

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

A link to each institution's ELIR 3 Technical Report is included in the left-hand column. Paragraph numbers are indicated in the middle column.

Institution	Para	Topic
University of Aberdeen	17	Planned changes to structure of postgraduate taught provision
	35	Availability of academic and non-academic support
	42	Aberdeen Graduate Attributes and the ACHIEVE area of the VLE
	56	Support for postgraduates that teach
Abertay University	12	Subject-based curriculum rolling out for taught postgraduate programmes
	24	Programme review to allow for greater flexibility for postgraduate taught students
	30	Balance of home and international students, including postgraduate taught
	31	Expansion of postgraduate research student numbers
	51	Annual programme survey for taught postgraduates
	59	Establishment of the Graduate School
	60	Induction and training offered through the Graduate School
	66	Use of e-portfolios for postgraduate research student annual monitoring
	77	Graduate School facilitating good relationships between postgraduate students and staff
	90	Support for staff who supervise postgraduate research students
	100	Review of academic regulations for postgraduate taught and research degrees
	121	Intention to review postgraduate research provision
	122	Intention to review reformed postgraduate curriculum
University of Dundee	31	Committee structure for overview of the postgraduate student experience
	32	Code of Practice for Supervised Postgraduate Research
	33	Supervision of postgraduate research students

	34	Progress monitoring for postgraduate research students
	35	Skills development for postgraduate research students
	36	Support for postgraduates that teach
	38	Induction
	52	Employability and enterprise initiatives
	76	Accreditation of prior learning for second taught master's degrees
	77	Review of accreditation of prior learning for second taught master's degrees
<u>University of Edinburgh</u>	22	Increasing postgraduate student numbers
	40	Ascertaining support needs of postgraduate research students
	45	Peer support for postgraduate students
	50	Review of online/distance taught postgraduate provision
	55	Outcomes of Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey
	61	Views of postgraduate research students
	62	Support for postgraduate
	63	Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students; supervisor training
	64	Variability of research student experience with supervisors and Code of Practice
	65	Support for postgraduates that teach
	66	Recommendation that the University continue to analyse the needs and experiences of postgraduate research students
	70	Making the Most of Master's employability scheme
	78	Recommendation that the University continue to analyse the needs and experiences of postgraduate research students and students that teach
	95	Use of external benchmarks in the revision of the Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students
<u>Edinburgh Napier University</u>	14	Work with the NSA Partnership to better understand results of the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and enhance the student experience
	46	Enhancing support for postgraduate research students
	47	Development of the postgraduate research community

	48	Developments to strengthen research supervision capacity
	49	Maintaining overview of the research student experience
	57	Support for postgraduates that teach
	81	Support for postgraduates that teach
	118	Use of social media in the development of a research student community
<u>University of Glasgow</u>	29	Organisational structure for the support of postgraduate students
	30	Gilchrist Postgraduate Club and Postgraduate Development Officer
	31	Representation for postgraduate students
	47	Support for postgraduates that teach
	54	Review of postgraduate programmes and research student progress
	55	Maintaining overview of the postgraduate student experience
	58	Need for consistency of information provided to staff and students
<u>Glasgow Caledonian University</u>	20	Postgraduate student numbers across different campuses
	21	Role of the Graduate School in the development of the research community
	32	Support for postgraduate students at GCU London
	33	Support for postgraduate students at GCU London
	44	Use of results from postgraduate student experience surveys
	52	Role of the Graduate School in the development of the research community
	53	Variability of support for postgraduate research students
	54	Implications of increased research student numbers on resources for student support
	55	Representation for postgraduate students
	56	Implications of increased research student numbers on resources for student support
	83	Support for postgraduates that teach
	96	Recommendation that the University ensures postgraduate representation within internal subject review

