

# Understanding and enhancing postgraduate research students' sense of community

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# Executive Summary

**The University of Southampton’s Doctoral College has sought to investigate postgraduate research (PGR) students’ perceptions of the PGR research community. As part of ongoing work to improve PGR research culture, internal data reveals challenges experienced by doctoral students and how they connect to their wider School, Department, Faculty and university community. This report summarises the key themes and findings following student and staff stakeholder engagement meetings to better understand and improve upon PGR research culture and community.**

In the current higher education (HE) climate, an increased focus on improving academic research culture from a funding and regulatory perspective has meant that universities must display a concerted effort to develop the environment in which researchers work. This includes the increased weighting of the People, Culture, and Environment (PCE) element in the upcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF 2029), and UK research funding councils’ increasing commitment towards equality, diversity and inclusion in research and innovation spaces (Research Excellence Framework 2029, 2024; UK Research and Innovation, 2024).

Research culture is defined by the University of Southampton as ‘the manner and environment in which we support, conduct, share and use research’ (University of Southampton, 2024). Whilst our institutional research culture activity spans every member of the university community, our focus in this report is on PGR students. With over 2,000 doctoral students, a strong PGR community plays a



significant role in facilitating a supportive and inclusive environment for good research to flourish at the University of Southampton.

This report summarises the accounts of 24 PGR student representatives, three University of Southampton’s Students Union (SUSU) PGR Officers and 19 Doctoral Programme Directors (DPDs,) across the five Faculties (see below for breakdown). Each were interviewed by Doctoral College PGR Student Partner, Natasha Palmer, on topics with a focus on community, collaboration, and communication. Interviews identified current activity and suggestions for improving PGR community at the local level.

| Faculty                                           | DPDs engaged | PGR Representatives engaged | SUSU PGR Officers engaged |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Faculty of Arts and Humanities (FAH)              | 4            | 6                           |                           |
| Faculty of Engineering & Physical Sciences (FEPS) | 3            | 7                           |                           |
| Faculty of Environmental & Life Sciences (FELS)   | 4            | 4                           | 1                         |
| Faculty of Medicine (FMED)                        | 4            | 5                           | 1                         |
| Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS)                  | 4            | 2                           | 1                         |

The key recommendations that emerged from this research are summarised below

| Barrier                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lacking parity in terms of <b>dedicated PGR space</b> (for example, a Common Room) for all PGR students.                                                                                                                   | PGR Coffee/Break rooms have proved to be a popular and important resource for students. However, a lack of physical space restricts every School from being able to provide one. In these cases, utilising/booking common learning spaces regularly such as Lecture Theatres/Seminar rooms offer an effective alternative.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| On-campus/in-person engagement can present <b>logistical barriers</b> . For example, slow Wi-Fi, construction work, and hotdesking were all found contribute to a lack of incentive for in-person campus engagement.       | <p>Offer dedicated alternative working spaces, such as offices in the Sir James Matthews Building (University of Southampton City Centre).</p> <p>Increase the availability of regular on-campus socials, e.g. PGR coffee mornings to act as an incentive.</p> <p>Highlight the benefits of in-person working (e.g., mental health and wellbeing) during PGR student inductions and at the earlier stages of the PGR journey.</p>                                                                                                                                                 |
| Social events are often left to the sole responsibility of PGRs to plan (which is time-consuming and budget dependent). <b>Academic staff</b> members were seen to be <b>less engaged in creating a social community</b> . | <p>Increase advertisement of the Doctoral College Activities Fund – a fund for PGRs to lead on events and activities which support academic, career, wellbeing and social, skills development and impact.</p> <p>Promote Faculty and cross-Faculty wide, and external, collaborations for social events.</p> <p>Doctoral Programme Director involvement on co-leading and organising events.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Lacking awareness of a ‘PGR community’</b> either at the local or university-wide level.                                                                                                                                | <p>Enhanced promotion of the PGR Peer Mentoring scheme - new PGRs are matched with an existing PGR as a point of contact to aide their transition as a doctoral student.</p> <p>An online, accessible PGR student database. This would function as an online directory where PGR students can access contact and project information on other doctoral students e.g., their project focus, department, Faculty etc.</p> <p>PGR representatives should be trained, supported and encouraged to form online and physical communities/cohorts at the start of the academic year.</p> |

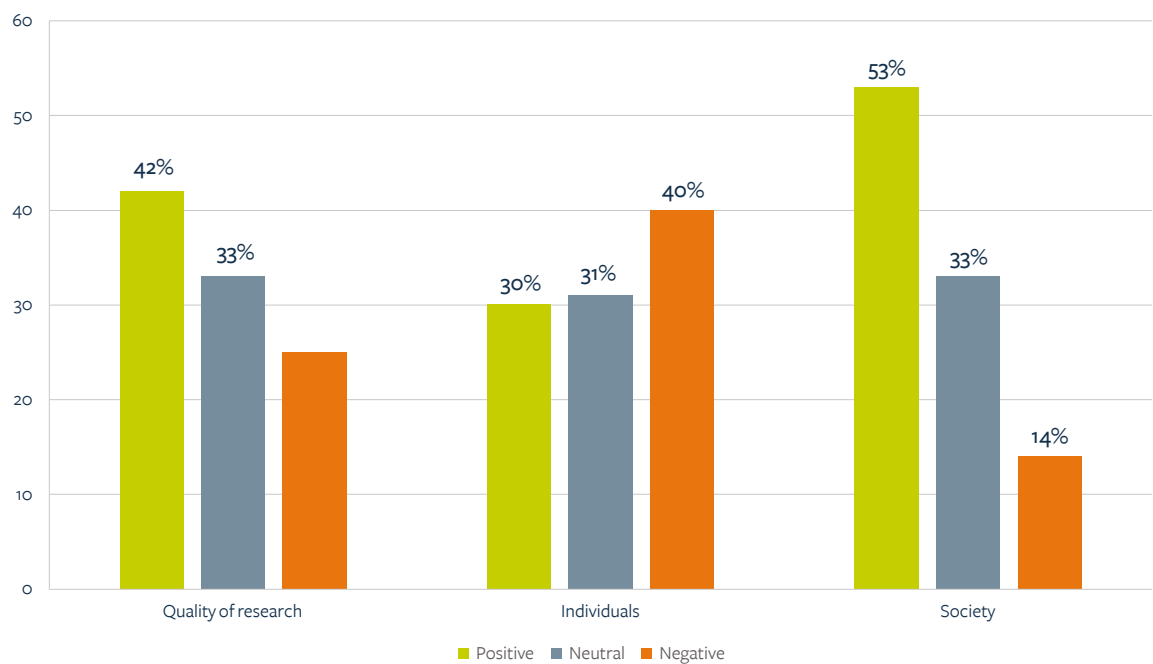
# Introduction

**A strong working culture is vital for quality research, collaboration and the sustainability of researchers. In January 2020, Wellcome commissioned an online survey of over 4,000 researchers (84% of participants were based in academia, with students comprising 21%), representing one of the largest surveys focussing on research culture to date (Wellcome & Shift Learning, 2020). Whilst the study found that 84% of participants were proud to work in their research community, 78% believed competition in the workplace has created hostile conditions, and 61% have witnessed (with 43% experiencing) bullying or harassment.**

Consequently, ‘poor research culture is leading to stress, anxiety, mental health problems, strain on personal relationships, and a sense of isolation and loneliness at work’ (Wellcome & Shift Learning, 2020, pg. 3). In reference to the production of research, this can translate to a loss of quality, superficial outputs, problems with reproducibility and cherry-picked data. The wider ramifications of a poor research culture can therefore influence innovation, reducing trust from the public and talent from the sector. Figure 1 demonstrates how researchers feel their current research culture impacts the quality of research, individuals and society. Importantly, 40% feel that the present-day culture negatively effects individuals, and a quarter feel that it unfavourably influences research quality.

