardisation of PGR policy and operations across the institution and more cross-college interaction would be beneficial.

- Challenges were noted for PG convenor role, not just for this Graduate School. How could this be enhanced or supported better and how could practice and knowledge be more effectively shared?
- A recurring theme is an issue with understanding who does what and how processes / operations fit together across Schools.
- The Graduate School did not have a clear PGR strategy. School level strategic thinking is not interconnected and doesn't build up to or integrate with a college strategy.

Commendations and Recommendations

Commendations

The Panel noted the broad range of excellent work being undertaken by the Graduate School who are supporting a large, diverse set of Schools across multiple sites. They were making positive progress as a Graduate School with appreciation from their community for this work.

Recommendations

1. The Graduate School should consider its approach to building community across the College through, for example:
 - by reviewing communications channels and creating additional communications channels to reach more of the community – the PGR Den was highlighted as potentially useful resource that was not being well used by students;
 - by looking for ways to provide clearer signposting to key resources, including wellbeing and training;
 - by working to create a more integrated community across different student groups (lab-based, clinical, non-lab based, international students, etc.) and across different locations.
2. The training programme for PGRs needs to be reviewed and the Graduate School has indicated that this is a project which has already commenced. The Graduate School should also seek to develop its vision for training and to work with other Colleges and Research Services to ensure that the programme fits with the broader institutional programme.
3. The Graduate School should consider ways to address the need for ongoing support for students to explore possible career trajectories and how this can be supported in an integrated way across the College.
4. The Graduate School needs to create a clear PGR strategy across its many strands of activity – recruitment, student funding, training, student experience, career destinations, etc., and ensure that this is integrated with School activities as well as shared and embedded across units. The Graduate School might consider the establishment of a Strategic Advisory Board or similar for external feedback and insight.
5. The Graduate School should consider the role of the PG Convenor and any deputy or subject convenor roles – creating standard job descriptions, looking at how the role is supported, how convenors can share practice with one another and what their role is in implementing PGR strategies.
6. A recurring theme in the discussions related to being unsure of what was being done where or that activity was taking place at multiple levels. A review of processes and roles to standardise these where possible and ensure that staff and students know where to go for support or information would be useful. This should include consideration on how the

Graduate School works with other Graduate Schools and the broader university to support a more coherent student experience.

University Recommendations

1. All Graduate Schools need robust data for decision-making, including related to careers and first destinations. The University should consider improved, consistent mechanisms for collecting and analysing data, and dissemination and action on this analysis.
2. The PG Convenor role exists across the University and work done to better define and support this role would benefit from cross-college discussion and sharing of practice.
3. Sick leave policies for PGRs were highlighted as not being well understood. The University should review its policy in this area and how this is communicated to students and supervisors.

Conclusions

The panel would like to thank the College for their submission and their participation in the discussion sessions. They panel was impressed by the high quality of support provided by the Graduate School across a diverse community, and as evidenced by the reflections on the pandemic, in difficult times.

Appendix 1: Session Attendance

College Session

Professor Stuart Nicklin	Dean of Postgraduate Research
Professor Helen Wheadon	Deputy Dean of Postgraduate Research
Ms Alison Wallace	Head of Academic and Student Administration
Ms Lesley Dinning	PGR Manager
Professor Collette Britton	PG Convenor, School of Biodiversity, One Health and Veterinary Medicine
Professor Kathryn Elmer	PG Convenor, School of Biodiversity, One Health and Veterinary Medicine
Professor Marshall Stark	PG Convenor, School of Molecular Biosciences / Deputy Convenor College Higher Degrees Committee
Dr Delyth Graham	PG Convenor, School of Cardiovascular & Metabolic Health
Dr Ruaidhri Carmody	PG Convenor, School of Molecular Biosciences
Dr Heather Jorgensen	PG Convenor, School of Cancer Sciences

Student Session

Cara Trivett	School of Cardiovascular & Metabolic Health
Manshi Zhou	School of Cardiovascular & Metabolic Health
Bethany Smith	School of Biodiversity, One Health & Veterinary Medicine
Nadia Ahmed	School of Health and Wellbeing
Raquel Boso Perez	School of Health and Wellbeing
Salil Deo	School of Health and Wellbeing
Ryan Field	School of Health and Wellbeing
Jocelyn Friday	School of Health and Wellbeing
Paul Campbell	School of Biodiversity, One Health & Veterinary Medicine
Lauren Black	School of Biodiversity, One Health & Veterinary Medicine

Staff Meeting

Professor Susan Jamieson	School of Medicine, Dentistry & Nursing, Supervisor
Dr Grant Hopcraft	School of Biodiversity, One Health & Veterinary Medicine, Supervisor
Dr Taya Forde	School of Biodiversity, One Health & Veterinary Medicine, Supervisor
Dr Lisa Ranford-Cartwright	School of Biodiversity, One Health & Veterinary Medicine, Supervisor
Professor Eleanor Davies	School of Cardiovascular & Metabolic Health, Supervisor
Professor Jason Gill	School of Cardiovascular & Metabolic Health, Supervisor
Dr Gemma Ryde	School of Cardiovascular & Metabolic Health, Supervisor
Professor Pasquale Maffia	School of Infection & Immunity, Supervisor
Dr Megan Macleod	School of Infection & Immunity, Supervisor
Mr Shaun Patterson	School of Cancer Sciences, Supervisor

Anne Best	School of Cancer Sciences, Professional Services
Rhiannon Darlow	School of Infection & Immunity, Professional Services
Janette McBride	School of Medicine, Dentistry & Nursing, Professional Services
Arlene Nelson	School of Molecular Biosciences, Professional Services
Dot Ronney	School of Cardiovascular & Metabolic Health, Professional Services