	109	Postgraduate representation within internal subject review
	123	Use of results from postgraduate student experience surveys
<u>Glasgow School of Art</u>	17	Intention to grow postgraduate student numbers
	30	Use of the VLE amongst part-time postgraduate students
	34	Teaching and other development opportunities for postgraduate research students
	39	Teaching opportunities for postgraduate research students
	59	Monitoring of quality of postgraduate research programmes
	62	Assessment and progress monitoring of postgraduate research students
	68	Handbook for Supervised Postgraduate Research
<u>Heriot-Watt University</u>	40	Induction for postgraduate research students
	41	Overview of the research student learning experience; research culture
	42	Support for postgraduates that teach
	44	Timeliness of feedback on assessment for postgraduate taught students
	55	Recommendations regarding paragraphs 40, 42 and 44
	68	Services delivered through the University Centre for Academic Leadership and Development
<u>University of the Highlands and Islands</u>	44	Postgraduate student representation
	45	Subject Network Student Officer role
	48	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey - participation and actions
	59	Postgraduate research students' experiences of using the Library
	61	Support for postgraduates who reach
	63	Induction, the Graduate School, Head of PGR Development and VLE
	64	Postgraduate research students' Associate Student status of the University of Aberdeen
	65	Training for postgraduate research students
	66	Postgraduate research conference
	67	Support for postgraduates that teach

	71	Support for postgraduate research students
	76	Postgraduate research students' positive experience of the Careers and Employability Centre
	84	Mechanisms to ensure consistency of the student experience across the institution
	85	Support for postgraduates that teach
	113	Postgraduate research regulations and relationship with Aberdeen
	114	Written materials supporting quality processes
	116	Assessment, feedback and marking
	121	Postgraduate Code of Practice for Students and Research Supervisors
<u>Queen Margaret University</u>	25	Doctoral Students' Association
	29	Induction
	36	Research Strategy Committee and Graduate School
	49	Support for postgraduates that teach
<u>Robert Gordon University</u>	9	Introduction of Graduate School
	40	Anticipated benefits of Graduate School
	41	Training and development needs of existing postgraduate students
	56	Consistency of the postgraduate research student experience; development of the research community
	75	Support for postgraduates that teach
<u>Royal Conservatoire of Scotland</u>	12	Planned review of postgraduate portfolio
	55	Planned review of postgraduate portfolio
<u>Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)</u>	4	Degree awarding powers
	30	Student representation
	64	Postgraduate Committee
	90	Importance of annual programme review
	98	Memoranda of Understanding with the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow for research degrees
	99	Importance of Memoranda of Understanding for each awarding institution

	100	Postgraduate Research Handbook
	101	Research training; support for postgraduates that teach
	102	Postgraduate research student progress monitoring
<u>University of Stirling</u>	42	Graduate School Officer role
	48	STEER peer mentoring scheme, including buddies for postgraduate taught students
	50	Establishment of the Graduate School
	51	Research Compass web system
	52	Sense of postgraduate community across the institution - differences between taught and research student experiences
	53	Postgraduate student representation
	57	Making the Most of Master's initiative
	130	Collaborative arrangements, including routes into master's degrees
<u>University of Strathclyde</u>	29	Credit-bearing Researcher Development Programme
	30	Postgraduate Researcher Code of Practice and capacity in view of planned increase in numbers
	42	Representation for postgraduate research students
	50	Impact of Researcher Development Programme on employability
	88	Variation in the consideration of postgraduate students' experience in internal review
	105	Postgraduate taught programmes on international branch campuses
<u>University of St Andrews</u>	7	Re-establishment of St Leonard's College and introduction of Pro-Dean (Taught Postgraduate)
	30	Variability of inclusivity and diversity
	39	Postgraduate student representation
	41	Postgraduate research student views on feedback and surveys
	48	Support offered by postgraduate research students through CAPOD
	49	St Leonard's College
	50	Skills development courses for postgraduates delivered through CAPOD

	54	Use of VLE to provide improved access to electronic resources
	55	Postgraduate student engagement in extra-curricular activities
	57	Postgraduate engagement with the Careers Centre
	59	Professional development for postgraduate research students
	60	Research and innovation embedded in postgraduate taught programmes
	69	Postgraduate research students deliver CAPOD programmes and workshops
	70	Support offered by postgraduate research students through CAPOD
	74	Support through CAPOD for postgraduates that teach
	81	Support through CAPOD for postgraduates that teach
	90	Taught postgraduate student concerns about grade compression
	95	Progress monitoring for postgraduate research students
	126	Role of collaborative provision in strengthening postgraduate research culture
University of the West of Scotland	40	Increasing student numbers and the introduction of the Graduate School
	41	Support for postgraduate research students

QAA1792 - Jan 17

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2017
18 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 6NU
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 0141 572 3420
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk