The University of Edinburgh

Internal Periodic Review
Year on response report

Internal Periodic Review of: School of Physics & Astronomy PGR Provision
Date of review: 7th & 8th March 2023
Date of 14 week response: 5 September 2023
Date of year on response: 30 May 2024

The School/Subject Area is responsible for reporting on progress with all recommendations, including those remitted to other areas of the University for action.
 If any recommendation has been fully addressed please record the action taken and date completed.   Any barriers to progress should be highlighted on this report.

Recommendation no	Recommendation	Timescale for completion	Comment on progress towards completion and/or identify barriers to completion	Completion date
1.	**Remit Item 1: SUPA arrangement** The review team **recommend** that the School a) clarifies with SUPA exactly what the requirement is; b) whether the hours undertaken by students need to be formally assessed; and c) clearly communicates the requirements with students and staff.	Sep 2023	We continue to mandate 40 hours of taught courses (as is essential for STFC accreditation) but have stopped enforcing a specific SUPA requirement. Courses from the University of Edinburgh, SUPA, and external providers (e.g. summer schools) are now all clearly listed as possible routes to fulfilling the course hours. SUPA have also streamlined their interface making it straightforward for students to claim credit hours from external providers.	**Sep 2023**
	The review team **recommend** that the School reviews its offering through SUPA and, if necessary, improves the available selection to ensure students can undertake technical training that is relevant to their discipline.	Sep 2023	We have stopped capping non-SUPA courses at 30 hours. A course will be weighted by the hours of lectures – irrespective of the provider. This simplifies the message we are trying to communicate, and ensures that students acquire technical training most relevant to their discipline.	**Sep 2023**
	The review team also **recommend** that the School explores new ways for the SUPA requirements to be met, such as capitalising on training that students already undertake as part of their development (e.g. teaching assistant, equality, diversity and inclusivity training).	Oct 2023	We have explored whether it would benefit students to count existing training towards their professional development credit requirements. On balance we decided not to do this. Training for EDI awareness, TA roles, Health & Safety etc should be regarded as a baseline that all students satisfy. The professional development credits go beyond that in a flexible student-specific way, targeting their individual needs. Ultimately 20 hours over their first two years is a rather low requirement, and this is an important prompt for students to self-reflect on their	**Oct 2023**

				training needs. We have been reflecting on available training and adding new options organised within the School. A new two-day writing course was organised in Dec 2023, and an impact/industry training session is in the planning stages.	
		The review team **recommend** that the School review its approach to professional skills training (which may require collaboration with SUPA) and **recommend** that the School reviews its use of language around professional skills and "soft skills".	Sep 2023	Our communication and language have been improved in line with the recommendations, particularly with respect to hours and assessment requirements. Our non-technical training is now labelled as "professional skills" in line with SUPA – who are a major provider. We have added further course recommendations to the graduate school website, to assist particular interest groups with finding their way to the courses previous students have found useful.	**Sep 2023**
2.		**Staff/student development**			
		The review team **recommend** that the School reviews its package of support and training available to the PGR community in their role as TAs.	Sep 2023	The Director of the Graduate School has met regularly with the Director of Teaching and TA coordinator over the past year to review our training and support model. In addition to the initial training day at the start of semester 1, we now offer a follow-up session in December, including a reflective session covering issues such as workload, marking, student engagement, and communication. It also includes a marking exercise targeting lab-based TA roles (which are generally in semester 2). We signpost TAs to resources from the Institute of Academic Development (IAD). Individual courses offer custom inductions and training, including Teams channels and other resources.	**Dec 2023**
		The review team **recommend** that the School offers annual reviews to TAs in their capacity as staff members, and also **recommend** that the School arranges an annual training event to continue to strengthen the skills of the cohort.	Sec 2023	Part of the normal annual review process for all PhD students is to discuss any teaching roles with independent assessors, who can provide guidance and make suggestions in this area. As there are >120 TAs, we believe offering separate dedicated teaching reviews to everyone is not practical. We do now offer annual reviews to all "super-TAs" in recognition of their special role.	**Dec 2023**
		The review team **recommend** that the School encourage students to undertake the teaching qualification available to them (EdTA).	Sep 2023	We support students with interest in the Edinburgh Teaching Award. This is advertised at all training sessions. Based on this recommendation we will continue to promote this qualification through multiple channels to	**Dec 2023**

