**Final Report: Graduate School Review**

**College of Social Sciences**

**Introduction to the Review**

A Review Panel was convened to meet on 8 June 2018 with staff and students from the College of Social Sciences (COSS) to discuss the written submission the Graduate School (GS) made to the Review Panel. Meetings were held separately with senior staff and Postgraduate Convenors, students and then supervisory staff, culminating in a wrap up meeting with senior staff. The Panel comprised one internal member, one external member, one Senate Assessor, one student member, the Vice Principal (Research) as Chair and the PGR Strategy Manager as Clerk.

***Panel Members:***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Professor Miles Padgett | University of Glasgow | Chair |
| Professor Andrew Tolmie | University College London | External Panel Member |
| Professor Nick Fells | University of Glasgow | Internal Panel Member |
| Professor Kirsteen McCue | University of Glasgow | Senate Assessor |
| Flynn Gewirtz-O’Reilly | University of Glasgow | Student Panel Member |
| Mary Beth Kneafsey | University of Glasgow | Clerk to Panel |

***Review Meeting Attendance***

*Key Staff Meeting*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name | School | Role |
| Dr. Duncan Ross | GS/ School Social and Political Sciences | Dean of Graduate Studies |
| Mr. Billy Howie | Graduate School | Graduate School Manager |
| Prof Mark Furse  | School of Law | PG Convenor |
| Prof Nicki Hedge  | School of Education | PG Convenor |
| Dr Mo Hume | School of Social and Political Sciences | PG Convenor |
| Dr Anna Morgan-Thomas | Adam Smith Business School | PG Convenor |
| Dr Helen Sweeting  | MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit | PG Convenor |
| Mrs Laura Macfadyen  | College of Social Sciences | Marketing Manager |
| Dr Dickon Copsey  | College of Social Sciences | Employability Officer |

*Student Meeting*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Name** | **School** |
| Rachael Mellin  | School of Law |
| Jose Garcia Godinez  | School of Law |
| Jessica Schechinger  | School of Law |
| Nadia Fanous  | Adam Smith Business School - Management |
| Elli Loose | School of Interdisciplinary Studies |
| Michael Scanlan | School of Social and Political Sciences – Politics |
| Sebastian Martinez Bustos  | School of Social and Political Sciences / Interdisciplinary – Politics/Maths/Public Health |
| Ryan Casey | School of Social and Political Sciences – Criminology |
| Angeliki Peponi | School of Education |

*Supervisor Meeting*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Name** | **School** |
| Dr Francesca Flamini  | Adam Smith Business School – Economics |
| Dr Craig Smith  | School of Social and Political Sciences |
| Dr Ty Solomon  | School of Social and Political Sciences - Politics |
| Prof Malcolm Nicolson  | School of Social and Political Sciences – Economic and Social History |
| Dr Maureen Farrell  | School of Education |
| Dr Lavinia Hirsu | School of Education |
| Miss Linda Thomson | Postgraduate Administrative Assistant, College of Social Sciences |
| Mr. William Shirriffs | Administrative Assistant, College of Social Sciences |

*Final Review Meeting*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Role** |
| Dr. Duncan Ross | Dean of Graduate Studies |
| Mr. Billy Howie | Graduate School Manager |
| Mrs. Sharon McGregor | Director of College Professional Services |

**Key Discussion Points**

The GS provided a detailed and reflective report for the consideration of the Panel. While it was clear from the written submission that there were challenges with which they were grappling, especially after key posts had remained vacant for an extended period, they were very aware of the issues they were facing and a number of matters were actively under review already.

The GS is clear that the student experience remains key to their success and that the focus should not be just on outcomes such as submission rates but also on how process improvements and culture change support improved outcomes. Key issues that they identified were the changing funding landscape, capacity and space challenges, and ongoing work to streamline processes and create greater consistency within the College and deliver culture change.

