



Postgraduate Academic Forum
St Andrews Students Association

Meeting date: Wednesday 19th November 2025 (16:00-17:00)
Small Rehearsal Room (Student Union Building)

GENERAL INFORMATION

Meeting called by: President of Education - Emily Bannister
Type of Meeting: Postgraduate Academic Forum (PGAF)
Chair: President of Education - Emily Bannister
Note Taker(s): Postgraduate Representation Intern - Rhiannon Cadelle

ATTENDANCE

Attendees: Provost - Dr Morven Shearer, Director of Student Experience - Ros Claase, Executive Officer to St Leonard's College - Kostas Zafeiris, Associate Provost Education - Dr Jacqueline Rose, Associate Provost Students - Dr Charles Warren, President of Education - Emily Bannister, PGT President - Pierluigi Maffi, PGR President - Amy Elizabeth Hopkins, Postgraduate Representation Intern - Rhiannon Cadelle.

Apologies: Proctor - Professor Claire Peddie, Academic Rep Co-ordinator - Amy McLaughlin.

Agenda

1. Welcome and Introduction(President of Education)

2. PGT Dissertation Guidance Standardisation (PGT President)

Overview:

Addressing the concerns raised by PGT Representatives regarding the perceived inadequacy of dissertation guidance currently available to students.

Discussion:

The following measures are proposed:

1. The creation and implementation of a standardised dissertation guidebook across all schools, with the initial framework to be developed in consultation with the PGT President.

2. University encouragement of each school to host a dissertation-focused Q&A presentation, aimed at providing clarity and support to students as they begin their dissertation process.

2.1 Dissertation Guidance - Meetings and Handbooks

PGT President - We have had our Forums with the PGT reps. Some courses had already had their SSCCs, but some had not. Raised items:

- **Students feel there is not enough dissertation guidance.** Impact at the start of the year, when students are chatting with students from other courses and are worried about the different stages they are at.
- **Assignment expectations are unclear.** It has been a problem for students who do not have much experience with the British academic environment, and therefore do not know how to write and what the requirements are.

Proposed Action Points

- Organise a **standardised approach** for dissertations **at a University level**. It has been acknowledged different Schools will have varying requirements. I propose every School must have a **meeting at the start of the academic year** to lay out what is expected and when students will have to produce something.
- **Dissertation Guidebook** - maybe helpful to have a guidebook for students to consult. The guidebook could outline the main approaches, rather than School specific concerns.

Discussion

Provost suggested bringing these points to the DoPG lunch, and agreed there should be some expectation management. Associate Provost Students was surprised to hear students were receiving dissertation meetings in Week 8, when a lot of dissertations take place in the summer and so do not come into focus until semester two.

Associate Provost Education raised concerns that standardised handbook could be difficult as Schools have varied expectations, but agreed students should know in Week 1 when they need to start thinking about dissertations. PGT President recognised the disparity in expectations and timeline of the dissertation per School, but noted the source of anxiety for students comes from comparing the knowledge they have or have not been given. Associate Provost Students noted the different period lengths of dissertations needs to be considered - some dissertations are a few months long and some are a year. PGT President agreed there should not be a singular resource for students' dissertations.

Agreed Action Point

- An **official meeting at the start of the academic year** that details expectations and plan of action for the dissertation, i.e there will be a structured meeting in December, you can begin to find a tutor/supervisor in semester two, etc.

Discussion

Associate Provost Education acknowledged the difficulty of producing a dissertation guidebook. Some Schools are using more innovative types of assessments, not just the traditional dissertation style - offering 60 credit, high level projects.

Proposed Action Point

- One of the Associate Deans is making a **general module handbook**, they could add a **checklist** of items Schools must cover, beyond that they can fit in their own structures and expectations.

Associate Provost Students agreed having this small element of standardisation would be helpful, as there will never be a single handbook which suits everyone. Provost and PGT President agreed with this suggested action point. Director of Student Experience thought point 2 I think will have more impact than trying to do something that will not necessarily work like Point 1, and highlighted the need for a longer time to think about what is necessary for dissertation handbooks.

