

# Thematic Report on Enhancement-led Institutional Review Reports 2013-16: The Postgraduate Student Experience

## Overview

In this report we highlight good practice and areas for development as featured in the ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports 2013-16. The key findings emerging from Outcome Reports in relation to **the postgraduate student experience** were:

### Activity to promote good practice

- The establishment of the Graduate School at Abertay University, which has had a positive impact on the postgraduate student experience and offers professional development opportunities.
- The proactive approach to supporting progression and development of postgraduate research students at the University of Dundee.
- The embedding of graduate attributes in taught postgraduate curricula at the University of Edinburgh.
- The support offered to postgraduate research students through the Graduate School at the University of the Highlands and Islands.
- The University of the Highlands and Islands' Postgraduate Code of Practice for Students.
- Exchange opportunities open to students on selected postgraduate programmes at the Glasgow School of Art.

### Areas for development:

- Supporting an increasingly diverse student population at the University of Aberdeen, specifically part-time and postgraduate students.
- Clarifying policy relating to exemptions granted for the award of second taught postgraduate master's degrees at the University of Dundee.
- Supporting postgraduates who teach at the University of Dundee, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University, the University of the Highlands and Islands, and Glasgow Caledonian University, Heriot-Watt University, Queen Margaret University, and the University of St Andrews.
- Managing the quality of student support in the context of increased postgraduate student numbers at the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University, and the Glasgow School of Art.
- Reviewing the effectiveness of supervisor training at the University of Edinburgh.
- Maintaining an overview of the postgraduate student experience, with a view to ensuring consistency and developing a sense of community, at the University of Glasgow, Robert Gordon University, and the University of Stirling.
- Ensuring consistency of information provided to postgraduate students at the University of Glasgow.
- Ensuring effective and consistent induction for postgraduate students at Heriot-Watt University.
- Ensuring that postgraduate students are appropriately represented and know how to raise concerns about their experience at the University of Stirling.
- Ensuring that staff workload planning recognises postgraduate research student supervision at the University of Strathclyde.

## Introduction

As part of the ELIR 3 method, QAA Scotland produces regular Thematic Reports to support learning from the outcomes of individual ELIR reports. The purpose of the Thematic Reports is to inform future development work in the sector and, in particular, to inform future QAA activity including work carried out in collaboration with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC).

## Scope and structure of this report

This report identifies material relating to the postgraduate student experience contained within the ELIR reports for all 18 Scottish higher education institutions reviewed in the ELIR 3 cycle (2013-16). The institutions included in this report are: the University of Aberdeen; Abertay University; the University of Dundee; the University of Edinburgh; Edinburgh Napier University; Glasgow School of Art; Glasgow Caledonian University; the University of Glasgow; Heriot-Watt University; the University of the Highlands and Islands; Queen Margaret University; Robert Gordon University; the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland; Scotland's Rural College (SRUC); the University of St Andrews; the University of Stirling; the University of Strathclyde and the University of the West of Scotland.

This report summarises examples of positive practice and areas for development as highlighted in the ELIR Outcome Reports (see page 1), and the more detailed findings included within the ELIR Technical Reports (see below). It is possible that additional practice takes place in these 18 institutions, but only those elements of practice included within the ELIR reports is included here. The report then outlines briefly the next steps in the ELIR process following the publication of the reports.

The annex includes references to the postgraduate student experience within the ELIR Technical Reports. The paragraph numbers used in the annex are taken directly from the original reports.

## Graduate Schools

One common development that has been evident during the ELIR 3 cycle is the establishment, re-establishment, or restructuring of institutional Graduate Schools. This is introduced here in order to provide context, since many of the examples of positive practice included here are related to Graduate Schools.

Some institutions have separate Graduate Schools for each college (University of Aberdeen, University of Glasgow) or school (University of Edinburgh), while others have a single Graduate School that serves the whole institution (Abertay University, Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow School of Art, Queen Margaret University, and the University of St Andrews). At the time of Robert Gordon University's ELIR 3 review, the institution was progressing with plans to move from three faculty-based research institutes to a single Graduate School. Some of these Graduate Schools have designated physical spaces, while others - such as St Leonard's College at the University of St Andrews, and Stirling Graduate School - are virtual spaces. The development of Graduate Schools is often linked to developments in institutional strategy, and may also be reflected in the remits of senior academic managers.