A focus on research culture has also been prompted with the next Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment scheduled for 2029, of which

content and weighting for some elements have been readjusted. People, Culture and Environment (PCE) will now account for at least 20% of assessments, and consequently, institutions are considering how their research cultures ensure the development of excellent research (Islam, 2024b). For example, The Royal Society launched their ‘changing expectations’ programme with a focus on understanding ‘how best to steward research culture through a shifting research landscape’ (Royal Society, 2024). University-based initiatives include the Research Culture Community Steering Group at University College London (UCL), and the University of Southampton’s Research Culture group, which bring together representatives of the research community from across their respective institutions to collectively shape the research culture agenda, bring together multiple stakeholders, and champion key initiatives to ensure broad awareness of changes underway.



**Figure 1** – Researchers’ view on what effect research culture has on research quality, individuals and society, taken from Wellcome and Shift Learning (2020) – Survey of 4065 research community participants, UK and international, excluding unemployed and retired.



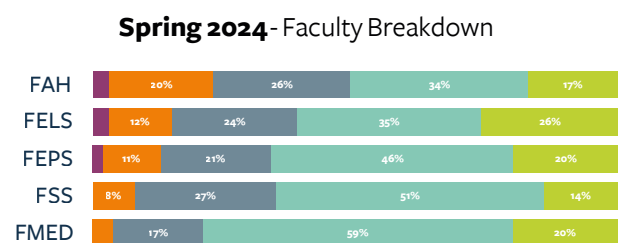
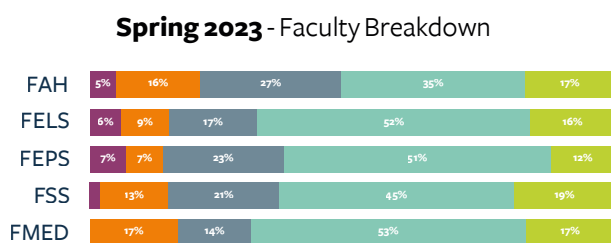
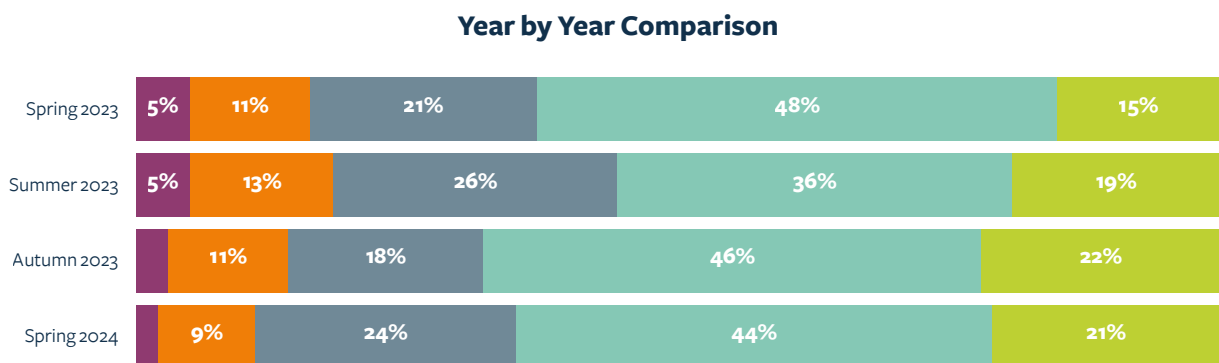
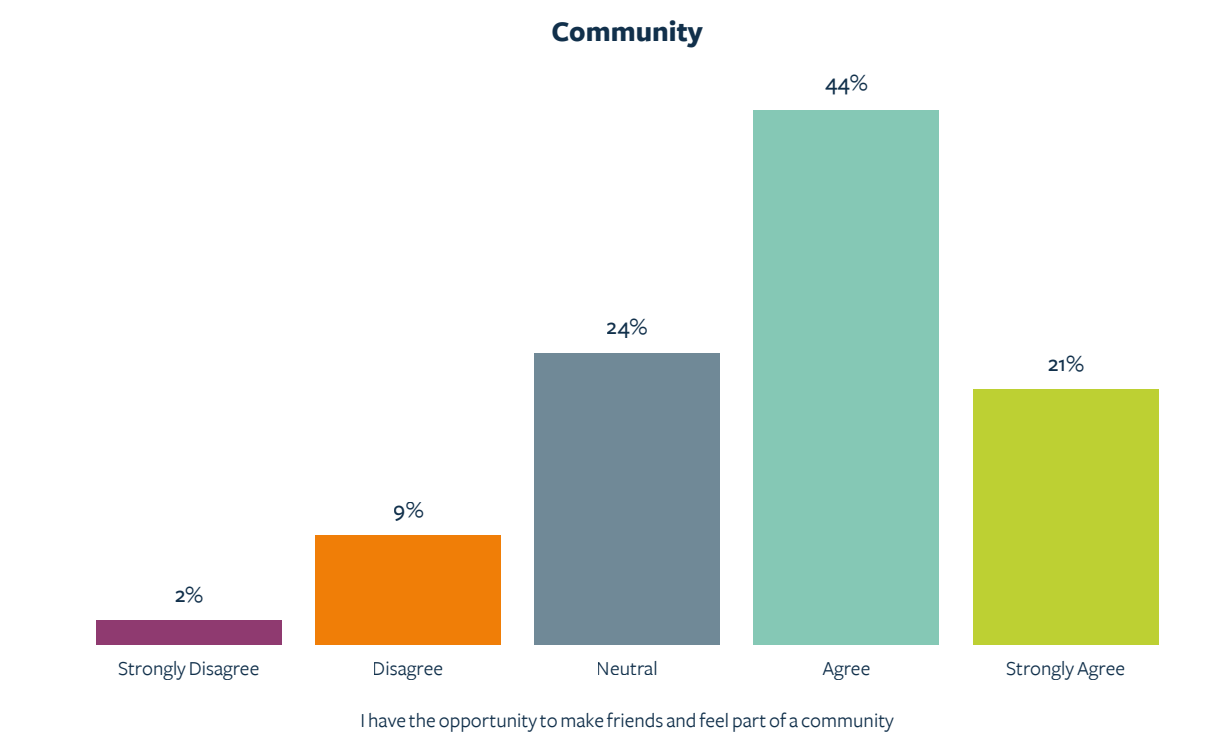
Within the Doctoral College, we acknowledge that PGR students contribute to and are embedded within the research culture. However, where this is differentially experienced, we must investigate sources of contentment and challenge. The PGR Experience Survey is one mechanism in which this is currently understood at Southampton. The survey is administrated by Southampton University Students Union (SUSU), in partnership with the Doctoral College, to understand and improve PGR student experiences across key topics such as:

- Finance,
- Programme progression,
- Skill development,
- Wider development,
- Support,
- Supervision,
- Mental health, and
- Community.

In addition to our larger scale, quantitative data, we undertook qualitative follow-up research. We specifically focused on research community as a core element of research culture (see Appendix 1 for list of full questions addressed to stakeholders in this project).