2.2 University Policy

PGR President conferred with Art History masters students and found handbooks point to University policy on dissertations and module assessments - which is dense and vague. The policy outlines you should meet with your supervisor once a month but does not specify at what time in the year these meetings should start. Art History have been told not to think about the dissertation until semester two but some lecturers have said to make a note of ideas throughout semester one; a lot of students have questions now. Students are trying to deduce how they can use feedback from a recently graded assessment for the dissertation. Those who want to do a PhD next year have to worry about funding deadlines which are, at the latest, in January; those students need to know what the subject of their masters dissertation will be to draft and submit a PhD proposal.

Proposed Action Points

- **Specificity in the Policy.** When the policy is reviewed next year it could be more specific with the inclusion of dates.
- **Schools' Dissertation Stage:** The DoPG lunch could be a good point for going through each School and seeing whether students have been assigned supervisors. I think the disparity between Schools is a cause for concern and we should be checking where they are in the process.

Discussion

Provost - Some won't be assigned for ages and this disparity is okay. It works because the timelines for the dissertations and high level modules are different and the expectations within each School are different. It would be difficult to make all Schools agree on a certain time.

Associate Provost Education liked the idea of asking Schools to provide a checklist of how to use feedback from an earlier assessment in the final project.

I have a couple of reflections:

- We **cannot** express a **date in University policy**. Specific dates will differ, for example online programmes can stop and start at any point, and we are moving away from specific dates for in-person in the academic year.
- Unlike other universities **we are flexible at point of entry**, we don't say you have to know who your dissertation supervisor will be when you turn up. It may be some people have met their supervisors because they know who they would like and some have not because they have not thought about it before.

President of Education informed PG Presidents she sits on a module handbook working group and they should confer with the group leader. President of Education proposed the committee should look at the dissertation policy for when it is reviewed.

Associate Provost Students informed the University policy has to be generic, if it is too specific, it becomes obsolete; it needs to suit all Schools. The policy could reflect diversity more explicitly so PGs are not worried about being in different stages to their peers - putting in phrases to recognise this would tackle students' concerns.

Agreed Action Points

- **Review Dissertation Policy** - Committee to review dissertation policy for 2026.
- **Making Diversity Explicit** - Including phrases in the policy to recognise the diversity in the dissertation process across Schools.

2.3 St Leonard's Website - Dissertation Handbooks

PGR President mentioned the St Leonard's website, there is a section for dissertation support and wellbeing.

Proposed Action Point

- It could be the space for **specific School dissertation handbooks**. A lot of students are having difficulty locating these handbooks, having them all in one accessible place might help.

Director of Student Experience sits on the project board for web innovation. "We are aware, as a University, how the digital estate, our website, is stored, shared, and found, and this does need enhancement. One of the challenges is a lot of localised information rapidly becomes out of date. So we are focusing on making the more important things findable. I am hesitant for there to be a repository in the St Leonard's website for these handbooks, because unless the language we use is a golden source of content it will not be helpful or findable."

PGR President noted Google is more often used by students than searching through student portals. Provost asked if there are links within the School webpages; while specific School information would be found in the student portal, general guidance should be more accessible. PGR President highlighted Art History student portal links back to the central University policy, and Schools have not done additional work to outline what the policy means. Executive Officer

at St Leonard's noted Art History as one of the most detailed with dates. Other Schools are not as detailed and there is a lack of consistency in information provided.

2.4 Assignment Expectations

PGT President - We expect masters students to know what is expected but do not offer a chance of finding out how they need to write. In an undergraduate degree, you have time to get used to marking and improve with your feedback, you have time to get better for assessments that count. However, with masters students in the first month you can take exams which will impact the final grade for your degree. International students are being penalised because they do not know how to write and what is expected of them.

Director of Student Experience noted IELLI offer this resource, we can consider: what is the uptake, how to push out that this resource exists, how to get Schools to push it.

Proposed Action Point

- **Converse with IELLI** - we can have a conversation with our colleagues in IELLI to see about the existence of this resource and the channels it is advertised by.

