

A 'Sticky' Post Graduate Research Student Induction and Student Experience at GCU

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This Case Study describes activities and enhancements designed to support PGR induction and improve research students' experience at Glasgow Caledonian University.

Background

Glasgow Caledonian University is Scotland's largest 'modern' university with over 21,000 students. The university offers programmes across three Schools: Health (including nursing and allied health professions), Business (including social sciences, media and journalism), and Engineering & Built Environment, (including design, computing, and environmental science). We undertake high-quality research that is relevant and impactful in addressing key societal challenges in local, national and global contexts, with 72% of our research considered world leading or internationally excellent in REF 2021.

The university currently supports around 450 post graduate research (PGR) students – a relatively small and particularly diverse community. Around half of our PGR student cohort are international students, many of whom arrive after the traditional autumn 'induction season'. In addition, more than half of our students are part-time (primarily staff members undertaking a PhD or Professional Doctorate aligned to their discipline), and this group can struggle to prioritise their research activity alongside teaching responsibilities. An additional challenge faced by this group is that they often have established 'staff networks' and do not identify as PGR students, despite having support and belonging needs that are distinct and complex.

The Case Study describes the local context and current activity, and reports the findings of a focus group held with postgraduate students exploring their perceptions.

The challenge of induction for a diverse cohort

We know that induction is a key point in any student's journey and this is no different for postgraduate research students (Loughlin et al, 2010). Although experienced higher education learners, post graduate research students still face challenges during and after their transition. As well as challenges that are common to all learners (such as making friends, finding your way around, understanding how to access wifi and printing), and challenges that are common to a subset (for example, international students whether research or taught, may face visa, accommodation and cultural/language challenges, and may need to adapt to the norms and expectations of a different education system), postgraduate research students face additional challenges.

- The transition in expectations from being taught (undergraduate or taught postgraduate) to becoming a research student who is expected to 'make an original contribution to research' is a huge leap (Delamont et al, 2000).
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- The status of a PGR Student, while still 'a student' shares many attributes with academic staff (an office and being a team member, a university supplied PC etc.) and so there are additional transitional challenges akin to those faced at onboarding by new employees (for example developing a close working relationship with a new team/boss (supervisor), and organisational socialisation.
 - Isolation is a challenge, as, instead of arriving in a cohort with a large number of other students all studying the same thing, a PGR student may arrive outside a traditional 'Freshers' week' and in addition, immediately finds themselves working on their own project with no one 'in the same boat'.
 - Staff undertaking a part-time PhD in addition to their main role face an entirely separate set of challenges around identity, complex expectations from line managers, and peers as supervisors.
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Activity