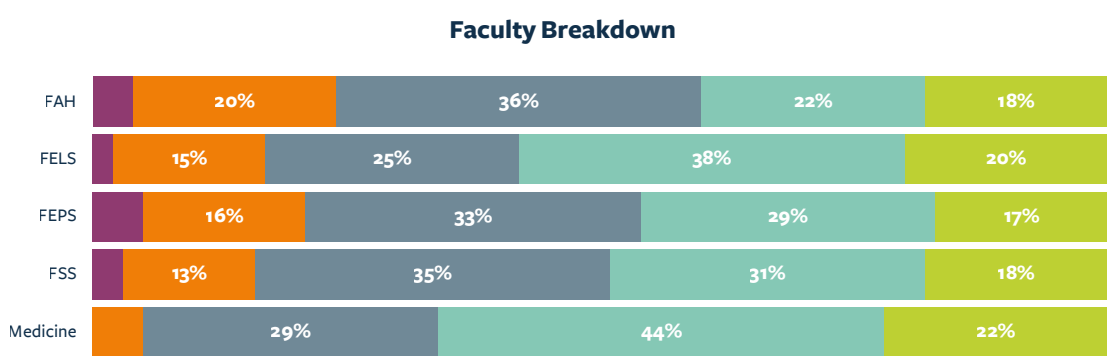
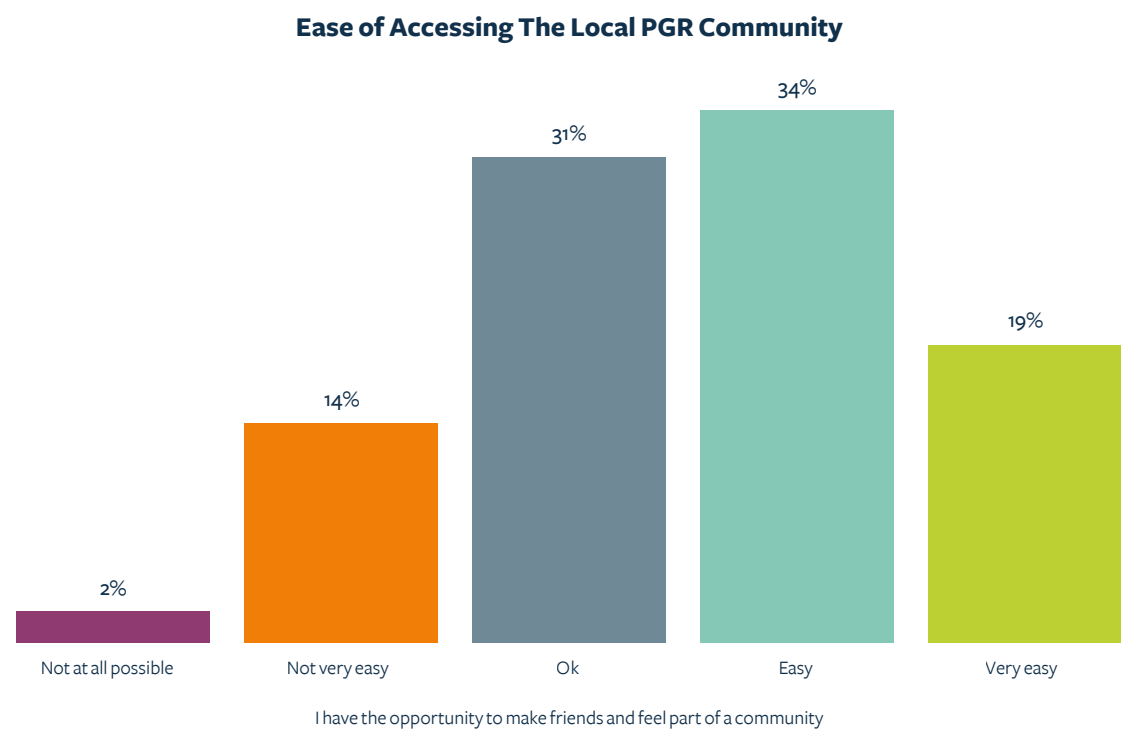
## Research community at the University of Southampton

In the Spring 2024 SUSU PGR survey, a total of 580 survey responses were received (representing approximately 19.3% of the total PGR population). 11% of participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had the opportunity to make friends and feel part of a community - a slight reduction from the Autumn 2023 survey response (see Figure 2). Disaggregating these responses by Faculty, FAH had the least positive scoring, with 23% of students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. In contrast, FMED had 4% of their students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement. When comparing to the Spring 2023 PGR survey, we see improved ratings to this question for FMED in particular.



**Figure 2** – SUSU PGR Survey (Spring 2024 and 2023) results relating to community.

Respondents were also asked to rate ease of access to their local PGR community (i.e., at the department level). The results mirror previous findings in that 16% of participants said it was not very easy or not at all possible to do this. FAH had the least positive responses out of Faculties, with 24% of students stating it was not very easy/possible. Overall, the data suggests that a significant proportion of PGRs are not able to readily access a community and that there are discrepancies in accessing PGRs (16%) communities across the Faculties. Whilst this quantitative data provides a baseline for understanding the current PGR landscape, there is a need for qualitative data to uncover the factors contributing to these differences.



**Figure 3** – SUSU PGR Survey (Spring 2024) results relating to the ease of accessing the local PGR community.

# Research Overview

**In the Winter 2023 SUSU PGR survey, a total of 487 survey responses were received (representing approximately 16.2% of the total PGR population) at the University of Southampton. Within this survey iteration, students were asked to submit words they associate with the University of Southampton's research culture. Whilst the top two responses were "supportive" (45%) and "respectful" (39%), 19% of participants used the words "isolation", "harsh", "lonely" and "segregated" amongst other negative-leaning words which were mentioned.**

In December 2023, two focus groups were held by PGR Student Partners (Fabien Littel, Dr Sarah Cryer and Lilian Odaro) which sought to better understand the negative connotations of research culture identified. Focus groups participants referred to many factors which contributed to the feeling of isolation, including physical segregation (e.g., where Faculties span different campuses); restrictions on time making it difficult to socialise; and no common purpose PGR space outside of some Faculty buildings. Furthermore, issues related to hot desking systems, used by some Faculties, was also seen to be a contributor to a negative sense of community (i.e., by not having a permanent sense of place and logistical issues surrounding the booking system). Other factors referred to how SUSU societies and sports teams cater mainly to undergraduate students, leaving disparities in access and experience for postgraduates.

To build upon these findings, a project investigating PGR community was designed to gain more specific insights into the positive and inhibitive contributing factors such as communication, social events, and collaboration.

## Aim and objectives

**Aim:** To understand the current PGR student community landscape at the University of Southampton to improve student experience within individual Faculties and across the institution.

**Objectives:**

- To liaise with PGR student representatives and Doctoral Programme Directors (DPDs) to discuss communication, feedback, collaboration, academic and social events, and barriers to building a PGR community.
- To explore possibilities for improving upon PGR community within Faculties and across the University.

## PGR Student Partners Scheme

In April 2024, Natasha Palmer was recruited as a PGR Student Partner to work in partnership with the Doctoral College to meet the above aim and objectives. The PGR Student Partners scheme is an award-winning initiative developed and launched by the University of Southampton's Doctoral College in June 2023. The scheme is grounded in principles of social justice and equity whereby PGR students are paid to work in partnership with the Doctoral College on projects with an equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) remit. To date, the scheme has worked collaboratively with students to enhance research culture, address racialised inequalities, and build a pipeline to PGR for underrepresented student groups, in line with the strategic aims of the Doctoral College and wider university (Islam, 2024a).



