



Postgraduate Academic Forum

Tuesday, 4th April 2023

Microsoft Teams

Invited: Director of Education (Noah Schott), PG Research President (Callum Irvine), PG Graduate Teaching Officer (Aimee Bebbington), PG Distance & Part-Time Officer (Rebecca Munro), PG International Officer (Juan Yang), PG BAME Officer Arts & Divinity (Khadija Ali), PG BAME Officer Science & Medicine (Ancy Anna John), PG Disability Officer Arts & Humanities (Kait Havens), Provost (Prof. Frank Muller), Proctor (Prof. Clare Peddie), Associate Provost Education (Dr Jacqueline Rose), Associate Provost Students (Dr Charles Warren), Hazel Grapes (St Leonard's College), Chase Greenfield (Academic Representation Co-Ordinator), Toni Andres (Academic Representation Intern), Iain Cupples (Helphub Manager), Heather McKiggan-Fee (CEED), Lara Meischke (Student Services), Emma Wisher (Library), Hilda McNae (Library), Sandie Pettifer (Library), Vickie Cormie (Library), Kostas Zafeiris (St Leonard's College).

Chair: Sandro Eich (Postgraduate Academic Convenor)

Minutes: Toni Andres

1. Welcome, Introduction, and Apologies
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) welcomes all attendees.
 - Apologies from: Kait Havens, Rebecca Munro, Lara Meischke, Francesca Lavelle
2. Postgraduate Taught Matters
 - a. Update on Co-Optioning PGT President plans
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): Due to personal reasons, the current PGT president had to step back from the role. Due to the time of year (end of programme feedback, dissertations), it was decided to co-opt the position. The goal is to have someone in place by 25th May.
 - No questions are asked on the co-option.
 - b. PGT-related updates
 - i. Vertically Integrated Project (VIP) modules
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) and Jacqueline (Associate Provost

Education) have been discussing how VIP modules are going to be included in PGT curricula and how PGT students can be actively integrated, as they currently mainly cater towards UG students. Sandro and Jacqueline will write up a draft to be submitted to PG group. The reasoning behind is that Sandro's impression from a conference in the US is that VIPs are still very new at US Universities. Sandro hopes to set an example at the University of St Andrews, as VIPs could be a great research and learning opportunity for PG students.

- Frank (Provost): expresses support for this project. Often issues of integration are due to curricular problems: some Schools feel that their curricula are already crowded so they are hesitant to include what is not deemed "essential." Frank emphasises the importance of aiming at a shift in learning values. For PGs it may be difficult to include VIP modules because the programme is already compressed. Frank emphasises the importance of making sure that students are not overwhelmed. Usually, PGRs and PGTs both occupy essential roles in VIPs.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) thanks Frank and emphasises that it has barely been addressed that PGRs are included. Frank responds that this is specifically asked for in the proposition of new VIPs. This should extend to emphasising co-learning. Budgets for VIPs depend on whether PGRs are participating or teaching on the module. In the case of teaching, PGRs would count as a member of staff. For PGRs, credit points are also not necessary to advancing in their studies.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) stresses the importance of communication of VIPs to PGTs in the next academic year.
 - Heather (CEED): advertising to next year's recruiters has already started – now would be a great point to start.
 - *Action Point*: Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) will write down notes from discussion with Jacqueline, then discuss, and submit to PG group. Then think about what kind of support will be offered to Schools and Module Coordinators of those modules.
 - Charles (Associate Provost Students): is it beneficial for one-year PGT students to be involved?
 - o Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): some students take VIPs for one, some for several semesters. It really depends on the aim of the module. Sandro does not see how being involved for one year would not be beneficial. But it needs to be communicated to Module Coordinators so they keep that in mind.
- ii. Online PGT programs
- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) met with marketing to discuss the process of planning how to advertise newly introduced online PGT programs. Sandro stresses the importance of communicating to students that they are an active part of shaping how the programs are run in the future. Sandro emphasises transparency in communicating to students

that the programmes are newly introduced. The aim is to manage expectations and emphasise the importance of student feedback. It should also be communicated that there are formal mechanisms in place to offer ways of voicing constructive feedback.

