University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Research (PGR) Cultures Plan

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on behalf of the Doctoral College

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1. Introduction

Postgraduate researchers are vital to our success as a leading research-intensive University. They form a large and varied community and bring new approaches, insights and creativity which enrich our research and environment. However, research is highly pressured, and for postgraduate researchers who are at the beginning of their careers this can be particularly challenging. It is well-documented that isolation, insecurity and difficulties in supervisory relationships are factors which contribute to a high prevalence of health problems and anxiety in this population (Hazell et al. 2021). It is also known that postgraduate researchers themselves often feel dissatisfied with aspects of research culture, such as a perceived lack of opportunities to become involved in the wider teaching and research communities[1]. Recent studies have also highlighted how these challenges are particularly acute for postgraduate researchers from diverse backgrounds (QAA 2023). At Edinburgh, we are proud of the diversity of our postgraduate researchers and recognise the need to equip our support structures to support them effectively.

The need to take positive action to address these challenges and to improve research environments has become a priority at international, UK and institutional levels. Of particular focus are supervisory support and training (including routes for relevant and targeted continuous professional development and supervisory recognition and reward), support for interdisciplinary researchers, and researchers from diverse backgrounds, and a pressing need to prepare postgraduate researchers for a wide range of careers (SFC 2021, UKCGE 2022, UKRI 2023).

At Edinburgh, we have a strong sense of the main challenges in postgraduate research cultures, gained from our student representatives, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and Pulse survey responses, and various other forums. These largely align with the wider nationally and internationally recognised challenges outlined above, but there is a particular emphasis on the difficulties around community building, understanding and communicating effectively with a diverse postgraduate research population, and setting and managing expectations for students and supervisors and teams.

The University of Edinburgh Research Cultures Action Plan recognises the essential role of postgraduate researchers as contributors to the wider research community and reiterates the University's responsibility to foster a culture in which researchers are encouraged, supported and recognised in an equitable and inclusive manner. The deliverables in this plan are closely aligned to the University Research Cultures Action Plan.

This plan outlines a number of areas of priority for improving the research cultures experienced by postgraduate researchers. These have been selected as a result of consultation and evidence gathering from across the University. As such, this plan deliberately does not try to cover all areas of postgraduate researcher experience, rather it focuses on a selection of key areas which impact most significantly on culture. In doing so, it identifies clear deliverables which will bring about change. The plan will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

There are other significant pieces of work at the University which are important to consider along with this plan as they have impact on the postgraduate research student experience. These include:

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[1] Satisfaction with research culture consistently scores lower than other areas in the UK wide Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). This is also the case at Edinburgh, where overall satisfaction in 2023 with this area was 57.3%.

- Work on Tutors and Demonstrators
- Student Support Model
- Stipends and Fees

2. The Doctoral College and PGR Research Cultures

The Doctoral College was founded at Edinburgh in 2020 and is a coordinating structure for all postgraduate researchers and supervisors across the institution. It operates as a team of around 200 staff involved with postgraduate researchers from across the Schools, Colleges and services. It does not have dedicated resource via staff, budget or time buyout for staff. The College Deans act as Doctoral College academic leads and are supported in their roles by the College offices. The Institute for Academic Development (IAD) provides support in coordinating the Forum and the Management Group and other related activities but does not presently have dedicated resource to support Doctoral College administration. Despite the lean model, the Doctoral College has successfully shaped policy, process and student experience over the last four years.

The strategic aims of the Doctoral College relate to improvement of research cultures. These are:

- Promote and facilitate the exchange of expertise to support and improve the postgraduate student experience
- Raise the profile of postgraduate research across the University
- Coordinate support for postgraduate researchers and supervisors across the institution
- Lead on national and international debates and initiatives in doctoral education

The University of Edinburgh is a large, devolved structure and the Doctoral College recognises the strength of tailored local level support and community-building initiatives, which are underpinned by clear and consistent frameworks, communication and connections across the institution. This structure fosters the sharing of good practice, through regular meetings of the Doctoral College Forum.

The work of the Doctoral College is organised into six themes (listed below). Each of these has a named lead from within the Doctoral College Management group[2]:

- Experience and Development
- Wellbeing
- Administration
- Scholarships and Fees
- Communities
- Research Strategy

Improving cultures for postgraduate research underpins many of these themes and this plan demonstrates the ongoing commitment to building on existing progress and making changes which will have a positive and visible impact across the postgraduate researcher community.