***Systems, Processes and Administration***

A specific challenge for the GS is the quality and complexity of the processes and systems that support delivery. The recently appointed Graduate School Manager is reviewing processes and how the GS and School processes link together, but IT systems remain an issue. MyCampus provides some management information, particularly related to admissions, student status and milestones but does not support work-flowed processes or provide comprehensive ‘cradle to parchment’ support for the student journey. The need of the GS to fully understand their landscape and the role of robust management data in improving key metrics such as submission rates cannot be underestimated. This is an issue for all Graduate Schools across the University.

The size and complexity of the College and its constituent Schools has led to local processes and systems which have evolved organically, but which can be hard to navigate or manage centrally by the Graduate School. Convenors also note that the absence of a more comprehensive system means that there is much ‘local knowledge’, but that this isn’t able to be used or collated centrally to support strategic decision-making. The GS is actively trying to understand how local systems and processes fit together and streamline activities accordingly with a view to activities being undertaken by the most appropriate staff at the most appropriate level.

*Annual Progress Review*

Annual Progress Review (APR) is a key example of a process that would benefit from an IT system to streamline activities, relieve staff of significant administrative burdens and improve the student experience. APR processes are run largely by Schools but are reported back to the GS, requiring significant administration at the level of the Graduate School. As it stands, current processes revolve around a number of forms that need to be completed and shared. These forms are rich with information about the student experience and this is currently all but inaccessible on hundreds of individual forms. This has also tended to create divergent practices in terms of what is required to be submitted, the duration or intensity of the actual event and/or the direct participation of the supervisor. GS staff and PG Convenors - staff who have oversight of the processes in their local areas - were clear that while the process was time-consuming and detailed, it was valuable to students and to supporting them appropriately and ensuring any issues are identified and dealt with as soon as possible. Students also valued the process for the reflection and support that it provides but anecdotally highlighted to the Panel the very different experiences they had in different Schools. Supervisors echoed the students’ comments about the usefulness of the reflection and preparation for the APR being almost as valuable as the event itself.

*Student Recruitment*

The College is very successful in attracting PGT students. This, however, presents a number of challenges as there is a large volume of applications for a small number of funded places and demand is high for places across the board, leading to capacity and space issues. One issue the GS specifically raised was a desire to improve the PGT to PGR pipeline. They are able to attract excellent students to their PGT programmes and would like to encourage more of them to move onto PGR programmes. A significant challenge here is structural and related to the timing of PGT activities against the recruitment cycle for funded PGR places. To apply for a funded place, students need to be prepared to make an application while still quite early on in their PGT programme, or take a year out between PGT and PGR to make the application. This is less of an issue for self-funded students and some Schools undertake some conversion activities later in the year towards the end of the PGT programmes. Additionally, because the College has been so successful in developing PGT programmes and attracting large numbers of students, marketing and recruitment efforts have been very focused on this in the recent past. However, the GS is now putting more focus into PGR recruitment and working closely with colleagues in the External Relations team to do this.

The issues that the GS raised are the challenges with enquiry management, marketing, recruitment and application systems across the College. There are many routes into the University when searching for information about PGR programmes, looking for funding or trying to identify a supervisor. Students may approach supervisors directly, some with their own funding, apply for advertised projects or scholarship schemes or apply directly to the University. Information about different PGR programmes and sources of funding within the GS is not always clear and easy to find for supervisors and potential students. Supervisors report that their best experiences with recruitment come as a result of direct contact with students, perhaps working with them on a proposal or finding a good match between a student and project. They support the idea that many very good PGRs come as a result of having done a PGT programme here and they encourage students to think about doctoral study. However, they do note that there are issues with the multiple applications that students have to make in order to maximise their funding opportunities. Supervisors do not always understand their roles in the various processes and may inadvertently cause delays. Supervisors also feel that they would benefit from having more information earlier about scholarships or more centralised information sources to answer queries.