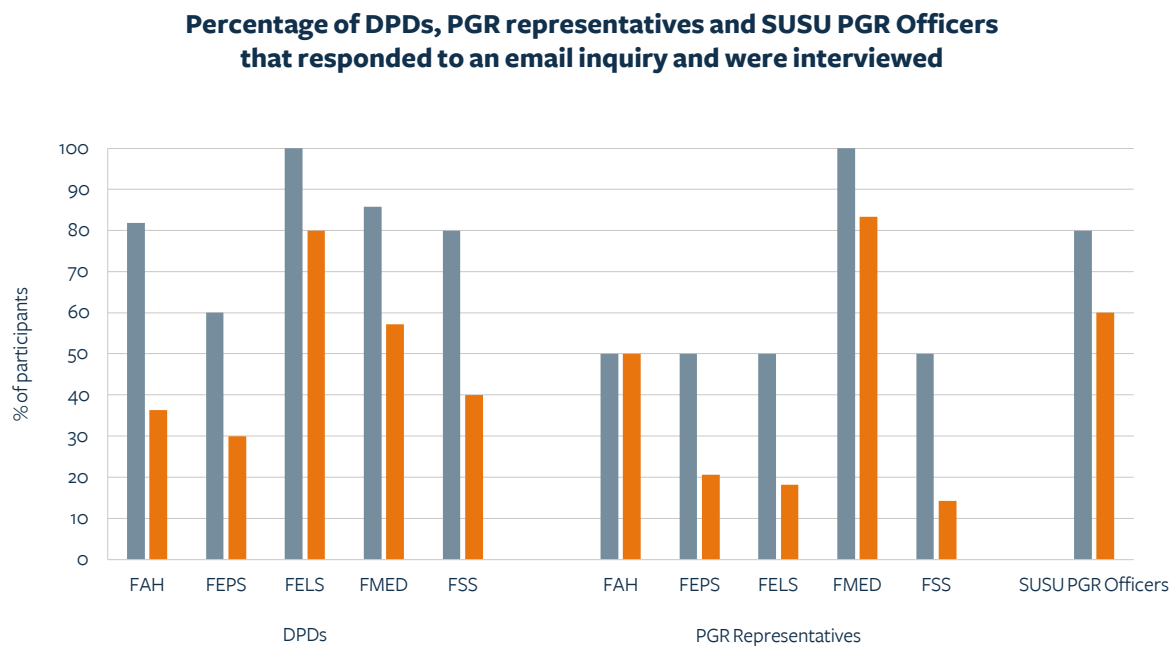
## Research design

Throughout May to August 2024, Natasha met with 24 PGR student representatives, 19 Doctoral Programme Directors (DPDs) and three SUSU PGR student officers from across the Faculties. Conversational interviews took place via Microsoft Teams and involved a ~30-minute discussion about their experience, insights and recommendations for PGR community. PGR community was defined as “a space where PGRs from all Faculties, and at all stages of research, come together, share ideas and experiences, either academically or socially”. Supervisory, administrative, or programme-specific issues were therefore not within the remit of discussion.

Stakeholders were recruited to this research directly via email and, prior to attending the interview, participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix 1). For those unable to attend an interview, they were given the option to submit written responses. Where appropriate, specific PGR representatives and DPDs have not been named, instead their Faculty is listed to protect the anonymity of participants.

## Participant overview

In total, three SUSU PGR officers, 19 DPDs and 24 PGR representatives engaged in interviews and/or provided written responses. Figure 4 illustrates the breakdown of participants from each Faculty, showing that whilst in general there was a good initial response rate from stakeholders to engage in informal conversations (blue bar), the conversion rate for attending an interview varied (orange bar). However, we acknowledge that time restrictions; being on research sabbatical; or no longer acting as a PGR representative and/or DPD played a role in uptake. Nevertheless, there was seen to be low engagement from FEPS, FELS and FSS PGR representatives, and FEPS DPDs which impacts the findings being reported.



**Figure 4** – Percentage of DPDs, PGR representatives and SUSU PGR Officers responding and subsequently taking part in the research.

## Findings

This section presents the findings of the research in two tiers. The first provides an overall summary across all five Faculties, split into the topics of communication, feedback, collaboration, academic and social events. The second, an overview of School-specific communities, for each Faculty, is presented.

### 1. Overview

In the Winter 2023 SUSU survey, PGRs were asked where they felt their community was based, and only 13% responded in their Faculty (n=63). This was also reflected in the discussions with PGR representatives and DPDs presented here. Findings suggested that FEPS, FELS and FAH had a weaker sense of Faculty community, although there were examples of positive School-based communities. In FSS, there was more consensus surrounding a positive sense of Faculty PGR community. It was suggested that the strongest sense of Faculty community came from FMED, largely attributed to more opportunities for collaborative research and regular Faculty wide social events facilitated by a PGR-run society.

#### 1.1. Communication

Every Faculty reported strong communication through email (which was the preferred method of communication for PGR students), with some Schools using Microsoft Teams groups, SharePoint sites, or Blackboard (the university's Virtual Learning Environment). Whilst four out of seven of the FEPS PGR representatives reported receiving too many emails, noteworthy positive communications examples came from Chemistry (FEPS) and Clinical and Experimental Sciences (FMED) who receive EDI-related emails noting religious and cultural celebrations (e.g., Eid), which were welcomed.

"I prefer email communication. Blackboard, Teams and SharePoint is over-kill, and SharePoint is hard to navigate." – **PGR Representative (FSS)**

"The amount of email communication is spot-on in Medicine; I think we receive everything we need to know." – **PGR Representative (FMED)**

Across all Faculties, there were mixed feelings related to the distribution of Faculty newsletters – the majority of PGRs interviewed (79%) enjoyed receiving these as it was a mechanism to understand current activity, relevant information and sometimes recognising/celebrating PGR achievements. However, the remaining representatives reflected that there is sometimes "unnecessary information".

"They [Faculty newsletters] contain a lot of unnecessary information that is not always read." – **PGR Representative (FAH)**

There was confusion regarding the existence of an FSS newsletter. One representative stated there was no newsletter, while two DPDs and another PGR representative claimed there was a newsletter, but it was not PGR-specific. Meanwhile, the SUSU PGR Officer reported that there was a PGR-specific newsletter. This may infer an over-saturation of communication mechanisms causing confusion amongst the local-level staff and students.

In cases where PGR-only WhatsApp groups were used, such as in English, History, Philosophy and Archaeology (FAH), Quantum, Light and Matter (FEPS) and Politics and International Science (FSS), they were reflected on very positively. This suggests that organic and grassroots-level communication mechanisms are more effective in evoking a sense of community.

#### 1.2. Feedback

All Faculties demonstrated strong feedback systems, including PGR representatives that are invited to Student Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) meetings; PGR forums; surveys; and frequent 'open door' policies from DPDs. Some noteworthy examples include History (FAH), in which the PGR representative has a dedicated slot in departmental meetings, and Biological Sciences and Health Sciences (FELS) who have termly PGR 'no agenda' meetings to allow any PGR to attend and provide feedback. Within FMED, there is an anomalous feedback form on a SharePoint site for any PGR to access.

There were minimal cases when PGR representatives felt they did not have the opportunity to convey feedback. For example, a representative based in



FEPS said they were not invited to SSLC meetings. However, the quote below suggests that further work to improve the PGR representative system may be required to ensure students understand the expectations of their roles.

“I’m less convinced this [the PGR representative system] works at the moment though as attendance is poor.” – **DPD (FEPS)**

Nevertheless, this seems to be down to the individual representatives, as some demonstrated exceeding standard expectations to gather feedback from their cohorts. For example, the Transportation and Electrochemistry (FEPS), Psychology, and INSPIRE Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) (FELS) representatives described sending out anonymous feedback forms before their SSLCs to gather feedback. Whilst these representatives volunteered and subsequently were elected within their roles, some PGR were assigned to the role, and so consequently commitment will vary.

Lastly, it is worth considering that 46% of listed PGR representatives (41 out of 88) failed to respond to two emails inquiring to meet for the purposes of this research, which raises the question whether PGR students could contact and receive a response from their representative(s) to provide feedback.

### 1.3. Collaboration

There were many examples of departmental collaboration opportunities, facilitated through joint supervisors, shared working spaces and networking at academic events. However, this collaboration was limited to School level as it is often due to the specific nature and focus of the work. The exception was FMED in which collaboration across all Departments and Schools is common practice.

“I really enjoy the collaborative nature of research in our Faculty, and it’s great for future employability because it leads to a higher numbers of papers being published.” – **PGR Representative (FMED)**

In instances where academic collaboration opportunities are limited, some Schools still provided their PGR students with collaboration opportunities. For example, in the English Department (FAH), students can work together on teaching courses which helps develop a sense of community. Similarly, in Health Sciences (FELS) and the Business School (FSS), students can work as a team on various goals and projects e.g., achieving Athena Swan Charter marks or working as part of the Work Futures [Research Centre](#). This demonstrates how active investment into social and academic opportunities can collaboratively be driven by Faculty staff.

