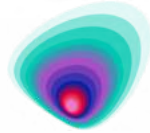




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# PGR GAPS AND PRESSURES ANALYSIS REPORT

2025







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An aerial photograph of a city, likely London, with a prominent red overlay. The image shows a dense urban landscape with numerous buildings, including a large, ornate Gothic-style building in the center. The red overlay is semi-transparent, allowing the city details to be visible while creating a strong color theme.

# **INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY**

# INTRODUCTION

In 2024, members of staff from the Student Wellbeing and Accessible Learning team and from Staff Wellbeing at Queen's carried out an update to the 2019 Gaps and Pressures research to explore the student wellbeing issues encountered by staff supporting students in Schools, and to work out any gaps that existed in support or training. The final 2024 report is available [here](#). In 2024, while Schools were invited to bring along staff members who support students, **very few colleagues spoke specifically about PGR students**. It was therefore decided to do some work to review the support needs of PGR students.

Concurrently, a review of the Thomas J Moran Graduate School provision was also being undertaken by the newly appointed Dean of the Graduate School to review the training and support offered by the Graduate School team to PGR and PGT students. In addition, the Students' Union and the Student Engagement Team had committed in 2025 to undertake a review of how Student Voice was embedded at PGR level across the Schools and Research Centres.

In light of the multiple reviews, it was decided to combine the PGR Gaps and Pressures review with the SU review of the PGR student voice into one joint exercise, and to share learning with the Graduate School. The Graduate School review was of PGT and PGR provision. **The PGR student experience differs fundamentally from that of PGT students in structure, support, and academic expectations** and therefore a standalone review of PGR student support needs was considered sufficient to identify their specific support needs.

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## METHODOLOGY

The Gaps and Pressures review team drafted an initial questionnaire which was disseminated among School Managers, Directors of Research and PGR Directors or equivalent within each of the Schools and some of the bigger Research Centres within the University. Based on the responses received, we identified key issues which formed the basis of conversations during focus groups, and which were as follows:

- PGR student culture within the School or Research Centre
- Isolation/loneliness/belonging
- PGR student voice
- The supervisory relationship
- Completion of PGR studies
- Additional resources or training needed and any other issues

**Focus groups were organised with 14 Schools and 2 Research Centres to dive deeper into some of these issues, and to explore other relevant themes.**

This report of the meetings will focus on each of these areas in turn, outlining the main discussion points that emerged, and which contribute to the **recommendations on page 19**.



A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, stands in a library aisle. She is reaching up with her right hand to a high shelf to pick up a book. The aisle is lined with tall bookshelves filled with books. The entire image has a red overlay. The word 'CONTEXT' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the center. A large white graphic element, resembling a stylized 'C' or a bracket, is positioned behind the text.

# CONTEXT

# CONTEXT

From the outset it is noted that while there were common themes across Schools, there were no 'burning platform' issues requiring urgent attention. The PGR student experience is very individualised, not only reflecting the circumstances of the student, but also the nature of the School, and even research groups within a School. PGR students operate more like staff and are reported by many to increasingly treat their research like a job. With the exception of the Research Centres in MBDS, each School has their own dedicated PGR Administration Team who are highly regarded by both staff and students. They serve as the linchpin for data and information (including information on non-academic issues such as accommodation or school uniforms at times) for both staff and students, often acting as a bridge between the two. PGR administrative staff get to know the students at applicant stage, which at this level of study is more relational and may involve some form of interview. PGR administrators also support students as they make the transition to Queen's and help colleagues with progression and other data throughout the student life cycle.

Curiously, recovery from the impact of Covid was mentioned more among staff supporting research students than when discussing taught students. This was often in relation to students who were impacted by delays in research as well as a perception of more of a 'work life balance' awareness among PGR students post-Covid.

What follows is a summary of the main issues which were discussed with each School, while noting that none of the issues were particularly acute and that most Schools reported good progression and completion rates despite any reported challenges for individual students.