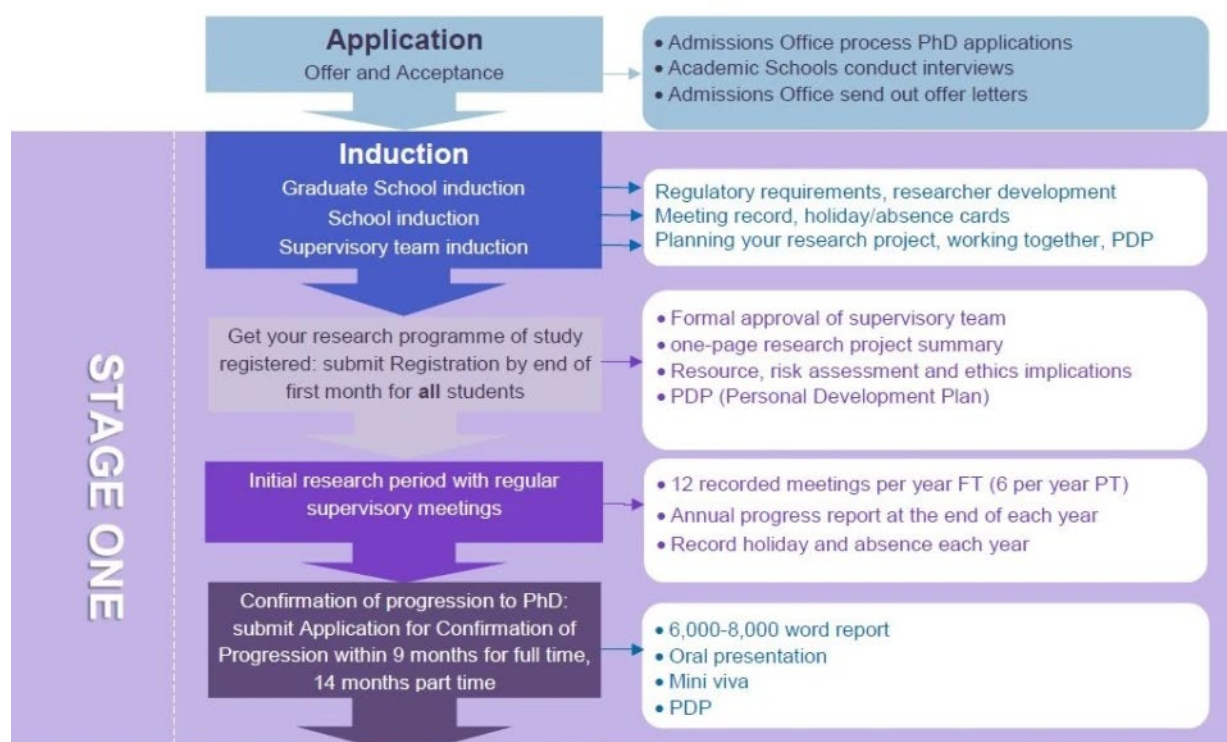
Against this backdrop, and building on analysis of PRES 2023 data which identified themes important to PGR Students including: research culture; our students' sense of community; health and wellbeing support; and consistency of experience, the university introduced a number of changes and enhancements to improve our PGR students' experience. The activities centre around the provision of an extended induction supported by a new SharePoint site to ensure a consistent source of information for all PGR students, and the provision of a new physical space. Together, they try to build a sense of belonging across the PGR cohort, creating a sticky campus, and ensuring that our diverse cohort is fully supported.

SharePoint Supported Extended Induction

As noted above, a 'Freshers' week' style induction doesn't really work for PGR students. Instead, the Graduate School designed an extended induction approach which supplemented initial welcome activities with specific workshops targeted at new students later in the first Trimester. This approach had been used successfully with our PGT programmes which repeated induction for international students in Week 6 of Trimester A to accommodate late arrivals - recognising that these students are overwhelmed with information in their first few weeks after arrival. This feeling of 'overwhelm' is shared by PGR students, as shown by a quote from our focus group: *"... it's already quite overwhelming and even in second week, even after five weeks, even after two months, you might still be just familiarising yourself ..."*. Whereas taught programmes quickly fall into a recognisable pattern of lectures, seminars, assessments, exams, this is not the case for PGR. Focus group respondents noted that the need for an ongoing induction was integral to the PGR experience with one comment describing how PGR induction needed to match the scale of the PhD journey: *"... the journey of a PhD is very different from just having one induction ... it's like Pandora's box: you've opened it ... you've put somebody in a room on their own ... you've told them to start thinking..."*.

Consistent provision of information is important. Even in our small focus group we saw a wide variety of experience and understanding of processes and expectations around postgraduate research study. This is a particular challenge for staff members, one of whom said in our focus group *"there's a kind of presumption that I'm here with the bricks"*. For this group, it may be just as difficult to find information, but less obvious that they need help finding it. To address these types of challenges, the University has developed a SharePoint site as a single locus of information for our PGR students. An infographic provides an at-a-glance summary of the research student journey.

Your PhD Journey at GCU



The pages also highlight:

- Links to key resources such as the research student handbook, regulations and guidance,
- Links to development opportunities (both internal and external, for example via Vitae).
- Information on health and wellbeing support that students can access (the University holds the Student Minds Mental Health Charter Award and has well developed mental health support provision).
- Specific support for international students.