“Although I don’t engage in formal academic collaboration, in our office we are always chatting about ideas and giving feedback.”

– **PGR Representative (FSS)**

Cross-Faculty collaboration was limited but, when possible, it was a highly valued practice. PGR students greatly appreciated opportunities to learn interdisciplinary skills and expand their networks with key examples referenced including: Archaeology (FAH) working with Engineering (FEPS); Biological Sciences (FELS) with Chemistry (FEPS); and Social Statistics and Demography (FSS) with FMED. External university collaborations were also seen to be rare, but again spoken positively of. For example, an integrated PhD course in FMED allows group work with PGR students at Queen Mary, University of London.

#### 1.4. Academic events

PGR representatives and DPDs interviewed within every School, across the five faculties, were reported to run frequent academic research seminars, most of which were open to all in the Faculty (although they were described not to be actively advertised to everyone). Additionally, many Schools reported to have annual conferences and various academic events throughout the year including: poster sessions; Three-Minute Thesis (3MT) competitions; and workshops on topics such as CV writing. Whilst none of the FAH or FELS PGR representatives or DPDs mentioned an annual Faculty conference, PGR students in Archaeology (FAH), Psychology (FELS) and in the Business School (FSS) reported to have organised their own departmental annual conferences. PGR Representatives and DPDs in FEPS, FSS and FMED spoke highly of holding School/Faculty annual conferences, which suggests that these should be arranged across Faculties where possible.

“Sometimes you get so absorbed in your own work, so the annual conference is a cool opportunity to see what everyone else is up to.”

– **PGR Representative (FELS)**

Other examples of academic events include PGR training days in Electronics and Computer Sciences (ECS) (FEPS) which are designed for new students. Whilst the training is skills-based, it facilitates a

community building opportunity. History (FAH) PGRs also organise an annual writing retreat, and Gerontology (FSS) have a departmental writing group run by the DPD, involving PGRs bringing along a written chapter which attendees give constructive feedback on.

#### 1.5. Social events

Overall, there were reported to be some PGR social events/activities happening across the University of Southampton, with the majority being School-based or departmental. However, there were no specific Faculty social events reported by participants from FAH, FELS or FEPS. Social events were therefore mainly reported in FSS and FMED. For example, FSS hold monthly PGR ‘coffee and chat’ mornings, as well as socials organised by the SUSU PGR Officer – ranging from an [Easter Egg hunt](#) to a Valentine’s Day ‘[Writing a love letter to your PhD](#)’ session. It is important to note that these events were funded by the Doctoral College Activities Fund. In FMED, the [Life Sciences Postgraduate Society](#) (LSPS) also run faculty PGR events, including monthly wellbeing sessions; casual socials such as pub quizzes and midweek restaurant trips; and organised, formal events including a Christmas party or post-Conference meal. Whilst not reported by participants here, it is important to note that the National Oceanography Centre (NOC) (FELS), has a dedicated Postgraduate Lounge which hosts weekly Coffee Mornings. Additionally, the Chemistry (FEPS) Common Room provides discounted refreshments and is available to all students.



PGR representatives felt that consistent regular socials, e.g., weekly/monthly PGR coffee mornings, are a good strategy for community building. Furthermore, numerous representatives said they would appreciate formal support from DPDs with organising social events as it can often be time-consuming and reliant on individual students. History (FAH) is an exception as the DPD has planned socials including after-work drinks.

There are limited EDI-related events, but examples that could inspire Schools/Faculties come from the Education School (FSS) where PGR students organise international celebrations for students and staff to bring in food from their respective countries and cultures. Clinical and Experimental Sciences (FMED) also offer a similar opportunity (although not PGR specific) with EDI lunch time events – previous events centred around Diwali, Chinese New Year and Eid.

## 2. Faculty specific overview

Overall, across the University of Southampton, there are positive School/departmental PGR communities that are fostered by frequent academic and social events, strong communication and collaboration. However, we recognise that Faculties are extremely diverse, so we explore here individual Faculty PGR communities to better support Faculty-level understandings of PGR community.

### 2.1. Faculty of Arts and Humanities (FAH)

In FAH, four DPDs and six PGR representatives were interviewed. Most participants reported little-to-no Faculty wide community feeling within FAH, including no interaction between Schools. Despite this, four out of the seven Schools interviewed had very positive feedback regarding their School-based communities – History was described as “diverse and friendly”, similarly Archaeology was described to have a “friendly, supportive community”. Winchester School of Art was said to have a “positive, friendly” environment, and Philosophy reported a “very social, international” community.

The challenges in Schools within FAH that had reported a weaker sense of PGR community seemed to stem from the geographical spread of PGRs, which limits in-person interaction. For example, whilst English was said to be an “interactive and diverse” School, due to a high proportion of remote-working PGRs, it was said to be “hard to grow the community organically”.

Likewise, Music had been impacted by a reduction in PGR numbers since the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a “disjointed community” and feelings of isolation. The South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership (SWW DTP) was said to have a very poor community feeling as this cohort of PGRs “belong to nobody and yet belong to everyone” as they are spread across numerous Schools and across multiple partner institutions. Consequently, PGRs were reported to not know each other, and tried to find a community through whichever department they were based in.

### 2.2. Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences (FEPS)

Three DPDs and seven PGR representatives from FEPS took part in this study. Four out of six Schools had strong positive feedback on their communities. For example, the Institute of Sound and Vibration (ISVR) reported a “friendly, supportive, engaged” community and has benefitted from a recently opened Coffee Room. Similarly, Physics and Astronomy described their PGR environment as “casual, friendly”, where in-person interaction was something strongly encouraged. Whilst Chemistry was described as being “in a departmental bubble”, it was also described as a “hard working, social community”.

The consensus from participants was that there is no Faculty wide PGR community, and instead the communities are localised to departments/research groups. For example, the PGR community in ECS was described as “quite mixed”, where “community building is often at the group level, with group meetings, seminars and other activities”. Similarly, in Engineering, different departmental groups appear to have varying levels of community; representation from Energy and Climate Change reported it was hard to connect with other PGRs, whereas Transportation noted regular social events that fostered a positive community.

### 2.3. Faculty of Environmental and Life Sciences (FELS)

In FELS, PGR communities were stated to be limited to School level as there is not a strong Faculty wide community, according to the four DPDs and four PGR representatives interviewed. Importantly, one DPD reported that their PGR periodic review had already highlighted the need for more Faculty events, which in turn would help in the development of a wider community feeling.



Every School involved in this research reported positive descriptions of their PGR community. Psychology was described as having an “interactive, motivated and supportive” atmosphere with “good community spirit”, and Biological Sciences was reported to have a “positive, hard-working and social” community. Health Sciences was described as having a “diverse PGR population” that was associated with a “good overall community feeling”, although it was noted this may be limited to full-time PGRs who are more likely to be physically on campus (a consideration which is applicable across the Faculties). Finally, representative from the INSPIRE DTP described the community at NOC as “friendly, close and diverse”.

#### 2.4. Faculty of Medicine (FMED)

Apart from Human Development and Health, all schools in FMED were represented through four DPDs and five PGR representatives. There was reported to be a strong Faculty-wide sense of community, facilitated through numerous collaborative opportunities; the LSPS social events; joint conferences; and shared supervisors.

Cancer Sciences was described as fostering an “engaged, active, and supportive” environment, and Primary Care, Population Sciences and Medical Education was said to have a “small but close-knit community”. Yet is still recovering from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as increased remote working – again, a likely implication affecting all Faculties. The Clinical and Experimental

Sciences was described as a “vibrant”, “well-connected” and “hard-working” School, but others felt that the community was ‘floor-dependent’ i.e., if you were based on a less “social” floor, you would have a weaker sense of community. Lastly, an integrated PhD DTP in FMED was reflected on positively, as PGRs were said to be familiar with each other from annual conferences and sharing the same taught first-year modules.