- *Action Point*: continue the conversation. There is no need to take this into PG group.
- No questions.

c. Matters for discussion

i. Workload (particularly coursework) and Assignment deadlines during and immediately after vacation

- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): At PGT Forum a constructive conversation took place concerning workload, in particular coursework. The need for raising awareness for complexity of coursework planning was communicated which also gave rise to the importance of feedback to be collected by Module Coordinators. Sandro asks whether there is a question in MEQs on deadlines?
 - Frank (Provost) answers: there are free text opportunities and a question asking how much time is committed to module.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) asks: might it be worth including a question that asks for that? Currently, there is no formal mechanism to catch that.
 - Callum (PG Research President) suggests in the chat: "Do you feel that the deadlines for this module were appropriately placed/timed?"
 - Heather (CEED) clarifies that this would need to be a free text question. Heather also stresses that it is tricky to ask for coursework in MEQs because it would need to be tailored to the module, whereas MEQs are generalised. There is a Capstone project module which analyses whether or not the day that the deadlines are set impacts the number of extension requests (day of week and week of semester). This focuses specifically on extensions granted, not requested. Data of the project will be shared when finished by the end of the semester. Heather acknowledges variation amongst Schools. Another piece of information that became apparent was that group work assignments had rarely extension requests which suggests that nature of group work enabled students to hit deadlines maybe due to the sense of responsibility. Sandro acknowledges the importance of considering mode of assessment and adds that importance (through percentage) also needs to be considered.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) agrees that these are School/Module-specific issues. Some Schools seem to

have effective ways of engaging with students and their concerns about deadlines. In other Schools, it was not only timing but also the number of deadlines which is also related to larger discussions about the effectiveness of coursework.

- Frank (Provost) adds (in the chat): 'If there is a consensus amongst the relevant student cohort about the (un-)desirability of specific deadline dates (e.g., immediately after a break), on a Monday, on a Friday etc., could this be communicated to me? I could then share that with DoPGTs and facilitate a wider conversation about best practice in this area.'
- Noah (Director of Education): low-credit assessments are usually handed in late rather than students requesting an extension because it will not realistically have an effect on the overall grade. Noah asks if there is a way to track this or if data on this are available?
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): individual Coordinators would need to be contacted about this.
- Callum (PG Research President) adds that there was a debate a few years ago about mid-day vs midnight deadlines. Callum emphasises the importance of clear communication.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): there is perception that deadlines outside of academic world are even stricter, but Sandro adds that in his experience, deadlines are negotiable for better quality.
- Frank (Provost): deadlines within a system where students are entitled to prompt feedback and staff have various responsibilities, work should also be plannable. This is a reciprocal arrangement.
- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) asks: how PGTs be included in discussions of academic calendar, since they do not have experiences of a different one?
 - Clare (Proctor): the current academic calendar has been running for two years and was changed in response to many requests from staff who found the previous one restrictive around Easter time. Now staff have the opportunity to spend time with their families which they previously spent teaching. A review of the current calendar is being undertaken by a group of people; models available at other Scottish institutions are being taken into account. Parameters are the release of A-level results, Christmas, discussions about deferred and re-sit exams, Sustainability, Registry (processing results for Graduation), and various other factors. The Director of Education and Postgraduate Academic Convenor will be

invited to give input. Claire emphasises that the University of St Andrews is one of the few institutions that provides a Spring Break at all. The problem is a list of incompatible demands from stakeholders. A list of models will be proposed to Senate in September. Claire emphasises that none of the options is going to be perfect and will take time to be implemented.