Associate Provost Education suggested whether part of the issue is a UG to masters change. "I am wondering how many Schools as part of the process of inducting students have sessions on masters essays?"

PGT President did not have numbers for the different Schools, but emphasised in his School there is no such resource. PGT President highlighted for a lot of students the first time they are hearing about expectations is in the feedback from essays that have been graded. Associate Provost Education thought it would be useful to hear from students if they would like the resource and also in what form it would be most useful: videos, a text-based resource, a session. PGT President agreed and will invest time into investigating this.

Another issue raised was the lack of assignment examples, usually reasoned so students can develop creativity in their writing and research. PGT President emphasised without a basis for how to write, students do not know professors' expectations until the feedback; however PGT President was skeptical about a general resource as this would not cater to individual professor's expectations.

Associate Provost Education noted masters coursework is no longer just essays, it can be policy briefings, reports, and agreed at that point guidance should be specific. Director of Student Experience suggested transition toolkits. UG has one for students entering Honours, there might be one in the works for PG. They might need upskilling; they could help students find where to go for information they specifically need. We can speak to IELLI about PG transitional toolkits. There should be something for Schools at an interdisciplinary level, such as expectations.

Agreed Action Point

- **University to reach out to IELLI** about resources for international students and PG transitional toolkits .
- **What type of resource?** PGT President to investigate what form this resource should take that would be of most use for students.

3. Issues with the organisation of PG SSCCs (PG Presidents)

Overview:

PGT Representatives have raised concerns regarding the current practice of DoPGTs organizing SSCCs on their behalf. This arrangement has resulted in scheduling conflicts and challenges for representatives in gathering comprehensive student feedback before meetings. While the support of DoPGTs is appreciated, it is essential to recognize that SSCCs are specifically intended to be student-led forums, and therefore, student representatives should be central to their planning and execution.

Discussion:

Following the agreement at last year's PGAF, it was decided that faculty members and Students' Association would collaborate on an email to DoPGTs and DoPGRs, outlining the principles of academic representation. This action was not completed as planned. We propose that this initiative be implemented now, with specific emphasis on the critical role of PG Reps in the SSCC planning process.

3.1 Scheduling SSCCs

President of Education - We have noticed the DoPGT or DoPGR will organise an SSCC on behalf of the PG reps. We are grateful for staff relieving the burden of organising these meetings but there have been scheduling issues. PG reps have not been able to attend because their availability has not been considered. Some SSCCs were scheduled for a week after PG rep elections, reps did not know their cohort yet, they had no student feedback to present.

PGT President added some reps felt it was hard to go back to DoPGT/R to reschedule.

Proposed Action Point

- **Polite Reminder from University** - PG reps should be able to attend SSCC meetings.
- **Time for Feedback** - We ask reps to gather feedback but with SSCC scheduled so soon after rep elections, reps did not have time to collect feedback to present at these meetings.

Discussion

Provost is happy to clarify this at the DoPG lunch. Associate Provost Students agreed this is essential. Director of Experience suggested a good opportunity for a reminder would be when discussing the Student Voice and Rep policy. Director asked whether PG election timing had changed over the years, proposing Schools had got into a pattern of scheduling meetings around these dates.

President of Education noted last year it was decided Schools and the Union would send emails when reps were elected and asked if this could be put in the schedule. President of Education

proposed a joint email or to take this to the DoPG lunch. Provost informed the opportunity to do it this year had passed. If we put in place a process where once the reps are decided and an email goes out, these are what SSCCs are and then give a time to have them. Lunches would then be appropriate to let us know if there is an issue for semester two. President of Education agreed and will give this action point to Amy.

Agreed Action Points

- **Polite Reminder from University** - reps should be able to attend SSCCs.
- **Awareness of PG Rep Election Dates** - allowing time for gathering feedback when scheduling SSCCs.
- **Email After Rep Elections** - action point for Academic Representation Co-ordinator; for next year, emails to Schools including who their reps are, what is a SSSCCs and when they should happen.