#### 2.5. Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS)

The four DPDs and three PGR representatives that took part in this research similarly reported that there is no Faculty-wide community in FSS. It was suggested that this is due to the Faculty being extremely diverse and physically spread out, with no singular/common area to congregate. This becomes apparent in certain Schools such as Social Statistics and Demography, which was described as having a dispersed community, with new PGRs finding it challenging to connect with other PGRs due to the geographical spread.

Despite this, other Schools reported an overall positive PGR community. The Education School was mentioned to have a “diverse and close-knit” community. The Law School described frequent in-person interaction in their “friendly and welcoming” environment. The atmosphere in Gerontology was also described as “vibrant, supportive, social” and likewise, Politics and International Relations was mentioned to have a “tight knit group” of students and staff.

# Barriers to fostering a PGR community

**Our stakeholder engagement revealed four main barriers to building PGR community that are applicable to all Faculties: physical space dedicated to PGRs; challenges related to on-campus working; social events; and lacking awareness of community. Where applicable, Faculty-specific barriers are discussed.**

## Physical space dedicated to PGRs

Having no dedicated PGR space, such as a Coffee or Common Room, meant that for some PGRs, there is no place for students to congregate or interact, other than their PGR offices. Nevertheless, PGR offices are by nature a shared space of working, so can become distracting if used for socialising. In cases where Faculties are spread across multiple buildings, students are again unable to network as there is no common space.

“There is no dedicated PGR space, it [the community] is devolved to individual groups.”  
– **DPD (FEPS)**

“There are no set social spaces outside the canteen” at Avenue campus.  
– **PGR Representative (FAH)**

## On-campus/in-person working infrastructure

Whilst seen as a flexible working practice, restricted office space, and the implementation of a hotdesking system, has created a barrier to building PGR community. Some had also reported that whilst on campus, Wi-Fi was generally less reliable, and the presence of building construction all held a disincentivising effect for students to work on campus after the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The broadband at home is usually very good and the machines that iSolutions [IT support service] provide will be worse than many people have at home.” – **DPD (FEPS)**

“There are frequent construction works going on which make the office a noisy environment.”  
– **DPD (FEPS)**

Remote working was reported to be a predominant issue for building PGR community in FAH, which has a very diverse PGR population i.e., holding a large proportion of mature or part-time PGRs, and PGRs that do not live in Southampton. This factor, combined with the geographical spread of the Schools means there is subsequently a lack of difficulty for in-person engagement.



## Social events

A common barrier raised by both PGR representatives and DPDs was a lack of Faculty social events. PGR social events were frequently reported to be either departmental or School-based, and often down to PGR students themselves to plan – three representatives from FSS, FMED and FAH stated that academics/supervisors are less engaged in creating/facilitating a social environment. Other issues surrounding social events included financial restrictions. For example, one PGR representative reported that despite the presence of the Biological Sciences Postgraduate Society, financial restrictions prevent PGRs from socialising as often as they would want to. Similarly, in FMED, four PGR representatives had been part of the Life Sciences Postgraduate Society committee and noted there are limited funds available, meaning not all events can be subsidised.

Nevertheless, another reported barrier PGRs faced was a lack of time to socialise. In the Winter 2023 SUSU PGR Survey, participants were asked when the ideal time to engage with an event would be. As demonstrated by Figure 5, there was inevitably a wide variety in responses, making it challenging to plan an event that would suit most PGRs. This finding was consistent with the feedback from the PGR representatives interviewed. In FMED, it was noted that clinical PGRs have even tighter restrictions on time, so they are less involved in social events. Similar deductions can also be made for part-time and commuting students.

“The time of travel does not justify attending an event on Highfield [campus].” – **PGR Representative (FELS)**

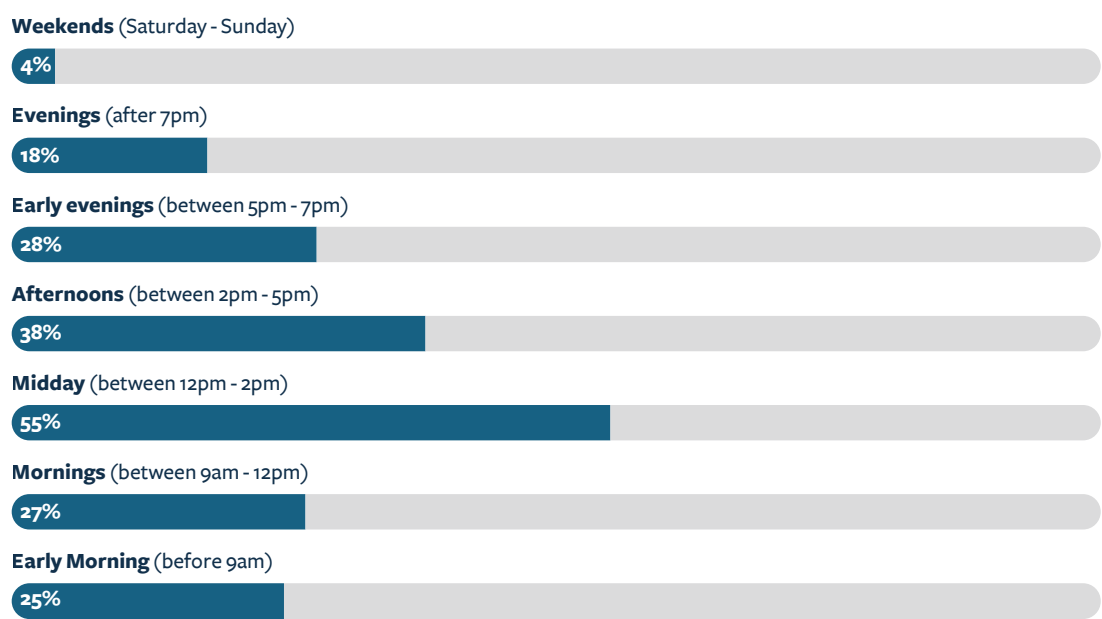


Figure 5 – SUSU PGR Survey (Winter 2023) results on preferred event times.



## Lacking awareness of a PGR community

Lastly, many PGR representatives, and some DPDs, reported that they do not know who the PGRs in their School or Faculty are. This is potentially caused by the increase in remote working and lack of suitable social events. Ultimately, not knowing who the cohort is restricts the overall sense of community.

“New PGR students often face barriers in building a community within the Faculty and the broader university, primarily because they do not yet know their Faculty well.” – **PGR Representative (FSS)**

## Faculty-specific barriers relating to social and academic events

### FAH

In FAH, teaching responsibilities were said to influence a PGR’s decision to attend SUSU clubs, societies and events – particularly where this may blur boundaries between PGRs and the students they teach.

“A lot of PGRs get involved with teaching so most of us avoid joining clubs and societies in case our students are in those groups.”  
– **PGR Representative (FAH)**

“SUSU appears keen to get involved with PGR community – I am sceptical of this from a Humanities perspective because of the teaching cross over and age gap between undergraduates and PGRs.” – **PGR Representative (FAH)**

### FELS

In areas where field work is common, such as in the Biological Sciences, there was seen to be a higher sense of isolation compounded by a lack of social events. However, even with hybrid events, time differences were noted to be difficult to manage.

### FEPS and FSS

PGR representatives from FEPS and FSS respectively reported lacking engagement from international students who were reported not to have attended as many social events. However, this claim cannot be further substantiated and so further research into this and why this might be is required.

“There is no support from the School in addressing cultural difference.” – **PGR representative (FSS)**

### FMED

The LSPS is run by PGRs on a voluntary basis, therefore the onus is on a few individuals each year to organise social events. As LSPS Society positions are mandatorily filled, some committee members may be less enthusiastic to take on such roles.

