



PGR Forum

St Andrews Students Association

Meeting date: Wednesday 29th April 2026 (10:00-12:00)
Large Rehearsal Room (Student Union Building)

GENERAL INFORMATION

Meeting called by: PGR President - Amy Hopkins

Type of Meeting: PGR Forum

Chair: PGR President - Amy Hopkins

Note Taker(s): Postgraduate Representation Intern - Rhiannon Cadelle

ATTENDANCE

Attendees: PGR President - Amy Hopkins, Academic Rep Co-ordinator - Amy McLaughlin, Postgraduate Representation Intern - Rhiannon Cadelle, Astrophysics PGR Rep - Holly Seo, Photonics PGR Rep - Rhona Hamilton, Classics PGR Rep - Shannon McMillan, Chemistry PGR Rep - Joanna Urbanczyk, Art History PGR Rep - Francesca Bisi, Medicine PGR Rep - Richard Edel, Biology SOI Rep - Toms Ekmanis, Biology BMSRC Rep - Keenan Parker, Modern Languages PGR Rep - Natalia Hernandez Samarriba.

Online: N/A

Apologies: Computer Science PGR Rep - Jess McGowan, Mathematics and Statistics PGR Rep - Madeleine Heideman.

Absences: Divinity PhD Rep - Jonathan Moore, Psychology and Neuroscience PhD Rep - Janie Fink, Classics PGR Rep - Jana Mauri Marlborough, Earth Science PGR Rep - Grace Nielson, Business School PGR Rep - Waqas Anwar, History PGR Rep - Michael Wang, Business School PGR Rep - Jakub Kowalczyk, Chemistry PGR Rep - Filomena Tedesco, Film Studies PGR Rep - Rachel Ng, Geography and Sustainability PGR Rep - Gauthier Dulot, Geography and Sustainability PGR Rep - Daniela Alvarez Gallo, International Relations Year 3+

Rep - Bastian van der Neut, Philosophy PGR Rep - Meg Gottschall, Social Anthropology PGR
Rep - Israa Hatem Aljaish.

Guests: N/A

Agenda

I. Welcome and Introduction

PGR President welcomes all to the PGR Forum. Note: Item V. Proposed Changes to Postgraduate Students Webpage was dropped due to time constraints.

II. School Level Updates

Astrophysics and Photonics

- No particular issues. Working with other PG Reps and DoPGR to arrange more career events, invite speakers.
- Second Year PGR Annual Presentation, at the end of May.
- Continuing to work on closing the feedback loop with centralised communication in teams channel including all PGRs.

Classics

- Organising a potluck on Sunday evening, expecting a lot of first year PGRs.
- Arranging careers based events with DoPGR, particularly for non academic careers, trying to get people with non-traditional paths with a Classics background to come in and speak.

Chemistry

- Contact form on ChemInternet that is constantly open for feedback. One suggestion: more social events.
- Series of Lectures 'What Can We Do For You', non academic staff and postdocs talking about what can be done in the department.
- Organising a BBQ for the School
- Want to look into events with ChemSoc but unclear who to contact.

Art History

- PGR Rep in School can now sit in on School Council Meetings.
- Talking with DoPGR about setting up Research Culture Cafe
- Main concerns are office space, and the delay between PhD being submitted and Viva scheduled, almost 6 months for one student - and likely others. If possible, can this be raised at a higher level for guidelines on communications, as lack of communication has caused the student a lot of stress. Have other Schools had this issue reported?

Chemistry

- Students stop getting funding at the moment they submit their thesis; even if you submit 3.5 year mark and you applied for 4 years of funding, you will not get that remaining funding - so students delay.

- Registry drafted a doc that merges the two date, which imply the exam is finished by the end of funding day but the submission must be earlier than that, changing a 4 year PhD into a 3.5 year PhD. Chemistry DoPGR is fighting this.

Medicine

- Some grants detail that the Viva has to be passed by the end of the programme, at the end of 4 years for example.

PGR President

- Registry are changing things: matriculation cards to have 3.5 years, so students can get everything done by this date but the Viva.
- Number of students being funded externally have technically failed due to their Viva being delayed, this puts University in jeopardy when students do not pass in time. Registry has therefore made the change so hopefully by the end of 4 years the Viva will also be done.
- What does this mean for PhDs funded for 4 years? I will ask the Registry in my meeting this afternoon.
- Rules will not change for us as existing PhD students, but will be applied for incoming PhD students.
- Access to the library should still work after those 3.5 years until the 4 year mark.

Chemistry

- We should still get our stipends for the Viva as we are still learning, preparing to present before the Viva - funding should not be cut before then.

(See further discussion in Item IV)

Medicine

- Social events like Pizza Fridays every week - regularity has meant an increase in attendance.
- Issue with 4th year undergraduate students having never been in a lab has meant PGRs are teaching but not getting paid. Mentioned to administration and higher-ups are aware.

Action Point

Medicine to contact PGR President via email. If academic channels are unresponsive, UCU PGR Rep can be contacted.