3.2 PGR SSCCs

PGR President informs the committee there was a lot of discussion in the PGR Forum about what are SSCCs and who needs to attend, and at PGRC this week, there was push back on what a PGR SSCC is and because it cannot be integrated.

Discussion

Director of Student Experience took from PGRC that PGR SSCCs had not merged in with taught sessions but other research related committees to which PGR reps are invited had a point to discuss representation within the agenda. So the function of the representation meetings was happening elsewhere. The Director is okay with this as long as it is made explicit that this is what has happened, noting the push back was “don’t make us have more meetings”. If the function of a SSCC is not happening within those meetings, then this will need to be addressed. The action from the PGRC was to ensure the finalised Student Voice and Rep policy made clear that in an “SSCC or meeting where an SSCC function was fulfilled...”.

PGR President:

Concern

- PGR reps will not have the space to discuss issues which are sensitive in these other meetings.
- In SSCCs with DoPGRs, all issues can be discussed including wellbeing concerns which do not necessarily fit within other meetings.
- These committee meetings can also have many senior members of the University in attendance, and the PGR rep may not want to voice these issues there.
- Information is not getting back to the Union because SSCC notes are in another meeting’s minutes, so the Union remains unaware of issues and cannot seek to resolve them.

President of Education:

Proposed Action Point

- **Caveat in Policy for Sensitive Information** - we should add a caveat for “if sensitive information needs to be discussed then the DoPGR will make every accommodation to meet with you, if the DoPGR will not accommodate this...”.

Provost agreed in these instances a thirty minute meeting is a fair request.

Associate Provost Education agreed we should facilitate more flexible ways to fulfill the policy. She suggested a review term for internal teaching reviews; if the SSCC is happening in other meetings, is there a way of extracting that so it can be used. Executive Officer at St Leonard’s agreed when the SSCC function has taken place in other meetings, the minutes should reflect representation issues were expressed, discussed and recorded.

Executive Officer at St Leonard’s confirmed different formats of SSCC should be allowed, and asked the PGR President if this could be an action for herself and Sandro.

PGR President is happy if all issues are being covered, as long as all things that come under the PGR SSCC are recorded.

3.3 Summer SSCCs for PGs

Associate Provost Education asked if SSCCs are timetabled on UG teaching patterns, and if there is a need for some contact in the dissertation period for in-person students?

Discussion

President of Education highlighted this has been discussed. The Union closes in the summer, but representative team are considering continuing to run PGR and PGT Forums. PGAF in the summer could be a possibility, contingent on availability.

PGR President - Is there scope to pull PGT out of the UG SSCCs?

Proposed Action Point

- **Separate UG and PGT/PGR SSCCs** - so meetings run as UG and then PGT/PGR year round. The concern for PGR reps is hearing about their teaching during these meetings, but it is rare for PGRs to be teaching at masters level.

PGT President highlighted the last point of contact with reps is around February/March time and agreed the majority of issues for PGs seem to be in August, being dissertation issues. PGR President added PGR reps also work up until the election of a new PGR rep.

Agreed Action Point

- **Demand before Action** - see what the demand is over the summer. There could be an outpour of need for support from the PG community, all PGs have an abundance of issues over the summer.

4. PG Community Initiatives (PG Presidents)

Overview:

PG Representatives have collectively voiced concerns regarding the absence of a robust postgraduate community at the University of St Andrews.

In response, the Students' Association is proactively addressing the issue through several initiatives. These include the organisation of the inaugural Leonard's Day Postgraduate Pier Walk and the establishment of a weekly postgraduate social gathering at the Beacon Bar, commencing in S2 AY25/26.

Discussion:

University endorsement of these events- funding and attendance.

4.1 PG Events

PGR President - We are responding to the longstanding request for PG students to have a robust community. What we have done was put on the agenda in the All Students Forum last Friday. There were only two or three PGs in the audience but there were lots of questions from UGs and societies specifically asking what they can do to make PGs feel more involved.