Outside of LSPS, the FMED Poster Session and Doctoral College events are open to all, so where confidentiality is compromised, it can limit certain researchers from taking part. For example, where some PhD students are funded by external companies, those working on upcoming treatments may be restricted as to how much of their research they can share.

# Recommendations

**All student and staff participants within this research were asked for their suggestions and recommendations to address the barriers they had mentioned to student engagement and overall PGR community. These recommendations can be summarised under four key themes – PGR physical space; addressing on-campus working; accessible and collaborative social events; and growing a sense of community.**

“I think we probably need to think up new ways of engagement if it is becoming clear that the old ways are no longer working.” – **DPD (FEPS)**

## PGR physical space

Students and staff who were based within Schools or departments which had access to a PGR dedicated space (e.g. a Common Room), reflected on it very positively. For example, representation from ISVR (FEPS), and Clinical and Experimental Sciences (FMED) groups reported on the greatly beneficial role of having a dedicated space:

“The opening of our floor’s Coffee Room has massively improved the sense of community as every lunch time, there is now an opportunity for socialisation.” – **PGR Representative (FMED)**

Whilst the research advocates that designated PGR Rooms should be considered, we recognise the physical luxury of having such a recommendation. In cases where a permanent space is not a viable option, we recommend that a regular room could be booked for PGR events. This is an achievable short-term solution for all Faculties to implement. For example, reserving a lecture theatre or seminar room once a week for a regular PGR coffee morning. It should be noted that the Doctoral College Research Culture team are piloting monthly PGR Coffee Mornings available to all PGR students in the 2024/25 academic year, using the freely available facilities in the Faith and Reflection Centre on Highfield campus.

## Addressing on-campus working

On-campus working/in-person engagement is a challenging barrier to address as the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are still being felt. Evidently, there is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to address the social gap caused by the pandemic yet there is

a gradual process of returning to/expecting more in-person engagement. Whilst this does not negate the importance of providing alternatives to physical engagement, arrangements to incentivising and better accommodating on-campus working required addressing. This includes alternative working spaces when PGR office spaces are affected by university construction, slow/patchy Wi-Fi and hotdesking. There was a consensus from PGR representatives in that the removal of hotdesking would significantly enhance a sense of community. Increased on-campus socials, such as regular and frequent PGR coffee mornings, would also enhance a sense of belonging to flourish. The benefits of in-person working and engagement could also be raised and encouraged during PGR inductions to promote collaborative working and socialisation during the PhD.



## Accessible and collaborative social events

Across all Faculties, there were a wide range of PGR social and academic events, but they were either School based or departmental. To facilitate a wider sense of community, Faculty events are recommended. These do not have to be large-scale or expensive, as casual events such as a coffee mornings or lunches proved to be popular:

“Regular socials are a good strategy for engaging PGRs because if you are busy one week, you don’t have to wait long for the next event.”

– **PGR Representative (FEPS)**

It is recommended that social events should not be alcohol-centric and have flexible timings to be accessible for part-time and distance PGRs, as well as student parents. Where social events with an EDI focus, such as the ones that take place in the Education School (FSS) or Clinical and Experimental Sciences (FMED), proved to be well-received, this may be a focus that other Faculties may wish to take on board.

As PGR representatives reported a lack of funding to plan events, increased advertising of the Doctoral College Activities Fund is also required. This funding can support PGR-led activities, or Faculty/programme-led activities which support PGRs and their academic, career, wellbeing, social and skills development. Other suggestions for social events included a Faculty virtual networking session, and online writing retreats (FEPS PGR representative). Furthermore, where PGRs are based at several campuses, events should not simply be limited to a single campus as this can involve a time and financial cost to engage in these activities.

To address students’ time-restrictions, DPDs should also play a part in hosting and arranging social activities. Feedback from representatives within FEPS reported wanting support when planning significant events such as Christmas parties. Similarly, FMED PGR representatives felt that academic staff were not aware of LSPS, where it would be useful if staff directed new PGRs to their events. For example, some reported that meetings or research seminars were scheduled by academics that clashed with the LSPS on-site wellbeing events. This also suggests that DPDs and academic

staff should have more awareness of or work more collaboratively with PGR student-led societies.

“Planning events is time consuming on top of everything we have going on in the PhD, it would be good to have some help from DPDs or postdocs.” – **PGR Representative (FAH)**

Lastly, all Faculties may benefit from running local-level surveys or forums which bring together PGRs from Schools or Departments in order to better understand barriers impacting them from attending social events. This would be useful for those Schools which reported that international students do not attend events. Furthermore, Faculties could utilise the findings of the PGR SUSU survey (administered three times per academic year) to determine ideal timings for hosting academic and social events.

## Increasing awareness of the PGR community

Feedback from students and staff within this research suggests that more is required to build an understanding of PGR community. Several recommendations to support this goal include:

1. A PGR buddy system in which new PGRs are matched with an existing PGR student. This would be mutually valuable in that new students would have a dedicated point of contact, and existing students would become familiar with others within their Faculty, enhancing their sense of community too.

Examples of this initiative working successfully were found in Transportation (FEPS) and Clinical and Experimental Sciences (FMED), with a PGR representative stating that:

“Having a buddy was super helpful as it meant I knew someone whenever I went to social events. In later years, when I have been a buddy myself, I have become close friends with who I was matched with, and still to this day hang out with them.” – **PGR Representative (FMED)**

For Faculties who lack the resource to create a dedicated PGR buddy system, the Doctoral College run a PGR Peer Mentoring Scheme which similarly

matches mentees with mentors from their own Faculty, or a different Faculty, depending on their preference. Both mentors and mentees undergo specific training, and the overall aim of the scheme is to offer early-stage PGR students with support related to studying, career goals, communication with supervisors and managing a healthy work-life balance.

2. Creating an online PGR directory for PGRs to search for other peers by Faculty, department and research area. The aim of creating this database would ensure that students within the Faculty have the ability to become familiar with their community, which would also benefit research endeavours through better allowing for collaboration, but also network outside of their immediate circles.

In Gerontology (FSS), it was reported that the DPD advertises a list of new students with their corresponding email addresses:

“[Advertising the new students] helps generate a sense of community, as otherwise there is no way for students to know who has joined.”  
– **DPD (FSS)**

3. Cross-Faculty collaboration was a suggestion which was highly valued by PGRs that were given the opportunity to engage with it. Again, this would improve the awareness of the PGR community in a more structured way with the potential for

benefiting research output.

4. Both School and Faculty annual conferences were also spoken highly of. Where possible, these should be arranged collaboratively with students and staff and would also improve awareness of the diversity within the local PGR community.
5. Whilst there were positive remarks related to PGR feedback, there was potential concern with the PGR representative system. Therefore, training representatives to be aware of their role and remit in relation to PGR community-building could be beneficial.
6. Finally, there was a suggestion for PGR representatives to attend induction sessions, which can then encourage the formation of WhatsApp groups for the incoming cohort. WhatsApp groups provided an organic outlet for PGRs to communicate informally, and received strong feedback from the Schools that reported using them (including: English, History, Philosophy and Archaeology (FAH), Quantum, Light and Matter (FEPS) and Politics and International Science (FSS).