Among the institutions whose Technical Reports did not specifically mention Graduate Schools, the University of the Highlands and Islands has an institutional Graduate School, as do certain schools at the University of Dundee, schools and institutes at Heriot-Watt University, and colleges at the University of Strathclyde. Students can also benefit from membership of national, subject-specific Graduate Schools, such as that of the Scottish Universities Physics Alliance, as at the University of Strathclyde.

## Areas highlighted in the ELIR Technical Reports

In ELIR 3, each Outcome Report sets out the ELIR team's views of positive practice and areas for development at the institution. These key findings in relation to the postgraduate student experience are summarised on page 1 of this report. This section identifies current interesting practice at the 18 institutions as identified in the longer ELIR Technical Reports.

### Activity to promote good practice

#### **Integration of support for postgraduate students between academic departments and professional services**

Academic and professional services at the University of Dundee provide integrated support across individual services for all students, both pre and post-enrolment, as well as effectively targeting support for particular student groups. Feedback from students is particularly positive in relation to Disability Services, the Careers Service, and the Library and Learning Centre.

#### **Proactive approach to supporting the progression and development of postgraduate research students**

Students at the University of Dundee are very positive about the support provided by thesis monitoring committees and the generic skills training delivered by Organisational and Professional Development.

#### **Range of training and professional development opportunities offered through the Graduate School**

The establishment of the Graduate School at Abertay University has had a positive impact on the postgraduate student experience, providing a focus for postgraduate support and development and helping to foster a postgraduate community of students and staff at Abertay. The Graduate School offers a range of training and professional development opportunities, including induction training, seminars, a supervision training programme and support for students with teaching responsibilities.

### Areas for development

While there were examples of positive practice relating to the postgraduate student experience provided in the ELIR Technical Reports, a number of areas for development were also identified.

This section of the paper outlines the areas for development identified relating to the postgraduate student experience in a higher education institution in the ELIR Technical reports. There are areas of overlap between the issues highlighted below.

#### **Training and support for postgraduates that teach**

'Postgraduates that teach' is used here as a catch-all term for a variety of roles within HEIs. Students in these roles are often known as 'Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA)' or similar, but the details of such roles vary across, and even within, institutions.

The issue of training and support for postgraduates that teach emerged in 8 of the 18 reviews conducted during the ELIR 3 cycle. This was highlighted as an area for development at the University of Dundee, Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University, Heriot-Watt University, St Andrews University, Stirling University, Edinburgh University and the University of the Highlands and Islands.

For the most part, recommendations were general in nature, but there were also some more specific measures which may be of interest across the sector, for example: extending the opportunities for research students to gain teaching experience (Edinburgh Napier); ensuring appropriate linkage between teaching and training (Heriot-Watt); establishing arrangements to gain an institutional oversight of the variety of roles being fulfilled by GTAs (Glasgow Caledonian University); and encouraging students to make the most of existing opportunities (Glasgow Caledonian University).

It is fair to say that there is concern across the sector in regards to this issue - however, it is important also to note that areas of good practice are beginning to emerge (see the previous paragraph about Abertay University). In the case of the University of the Highlands and Islands, the institution was encouraged to build upon a mentoring scheme underway at one of its Academic Partners, the Scottish Association for Marine Science, which has a higher proportion of postgraduate research students than others.

### **Support for staff with research student supervision requirement (including staff workload allocation and research supervisor training)**

This issue is related closely to managing the quality of student support in the context of increased postgraduate numbers (see below). These issues were linked explicitly in the reports relating to Edinburgh Napier University and Glasgow Caledonian University. Workload planning was raised in the report relating to the University of Strathclyde; staff capacity was raised in the reports relating to Edinburgh Napier University and Glasgow Caledonian University; and research supervisor training was raised in the reports relating to the University of Stirling and the University of Edinburgh.

