
Meeting: Doctoral Forum

Date & Time: Tuesday 16th March, 12:30 – 13:30 pm

18 doctoral students attended the forum. Also attending were Fritz Ho, the SU Postgraduate Officer and Amy Young, the SU Insight and Engagement Manager. Fritz thanked doctoral students for attending, and invited comments verbally, in chat or with the padlets, with the link shared. It was explained that comments in these were anonymous.

1. PG Officer's Update

1.1 Doctoral employability

Fritz noted that he is part of the University's Doctoral Employability Workstream, which is looking to increase PGR employability in all areas, including industrial and non-research work. To achieve this the committee is looking to improve:

- (i) Work experience and placement opportunities
- (ii) Skills training, careers guidance and development opportunities, possibly even including workplace placements in some cases.
- (iii) Helping employers understand the unique value of PGR graduates in the workplace

- **Doctoral placements**

One PGR raised a concern about employability support. They acknowledged the value of providing support in this area, they noted reservations for doctoral internships. With PGRs often be in their late 20s if not older by the time they graduate. They suggested that having to complete an internship, at internship pay, risks being detrimental to career development, and sending a message that doctoral students should really focus on finding a job rather than their PhD.

1.2 Doctoral FAQs

Fritz outlined the SU is updating its webpage for doctoral students, and is gathering questions that have been raised by the doctoral community. The doctoral FAQ page seeks to answer these, and to signpost to useful information for doctoral students. Fritz welcomed comments on questions and information to include, and how to improve the SU Doctoral pages. He posted the link <https://www.thesubath.com/postgrads/doctoral/faqs/>

1.3 SU Officer election

Fritz explained that the SU Officer election, run earlier in March, with its first fully virtual election campaign. 3,783 students voted, 18% of the student community, with its 'Plant Your Vote' initiative meaning it could commit to planting 378 trees and supporting local sustainability charities. Fritz also shared the names of the newly elected officer team, including Annie Willingham as president and Sid Singh as postgraduate officer.

1.4 Education Awards and SU Awards

Amy noted that nominations for the Education Awards are now open, and shared the link <https://www.thesubath.com/academicreps/awards/2021/>. The awards are to recognise Academic and Faculty Reps and also some staff across the University. Nominations close 7th April.

She also mentioned that SU Awards nominations are now open at <https://www.thesubath.com/suawards/>. These awards recognise individual students and student groups who have done a great job. Nominations close on 26th March. Amy noted that the SU will be sending out more information on the Education and SU Awards soon.

1.5 Ethics approval

Fritz explained that the University is restructuring the way it organises and decides ethics approval across the University, which will apply to doctoral research as well. From September 2021 ethics approval is moving online. Fritz welcomed any experiences or issues PGRs want to share as a result of these changes. He added that the changes are likely to require providing training or information to PGRs who will be completing the ethics approval applications, and he will be seeking to ensure this is available.

1.6 PRES/PDES surveys

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and Professional Doctorate Experience Survey (PDES) are both live now. The surveys are valuable sources of student experience and understanding PGR issues, and extremely effective tools for lobbying the University for improvements. The surveys close at midnight on Friday 30th April. PGRs who complete the survey are entered into a draw with a £250 cash prize.

<https://www.bath.ac.uk/campaigns/have-your-say/>

2 Postgraduates Who Teach (PGWTs) / Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs)

- **Feedback pathways for raising issues**

Fritz noted that doctoral students have spoken of concerns about the lack of clear means of raising issues or offering feedback about their experience work as a PGWT. He added that teaching during the pandemic had also created new and unanticipated issues, making effective channels of communication more important than ever. Fritz explained that to enable better communications pathways, the SU is asking the University to publish a directory of contacts for departmental PGWT schemes. Currently it is not always clear who is the first point of contact for PGWT issues in a department.

- **PGWT Information forum and faculty contacts**

It was suggested by a PGR that it would be useful as a first step to run an information forum on PGWT to help understand what standards are at a university level. They also suggested that it might be useful to provide PGWT faculty-level contacts. They commented that the roll-out of fractional contracts varied significantly across the University, with different departments communicating and approaching differently, and noted that even within the Faculty of Engineering & Design the roll-out was implemented with varying success. They suggested that being able to see good practice on elements of PGWT delivery would benefit all departments.

Fritz invited the UCU Doctoral Rep, Katy Brown, who attended the forum, to comment.

Katy thanked the student for their suggestions and noted that they would pass them on to the UCU Branch President. She commented that there are developments in PGWT which she hopes to be able to report back on soon.