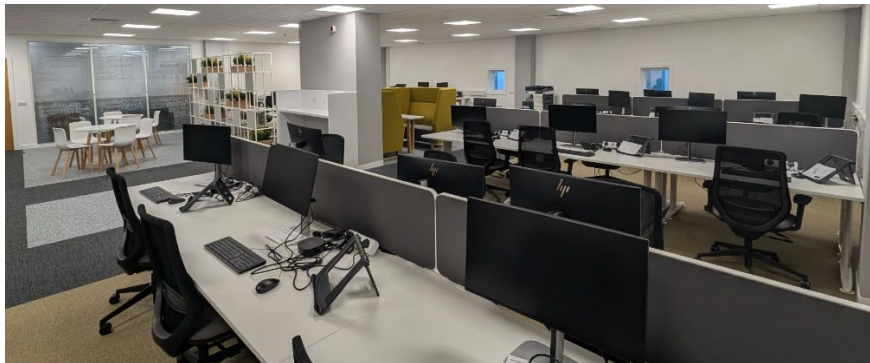
Even between the extended induction and the SharePoint site, there is still a need to provide targeted support for individual students. As one respondent recounted: *"I arrived late, so I had a one to one induction ... by my supervisory team and the Director of Administration. ... with the library, the IT and all the necessary departments. ... And it was a good one honestly. Because I wasn't expecting it since I arrived late, I thought maybe I was going to miss out on all that, but they still arranged everything for me personally again"*. One important point emerged in discussions – that the central induction needs to be complemented by a local induction that recognised the specificity of each PhD project, and how other departmental staff would inevitably be key contacts for a new student in a given discipline. Recognising how different members of the university community have a role to play in an individual's PhD study is important as it helps new research students feel part of the university community, and stick with their studies.

Physical space

The university's city centre location, while easy to get to, is also easy to get away *from*, and this (particularly after covid), combined with a lack of dedicated co-working and social spaces for research students has led to many PGR students (at least those who are not dependent on lab equipment/facilities) opting to work off campus. The provision of a dedicated physical space for students has been a priority for some time.

Our focus group highlighted some of the benefits that a physical space was anticipated to bring (nb the focus group was conducted at a point where the Physical Space was in final stages of construction - the new space opened in Spring 2025). A new space was seen as vital for developing networks: while it might be relatively easy to find other students in your own department, meeting other students across the university (who may provide opportunities for friendship, peer support (students at a similar stage of study) or exchange of ideas (interdisciplinarity, new

methods) can be challenging. The importance of a common space was highlighted by the following quote: *“although I have an environment where we're close together and we're sharing an office, but ... when we had induction, we learned of a few different PhD students that were scattered around the uni”*. Our hope is that the PGR students will find this a ‘sticky space’ that they want to frequent and meet other new researchers.



Next steps

Support for postgraduate research students is complex and activities that improve induction and ongoing support continue. The Graduate School runs sessions throughout the year, and students must maintain a personal development plan, attending and recording mandated and optional workshops which provides continued opportunities to meet fellow students. The Academic Writing Centre provides writing spaces/times to encourage PGR students to feel part of a community, and the university continues to participate in the three minute thesis competition (3MT).

The progress made in extended induction could be continued with further events to bring the PGR community together at set points in their journey. These could be focused around key milestones in the student journey (e.g. the RDC2 progression event) but, reflecting the view of our focus group respondents, these events should also seek to provide opportunities to come together for social purposes, or at least where there is no expectation on the students to prepare (e.g. showing a poster, or reading a journal paper) as this additional effort can sometimes discourage attendance.

Further Resources

GCU Graduate School: [Graduate School](#)

Research Student handbook: [The Research Student Handbook](#)

Vitae Research Careers and Advice: [Vitae](#)

GCU Three Minute Thesis: [Three Minute Thesis](#)

References

Delamont, S., Atkinson, P., and Parry, O. (2004) *Supervising the PhD: A Guide to Success*. 2nd ed. Buckingham: Open University Press and Society for Research into Higher Education.

Loughlin, E., E. Martin, L. McComb, and S. Taylor. 2010. *Induction for Postgraduate Research Students. Issues in Postgraduate Education: Management, Teaching and Supervision*, Series Two, Number 10. London: Society for Research into Higher Education