Events:

- **Pierwalk** - RoMo and Pier organised a PG pierwalk which was well received.
- **PG Night, Beacon Bar** - We are working with the Students' Association to establish a PG space in the Union for one day a week. We have earmarked Beacon Bar on a Thursday evening. The Bar will be open from 6pm until 10:30pm, 6pm-8pm will be for socialising, and then 8pm onwards there will be an event, for example a Cheese and Wine night, or an evening with Jazzworks. This will start in refreshers and continue throughout the semester.
- **All Welcome** - These events would not be exclusionary. Marketing would be towards PGs, but also mature UG students or early career researchers would also be welcome.

We have had a consistent complaint from the majority of PGRs about the distance to OBS as many of them are commuting to town and then would have to walk an additional 20 minutes to OBS, whether as the Union is next to the Bus Station.

PGT President - The idea is we are creating a space for PGs to come together and build a community, and once we have that community lifted off the ground we could have many more events, including more engagement at OBS..

Request

- **Funding** - The Students' Association cannot fund all of it. There was the question of whether we could get some money from St Leonard's or the University to bring in with the funding from the Students' Association to get it off the ground.

Discussion

Provost thought these events were fantastic ideas, and liked the idea of Students' Association doing more PG events over the summer. "We do not have funding for lots of events, the idea had been the Students' Association would do more of that. Financially, there is a block grant from the University but I do not know how that works. I will have to look at the movement of the

money from the University.” University funding tends to go towards more academic reading groups, conferences, and networking.

Proposed/Agreed Action Points

- **Double Badging** - the event can be double badged with St Leonard’s and the Students’ Association.
- **Promotion** - we can definitely promote the event via our channels.
- **Future Funds** - I can think about next year and how to fund this, and where the University will put its funds.

Director of Student Experience suggested on an operational level to apply for the **Student Activities Fund**; it is a finite bit of money but with set criteria. It is for setting up a new event which would benefit the wider student experience. It is not sustainable, it is for a one-off event or for setting up a group of events. Director suggested, in making events open to others, the CCMFL group would also be good to include.

PGT President asked if there could be double badging every week for the PG event, as it would help to facilitate PG community in the Union. PGR President invited the Executive team or other staff from St Leonard’s to come to the Launch Event. Provost - “It would be fantastic to come”. President of Education - We will all prepare something for the Student Activities fund and will be in contact for promotion.

4.2 Destereotyping OBS

Associate Provost Education understands North Haugh and OBS appear on opposite ends, but the walk is only twenty minutes. If St Andrews was a campus university it might be seen differently. Associate Provost Education thought we should push back against OBS being “far-away”.

Discussion

Provost agreed, suggesting OBS needs the University tagline of “closer than you think”. President of Education suggested speaking with PG Reps and strategising combating the stigma at the next PGAF. PGR President suggested the main issue is students do not know if they will enjoy the event and are taking time out that may be wasted. A lot of feedback said PGs do not like how OBS is decorated, it feels corporate.

Director of Student Experience liked the idea of taking away the barrier of how far away OBS is. It could be addressed with the Union Design and Marketing Team.

Proposed/Agreed Action Points

- **Mini Campaign** - demystifying the distance, similar to Union’s existing work on cycling.
- **Event Movement** - we can start building in movement, one week it is at the Students’ Association and next week the event will be at the OBS. After a few events, the “will I enjoy this” goes away.

Associate Provost Education agreed and highlighted if you are anxious then going for a walk is a good way to relieve stress. President of Education was happy to leave this to the Union for workshopping content creation.

5. Action accountability from Surveys (PGR President)

Overview:

Points of improvement and pledges have been made regarding the PGR experience in a variety of different fora/in response to different surveys, and it is important to centralise these to avoid duplication of effort and make sure we are aware of the various deadlines.

Discussion:

Creating a shared centralised database with updated and detailed actions for PG improvements.

PGR President - Morven and I have spoken about this in various forums, we would like a centralised database for different bits of information. Looking through action plans, there have been items Callum worked on but there has not been a handover to me. I do know they exist but do not know what point they are at. A central platform would be a benefit to staff too, those coming in and out of working groups. We want to ensure smooth transitions.

