

Meeting: Doctoral Council

Date & Time: Thursday 17th June 2021, 12:30 – 13:30

Fritz Ho (Chair)	SU Postgraduate Officer (PGO)
Lorenzo Giunta	Department of Mechanical Engineering
Soo-Hwa Kim	Department of Mechanical Engineering
Alessandro Lucini Paioni	School of Management
Chloe Burke	Department of Psychology
Annabel Burnley	Department of Psychology
Dan Bowen	Department of Mechanical Engineering
Jon Noble	Department of Chemical Engineering
Katharina Hug	School of Management
Jonathan Dempsey	School of Management
Masha Remskar	Department of Psychology
Niamh Leaman	Department of Chemistry
Fadoua Govaerts	Department of Education
Izzy Fitton	Department of Computer Science
Jose Muniz Martinez	School of Management
Peter King	Department of Economics
Stephanie Hall	Department of Mechanical Engineering
Siddharth Singh	SU Postgraduate Officer-elect
Amy Young	Insight & Engagement Manager

1. Postgraduate Officer's Update

1.1 Research-specific financial guidelines

Fritz shared the draft page for purchasing home equipment, conferences and tuition fees. The value of Clarity and whether it is a useful platform was discussed and campaigned on in 2017-18 and 2018-19. Earlier PGOs lobbied for flexibility on using Clarity or other more appropriate platforms, and changes to what Clarity allowed and was able to do. It was found that Clarity was expensive for purchasing and claiming back by many students and staff. Some of the functionality concerns were taken on and some changes made. The University's main concern was that in the event of a disaster or accident, it was unable to track where doctoral students off-campus were located. Clarity enables a coordinated oversight of locations for research visits and conferences.

A rep from the School of Management commented that if we book our own accommodation, it would be preferable if PGRs could waive the right to make H&S claims. They also noted that if the accommodation is not private such as AirBnB, health and safety shouldn't be a concern in the EU as legal and protection standards are high.

Note: other H&S measures were brought in at the same time in relation to doctoral students working off-campus for visits and trips, including Doctoral . This was pre-Covid when off-campus working was the exception. <https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/off->

1.2 PGWT FAQs in 2021-22

Fritz noted that the FAQs based on PGR concerns were sent to the PVC L&T. In terms of PGWT training, next year the University will be seeking to provide all training in-person, but online teaching support will also be available for students who have not returned to Bath. There will be some variation by department, as the training provided at department-level already differs.

1.3 VPN

The email from the University to all students and staff has been described as a response to a cyber-attack, which is why there was short notice for the request to change passwords.

1.4 Doctoral employability

Mentoring by senior staff members has been suggested as a means to support international students' employability. International students may be seeking employment abroad, and meet different challenges in the UK, such as visas.

1.5 Doctoral communication

Many students, part-time students in particular, have said that they do not see the Doctoral Digest and Doctoral News emails. It was asked if the University could host a page for those updates instead. The University has concerns about capacity, including of human resources, to commit to this. Improvements to Doctoral College webpages will also be made to make accessing information easier.

2. Covid-19 Statement

Fritz noted that the University has now published the Covid-19 statement. He explained that it provides guidance to examiners, and shared the statement in full. He shared the link <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/guidelines-for-research-examiners/> and in particular, he noted that the following passage may demonstrate a lack of consideration or mitigation.

'Examiners of research degrees are advised that the University of Bath's expectation for the standard of doctoral research presented for examination following the COVID-19 disruptions remain unchanged in terms of both the quality and quantity of work to be submitted. There will be no suggestion that academic rigour has reduced or that students graduating during the pandemic have done so despite producing inferior work.'

A rep from the School of Management asked if the statement was publicly available. Fritz posted in the Doctoral Reps Teams channel, and this can be shared.

Fritz noted that some directors of studies have felt that the effects of Coronavirus vary by department or discipline and ideally guidance and statement would reflect that.

A rep from the Department of Chemistry reported that students in the department were disappointed in the statement.

A rep from the Department of Psychology commented that reps have circulated the full statement to students within the Department of Psychology. They were very vocal on this issue, and felt it did not accurately reflect the circumstances or their experience. They also felt the statement over-emphasised how much the University has done to help. Students

in the department have written a joint letter to Cathryn Mitchell and Jeremy Bradshaw.