			ensure all students are reached and encouraged to apply if they are interested.	
	The review team **recommend** that there is an increased increment to reward the lead TA role in recognition of their additional responsibility.	Sep 2023	We propose to continue to reward senior TAs via hours of effort. It is a challenging HR problem to give incremental points. Interviews and roles are a problem. Fundamentally, senior TAs are not doing a different job. Furthermore, they would quickly hit the pay ceiling. Nonetheless, better communication about claiming appropriate hours is needed, and is now included in the TA resources and training.	**Sep 2023**
3.	**Strategy** The review team **recommend** that the School reviews the accounting of supervision hours in the WAM to ensure it reflects the frequency of contact described to students.	June 2024	In addition to the recommendations of the IPR panel about the School's WAM, there is also input from the EDI committee. Changing the WAM to better capture diversity related considerations forms part of the School's Juno Champion strategy. As part of this, the School will be comparing our WAM to those of other Schools. Ultimately the current WAM excludes research contributions, and so developing a plan to fully reflect the workload of PhD supervision and administration would require a wider redesign of the system. This is something we will continue to raise, notably with the incoming Head of School from summer 2024.	**Ongoing**
	The review team **recommend** the School reviews its staffing strategy to ensure that growth in the PGR population can be properly supported by commensurate growth in academic staff, professional services staff and available estate and resources.	June 2024	The School is committed to providing the appropriate level of support to our PGR students. The number of PGR students per member of academic staff has been reducing over the past five years, due to an expansion in staff, so there is scope for a further increase in PhD positions within the available resources. We have replaced two professional services staff who retired in October 2023: the Graduate School Manager and the Finance Officer who was responsible for PGR funding, demonstrating our commitment to maintain existing resources. We took the opportunity to revise the job description of the Graduate School Manager, which resulted in a regrading of the post, reflecting its additional	**April 2024**

		responsibilities. We added engagement with the new student wellbeing team to the role's remit, in response to the changing University student support environment. Our academic staff numbers have continued to grow. Common with other Schools, we face increasing pressure on our physical estate. We remain committed to providing every PGR student with their own desk, except for those who are away from Edinburgh for a long period of time, for example our PhD students based at CERN. In the short term we have secured additional multi-occupancy office space. Longer term we need to rationalise space allocations within JCMB. The School recently participated in a College-led review of JCMB space; we await its recommendations.		
	The review team **recommend** that the College processes the recruitment requests of the School in timely manner and ensures the Professional Services team are properly equipped to match the School's strategic ambitions.	June 2024	In June 2023 the College introduced a new approach to post approvals which allocated each School a budget for 'investment posts' for 2023-24. This removed the need for College approval for individual new posts, provided the School managed its overall investment post budget. We have brought in a new Graduate School Administrator post under our investment post plans (in addition to the existing administrator role) to augment the resources in our Graduate School team. The new postholder started in April 2024.	**April 2024**
4.	**Remit Item 2: Diverse Recruitment** The review team support the practice of anonymised recruitment, and **recommend** that the School examine if this is achieving its aims, and if so, refine and roll-out this practice across institutes.	Apr 2024	The EDI committee hosted a summer intern in 2023 who worked with the IfA coordinator to analyse the IfA PGR admissions data. They reported to the EDI committee in August. The primary recommendation is to continue monitoring the outcomes of this new anonymised recruitment approach, with as-yet insufficient data available to make any definitive conclusions. We will repeat this study after future recruitment rounds.	**Ongoing**
	The review team **recommend** that the School work with other Schools within the College to consider outreach opportunities across related subject areas.	April 2024	Towards the end of last academic year, a paper on engagement (including outreach) was brought to the College Strategy and Management Committee. Part of this discussion was around the balance between School and College in different areas of engagement. Work on	**Ongoing**

			turning this discussion into strategy and delivery is now being undertaken, with leadership shared between the College Office and professional services across the schools. The results are not yet available to report.	
5.	**Pastoral Care / Student Support**			
	The review team **recommend** that the School develops its pastoral care arrangement and continues it formally beyond the first year.	May 2024	Pastoral interviews are mandatory for first year PhD students in semester 2. Following a discussion with students at the SSLC in June 2023, we now offer pastoral interviews to every student every year. Individual offers having been made, the students opt-in by responding to their invitation. In the first round, a total of six Y2+ students opted-in to this scheme.	**April 2024**
	The review team also had some **suggestions** to improve the mechanism, including improved signposting of pastoral care.	May 2024	An additional contribution has been added to the PhD induction day to cover student welfare and the pastoral care role. In Sep 2023 this included presentations from the Student Welfare Office on available resources and events, and a brief talk from a current member of the pastoral care team giving information on the interview. This will become standard for the induction day. We have also created a one-page wellbeing 'cheat sheet' with information on all resources available to students, are various levels (School, University, beyond). This will be provided to all incoming students as part of their welcome pack. It has also been added to the Graduate School Sharepoint site and will be highlighted in our June 2024 Newsletter.	**April 2024**
6.	**Student Voice**			
	The review team **recommend** that the School seek to remind students of the formal channels of feedback available to them, such as the SSLC.	Dec 2023	The PGR-SSLC membership was refreshed at the beginning of the 2023-4 academic year. We took this opportunity to promote the SSLC more widely, with a dedicated page on the Graduate School Sharepoint site, and a highlighted item in the quarterly Newsletter. For the June 2024 SSLC meeting the students are being surveyed with an anonymous form to solicit input on the agenda. As a trial, this meeting will be co-organised and co-chaired by the student representatives.	**Dec 2023**