## Mental Health, Wellbeing, and Sense of Belonging

**Mental health and wellbeing remain a concern for many PGR students**, with staff across Schools reporting an increase in both the frequency and complexity of issues. These challenges are often linked to **academic pressures, financial uncertainty, and personal circumstances**, and tend to peak during two critical phases: the first year - particularly around **differentiation**, and during the **final six months** before submission, when students are often managing job applications, funding expiry, and life transitions.

**Assessment milestones** such as APRs and differentiation were frequently cited as stressors. While some Schools have introduced supportive measures like milestone clinics, others noted that these assessments can exacerbate anxiety, particularly when students feel unprepared or unsupported.

**Delays in ethical approval and difficulties accessing research participants** further compound these pressures. One School we spoke to has aligned assessment milestones so that all students progress through them at the same time. This makes it easier to run targeted events, reduces the administrative burden of organising APR panels, and may also help reduce feelings of isolation, as students are at similar stages in their journey. Staff felt that students who start later, for whatever reason, are at a disadvantage in terms of missing key information conveyed at induction, as well as missing the opportunity to make connections with others in their cohort or research group.

As expected, **isolation** and a **lack of community** were reported as a challenge for some PGR students, with clear implications for wellbeing, motivation, and academic progression. While some students naturally form connections within their supervisory teams or research groups, others, especially those who arrive off-cycle or work remotely, remain on the periphery, struggling to find a sense of belonging. The shift to remote working post-Covid has further complicated this, with some Schools noting that while academic progression may not suffer, students often feel disconnected from their peers and the wider research community.

Interestingly, in conversations with staff, isolation was mentioned less frequently than one might anticipate based on student feedback, suggesting a potential gap between staff perceptions and the lived experiences of students.

**International students face additional pressures**, including visa restrictions, cultural stigma around mental health, and financial obligations to sponsors or families. These factors can make students reluctant to take a Leave of Absence, even when needed; ‘There’s a stigma around mental health. Some students won’t take a break, even when they need it.’

Staff also noted a perceived **decline in resilience** among some students, who may struggle with the uncertainty and iterative nature of research, and take critical feedback personally. As one staff member told us; **‘Students need to be more self-critical before sending things to supervisors... they can get frustrated that they’re no longer given the answers.’**

Several Schools observed that students tend to **cluster around their supervisors** or within research cohorts. This can be a positive source of support, but it also means that students who do not fit neatly into these groups, whether due to research focus, timing of arrival, or personality, can find themselves isolated. Staff seemed to believe that this was more of an issue at the weekend than during working hours. Despite a wide range of events and initiatives, such as symposia, writing retreats, and peer mentoring, engagement remains inconsistent.

While students request social events, attendance is low. **As at taught level, student-led initiatives tend to be more effective.** Several staff members expressed interest in evaluating community-building efforts using a mechanism similar to the PRES survey. The Graduate School has now developed and implemented this survey.

Quite a few Schools seem to have one landmark event that they run annually, such as a symposium or Research Day where students in different levels have the opportunity to showcase their work, and which seems to work well, but these seem quite costly to run, and maybe don’t have the legacy of connecting students across research groups that staff would hope for.

The **physical and cultural environment plays a significant role in shaping students’ sense of connection.** Schools with shared office spaces or co-located research groups reported stronger peer relationships, while those with dispersed or hotdesking arrangements noted **greater student isolation.**

Remote working, now more common post-Covid, offers flexibility but can make it harder for students to feel part of a community. Some Schools are actively encouraging on-campus presence during key research phases or community events to help address this.

The question remains - **does our understanding of belonging align with how PGR students actually experience it?** The review team observed that PGR students often operate more like staff than taught students, with their experience shaped heavily by the culture of their School or Principal Investigator.


Attendance expectations varied: some Schools applied minimum attendance policies similar to those for staff, while others allowed students to attend only when necessary, particularly accommodating those with caring responsibilities. Even within Schools, different research groups adopted different norms.