The GS would like to streamline processes such that supervisors were clear that their essential role is to make academic decisions about applications and that the administrative aspects of the process will be handled by appropriate administrators. More clearly delineated roles would enable staff and students to make the right connections and have the right information throughout the process. The GS identified their own website as requiring improvement, as many students come to the website first. This highlights a communications issue that extends beyond recruitment, as clear and easily accessible information is extremely important for both prospective and current students.

***Student Support and Development***

The GS has had significant success in attracting ESRC funding from the Scottish Graduate School for the Social Sciences (SGSSS). For 2018, it was the most successful institution in Scotland in terms of the number of students funded.

Students were asked whom they would speak to if they needed help that their supervisor was unable to provide or about something they felt that they couldn’t discuss with their supervisor. Most students in the group responded that they would go to their PG Convenors and that they knew who they were. They would not be inclined to seek support from the Graduate School before they would seek it out in their own Schools. They also commented that they felt that they would be able to find information but that the website was complex and not that helpful in this regard.

Students were also asked about their feeling of being part of a community and their experiences were mixed. Many students felt that they were quite engaged in their local research community but students that were in smaller or more interdisciplinary research areas, or that were not co-located with others in their subjects, did not have the same positive experience. Issues were often related to communications which are often system generated or from lists that were system generated or to the relevance of what training or resources are offered locally and the difficulty of accessing more relevant courses and resources outwith their Schools.

Student feedback for their supervisors was that supervisors need to be more aware that the experience of PhD students has changed significantly over recent years and that students are likely to face pressures that didn’t exist even a few years ago. They also felt that supervisors could improve their communication skills and should understand that a work-life balance was important to students. Further, students are often interested in pursuing a range of opportunities beyond academia and could use support in making connections that will help them develop.

*Submission Rates*

The GS is aware that its submission rates need to be improved. Submission rates are a key performance indicator for funders such as ESRC and need to be maintained above a certain level. It is recognised that there are costs associated with students taking longer to submit and requiring ongoing support and resources. Many students who are funded also only have 3 or 3.5 years’ funding and therefore run out of funding prior to submitting their theses. There may be some improvements to be made with incentivising students who are close to submitting on time to achieve their deadlines. However, the GS also realise that this is a complex issue requiring culture change, and that good communication and a strong research culture are also required.

Students were asked what their understanding was of the need to submit on time and why the University was keen to encourage them to meet these deadlines for submission. They felt that it’s not often discussed explicitly and explained to them but they have felt the pressure to submit on time, especially where they are conscious their funding will run out. Students expressed that they felt that it was pressure from the Research Excellence Framework (REF) that makes the University want students to submit quickly. Supervisors felt that there were mixed messages to students about submission in that there was some pressure to submit within 3 years but actually many students have 4 years to submit, including their (unfunded) thesis pending period, and some students have 4 years of funding. They further feel that the pressure to submit in 3 years is damaging to students, as they also need to develop career skills or publications during this time. Furthermore, they felt that they would be remiss if they were not making sure that students are able to access the appropriate development opportunities alongside the production of their thesis. Clear messaging about this would be helpful to both staff and students to understand the requirements and be able to meet them.

*Training*

Training is an aspect of student support within the College that is also complicated. The GS offers a ‘research training programme’ delivering methods training as well as ‘researcher development training’ which provides personal and professional development training. ESRC / SGSSS is keenly focused on the delivery of high quality training. The GS has done significant work on its programme over the past few years and is actively monitoring and evaluating the success of the changes made. Additional training also takes place at School level making the creation of a comprehensive picture of training difficult. However, students do complete a training needs assessment (TNA) as part of their APR and the TNA remains under review to support individual journeys. As noted above with regard to APR, TNA forms are also not easily able to be comprehensively reviewed as the information sits in hundreds of separate forms. This also reinforces a tendency for knowledge and information to exist locally but not be captured in relevant systems to be used by the GS or the University.