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[2] Further information on this structure can be found on the Doctoral College webpages

3. How this plan was developed

Improving research cultures is a complex process and change takes time. The writers of this plan acknowledge this and have been careful to ensure that the deliverables outlined here reflect the priorities for change as shared across our postgraduate research communities and the staff who support them. From March 2023 to March 2024, a number of different consultative activities with a range of stakeholders fed into this work:

- Doctoral College Staff Forum April and June 2023, March 2024
- Doctoral College Town Hall meeting for all Postgraduate Researchers June 2023
- Research Cultures Forum March 2024
- Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) responses 2023
- College Postgraduate Committee discussions
- Input from Doctoral College student representatives
- Discussions with professional services

The input from these activities has been systematically gathered and commonalities and priorities have been identified by the Doctoral College working group. The result of this is a comprehensive and ambitious, yet achievable, set of deliverables which work across the existing themes of the Doctoral College and feed into the wider University Research Cultures Action Plan.

4. How the plan will be implemented

This plan will constitute part of the wider Research Cultures Action Plan implementation work and will fall under the remit of the RCAP Delivery Group. The recently appointed Head of Research Cultures will chair this group and the new University Postgraduate Research Lead will sit on this group and have oversight of the PGR plan. The PGR lead will work closely with the Doctoral College to ensure implementation. The existing structure of the Doctoral College and its themes provide a framework for the implementation of this plan. The named lead (or co-lead) in each theme will sponsor implementation of the deliverables which sit most closely within their theme. Each deliverable requires the input and commitment of at least one owner, and to comprehensively deliver on this plan there is a need for additional dedicated resource in some areas. Where this is the case, it is clearly indicated in this plan. Careful consideration will be given to how success is measured for each of these deliverables.

The reporting and reviewing expectations for this plan are outlined in the final section of this document.

5. How the plan is structured

The plan is organised under the five main drivers of the University Research Cultures Action Plan and reflect the values of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, wellbeing, citizenship, ethics and integrity and learning;

1. Career Pathways and Progression
2. Targeted Support
3. Responsible Research
4. Communication and Engagement
5. Governance and Data

Under each of these, we set out the main known challenges and issues for postgraduate research cultures at Edinburgh, summarise some of the work already ongoing or started, address the specific deliverables for each driver as set out in the RCAP and identify areas for future development. It is vital that the initial work identified under this plan is realistic and achievable and we have taken care to ensure that this is the case. Where an area for improvement has been identified but will require resource or ownership not yet identified, we have included it in the future areas for development.

Career pathways and progression

Known challenges and issues

- PGRs and supervisors often lack awareness of different career pathways
- Career planning is not systematically built into PGR degrees across the institution

- Professional development and training are not systematically recorded
- Supporting timely completion for PGRs

What is already happening?

- We offer dedicated Careers Support for all PGRs through our Careers Service. This covers preparation for all types of careers. This is complemented by training for professional development offered by the Institute for Academic Development (IAD) and through local level activity.
- The Careers Service oversees a Graduate Outcomes Survey which collects data 15 months after graduation
- We are committed to the introduction of a PGR Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR).
- A cross-institutional team led by IAD is co-creating a new Development Needs Analysis for PGRs.
- The University supports a wide range of internship and placement opportunities

Commitments under the Research Cultures Action Plan (RCAP) 2023

Deliverable	Timescale	Owner	Doctoral College theme
Promote and publicise initiatives which showcase different PhD career pathways (e.g. annual PhD Horizons Conference)	2023/24 - 2025/26	Careers Service, Doctoral College	Experience and Development
Promote and publicise Platform One as a resource for PGRs to meet others, network and find mentors	2023/24 - 2025/26	Development and Alumni, Doctoral College	Experience and Development
Incorporate career-related questions into the annual review forms for PGRs	2023/24	Student Systems, Doctoral College	Administration
Promote the development of structured career development plans for all PGRs	2023/24 - 2025/26	Careers Service, IAD, Doctoral College	Experience and Development
Undertake a feasibility study of introducing a student 'exit survey' to monitor experience and career intentions.	2023/24 - 2025/26	Careers Service, Doctoral College	Experience and Development
Introduce a PGR Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR), Undertake a pilot study to assess scope and scale (2023/24) Publish and promote guidance and processes (2024/25) Launch PGR HEAR (2025/26)	2023/24 - 2025/26	Provost's Office (Students)	Administration

Future areas for development (contingent on resource/ buy-in etc.)

- Gather data and information on PGR mentoring schemes or equivalent at Edinburgh
- Investigate ways to increase resource for core Careers Support for PGRs

- Evaluate the feasibility study of introducing an exit survey for PGRs and identify next steps

Targeted support

Known challenges and issues

- Processes, systems and policies do not always represent the increasing diversity in the PGR population
- There is a lack of recognition and reward of good supervisory practice
- There is a lack of recognition and resolution of inappropriate supervisory practice
- Where breakdowns in relationships occur between students and supervisors, lack of understanding of expectations is a common cause

What is already happening?