### **Oversight of the postgraduate student learning experience**

This was raised in the reports relating to the University of Glasgow, Edinburgh Napier University, and Robert Gordon University, though the contexts varied between the institutions. At the University of Glasgow, this was raised in the context of the different monitoring and review processes that are applied to postgraduate taught and research provision; at Edinburgh Napier this was linked, again, to the issue of planned growth in research student numbers; and Robert Gordon University were advised to evaluate progress in this area during the transition to a single Graduate School.

### **Developing a research community**

This was raised in the reports relating to the University of Stirling, Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University, and Robert Gordon University. In the report relating to Edinburgh Napier University, this issue was linked directly to supporting postgraduates that teach; Glasgow Caledonian University were advised to examine the effectiveness of structures and systems aimed at establishing a research community; and at Robert Gordon University this was linked, again, to the transition to a single Graduate School.

## **Managing the quality of student support in the context of increased postgraduate student numbers**

As noted above, some of the other areas identified for development are related to institutional intentions to increase postgraduate student numbers (with regard to both taught and research students). This issue was raised explicitly in the reports relating to the Glasgow School of Art, Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University, and the University of Edinburgh. However, as almost all institutions reported strategic intentions to increase postgraduate numbers at the time of their ELIR 3 review, this is an issue that will be pertinent across the sector. In particular, growth in postgraduate student numbers will have implications in terms of capacity for student support (as identified in the reports relating to the Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow Caledonian University, and the University of Edinburgh), and oversight and consistency of the student experience (as identified in the report relating to Edinburgh Napier University).

It is important to note that student populations are not only growing but also diversifying, and that this may potentially impact on the consistency of the student experience. This was identified as an area for development at the University of Aberdeen, with the needs of postgraduate and part-time students mentioned in particular.

### **Monitoring and review arrangements**

This issue was raised in the reports relating to the University of Glasgow and Edinburgh Napier University. The monitoring and review of research students' progress is necessarily individualistic, and additional arrangements are necessary in order to ensure that emerging trends can be readily identified and an oversight of the research student experience maintained.

### **Postgraduate student representation**

This issue was raised in the reports relating to Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of Stirling. Glasgow Caledonian University were advised to review the representative structures and arrangements for responding to the research student voice to ensure these are as effective as those in place for the undergraduate student population. The University of Stirling were advised to ensure that all research students have, and are made aware of, the facility to raise issues about their supervision (or their wider experience).

It is important to note in addition to the above points that there is also good practice emerging in this area. During the ELIR 2 cycle, the University of Stirling was piloting School Officer representative roles; by the time of its ELIR 3 review, this had been extended successfully to the whole University, with plans in place to appoint Graduate Officers for the research student population.

### **Equivalence of the postgraduate experience across an institution**

This issue was raised in the reports relating to the University of Strathclyde, the University of Stirling, and Robert Gordon University. In the case of the latter two institutions, it related explicitly to the role of the Graduate Schools at these institutions. The University of Strathclyde was praised for its Researcher Development Programme, which offers support to postgraduate research students in a systematic way; however, there was significant variation in the extent to which reviews explicitly considered the experience of postgraduate research students.

## **Induction**

Heriot-Watt University was advised to ensure all postgraduate research students receive effective and consistent induction irrespective of when or where they commence their studies.

## **Consistency of information for postgraduate students**

The University of Glasgow was advised to ensure consistency of the information provided to staff and students on postgraduate provision. The University has in place codes of practice for postgraduate research students at both the institutional and college levels, and the ELIR team identified some examples of conflicting advice in the different codes, for example regarding extensions to period of study, and leave of absence. The University of Dundee was advised to ensure that policy relating to exemptions granted for the award of second taught postgraduate master's degrees meets sector expectations.

## **What happens next?**

QAA Scotland follows up the ELIR outcomes with institutions individually through annual discussion visits, and each institution is required to produce a Follow-up Report indicating how it has addressed its own ELIR outcomes. QAA Scotland also promotes collaborative working between institutions to share good practice and to find collective solutions to common areas for development. Each institution is invited to participate in a follow-up event to engage with the ways other institutions who were reviewed at around the same point of the ELIR cycle have addressed their review outcomes.

## Index of references to the Postgraduate Student Experience in the ELIR 3 Technical Reports

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