- **Limited teaching hours and furlough**

Fritz commented that in the past year, the University has not been able to offer the full extent of teaching hours that it would in a normal year. For that reason the SU has encouraged PGRs to apply for the furlough scheme where this was the case. He directed PGRs to the Doctoral College website for more details.

Fritz shared the link for the University furlough scheme.

<https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/furloughing-guidance-for-staff-on-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-cjrs/>

- **PGWT overall responsibility**

Fritz noted that the SU is pressing the University for clarity on where responsibility lies because of this need to be able to raise and resolve issues. He commented that because PGWTs have two roles within the University, as both doctoral researchers and teaching staff, decision-making on PGWT has overlapped doctoral and learning and teaching areas. This has made it harder to address some issues that are raised by PGRs. In addition, because PGWT is delivered by multiple stakeholders within the University, such as HR or CLT, issues cannot always be resolved within the department.

- **UCU membership**

Fritz also encouraged all PGWTs to join UCU (University & College Union), which has free membership for PGRs in teaching roles, to represent their interests as staff members. Fritz shared a link for UCU <https://www.thesubath.com/postgrads/doctoral/universityandcollegeunion/>

3 **Bullying and sexual harassment**

Fritz noted that the University's PGR Independent Advisor's has highlighted there have been a number of cases of sexual harassment of PGRs. He noted that he was a member of the Forum for Tackling Bullying and Harassment in Research and Innovation which is looking into how the problem can be addressed across the sector. Fritz explained that UKRI have also introduced requirements for universities it funds to safeguard researchers and where cases arise to handle cases properly with appropriate action. UKRI will be monitoring universities for their compliance and those who fail to can be excluded from funding. It will also be looking at whether universities have been providing training on appropriate behaviours. <https://www.ukri.org/our-work/supporting-healthy-research-and-innovation-culture/bullying-and-harassment/>

4 **Further action to support doctoral students affected by Covid-19**

2.1 Funding extensions

Fritz shared the recent statement by UKRI <https://www.ukri.org/news/further-action-to-support-doctoral-students-affected-by-covid-19/> and explained that due to the UKRI's case-by-case approach to funding extensions it has freed up extra money to enable additional extensions to students earlier in their studies, based on need. This funding would enable support of PGRs who are not UKRI-funded, including those who have been able to access other sources of funding. It was suggested by UKRI that universities could reduce doctoral recruitment in 2021-22 to help support existing PGRs. Fritz noted that the Doctoral College is currently working to clarify what this new pot of money would mean in terms of additional support.

- **Funding process**

A PGR asked what the application process be for the funds made available for non-UKRI funded students, and whether it would go through UKRI or through the University. Amy noted that currently that has not been made clear, but understand that the Doctoral College and University teams are looking at the information which is being released by UKRI and will communicate to students what the process will be, eligibility and also timeframes and deadlines as soon as they can.

- **Funding Q&A**

Amy noted that The SU are currently working with the PVC (International and Doctoral) and Academic Director of the Doctoral College to organise a live Q&A session for doctoral students around the issue of funding. She added that this hopefully will take place in the next few weeks, and that as soon as The SU have a confirmed date will communicate to doctoral students.

2.2 Supporting doctoral students working from home

Fritz explained that the Doctoral College had made an announcement that doctoral students across the University are able to borrow unused equipment to work from home. Departments were advised to survey their students to understand their needs. It has also been made clear that accessible funds such as Training Support Fees and Research Grants may be considered for this purpose, although funders may not allow this and the decision is made by the supervisor.

- **Reimbursement**

A PGR raised that issue that some PGRs have already purchased equipment, and that it would benefit doctoral students if reimbursement for these purchases was possible.

Action: Fritz to raise this with DC.

- **Purchases outside University catalogue**

It was asked by a doctoral student if the limitation to purchase from the University's supplier catalogue was still compulsory for use at home. It was noted that the available stock does not fit everyone's needs, such as limited space at home and the available furniture on the catalogue did not provide a suitable solution in some cases. The PGR found themselves unable to make a purchase, even though they had accessible funds. Fritz responded that the SU will follow up with the Doctoral College regarding advice to departments and to see if there is flexibility in situations such as this.

Action: Fritz to take this issue to the DC to see if any flexibility on buying equipment.

5 Research involving human participants

Fritz explained that he has received concerns from PGRs that their research has been placed on hold as it involves human participants. The Government has informed Universities that due to Coronavirus research with human participants must be suspended unless it is for medical purposes. Some research with human participants is taking places in the University, as decisions are made on a departmental level on whether it should be allowed.