The rep noted that their understanding was that University senior management did not regard different statements being provided by department as appropriate. They were also concerned about the potential for damage to the University's reputation for research quality, and this prompted the wording. The rep commented that given student concerns, they are going to see if the statement can be changed. They asked reps who also have concerns to let them know to demonstrate to the University that the views are not limited to Department of Psychology students.

3. PRES/PDES

Fritz observed that a high proportion of PRES respondents (30%) have considered leaving doctoral study. Disruption of research and increased isolation due to Coronavirus seems likely to have been a factor, but notably the figure was high (27%) in PRES 2019. The most common reason given was 'my mental/emotional health'.

A rep from the Department commented that some of the changes up and down were surprising, and asked how large the sample was this year. Amy responded that in 2019 496 students completed PRES, in 2021 it was 467 students.

There have also been significant increases in the number of students accessing the Counselling Service in the past year. Information from the Doctoral College also shows a significant increase in the number of suspensions in the past year. Fritz expressed a concern that there will be an increase in students leaving doctoral study.

Fritz invited student comments on how doctoral mental health can be improved.

Fritz noted that great response rates are lower in some departments and this may skew data at a department level. It is possible that doctoral students feeling 'over-surveyed' in 2021 may have been a factor, but overall response rate as a percentage of registered PGRs was slightly higher than PRES 2019. He commented that although response may not precisely reflect the wider experience, it is an early signal that there is an issue. Fritz noted that a briefing paper will be prepared for all reps.

Amy noted that if PRES 2021 is not being discussed in SSLCs, it is useful for reps to ask in SSLC why it is not on the agenda. Ideally SSLCs should be going through areas of concern and how reps can inform that debate by sharing their knowledge from speaking to doctoral students in the department.

A rep from the Department of Chemical Engineering asked if PRES data was available to view. A rep from the School of Management answered that Tim and Fritz organised a couple of weeks ago to discuss the data, and data was made available there. Fritz responded that he would also send the rep the data.

4. Doctoral Mental Health Working Group

Fritz reported that he submitted a paper at the start of the year to CSSU (Council/Senate/Students' Union) committee for a preventative strategy for mental health. In February there was a meeting of a working group for doctoral mental health, which former Stefan Chindea, the Doctoral Faculty Rep for Engineering & Design, was instrumental in creating. Stefan is no longer in the role, so we are looking for a student who would take a lead on doctoral mental health, and continue the working group. He posted his recommendation for a student working group on mental health in the chat.

Fritz noted that as he is almost at the end of his term of office, he would like to know reps' suggestions on whether a student group for mental health is needed. He expressed a concern that the University has not fully recognised the distinct mental health needs of doctoral students. Any suggestions on how the Doctoral College webpages can be improved would also be appreciated.

Fritz continued that it would be useful to hear doctoral student opinion of whether a supervisor or DoS can appropriately provide mental health support. He questioned whether their role would prioritise academic interests, or whether they would be able to provide pastoral support in the way personal tutors do. Fritz also noted that it was important to consider whether PGRs would feel confident raising issues with DoS or FDoS to resolve an issue within the department.

A rep from the School of Management commented that they felt the student group was an excellent idea, as PRES very limited in the depth of the data. They noted that with mental health it is important to consider confidential issues, and doctoral students may not be willing to share these within a group.

The rep also noted that there was a 'prefer not to say' option on the PRES question about considering leaving doctoral study. They suggested showing the numbers of respondents who have said they have not considered, as this may convey the point even more strongly. Amy agreed and noted that this would be included in the briefing paper.

Amy noted that unfortunately data is not available on the number of students who actually left, or the proportion of PRES respondents who answered that they have considered leaving who actually went on to leave.

Fritz noted that the suspension data is also more complex. As suspension may happen for reasons not related to mental health.

5. Funding extensions for self/externally-funded students

The Live Q&A organised by the SU was held last week, and the funding extension for non-UKRI/ URSA-funded students will be made available.

6. 10 West study space

Fritz reminded reps that the 10W study space has now reopened to postgraduate students, and work is in progress to finalise furniture arrangements.

Fritz introduced Siddharth Singh, the newly-elected Postgraduate Officer, said goodbye to reps and thanked reps for his time as Postgraduate Officer. Reps thanked Fritz for his hard work in the role, and welcomed Sid. There was a round of applause for Fritz and the work he had done, suggested by a rep for the School of Management.

7. Time and date of next meeting:

Wednesday 18th August 2021, 13:00 – 14:00