While most Schools did not believe attendance patterns affected completion rates, several acknowledged that lower attendance could negatively impact the overall student experience. These challenges around connection and presence also intersect with broader concerns about how well students are supported when issues arise.

Staff expressed a need for **clearer understanding of referral pathways, more structured support, and training in early intervention and cultural competence.** While some Schools have introduced initiatives such as mindfulness programmes and Safe Harbour schemes, **many supervisors feel ill-equipped to manage complex wellbeing issues.** As one colleague said; ‘Most supervisors probably don’t know where to send students who are really at risk.’

Encouragingly, some Schools reported a **recent decline in mental health concerns**, attributing this to **improved community-building and stronger peer networks** as well as things ‘getting back to normal’ after the Covid pandemic. Nonetheless, mental health and wellbeing, closely tied to students’ sense of belonging, remain areas requiring sustained, coordinated attention across Schools and central services. The University is currently engaged in work to enhance the student welcome and foster a stronger sense of belonging, building on its participation in the Advance HE ‘Belonging’ project. This work will help ensure that **PGR students are meaningfully included in these efforts, recognising the distinct nature of their experience and support needs.**





# SUPERVISION

# SUPERVISION

We know from **research** that **the structure and quality of the working relationship between PGR students and their supervisors is a key causal factor influencing PGR wellbeing**. While Schools reported **relatively few serious issues** or formal supervisor change requests each year, each had encountered challenges in this area.

Colleagues who support PGR students highlighted that **supervisory difficulties can affect not just the student, but also the supervisor and the wider School**. As one person put it: ‘We need a better infrastructure for supervisors. It takes its toll supporting challenging students... Supporting academic progress can be the minority issue at times.’

Staff mentioned that **students are often reluctant to raise concerns about their supervisors, particularly international students**, for whom cultural differences or power dynamics may make it hard to speak up. Staff noted that differing communication styles, such as low-context versus high-context approaches, can lead to misunderstandings. In some cases, issues stemmed from **mismatched expectations, personality clashes, or students struggling to adapt to the demands of research**.

There is also heightened pressure for students working within larger research groups or laboratories, especially when they feel they are falling behind peers. Staff in some Schools reflected that research is not linear and, in a culture where some students treat it as a 9–5 job, they sometimes need encouragement to ‘go the extra mile’.

During the focus groups, staff mentioned that **supervisors are not always well equipped to manage pastoral issues**. One staff member said: ‘Sometimes I feel a bit out of my depth with it.’ **Many have not received recent training**, and even those who have may find it insufficient given the complexity of some situations. Staff described the difficulty of determining whether the issue lies with the student, the supervisor, or the relationship itself.

In response, some Schools have adopted proactive measures. For example, one PGR Director described a ‘traffic light’ system to monitor supervisory concerns, where repeated issues about a supervisor, even without a formal complaint, are addressed directly. This approach helps mitigate power imbalances and supports early intervention.

Disparities in the supervisory experience were also noted. Some supervisors place very high expectations on students, while others take on responsibilities that should sit with the student. Access to opportunities such as teaching, international travel, or specialist equipment also varies though some staff felt this reflected the nature of professional life.

Staff also spoke of the **emotional and administrative toll of managing students who are not progressing**: ‘It takes ages (6–12 months) to exit a student and takes a huge toll on supervisors. It’s better for the student if this could happen quicker – so as not to delay the inevitable. It’s never anyone’s aim to see a student fail, but a quicker turnaround would be helpful.’

Despite the challenges, several examples of good practice were highlighted. Many Schools have introduced **supervisory contracts to clarify expectations** early on, including preferred communication methods. **Adhering to University regulations**, such as recording supervisory meetings and APRs, was also seen as helpful in managing relationships.

One School has established a **Supervisory Support Group**, providing space for supervisors to share experiences, good practice, and seek advice. The Graduate School is reviewing its supervisory training and developing refresher modules, including content on managing difficult conversations. Staff also welcomed the idea of training for students on how to navigate the supervisory relationship effectively.