Two students on the Panel noted the challenges that they faced in particular with the interdisciplinary nature of their studies. They found it challenging to work across Colleges and to have appropriate access to information and training. This raises an issue around how Colleges might share training more effectively so that students can tap into relevant training outside their organisational units.

Students generally felt that the training they received was very good and that the range of options was suitable for preparing them for a variety of careers. They did highlight that obtaining funding to attend conferences can be a challenge as they can often only access small amounts of funding and that some funding is earmarked for scholarship holders but can often go unused. Supervisors felt that training was often broadly helpful for students but much of it could be quite general and therefore sometimes difficult for students to apply. However, overall the feeling was that taking training courses was beneficial even if not always immediately and obviously.

*Space*

Workspace for students is a recurrent issue that has appeared in a number of Reviews, not just in COSS. The University hopes to address this in various ways through its campus redevelopment plans. However, the issue is particularly acute in COSS. Students generally share office space with other students and in some cases they are in larger open-plan spaces. The Adam Smith Library was refurbished for postgraduate students broadly to meet the needs of a surge in PGTs in 2017/2018. However, it is hoped that the GS will be able to move to putting solely PGRs in this space. Across the College there are a diversity of issues as well as a diversity of solutions in place, including hot-desking in some areas. The Panel agreed that, while space issues were challenging and sometimes intractable, ongoing meaningful consultation with students about their workspaces can be very productive. Even where the situation is not ideal, providing students with input and some control helps to improve their perceptions of what is available and can make them feel more positive about changes when they are made.

Students also raised the issues with offices spaces. Some had been promised a dedicated work space for months without being assigned a workspace and others noted that the nature of older buildings can present challenges with interaction or creating a comfortable environment, for example with managing room temperatures. Others reported that they were quite happy with their workspaces so there is a diversity of experience. It is, however, something that the Schools and the GS are working on actively despite the current constraints.

***Supervisor Support and Development***

Supervisor training was identified by the GS as an area they are currently targeting. While some training will take place locally in Schools and some staff benefit from institutional programmes such as the PgCAP or ECDP, the GS would like to develop a more comprehensive programme of its own to support staff and ensure that staff possess the most up to date information. It was acknowledged that junior staff are more open to training but that reaching senior R&T and Research staff is more of a challenge. PG Convenors highlighted the importance of the local training they deliver as it enhances the local supervisory culture as well as enhances awareness of local processes. It was also acknowledged that while the College training was necessary, it was perceived as less than exciting since much of what has been offered was about delivering information rather than developing skills.

Engagement with more senior staff might be improved by focusing on ‘development’ rather than ‘training’, logging participation in HR systems, offering ‘master classes’ to more senior staff and enticing more senior staff into master classes by inviting them share their experience in the delivery of these. Convenors note a range of different approaches they have taken locally to engage with staff such as holding informational meetings which staff may be more likely to attend or developing a supervisory handbook. It was broadly agreed, however, that despite the challenges, staff were increasingly open to development opportunities and that this was evidence of culture change.

Supervisors themselves have noted that the PgCAP included a course on supervision and that this was useful. Some Schools have mentoring locally by more experienced supervisors and this has also been helpful. They noted that more training on supporting students with mental health issues or who were weaker overall would be helpful. They also noted the need for developmental training, rather than training to impart information, which might be handled in other ways. However, supervisors did enjoy the opportunities for discussion and interaction with each other that training courses can provide.

The Panel was also keen to discuss the distribution of supervision within the College as it was noted in the SEQ that this was somewhat uneven. There were some structural reasons for this, such as how the Doctorate in Education concentrates supervision in a small number of staff in the early stages of the programme, but this is something the GS intends to review more closely. The discussion also focused on the supervisory culture and how the moves within the College towards creating research clusters and embedding students within these have shaped this. The GS, reflecting on PRES results that suggested students didn’t always feel embedded in a research community, has taken a direct approach to improving this and has facilitated these moves to having students be more embedded in clusters. The GS feels that this potentially enables staff to think more broadly about how students are supported throughout their journey beyond their primary supervisor. Supervisors felt that there was quite a lot of activity locally to bring students together in their clusters or subjects and that while students were encouraged to attend seminars and events, they did not always value this. They noted the space challenges in bringing people together in just the right ways but noted that some sensitivity to what students want, what works in various disciplines and a recognition that students have to take some responsibility for this as well is required.

**Commendations**

1. The Panel perceived that satisfaction amongst the students across the College was generally high and that they report having positive and intellectually stimulating experiences.
2. The Panel commends the College’s approach to providing a significant amount of its internal funding to supporting scholarships for PGRs. Further, the Panel commends the GS on its success in attracting ESRC funding for studentships. It is recognised both that the funding environment is challenging and that PGRs are a key element of a vibrant research environment.
3. The Panel commends the work that the GS has done to revamp and improve its researcher training programme both to support the needs of its own students as well as meet the requirements of the ESRC.

**Recommendations**

1. **Management Systems:** Current systems do not provide a ‘cradle to parchment’, full service approach to data management that enables the provision of high-quality management information. The University should consider how it can provide improved IT systems to better support the PGR student journey and improve data collection and reporting across all the Graduate Schools. Key examples are submission and completion data and systems that support key processes such as APR. Submission and completion data is needed for strategic planning, operational management and REF reporting of ‘doctoral degrees awarded’ but is currently inconsistent. The APR is currently run as an administratively challenging paper-based exercise. Data about the student experience gathered in this process is effectively ‘locked’ in hundreds of paper forms which makes it difficult to access in a useful manner. It is preferable that systems are developed at university level rather than College level to avoid costly duplication of effort.
2. **Communications:** The GS needs to improve its communications and develop clear and simple messaging. This applies to recruitment messaging and information for prospective students as well as to news, policy, procedure and deadlines for current students and staff. The Panel recommends that the GS review its webpages and Moodles, develop simple and clear pathways to where information is located, and improve ways to foster communication amongst staff and students and close feedback loops. This would also support improving the profile and presence of the GS across the College community and provide clarity about the value of the GS in supporting the student journey.
3. **Managing APR:** Managing APR requires burdensome processing and the GS should consider the role and value of the process, how this is communicated to students and staff and how to streamline the administrative processes that support it. The GS should maintain a view as to where and how it is acceptable for the practices to diverge across Schools.
4. **Streamlining Internal Processes:** The Panel recommends that streamlining internal systems and processes between the Schools and the GS as well as between the roles of academic staff versus professional services staff, some of which is already underway, will yield significant benefits. Creating clear roles and greater consistency will assist with developing clear messaging.
5. **Recruitment:** In particular, the Panel recommends that the GS review recruitment processes in order to clarify how roles are shared between the Graduate School, the Schools, supervisors and the External Relations team. Supervisors are key to decision-making processes but require appropriate professional services support and systems to do this.
6. **Supervisor Training and Development:** Supervisor training and development is an area that the GS has identified as needing improvement and the Panel endorsed this view. The view reflected in discussions highlighted that there were two elements to consider: how to improve awareness of policy and procedure and how to improve supervisory skills. The former might be addressed through improved supervisor communications which enhance awareness of key information and support improvements in understanding submission dates, sharing of good practice and creating more process-related consistency across Schools. The latter might be addressed through the provision of development opportunities such as ‘master classes’ on specific topics to engage staff in discussion of elements of supervisory practice and which draw on senior colleagues to share their expertise.

**Conclusion**

The overall impression made by the GS in this Review was very positive. There was a strong sense that the Graduate School had an awareness of the issues facing them and had already begun to address these. There were clearly longer-term issues that they were working to resolve but it was possible to see the positive impact of the Graduate School. The GS should be proud of its achievements and the Panel would like to thank them for their participation in the Review process.