- **Guidance on exclusions and measures to manage research**

A PGR asked if there will it be an absolute refusal, or will it be possible with appropriate risk assessments and ethical considerations, and if there was any specific advice for working with participants who have extra needs or health concerns. Amy responded that The University will be

waiting for government guidance on this as part of the roadmap coming out of lockdown. Once this guidance is provided the University will look at what this means for the research being undertaken at the University of Bath and departments will be asked to review the risk assessments and measures which are currently in place to ensure that this type of research is being considered. She added that if your research involves participants which fall into these categories you would be advised to speak to your supervisor to look at whether any existing risk assessments (from pre-lockdown) would need to be updated.

6 Issues from PGRs

6.1 Complaints

In response to a PGR enquiry about raising complaints in the forum, Fritz commented PGRs should feel free to raise concerns in the forum, particularly if PGRs feel that they are issues that may be shared by other doctoral students. If they are more of an individual issue, it might be better to send details separately to him, and he and the SU can offer individual support and assistance.

Amy noted that complaints can be made either individually or collectively, and if doctoral students are considering making a formal complaint we would recommend contacting our SU Advice Centre. Advisors will be able to talk through the process and options and help PGRs through the process. By emailing suadvice@bath.ac.uk there is no obligation to put in the complaint but it may be worth discussing the options. She added that anything which is discussed with the advisors is confidential.

6.2 Access to University high-performance computing (HPC)

A PGR commented that they were running calculations for their research and were hoping to access University cluster HPC. They submitted a request, but had not received an answer so had to use the Google's free resource, which cannot be used for very long. In Teams chats this issue has been raised by a number of people but these never receive a reply. They noted that they are doing their research without the very resource that they need.

Stefan, The Doctoral Faculty Rep for Engineering & Design, suggested that there is a 'gatekeeper' in your department who gives researchers the credentials for access to the supercomputer. Soo-Hwa, a Doctoral Academic Rep in Mechanical Engineering also suggested submitting a request to <https://wiki.bath.ac.uk/display/BalenaHPC/Getting+Access> for access to the Balena supercomputer.

The PGR expressed concern that researchers needed technical support in addition to access, but when tickets are raised with DD&T they are not responded to. Soo-Hwa suggested speaking with Steven Chapman, Advancing Research Computing Manager, in DD&T about HPC support.

Fritz suggested discussing this issue with the director of studies, and Amy asked the PGR to keep Fritz and Stefan Chindea updated. She suggested that if you are still experiencing difficulties getting support then we can raise at the FDSC to see if the faculty can resolve this issue.

Action: Fritz to follow up with PGR about progress and raising in FDSC if necessary.

6.3 Feedback from tutors and supervisors

A doctoral student raised a concern among a number of PGRs on professional doctorates in the Department of Education that they are not receiving timely feedback on drafts and assignments they have submitted. In some cases they are receiving very small amounts of feedback on large assignments. Some have reported having to repeatedly chase feedback, received up to two months later in some cases and when received is minimal. The issue has been raised in SSLCs, with the

director of studies for EdD and the head of department has also been made aware of it but there has not been progress.

Fritz expressed unease that appropriate support was being provided for professional doctorates in a number of areas, from ethics approval to induction, where those on 'prof docs' have different requirements. He noted that the University needs to be aware that the University devotes suitable attention and resources to PGRs on those courses.

The PGR explained that unless those on the course get two merits in the assignments, they are not able to progress onto the thesis stage. For that reason, PGRs are particularly concerned about them, and it is those where the lack of timely, useful feedback has been an issue.

Amy noted that an option for PGRs from the professional doctorate in Education would be to either individually or collectively make a formal complaint, with SU Advice able to support as noted in 6.1.

Action: Fritz to raise issue with the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences and press for improvement.

6.4 University's roadmap for return to campus

A PGR noted that there are plans to have a series of events for staff in coming months focusing on returning to campus, to improve a sense of community. This obviously depends on government guidelines and relaxation of restrictions. They asked when information about returning to campus in a more social aspect will be shared with doctoral students.

Fritz agreed that the University were awaiting further Government guidance, but commented that it was hoped that after Easter more social spaces around campus would be possible to re-open. The SU will also be able to provide more social events for doctoral students after that date.

Amy responded that the SU will raise this at the University Doctoral Studies Committee (UDSC) this week and ask for an update on when this communication will be released. She acknowledged that it is difficult for many doctoral students who are missing out on being able to seeing peers so if you have any ideas of things we can do virtually in the meantime then please let us know at postgrads@bath.ac.uk.

Fritz thanked everyone for attending.

Next Doctoral Forum:

Thursday 22nd April 2021, 12:30-1:30 pm