Finally, more than one PGR Director noted the difficulty of speaking to a colleague about their perceived behaviour towards a student – especially when the student did not want to raise the issue themselves. Systems such as the traffic light model were seen as helpful in these situations, enabling concerns to be addressed even without a formal complaint.





# ACADEMIC PROGRESSION/ COMPLETION, FEES AND FUNDING

## ACADEMIC PROGRESSION/COMPLETION

Almost every School or Research Centre consulted expressed concern that **the standard three-year timeframe is insufficient for most students to complete a PhD**. Delays in ethical approval, challenges in data collection, particularly involving human subjects, and the need to work across multiple organisations or Trusts were frequently cited as contributing factors.

These delays often push students into a fourth, unfunded year, during which they must balance part-time work with writing up their thesis. This situation can compromise both the quality and timeliness of completion.

All Schools noted that while their overall completion rates were not a major concern, **a significant number of students** (227 at the time of writing) **were in a writing-up year**. Many treat the first three years as a research phase and the final year as a dedicated writing-up period, often without funding. While not directly discussed in meetings with Schools, data analysis indicates that Schools regularly apply for concessions allowing certain students to exceed the maximum study period. This is a trend that will require further scrutiny with the new funded periods of absence which have been introduced by some funding bodies.

Some staff noted that the introduction of formal research milestones has helped maintain professional boundaries and manage expectations, particularly when students are struggling to progress. However, it can still be difficult to determine whether a student is facing genuine challenges, is struggling to adjust to research-level study, or is simply not suited to doctoral work.

There was also interest in Thesis by Publication, though staff emphasised the need for clear expectations and guidance if such models are to be adopted more widely.

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## FINANCE AND FUNDING

To do a research degree programme it costs a full fee-paying student £5,006 (UK/ROI) or £20,500/£25,600 (International/EU) per year depending on the type of programme. In excess of 500 students are in receipt of a DfENI studentship in any given year. A further 300 approximately are sponsored in part or in full by a research body, industry or their government. In some Schools where a number of their students have a professional qualification, there are reportedly high numbers of students working shifts in their regular profession to supplement their income.

It was also reported that there was a particular pressure on some international students, who being funded by their home government, were required to successfully complete their studies or face having to repay their PGR sponsorship. This at times brought additional pressure to both the student and a School where a government-funded student may be struggling to complete their research studies.

In many conversations it felt like a vicious circle of issues; students needing more than three years to complete their studies, therefore they have to go into a fourth with no funding and risk the quality or speed of their write-up due to having to concurrently get paid employment to get them 'over the line'. There continues too to be the residual issue of funded students, who need to take a break from their studies for a range of reasons, but being reluctant to do so as their stipend may be stopped. This inevitably impacts their ability to successfully complete their programme on time and just 'kicking the funding can down the road' as they ended up running out of funds at the end of three years but still had work to complete. Forthcoming changes to the rules allowing students paid absence time may address this to a degree but as the overall funding pot will not increase paid absences may result in issues being pushed down the line.





# TRAINING AND SKILLS

# TRAINING AND SKILLS

Staff across Schools consistently highlighted the need for more **tailored, discipline-specific training for PGR students**, particularly in STEM subjects. While the Graduate School's central workshops were acknowledged, several staff members felt these sessions were too generic and more aligned with Arts and Humanities disciplines stating they did not always meet the specific needs of their students. As one staff member put it, **students often arrive 'undercooked', especially in relation to research methodology, and require significant upskilling which the School often provides themselves.**

There was strong consensus that students would benefit from structured development in **'managing up'** - helping students build the confidence and skills to navigate supervisory relationships, raise concerns, and manage expectations effectively. Staff also emphasised the need to **normalise mistakes and setbacks** as part of confidence-building more generally, noting that students are often hesitant to raise issues with supervisors due to inexperience or fear of the research process, and to support students in developing **resilience and self-advocacy.**

Some Schools run their own sessions to address these needs, including milestone clinics, journal clubs, and informal forums.