- Chase (Academic Representation Coordinator) asks in the chat: 'With regard to Sandro's point about the connection between extensions and the Academic Calendar- has there been a comparison of the number/volume of extension requests between 2020/21 (or any other previous year) and this year or the previous academic year? (Obviously other factors, notably the pandemic, will affect those numbers, but it might be interesting to see)'
 - o Frank (Provost) responds: 'I don't think this has been done, but the shape of sem. 1 has not really changed at all and we have still seen a marked increase in extension requests.'
 - o Chase: 'perhaps a comparison of just S2 to S2 data (by year) might be interesting to isolate the data set a bit more.'
- Jacqueline (Associate Provost Education): emphasises the importance of getting feedback through in-person groups, not only surveys.
 - o Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): many DOPGTs do receive feedback informally. It is nevertheless important to implement formal structures for this kind of feedback.
- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): as for extensions, in smaller PG programs working flexibly may be easier. This might fall under inequity issues but also feeds into conversations between students and staff in general.
 - o Clare (Proctor) expresses being sympathetic to sudden circumstances that force students to ask for extensions and student-staff relations. But also, Clare is aware of the fact that students will have to learn time management skills for future employment. A policy of being able to delay might work in some cases, but in others it means a piling up of work which leads to a crisis. Clare asks for a balance in this discussion: what is the University preparing students for?
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): as for the issue of piling, Sandro asks how do we support students in managing this, instead of denying requests? Sandro emphasises the significance of study advising. Sandro acknowledges that students are being trained for the world of corporate, but students are also being trained to self-manage time. Sandro emphasises that identifying the need for an extension is also a matter of time

management. Sandro emphasises that the corporate world does not operate like this anymore, deadlines are not as strict anymore. In a world of flexible work, the understanding of flexibility of deadlines is part of the larger change. If a labour system of 20 years ago is imitated, that does more harm.

- Clare (Proctor) points out that research grant submissions do not offer extensions
 - Callum (PG Research President) agrees with Sandro. If the University of St Andrews wants to prepare students for both academia and the industry, this needs to be taken into account.
- *Action Point:* greater consultations about the academic calendar with an emphasis on PG representation.

3. Postgraduate Research Matters

a. PGR-related updates

- Callum (PG Research President) relates that the need for preparing PGRs for a life after their programmes has been raised. There have been comments on the outdatedness of some of the existing preparations. Industry and academia are focusing more on newer theories of pedagogy that are not being put forward. People have brought up that the University does not offer resources (i.e., digital humanities).

i. Library recalls

- Callum (PG Research President): an issue has been raised widely that PGRs who are submitting their theses find recall notices from the library.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) emphasises communication. Students submitting their theses are in a tough position and may not know that a recall notice can be discussed individually via email or the library desk. Can there be set up a webpage geared towards PG students?
 - Sandie (Library): takes note. Sandie clarifies that all it takes is an email to library@st-andrews.ac.uk and it will be individually settled. The library is keen to work with students. This service is also available at the Walter-Bower House.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) emphasises gearing communication towards PGRs specifically, and being proactive, not reactive.
- *Action Point:* Sandie (Library) will consult with Emma and Scott to streamline discussion to students. The next Study Space catch-up will discuss this.

ii. School-level training for PGR students

- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) relates that the workflow is progressing nicely. Jacqueline (Associate Provost Education) has been working on

training opportunities to be implemented in the PGR curriculum.