Biology SOI

- School of Biology funded PHD is set by the University but is lower than the UK IR rate. Contracts do not increase with inflation - the contract details that it could increase if the University wishes, but they do not. Previous contracts had that provision.

- This false advertising was brought up to new DoPGR and the PGR Committee - simply responded that student have signed the contract.
- Some students are paid more than other, at the moment £90 more a month. If University does not adjust rate and UK IR rises theirs, by October their will be a £150 difference. These students face more hardship when landlords raise rent, etc.
- A lot of interest from students who are not University funded, outraged at other being paid less for their research.

Biology BMSRC

- Organising annual Biology PG Conference, happening spring/summer time. Everyone will present.

PGR President

- Over the summer I want to clearly define the PGR Rep role description and outline the expected hours.
- Do you believe the role description should include organising and hosting social events, or should this be optional?

Consensus - Optional.

Action Point

PGR President

- The role itself is predominantly academic, therefore reps are encouraged to suggest events for academic activity such as conferences and research culture cafes - academic focused activities.
- Other social events are a great additional but not expected.

III. Maintaining Good Working Relationships with Academic Staff

Classics

- Hostile relationship between PG students and staff in the School. Finding the role of rep affects how I am treated as a student. I am interested in good working relationships with staff so it does not have a knock-on effect for my career.
- Members of Staff seem unclear on what the rep role entails, and have been warned about my name coming up in awkward conversations. A part of this is coming from a lack of understanding about what we are meant to be doing in our roles, and could be partially resolved by better communication to academic staff about what our role is.
- Any thoughts about retaining a good relationship with DoPGRs?

Medicine

- We have new DoPGRs this year, if they ask me for something I will do it to balance goodwill.
- Choose battles wisely, do not overly raise an issue when answers have been given.

PGR President

- It is useful to use the forms with student feedback, helps show that the issues you bring up are the feelings of the cohort and not just your own views.
- I am happy to meet with DoPGR to explain the role.

Biology SOI

- Remember the staff's position and keep in mind their capacity for addressing the issues you present. They are doing their job and you are doing yours, whilst it is difficult subtracting emotion helps make these matters less personal.

PGR President

- DoPGRs are offered training. It should not be obstructive to raise the feelings of students and be worried about your own career in the process.
- If others have more advice please add to Teams Channel or email Classics PGR Rep.

Action Point

- Keep striking that balance, and we (PGR President and Classics) can arrange a chat with DoPGR.

IV. Changes to St Andrews-funded Stipends

PGR President

Background:

St Andrews used to align with UKRI rates, who increased their rates almost 3-8% yearly, the University was not aware of this and therefore could not plan. The University made the decision to not uplift with UKRI rates. This triggered a review of the stipend process. There will be a meeting next week to discuss stipend rates for Scholarship boards, chaired by the principal. I do not think we can align with UKRI anymore. Majority of funding and scholarship come from pots, and interest of the University Capital Spend.

Biology BMSRC

- In the School of Biology, it feels unfair where the decision comes from a University level, fair to others who are University funded but a unfair to UKRI funded students.
- There is no provision about raising to inflation, it will not be adjusted going forward unless unforeseen raise in inflation. Some kind of uplift would be appreciated

PGR President

- Annual meeting every year at the start of May for the provisions of uplift, this decision is dependant on University finances.
- Wording of the contracts details that students will not get a decrease in stipend. Some Universities do not have this in their stipend contracts.

- In regards to endowments, the fixed high yield interest of the account is used for stipends. If the interest does not go up, the stipend uses the endowment and thus it decreases. This is unsustainable.

Action Point

- My plan is to argue for more than cost of living consumption price index, assessing bench fees, conditions of living, rent increase, bills, coming into how much we can reasonably increase by.
- I have a week until this meeting. If you can get feedback, written statements, etc from University funded students about stipend rates, cost of living, etc, I can present this in the meeting.
- All letters going out to new PhD students who are St Andrews-funded will be aligned with stipends.

Modern Languages

- No one in the School informed students about UK IR rates.
- Interested about not only the stipend but the benefits such as parental leave/sick leave - that is something that gets less addressed than the stipend itself.
- Health issues are very complicated, and the policies in place with the University are not clear on what happens.
- These issues should not depend on the kindness of supervisors. If you need a month off, you can ask for a leave of absence, and ask for discretionary fund, but you also stop being a matriculated student - if you are an international student, your visa will be suspended. You also cannot work as a GTA on a leave of absence.

PGR President

Action Point

- That policy is up for review and I can flag this.

PGR President

- There are mandatory closure periods. Part of the policy about annual leave is university-wide, and all Schools should follow. It does depend on your funding body, and a caveat in all policies.
- It is important that the University has a repository: if you are a St Andrews stipend student, then this is your policy.