		The review team **recommend** that the School should allow for a form of anonymous reporting to encourage students to come forward if they are experiencing issues with their supervisor and have concerns about how to address this.	Dec 2023	We have promoted the anonymous reporting route that is already available via Edinburgh University Student Association. We are also discussing this as part of a broader effort to integrate PhD students into the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee. There are student reps on this committee who have helped to identify potential issues and actions. There is also an increasing focus on PGR issues in EDI meetings and seminars.	**Dec 2023**
7.		**Resources/Estate** The review team **recommend** that the Estates team work with the School, especially as refurbishment work is carried out at the Royal Observatory, to ensure that available space is optimised and any short-medium term pressures can be offset with access to other areas of the campus and/or facilities so that students are not negatively affected	Mar 2024	We have initiated discussions with PhD coordinators across the School to identify pressure areas for PhD student offices and spaces. Based on this consultation several improvements have been made across the School, including a redesign of JCMB 3305 (PhD student office for Particle Physics Experiment) to increase capacity and improve facilities. Office space is now a standing item in the annual pastoral interviews with students. Students seem to be very happy with their arrangements, whereby everyone is allocated a desk and provided with a computer. The new PhD student & Staff common room (JCMB 4200) is now well-established. It was used in the most recent poster evening with good success.	**Mar 2024**
		The review team **recommend** that the Hybrid Working project team consult with the School and College to better understand and meet the requirement for virtual meeting space now that hybrid working is commonplace.	Mar 2024	This is an item regularly discussed with students and PhD coordinators across the School. To support virtual meetings, dedicated videoconferencing pods have been installed across several floors of JCMB, including in PhD student office spaces.	**April 2024**
8.		**Availability of Information** The review team **recommend** that the School reviews and updates programme material and student information on its webpages and handbooks to ensure it is accurate and properly signposted.	Sep 2023 / ongoing	We are making every effort to ensure all information is complete and up to date for the incoming cohort. Our Graduate School Sharepoint site is being continually improved, with student input. Recent additions include an event calendar (co-managed by the student PPA society), a rolling news section, and a quarterly Newsletter. Several new pages have been added covering various resources,	**May 2024**

		and existing pages are being updated to improve navigation. With the additional administrator post in the Graduate School office, we have been able to be more proactive in communicating with students. A notable case is for student annual reviews, where the automated EUCLID email is now supplemented by a personalised email from our GS office to each student, clearly laying out the timeline, expectations, and responsibilities for the student, supervisors, and assessors. This has been well received.
	Please report on steps taken to feedback to students on the outcomes of the review	The results and recommendations of the review were discussed during the June 2023 SSLC meeting, with particular focus on the TA duties / feedback, on course requirements, and on pastoral interviews.
For Year on response only	Any examples of a positive change as a result of the review	Here are the main three highlights here, already mentioned above. (1) The IPR gave us a clear mandate via recommendation to rethink student training and course tracking. We now treat SUPA as one of several course providers, rather than the default option. That has simplified the student experience across the School, and allowed flexibility for students to pick the right courses for them and their project / research areas. (2) The IPR recommendation to expand the pastoral interviews beyond first-year students was an excellent proposal, and this has already been implemented. Only a few students opted-in to this, but those are the students we need to engage with to ensure they have the necessary support, and an opportunity to discuss any potential issues. This recommendation has also initiated a wider discussion of PGR student wellbeing support in the School, and I am hopeful that this can lead to further positive outcomes over the next year or two. (3) The IPR recommendation, in conjunction with other inputs, facilitated the expansion of our graduate school office to add a second administrator post. This has had a significant positive benefit, enabling a more proactive approach to managing engagement, annual progression, and student support and communication. We anticipate it will make recruitment for the next intake much smoother and allow us to trial new approaches.