Provost - Steve and Judith are the people to see about making sure those actions which come up in different committees are getting fed to the right place. Judith is looking at how different groups are clarked; if it concerns PG then letting Kostas know is the first step. At the end of the year we will need to see these actions, and be able to access them.

Proposed Action Points

- **Centralised Database** - We make promises in different places and how can we centralise this so nothing is lost. PG group may be the place to do that. We need to make sure we are keeping track.

Discussion

Associate Provost Education:

Proposed Action Points

- **Loop in the Academic Monitoring Group**, they are good at chasing up actions, putting pressure on the team.
- Last year, points from academic plans were monitored by the **quality team**.

Summary - Before PG group, implementing surveys should be for the quality team and then Academic Monitoring Group for chasing.

6. Any Actions Following PGR Representative Forum(PGR President)

Overview:

The PGR Representative Forum is scheduled to take place on Wednesday 19th November 16:00-17:00. As such, the Students' Association have not gathered the recent views of

PGR Reps prior to PGAF. We will dedicate this space in the agenda to discuss the views of PGR Representatives.

Discussion:

Any action items following the PGR Representative Forum.

PGR President - We had the PGR Forum on Wednesday.

Main discussion points:

- SSCCs - what are they?
- PGR handbook for international students
- TEQEL action plan point
- Funding Page, St Leonard's website.

Discussion

Provost said the funding webpage will be open soon.

Associate Provost Education and Associate Provost Students were not aware of a handbook for PG international students. PGR President thought there was a handbook that was more holistic than academic and covers issues like how to bring your children over. Some reps mentioned Schools had said they had one but it did not appear when they searched.

PGR President - Another issue was contract clarity. Physics has moved from a standard contract paid at the end of the month to timesheets, but did not clearly communicate this change. Some students missed the timesheet deadline and will not be paid until next month. There is disparity in the use of timesheets across Schools. I know there are good reasons for why one School uses them and not another but perhaps we can look into effective communication.

Provost agreed contract clarity is a good action point, and inquired about the handbook. Associate Provost Education asked if it is an existing resource or an action that was meant to happen but did not. Associate Provost Education remembered colleges told international students where to find information, but was not aware of such a handbook for UGs and PGs.

Director of Student Experience mentioned there are resources in orientation for international students but wondered if the idea of a handbook has been lost in translation. This may come under student accessibility? Director agreed clearer and more findable information for international students is needed, but a handbook may not be ideal for this.

President of Education informed the committee, the Union has a disability guide and a widening access scheme, but is not working on this handbook."I think we should pause this and as soon as someone in this committee finds it, let us all know and we can tell reps."

Agreed Action Points

- **St Leonard's Website, Funding Page** - will be up soon.
- **Clear, Accessible Resource for PG International Students** - to workshop, unlikely a handbook.

- **Contract Clarity** - where relevant, the use of timesheets in Schools for GTAs being effectively communicated.

7. Research Excellence Awards

Discussion:

Will this be done in partnership? If so, has the capacity of the Students' Association been considered?

Director of Student Experience - There was a meeting this morning from Research, this award would recognise research culture and research excellence. We mentioned that we do Teaching Awards in partnership with the Union, and asked if we will involve PGRs in the research awards, can we work with the Union.

President of Education - What awards would we be expected to give or would we present any awards?

Provost - We are in the very early stages. It would be around research culture. Integrity was mentioned; not as much what research has been done but what you have done to enhance research culture as a whole. PGs will be eligible. We met with Don, to understand where early career researchers and PGRs interact. We don't want to see parallel paths where integration can happen.

Agreed Action Point

- **University to keep the Union informed about developments.**

8. Faculty Attendees Items for Discussion

Discussion:

Provost noted the importance of taking notes and having access, knowing what has been discussed since discussions here will likely feed into other committees. Provost highlighted the idea of running lunchtime sessions for PGT and PGR rep lunches next semester and will pick it up with the PG Group.

President of Education informed at the end of the year SABBs compile a report of what they have done. For this year the President of Education would like reps to do this also. This representation report would include summaries of forums, and what is being done on the University side, even if it is just a mention that a meeting took place.

9. Meeting Adjourned (President of Education)