Biology BMSRC

- Can we add visa information to this repository?
- UK Government uses the default of undergraduate students. In term time, students can work 20 hours but outside 40 hours. Does annual leave count? The University should have those answers for students. It would be nice to work full time hours for the 3 weeks off at Christmas say.

PGR President

- The University would be reluctant because the Home Office makes changes often, so it would likely be a link to the Home Office webpage.

Chemistry

- DoPGR mentioned issues with PGRs acting as wardens, and accommodation over the summer.

PGR President

- 50 assistant wardens, about 5% of PhD students are assistant wardens.
- This year we are offering something similar to the previous arrangement working for RBS and pay staff rate on homes over the summer, or if not working then a 50% discount.
- In January we confirmed the situation for this summer, and can now look at longer term solutions.

Action Point

- Conversations are happening in the Students' Association with Res and Business Services. This will come up at the PG Research Committee meeting this afternoon.
- As with the stipends, please use your networks so I can take as much qualitative and quantitative data into these meetings.
- As part of the assistant warden conversation, we will discuss how the Hardship Fund is applied for PhD students. It is for unforeseen difficulties. PGRs cannot get loans like UG students. I will be meeting with the money team to discuss how the policy is not fit for purpose.

Biology SOI

- For stipends, students are given unclear and vague contracts. For many incoming PhD students, they have never seen a contract and cannot know if what is offered is fair - there is a lot of trust in the University.

PGR President

Action Point

- I will ask for contracts and offer letters to be more explicit. If they are made deliberately vague, then there is no informed consent.

Modern Languages

- What happened to the Digital Fund? Where the Discretionary Fund is listed there used to be a Digital Fund - it has disappeared and no one has mentioned this.

PGR President

Action Point

- To ask about the Digital Fund.

Chemistry

- Students are no longer allowed external food, and have to use School catering.

PGR President

Raise hands if you have to use ACE for PGR School Funding.
(5 hands raised).

Astrophysics

- I think this is a University policy, to use catering from the School and perhaps some Schools are more lenient than others.

Amy McLaughlin

Who was not told about changes to their stipend by their DoPGRs?

Biology SOI

- Incoming students were not informed that their contracts were different. I did a survey, no one knew of the major changes.
- I know people affected, I can forward them to you.

PGR President

Action Point

- I have a meeting 9 am Wednesday. If you want to forward my email to students on St Andrews-funded stipends please do, if you want to collect their feedback and pass it on that is also fine. Could this be sent to me by Tuesday 5th May 5pm.

V. Proposed Changes to the Annual Review MMS Forms

[PGR progress reviews - PGR student consultation](#)

PGR President

- I hope all had the opportunity to look at the policy put together by Karen in our academic policy team. Everything in blue is what has been suggested to be added. Does anything stick out?

Chemistry

- For career development, will it feed into what we will get out of the PhD?
- We do a lot of things alongside the four-years of study which are not recognised.

PGR President

- The HEAR transcript is supplementary to academic interest for UGs. We are looking at something similar for PGR, to list volunteer hours, courses, etc.

- This might not be formally recognised as a certification, but we are looking at how we can recognise additional things that PGR students have completed.

Classics

- My concern would be that additional things will become so normalised by the form, that it is expected. So there could be a negative effect on those only focused on their research.

PGR President

Action Point

- I will feedback to Karen, that this should not be an expectation and should not become a requirement of PhD.

Biology SOI

- You could look at a PG certification that is wider in what it includes, such as things outside academia. The PG Cap is very academia focused.

VI. European Doctoral Day

[Sign up link for participation](#)

PGR President

- I have sent around a link if anyone would like to participate, we are still looking and this will be low effort.
- This will look at the breadth of research we undertake as doctoral students. I will need a photograph of yourself and a small paragraph about your research, and why you picked St Andrews. I would like these by 13th May.
- This will be posted on St Leonards social media pages, potentially a blog post too. This will be shared on the University's Instagram Stories and make up other temporary social media.
- The idea is that we are increasing the profile of our researchers.

VII. Proposed Changes to Postgraduate Students Webpage

See Item I. Welcome.

[President of Wellbeing and Community's suggested redesign](#)

i. This will replace this [webpage](#)

ii. Displayed with and without suggested images, scroll for the full page

VIII. Summer Forum

PGR President

- Over the summer we plan to continue PG Thursdays and work with St Leonards to run some events using the OBS outdoor space.
- If there are any ideas for events please let me know.

Biology BMSRC

- Golf at Himalayas - cheap entry fee.

PGR President

- President of Education, PGT President, and myself are thinking about a conference over the summer, similar to the Academic Rep conference in February.
- Sparks are keen for partnership and student engagement, they are developing a PGR experience model, recognising how different our experience is from a taught experience. The model should be in the final stages in the summer, so they may come in for a test run.
- We would discuss PG community, how to talk about this position in an interview. Please let me know if you are interested.

IX. Any Other Relevant Business

Amy McLaughlin

UCU PGR Rep has asked for you to look at the survey for GTA and Flex Workers, I have put a link in the Teams channel.