- Frank (Provost) relates that there is more awareness for how this is being run in each School. There is great variety amongst Schools which will be discussed at next year's DoT meetings. Heather Scott will collate information. The goal is to strike a balance between consistency and homogenisation. So far there is a good sense of centrally provided training (via CEED).
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) emphasises the importance of maintaining that bird's eye overview for training opportunities for PGRs and further conversations about how to monitor this.
 - Kostas (St Leonard's College): any ideas about any areas that are not covered by grad skills are welcome.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): there is a longer-term question of how PGRs relate to grad skills and how they incorporate them into their own experiences.
 - Callum (PG Research President) adds: a lot of feedback is from graduated PGRs who are finding that those skills are not applicable to the job market even in applying for jobs at the University of St Andrews. Callum stresses the importance of looking at hiring practices in terms of the things that are taught is a good way to go ahead.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) stresses the importance of assistance from St Leonard's college.
 - Heather (CEED) relates that grad skills came out of a report that showed that grad students are not displaying the skills that the industry wanted – things that transcend the discipline. If they are specific to the School, it would not be run via grad skills. Heather asks: where does the training best sit – the School (which often does not have time) or a cognate group?
 - Sandro asks whether there are long-term plans to change that?
 - Heather (CEED) relates that back when Heather was Director, students appeared to be aware of grad skills which should be something to focus on again. With PGRs, it is the researcher development framework, not grad skills (which is mainly for PGTs and UGs). Those frameworks as a structure of approaching tasks at hand (i.e., speaking skills) could be useful.
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) emphasises that this nicely connects to the previous conversation: how can we implement career-orientation into the curriculum rather than doing that on top of curriculum? Sandro relates from personal experience that this is not happening currently.
- iii. Inconsistencies in progress reviews across Schools/Departments
- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) relates that worthwhile work is happening. Jacqueline (Associate Provost Education) is in conversation with various Schools on progress reviews. This is not about homogenising, but finding out what process works for which group.
 - Heather (CEED) asks: does the standard progress review standard

- question ask what developmental work students are doing?
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) responds that there is not. However, there is a free-text field.
 - Heather (CEED): should the question be re-framed so that it is inclusive of non-academic events that give transferable skills?
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): is this the same question for all Schools?
 - Charles (Associate Provost Students): yes. DOPGRs would need to be approached about changing questions. DOPGR lunch is coming up so that question can be addressed there in an informal way.
- Jacqueline (Associate Provost Education) expresses that the question is clearer for reviewers than it is for students, as it addresses explicitly both academic and non-academic matters: Jacqueline shares the MMS guidance on the reviewer's report:
 - Question 5 should be answered in the text box provided. The answer should cover if the student and supervisory team have considered the students training needs; if the student and supervisory team have considered the students career development needs; if both the training and career development needs are being met, or what actions should be taken to enhance training and career development; whether or not the reviewer has concerns regarding the balance between research and non-research commitments and how these concerns might be addressed.*
- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) asks: are these available to students?
 - Jacqueline (Associate Provost Education): this is available on Moodle but may not be visible to students. This should be kept in mind for DOPGRs.

4. Matters across programs

a. Cost-of-living: Student who also work part time

- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) relates that an issue at the University that has arisen is the assumption that all students study full-time; this issue becomes particularly pressing in light of the cost-of-living crisis, the implication being that students who after 6 years (having studied half-time) are affected in their ability to earn a wage. Does this affect extension requests?
- Callum (PG Research President): There's also a decent proportion of students who started on a full-time programme who were forced to seek out employment with the increasing living costs (rent increases, etc.) halfway through their programme.
 - Noah (Director of Education): Especially student rents have increased by about 100% in many cases in the last 5 years.
- Jacqueline (Associate Provost Education): if a student who will be

eligible for part-time degree thinks that they should move from full-time to part-time study, that is permitted. It is difficult to predict the effect this has on extension requests, as all requests are unique. Part-time is only offered to students with home status. Jacqueline expresses that a student should rather be granted a request than being forced in a position of struggling. Jacqueline points out that a part-time degree has various implications.

- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) relates that Sandro has considered several times going part-time, but current housing costs made that impossible. Sandro emphasises the importance of capturing the implications that moving to part-time has. Sandro asks for a brainstorm of mechanisms of how part-time students could receive support beyond that decision.
- Frank (Provost) emphasises that there is money available through discretionary funding. The University also desperately wants to build more beds and accommodation in town but a contraction in supply of private accommodation has made it difficult. The University is interested in creating decent and affordable places.
 - o Noah (Director of Education) relates that the departure of Joyce from financial matters has drastically changed that. International students and marginalised students have relied on consistent support. Now they have to justify that and that was not communicated to them in advance, so they had to re-apply. Noah emphasises the importance of widening the pool of students that the fund is available to. Having a harder time accessing the fund also wears on students in addition. Students are also receiving less money than before. Noah understands the importance of re-assessing but expresses that the extent to which this has changed is worrying. This has been communicated to Student Services but this has not led anywhere. When discussing the Discretionary Fund, it should be kept in mind that this is not a cure-all. Noah stresses the importance of remaining aware. Another issue that has been raised is that the Discretionary Fund only allows one application at a time, another application can only be opened at the discretion of a money advisor, which is not always communicated to students.
 - o Frank (Provost) adds that the Discretionary Fund is not there for students to rely on but for moments of crisis. There should be a financial plan in place at the beginning of a PGT or PGR. The university has limited means to address that. Bursaries and stipends are available but limited.
- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): at PGT level, we are in a good position to trust students to manage their time. It is a different conversation at UG level. If someone at PGT level thinks it is reasonable to push a piece of coursework back, then putting trust into students is

part of the pedagogical mission.

- Charles (Associate Provost Students) stresses that that already exists. If students want to submit early, then that is fine. If they cannot meet the deadline, they can ask for an extension which will be granted.
- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): this was addressed before and points at the question: what makes an extension request reasonable? Currently, students have to justify themselves. It should be the other way around.
- Heather (CEED): staff have rigid timetables, flexible deadlines play havoc. Logistically this is difficult in particular for large modules.
 - o Noah (Director of Education): that sounds like staff do not have positively balanced workloads.
 - o Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) acknowledges input but also emphasises the uniqueness of the situation, given various points of stressors on deadlines currently.
 - o Heather (CEED): if there were to be a test group, PGT groups would be perfect for trying out flexible deadlines policy due to small size. Heather hopes that the School considers the considerable impact on staff.
 - o Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) appreciates that this is a valuable conversation to have and asks where should this work be taken?
 - o Clare (Proctor) and Frank (Provost): PG working group. Frank acknowledges the problem but is concerned that the PG program is the most compressed. Staff teaching on the program often have to work over the summer (due to dissertations) so more consideration on what is feasible needs to be had. But if flexibility has financial and wellbeing benefits, Frank is happy to put this out for a trial. PG programs are very differently structured.
 - o Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) agrees with Frank; it needs to be considered when weight taken off students is shifted to staff and how to balance that. Flexible deadlines at PGT level would take the pressure off of coursework deadlines, but not necessarily off of end-of-semester works. In this way, students can take up work. Sandro acknowledges that this will take more planning but thinks that this is worth looking at. On PGR level, that is already being practiced. If this is still within the academic year they are enrolled in, an extension can be asked via supervisor and then Charles who looks into extension request can grant it.
 - Frank (Provost): the difference is that one is a taught program, the other one is not; module grades have to be reported by a certain deadline. PhDs are individual pieces so fewer people are affected. Frank understands Sandro's point but points out that this operates on the

assumption that there is less work at the end of the University.

- Clare (Proctor): will look into issues raised by Noah (Director of Education). Clare emphasises that everyone should feel encouraged to apply to Discretionary Funding. Clare emphasises the importance of working hard on prevention, rather than on a cure.
- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): will take general encouragement back to PGR and PGT students.

5. Provost's Office Updates (Provost, Associate Provost Education, Association Provost Students)

- Frank (Provost): there is a significant furniture change to the Old Burgh School. Hazel tried hard to get the local student community engaged but students were not particularly engaged. Frank asks for more engagement to make this a student space. Also, £10,000 were found that need to be spent before 10th July. This is available for travel (research, conference, etc).
 - Sandro (PG Academic Convenor): this sparks further discussions about how that money can be maintained as an accessible pool for PG students. Sandro predicts that many applications for the money will be coming in.
 - Callum (PG Research President): What's the process of applying?
 - Kostas (St Leonard's College): It is currently being set up in Fund/MySaint and in SLC webpage.
- Clare (Proctor): Level 1 of library will open on Monday (10th April) with dedicated PG spaces.

6. Any Other Competent Business (AOCB)

- Sandro (PG Academic Convenor) thanks everyone.