- Supervisor briefings are held regularly at local level across the institution. Briefing content is co-ordinated through the Doctoral College.
- IAD has updated and relaunched the mandatory online course for PhD supervisors, Fundamentals of PhD Supervision, aligning with the UKCGE supervisory framework and integrating with People and Money to ensure consistent recording of completion
- IAD has invested in a new academic developer post who will partly focus on supervisor support and training
- The Doctoral College supported an internship project into widening participation in recruitment for PGRs which resulted in a series of videos of PGR stories which can be used by Schools.

Commitments under the Research Cultures Action Plan (RCAP) 2023

Deliverable	Timescale	Owner	DC theme
Strengthen supervisor professional development through design and implementation of a supervision framework (which includes opportunities for peer support/ recognition of professional development)	2023/24-2025/26	IAD, Doctoral College	Experience and Development
Develop work already started by the Doctoral College in 2021 on widening participation and inclusion for postgraduate researchers	2023/24 - 2025/26	College PGR Deans	Experience and Development

Future areas for development (contingent on resource/ buy-in etc.)

- Review targeted support for specific groups of PGRs (eg. Disabled researchers, researchers from Black and Ethnic Minority backgrounds, researchers who are parents or carers, international researchers)
- Develop communities of practice for PhD supervisors
- Develop a structure of coaching skills training for supervisors
- Build on the widening participation work for PGRs
- Investigate the feasibility of 360 degree feedback for PGRs and supervisors
- Investigate the desirability of creating a postgraduate researcher-supervisor agreement template

Responsible research

Known challenges and issues

- Devolved institution and different models of PhD means there are differences in expectations and provision in research ethics and integrity training and support at local level
- Rapidly changing landscape means AI technology and ethics is a fast-moving area and it is difficult for University processes and systems to keep up with changes and how they relate to PGR

What is already happening?

- IAD has developed a comprehensive online introductory course for Research Ethics and Integrity which is suitable for all PGRs
- The Research Data Service offers a wide range of relevant support for PGRs in research data management
- Edinburgh hosts an annual Open Research Conference which is open to PGRs
- Edinburgh ReproducibiliTea has regular events for all researchers, including PGRs.

Commitments under the Research Cultures Action Plan (RCAP) 2023

Deliverable	Timescale	Owner	DC theme
Systematically roll out research ethics and integrity training • Further develop and refine IAD ethics and integrity online modules (2023/24) • Ensure that PGR included in wider review of research ethics and integrity training and support	2023/24 - 2024/25	IAD, Research ethics and integrity review group (REIRG)	Experience and Development

Future areas for development (contingent on resource/ buy-in etc.)

- Develop training, guidance and support for using AI tools in postgraduate research
- Develop train the trainer resources and support to support research ethics and integrity training and development for PGRs at local level

Communication and engagement

Known challenges and issues

- The University has a highly devolved structure, so it is difficult to communicate efficiently with PGRs and supervisors
- An increasingly diverse PGR population means traditional methods of communication are not always appropriate or successful
- Communication and engagement methods are continuously evolving and require continued maintenance and review

What is already happening?

- The [Code of Practice for supervisors and research students](#) is concise and sets out expectations of the University, supervisors and students. It is complemented by local level handbooks and guidance.
- The Doctoral College webpages have been set up to gather central level information for PGRs and supervisors
- The Doctoral College has an active Microsoft Teams site for staff who work with PGRs (from Schools, Colleges and services) and holds bi-monthly Doctoral College Forum meetings. Bi-annual Town Hall meetings are held for all PGRs
- Consistent and appropriate communication via central level email to PGRs has improved considerably since the set-up of the Doctoral College
- There is an established network for PGR representatives across the institution supported by the Students' Association. The Doctoral College has set up monthly meetings for representatives.

Commitments under the Research Cultures Action Plan (RCAP) 2023

Deliverable	Timescale	Owner	DC theme
Identify and secure central level resource to collate and put together a regular newsletter, calendar or equivalent on societies and community building activities to circulate to all postgraduate researchers	2023/24-2024/25	Doctoral College, College PGR Deans	Communities
Roll out, publicise and integrate communication on societies and community building activity into local and central mechanisms.	2023/24-2024/25	Doctoral College, College PGR Deans	Communities
Pilot and evaluate the effectiveness of a programme of outreach activities to allow direct interaction with the PGR Student body	2023/24-2024/25	College PGR Deans	Communities
Work in partnership with the Students' Association and Colleges to strengthen postgraduate research representation and reporting processes for Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs)	2023/24-2024/25	College PGR Deans	Communities / Experience and Development

Future areas for development (contingent on resource/ buy-in etc.)	
• Develop Doctoral College webpages as a hub for PGR information and community building • Establish a sustainable structure for PGR communications and engagement at central level	• Build on progress with PGR representative structure to ensure sustainability • Revisit plans for establishment of a PGR student building or PGR spaces on different campuses

Governance and data

Known challenges and issues
• Any data pertaining to postgraduate researchers is generally entered locally and so can be hard to compare • Scholarship data is not held centrally and so it is hard to understand the distribution and level of scholarships across the institution.