**Supervisory relationships emerged as a consistent area of concern**, with staff noting a lack of consistency in approach and expectations. There was a clear appetite for training for supervisors more widely, both in terms of **understanding PGR processes** and **supporting students pastorally.** Staff suggested joint training for students and supervisors could be helpful, especially around raising and responding to concerns, managing expectations, and having difficult conversations, giving and receiving feedback, and **understanding the boundaries of the supervisory relationship.**

A few staff also expressed a need for **clearer training and communication for supervisors around University procedures**, noting that inconsistent adherence to processes (e.g. around examiner nominations, leave requests, and progression documentation) could negatively impact students.

Finally, some staff raised the **need for targeted training to support Adviser of Studies roles**, especially in handling sensitive issues such as temporary withdrawals, or mental health concerns. In some cases, staff admitted to feeling 'a bit out of my depth' when a student may not be suited to PGR study. Staff noted the absence of a structured debrief or support mechanism for those managing or trying to navigate complex situations.

In reflecting on student needs, staff observed that some students, especially those who **missed induction or started off-cycle**, appeared **uncertain about expectations and how to navigate the early stages of their programme.** Schools that provided additional support for late starters reported better engagement and smoother transitions. These observations underscore the importance of **clear communication and structured onboarding to support student confidence and progression.**

Finally, staff noted that **international students often require additional support**, particularly around academic English, cultural expectations, and navigating university systems. APRs were sometimes flagged as a point where language support needs became more visible.





# STUDENT VOICE



# STUDENT VOICE

Student involvement in academic governance is a longstanding principle of UK higher education and integral to the QAA UK Quality Code. The University's academic representation system, jointly developed with the Students' Union (QSU) and codified in 2019-20, faced inconsistent implementation, further disrupted by COVID-19.

Following a 2022 QSU-UMB Consultative Committee discussion, a joint listening exercise identified gaps, prompting a relaunch of the Code as a jointly owned University system. The Enhancing Student Voice and Representation (2023–25) project was launched under Strategy 2030 to drive improvements. In practical terms, efforts to enhance formal student voice systems have focused on students engaged in taught programmes.

Formally, postgraduate research student voice processes and structures operate identically to those for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students. It is recognised that the postgraduate research student programme structure and student experience is distinct and that there have been variations in application of codified formal student voice processes across the University.

Focus group participants were advised that the goal is to establish a consistent, institutional approach to postgraduate research (PGR) student voice. This approach should align with the QAA Quality Code, reflect existing institutional practices, adopt identified good practice, and recognise local variations in the PGR student experience.

The focus groups and survey responses identified a broad range of practice across the University, with variation in the level of formality and structure of student voice activities.

Practices identified included:

- Open meetings / town halls and informal social (e.g. coffee) events to garner student views
- Physical comment cards / suggestion boxes and virtual 'suggestion boxes'
- Formal Student Voice Committees
- Dedicated Teams channels and other fora for communication with / amongst students
- Regular meetings with representatives
- Adoption of formal 'course rep' roles, with cohorts identified by a variety of subject discipline, year of progress/study, research group, laboratory, geographic location

- Formally defined roles and expectations for rep roles, loosely defined roles, expectations that student reps organise community and social activities, or educational development opportunities
- Student representatives becoming involved in supporting individual student issues rather than signposting to support services
- Open two-way discussion on school / institutional developments vs focusing on issues raised by students
- Participation and membership of School Postgraduate Research Committee (with exclusions for reserved business), Research Committees and other committees within schools (e.g. Athena Swan)
- Local resolution of issues informally by supervisors and administrators without recourse to formal mechanisms (e.g. at a laboratory level)
- Use of institutional survey data (e.g. PRES) and local survey data to focus discussion with reps

## Challenges identified included:

- Inconsistent recruitment, training, and support practices across Schools
- Difficulty recruiting research student representatives during the current recruitment period (which aligns with taught programme provision)
- Identifying common themes for SVC discussions when many issues are resolved at an individual supervisor/PI level
- General engagement with student voice activity, which resonates with other general engagement challenges
- Limited assurance that issues raised are representative of broad student opinion
- Issues raised are largely operational in nature, with limited engagement with broader strategic issues or matters related to teaching / learning or research practice
- Communicating student voice outcomes and impact to students
- Disconnection of PGR student voice from broader student voice activity and momentum across the institution.