“Attending the inductions for new PGRs is a great way for them [PGR representatives] to meet some students. I found the inductions to be very long and overwhelming, but I remember enjoying the ice breakers run by the reps.”  
– **PGR Representative (FMED)**



# Actions from the Doctoral College

**As a Doctoral College, we are already taking steps to address concerns raised and action some of the recommendations emerging from this research and wider existing work:**

| Barrier                                                                          | Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Action                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lacking parity in terms of <b>dedicated PGR space</b>                            | → PGR Coffee/Break rooms have proved to be a popular and important resource for students. However, a lack of physical space restricts every School from being able to provide one. In these cases, utilising/booking common learning spaces regularly such as Lecture Theatres/Seminar rooms offer an effective alternative.                                                                                                                                                           | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Doctoral College are producing a Doctoral Programme Director (DPD) role descriptor to provide academics with clearer expectations of their roles, in addition to a DPD Network for collegiate support, advice and guidance. As part of this, we will: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Produce guidance which signposts to available rooms within specific buildings that can be booked if dedicated PGR space is unavailable.</li> <li>b. Remind DPDs of their role to provide pastoral support to PGRs and work in partnership with them to build belonging and community.</li> </ol> </li> </ol> |
| On-campus/in-person working can present <b>logistical barriers to engagement</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Offer dedicated alternative working spaces, such as offices in the Sir James Matthews Building (University of Southampton City Centre).</li> <li>→ Increase the availability of regular on-campus socials, e.g. PGR coffee mornings to act as an incentive.</li> <li>→ Highlight the benefits of in-person working (e.g., mental health and wellbeing) during PGR student inductions and at the earlier stages of the PGR journey.</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ See Action 1a</li> <li>2. Raise awareness of the monthly Doctoral College Coffee Mornings.</li> <li>3. Our Doctoral College Research Culture Lead (Student Experience) will highlight the importance of in-person engagement within a bespoke PGR work-life balance campaign, and include this content during Doctoral College Inductions.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

| Barrier                                                                                               | Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Action                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Social events</b> are often left to the sole responsibility of PGRs to arrange and organise</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Increase advertisement of the Doctoral College Activities Fund – a fund for PGRs to lead on events and activities which support academic, career, wellbeing and social, skills development and impact.</li> <li>→ Promote Faculty and cross-Faculty wide and external collaborations for social events.</li> <li>→ DPD involvement on co-leading and organising events.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. We will seek to review the current processes and advertising associated with the Doctoral College Activities Fund in order to raise awareness and uptake from PGRs.</li> <li>5. We will advertise Faculty social events on the Doctoral College Professional Development Calendar.</li> <li>→ See Action 1b</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p><b>Lacking awareness</b> of a ‘PGR community’</p>                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Enhanced promotion of the PGR Peer Mentoring scheme - new PGRs are matched with an existing PGR as a point of contact to aide their transition as a doctoral student.</li> <li>→ An online, accessible PGR student database. This would function as an online directory where PGR students can access contact and project information on other doctoral students e.g., their project focus, department, Faculty etc.</li> <li>→ PGR representatives should be trained, supported and encouraged to form online and physical communities/cohorts at the start of the academic year.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. We will seek to better advertise the PhD Peer Mentoring scheme, run by the Doctoral College.</li> <li>7. Our PGR Manager system (used primarily to manage and track the progress of PGR students) includes a tool which enables users to search for doctoral students. We will explain this function at Doctoral College Inductions and provide reminders within our Doctoral College Digest newsletter.</li> <li>8. We will work with Southampton University Students’ Union (SUSU) on PGR representative training, and the formation of a PGR Representative Network.</li> </ul> |

# Conclusion

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**This research has explored perceptions of PGR community across the five Faculties at the University of Southampton, from the perspective of DPDs and PGR student representatives. Our aim in doing so has been to better understand the barriers of developing a strong sense of community for PGR students and staff within local and Faculty research environments. The findings presented here suggest multiple areas for improvement that can be adopted going forward to enhance the PGR experience and wider research culture at the University of Southampton.**

Our findings evidence that there are multiple examples of positive School based PGR communities, throughout all five Faculties, fostered by frequent academic events, opportunities to socialise, intentional collaboration between students and staff and effective communication. PGR students highly valued these local communities; however, Faculty communities were lacking, due to many factors including the geographical spread of PGRs, increase in remote working practices time and financial restrictions of social events, and limited awareness of who makes up the PGR community. This report has outlined key recommendations that can be used to address these barriers, including the addition of dedicated PGR spaces, increased on-campus events, promotion and adoption of peer/buddy schemes, and an accessible online database of PGR students' research areas/interests.

Whilst this research engaged with a wide array of doctoral students and staff across the Faculties, there are limitations worth noting. Firstly, low participant numbers may have skewed the results for certain Faculties. For example, in FSS, only two PGR representatives were interviewed out of 14. Consequently, the representativeness of some Faculty-specific findings is low as, combined with the interviewed DPDs, there was no representation for Schools such as Mathematical Sciences, Economics and Sociology, and Social Policy and Criminology. We further recognise that the identity characteristics of PGR representatives and DPDs will have impacted the responses gained as experiences of minoritisation can affect perceptions of community and belonging.

A second limitation is the wide variation in the responses. Each Faculty is diverse with distinctions between their respective Schools and departments. Additionally, there were discrepancies between PGR representatives from within the same School. As personal experiences are subjective and therefore vary greatly, this led to some contradicting opinions. For example, in FMED, some representatives had conflicting views on the current PGR community they experienced.

Nevertheless, there has not been a comprehensive review which gathers the qualitative views of students and staff regarding the PGR community at the University of Southampton to date. Therefore, the themes, findings and recommendations provided allow for validity and a deeper insight into this area. Further research into this area may also wish to explore international students' perspectives of PGR community and their seemingly reported lacking engagement with social events.

## Insights from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)

Since this research was conducted the University has taken part in the 2025 [Postgraduate Research Experience Survey](#) (PRES) – a UK-wide national survey run by Advance HE, designed to gather feedback from PGR students about their experiences. The results, which were released in July 2025, show PGRs at Southampton reporting an overall satisfaction of 89%. This survey marks an important milestone in measuring our efforts to foster a vibrant and inclusive research culture across the PGR community.

With 70% of our PGRs reporting a positive sense of community, we stand among the highest scoring Russell Group institution and rank eighth overall nationally. This achievement – 7.5% above the PRES average and 6.3% above the Russell Group average – reflects the collective commitment of our students, academics and professional services to deliver meaningful improvements to our PGR community.

While we are proud of this success, we remain mindful of the work still to be done. The data highlighted areas where we must focus our attention, particularly in better serving our part-time students, mature learners, and those with declared disabilities. These groups continue to face unique challenges that require tailored support.

This progress is encouraging but is still only the start of the work required, and the Doctoral College's commitment to continue listening, learning, and working in partnership with our PGR students to ensure that every doctoral researcher feels a genuine sense of belonging and value within our community.



## Reflection from PGR Student Partner, Natasha Palmer:

Wherever I work or study, I strive to create strong, engaging communities, so during the past three years of my PhD at the University of Southampton, I have been involved as a PGR representative, society president and wellbeing champion within the Faculty of Medicine. Taking part in this project has allowed me to reflect on the research culture I have experienced at the University of Southampton, but also the two Universities I studied at prior to my PhD. I have been lucky to study in a supportive and inclusive environment, and it was reassuring to hear positive feedback from most PGR representatives I spoke to. In cases where the responses were not as positive, it reminded me why I should continue actively trying to foster and be a part of PGR communities on all levels.

Overall, I am grateful to the Doctoral College for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this worthwhile project, whilst also learning new qualitative research techniques that I would not have in my PhD. I have had an extremely beneficial experience in this role with the Doctoral College and I will try to take partnership working forward in all future assignments.



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

The following questions were discussed with the SUSU PGR Officers, DPDs and PGR representatives:

1. How would you describe the PGR community within your department and faculty? What ways do you facilitate PGR community building? (Overall PGR community)
2. How does the department and faculty communicate with PGR students? (Communication)
3. What events do you provide for PGR students, both social and academic? (Events)
4. How does the Department and Faculty promote collaboration and community between PGR students? (Collaboration)
5. Do you have a feedback system for PGR students to voice their ideas on PGR community-building events and activities? (Feedback)
6. What barriers do you think PGR students face in terms of building PGR community within the faculty/broader university? (Barriers)
7. Do you have any ideas or plans of future events or ways to engage PGR students, and are there any barriers to these events? (Recommendations)

**Find out more:**

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