What is already happening?
• We run the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) every two years and Colleges compile a report on responses for their College which is presented to the Senate Education Committee • We have run a Pulse survey also reported to Senate Education Committee • Data dashboards on student numbers exist in Colleges and Governance and Strategic Planning. These include completion rates and can be broken down by protected characteristics, programme, School and College. • Completion data for the Fundamentals of PhD Supervision course are available. • Recruitment and selection data is also available in Euclid via dashboards.

Commitments under the Research Cultures Action Plan (RCAP) 2023

Deliverable	Timescale	Owner	DC theme
Continuing to conduct the 2-yearly Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) • Increase visibility and use of PRES and other student voice mechanisms by working with PGR representatives, Schools and Colleges • Pilot a range of mechanisms to publicise and encourage completion of PRES 2025	2023/24 - 2024/25	Doctoral College, Student Analytics, Insights and Modelling, College PGR Deans	Communities/ Experience and Development

Future areas for development (contingent on resource/ buy-in etc.)
• Explore ways to develop central level reporting systems for fast, straightforward generation of PGR student metrics

6. Measuring success

Measurement of a successful outcome for postgraduate research students has traditionally been predominantly binary (pass/fail) and relatively limited. Outcomes measured routinely to indicate success have been limited to quantifiable metrics (such as: successful award of the degree; examiner's recommendation – Regulations A-J; time to completion). Even within this limited field straightforward access to data to enable fast, informative report generation is not available. Approaches to measuring success in postgraduate research need to include broader and more inclusive parameters than has traditionally been the case. The metrics must be meaningful and measurable.

There are useful examples of relevant approaches in this area:

- Postgraduate Researchers from Diverse Backgrounds: A Framework for Defining, Measuring and Supporting Success (ukcge.ac.uk)
- Identifying metrics to track improvements in research culture | Research Culture at Leeds

Measurement of success would be improved if systems allowed rapid generation of comprehensive, meaningful reports (including data listed previously as well as: percentage completion rates; exit awards; concessions; part time/ full time; online/distance/on campus), with the ability to compare data across relevant groups (e.g. by College; Deanery/ School; sex; ethnicity; nationality; age; other protected characteristics).

A key limitation of the data currently collected is the inherent assumption that award of the degree indicates a successful experience during the PhD. Gaining insight into, and measuring, the actual experience of postgraduate students is hampered by numerous factors, not least the individual nature of the experience for each student, which contributes to the isolation felt by many. Information on postgraduate student experience gained anecdotally, or in a more systematic way, through surveys (e.g. Research Cultures Survey; Pulse Surveys; PRES) is impaired by the informality of some feedback and the low response rate common in the more systematic surveys. The University of Edinburgh does not run an *Exit Survey* for postgraduate students to obtain retrospective views on the overall experience. The evidence that is available indicates good satisfaction in many areas but highlights important areas where considerable improvement is required; *Community* and *Research Culture* returned the lowest scores in PRES in each of the three Colleges. It is apparent that better ways are needed to communicate effectively with the postgraduate student population so that they understand and assimilate key information. In addition, experience suggests that more pro-active approaches are required to obtain meaningful experience data from an appropriate proportion of the studentship.

7. Reporting and review

An annual report on the implementation of this plan will be submitted to the Research Cultures Delivery Group, which in turn reports to Research Strategy Group. This annual report will also be shared with the Doctoral College Management Group and the wider Doctoral College. The Plan and reports will be accessible on the Doctoral College webpages. The plan will be reviewed and updated in August 2025.

8. Acronyms

DC – Doctoral College

IAD – Institute for Academic Development

PGR – postgraduate research

PGRs – postgraduate researchers

PRES – Postgraduate Research Experience Survey

QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

RCAP – Research Cultures Action Plan

REIRG – Research Ethics and Integrity Group

SFC – Scottish Funding Council

UKCGE – UK Council for Graduate Education

UKRI – UK Research and Innovation

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Scottish Funding Council (SFC) (2021) Coherent Provision and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability (sfc.ac.uk)

UKCGE (2021) UK Research Supervision Survey UKCGE | UK Research Supervision Survey 2021 Report

UKRI (2023) A New Deal for Postgraduate Research: Response to the call for Input https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/developing-people-and-skills/new-deal-for-postgraduate-research/

University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) results dashboard (accessed September 2023)

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