The roles of Directors of Research and PGR administrator was identified as key to maintaining a positive culture of student voice.



## Recommendations

- Revise formal guidance for academic representation (the Academic Representation Code of Practice) to include distinct PGR-focused measures which align to the QAA Quality Code but allow for flexibility within schools / research centres.
- Replace Course Rep roles with Research Student Rep roles
- Formalise student voice feedback approaches and fora across Schools.

### Detailed Recommendations

#### Potential PGR Representation Structure

- Revise formal guidance for academic representation (the Academic Representation Code of Practice) to include distinct PGR-focused measures which align to the QAA Quality Code but allow for flexibility within schools / research centres.
- Replace the PG School Representative role with a PGT School Representative role and PGR School Representative role.
- Maintain current PGR Faculty Representative roles
- PGR School Representative roles have membership of School Postgraduate Research Committee and School Research Committee, and to chair a PGR Student Voice Committee.

## Research Student Reps

- Replace “Course Rep” role, with a “Research Student Rep” role, with a centrally agreed role description and expectations.
- Extend the recruitment period for PGR student reps up to late October each year.
- Agree a flexible approach to Research Rep recruitment - Generally a broad mix of levels of study / research subjects / centres etc. (Essentially open-ended recruitment, where subject / research centre gaps can be filled if identified.) No specific level / subject level requirement.

### Student Voice Committees (Research)

- Meet four times per year
- Relevant academic and PS support staff
- Actions escalated to SPRC / Dir Research and elsewhere as per taught SVCs
- Composition can be Research Student Reps or can be open to all PGR students.



# CONCLUSION AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS



# CONCLUSION

This review has highlighted a range of pressures and challenges experienced by PGR students, many of which are complex, interrelated, and shaped by the unique structure of doctoral study. While no single issue emerged as requiring immediate or urgent intervention, several recurring themes were evident across Schools: the **need for more structured and consistent supervisory support**, the **impact of financial and time pressures on progression**, and the **importance of fostering a sense of belonging and wellbeing** within the PGR community.

**Staff across the University are clearly committed to supporting their PGR students**, and many examples of good practice were shared. However, the findings also point to areas where further development is needed—particularly in **training, communication**, and the **consistency of support structures**. The recommendations that follow aim to build on existing strengths while addressing the gaps identified through this review.

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## FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

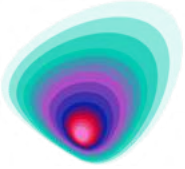
1. Support the development of revised supervisory training by the Graduate School, including Refresher Training, and training in supporting difficult conversations
2. Support the roll out of good practice in relation to the adoption of supervisory contracts to help manage the supervisory relationship
3. Support the recommendation for further training for students on how to receive and respond to feedback from their supervisors
4. That PGR students are included in the Welcome and Belonging framework currently being developed so that good practice can be shared
5. That where Schools would like to develop them, support is given from the Graduate School and Student Wellbeing for School-based supervisor communities of practice
6. That the Accessible Learning Service work with Schools to help better understand the particular needs of PGR students and make ISSAs less generic
7. That the Academic English Service be supported to embed further academic English language and skills support for PGR students
8. Further consideration is given on how to manage PGR students who are ‘failing’ but between APR milestones
9. That the PGR Administrators Forum and the PGR Directors forum continue to be used proactively to share good practice in the management and support of PGR students



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