Report on the Post graduate Research Student Experience

Presented to Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) by **Arad Research**

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Executive summary

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) commissioned Arad Research to report on the Post graduate Research (PGR) Student Experience. This executive summary report presents the main findings of the research.

I.   Report background and methodology

The main objectives of the research reported here was to provide HEFCW with insights and understanding of the **issues faced by PGR students**. The research aimed to investigate key aspects of PGR student experiences, including academic support, development and training opportunities, community building among PGR students and representation at the institutional level.

PGR students make up the smallest proportion of higher education (HE) students across the UK with less than five percent of the total number of HE students. In the academic year 2021/22, 4,315 PGR students were enrolled in Wales across eight HEIs. Despite a slight decline in 2021/22 compared to previous years, the number of PGR students in Wales has remained static over the last five years.

Whilst the level of overall satisfaction of PGRs has been found to be consistently positive over recent years, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) reported in 2022 that PhD and other postgraduate students are over-represented in the number of complaints received. The OIA considered that this overrepresentation may be the result of personal and financial investment, challenges for international students and supervision issues. Financial issues and low pay have also been noted as a significant challenge for PGR students.

There are key differences between PGR students which could influence their experience and outcomes. Some PGR students will receive funding for their research, either from external sources such as UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) or from the university itself, whilst others will self-fund their degrees. PGRs on studentships supported by UKRI research councils can be supported through Centres for Doctoral Training (CDT) and Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)) which provide training and support for doctoral students[1]. Additionally, all PGRs may have the opportunity to teach (depending on the availability of opportunities in their institutions) and some will form part of university research teams, leading to some PGRs having both staff and student status.

Methodology

The methodology for the research involved a combination of qualitative interviews with universities and wider stakeholders, focus groups with PGR students and desk-based research. A total of 23 individuals took part from nine HEIs in Wales including Pro-Vice Chancellors of Research, Directors of Doctoral Colleges/Schools and Postgraduate/School Deans. Five wider stakeholders also participated from five different bodies including funders, representative student bodies and other organisations with a link to the Welsh higher education sector.

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[1] Doctoral Training Partnerships 2 (DTP2) – UKRI

PGR student focus groups were held online via Zoom. A total of 50 PGR students took part in online focus groups from eight HEIs.

II. Policies and procedures to support PGR students

There was recognition from across the Welsh universities that PGR students are a unique and varied cohort needing tailored support and guidance. Most institutions use PRES and have carried out their own reviews to better understand PGR student needs as well as being guided by research councils, external funders, funding bodies and governmental standards in areas such as parental leave and employment conditions. PGR student representatives also sit on institutional committees and groups, in line with efforts to increase PGR student representation across institutions.

This has led to a range of bespoke policies, activities, communications and training to meet the skillset required to be an effective PGR student, promoted during all stages of their recruitment and integration into university life. This range of support comes through two main channels. One is a set of centralised, institution-wide measures to ensure a uniform approach. The second is where elements of support are more devolved to a department level or, in some institutions, Graduate Offices or Doctoral Schools, which is viewed by university representatives as offering a more flexible and responsive approach.

In terms of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), most institutions highlighted that EDI structures and processes were set at a university-wide level and recorded and monitored all students in areas such as recruitment, induction, admissions and performance. Students' union representatives and some PGR students considered nevertheless that there was more progress to be made in embedding support for, and awareness of, EDI across the PGR community.

> **Institution recommendation:** Institutions should ensure that the EDI policies and structures that support PGR students are aligned across all departments / schools to ensure a consistent and equal level of support.

III. Supervision

The supervisory relationship is a crucial aspect of the PGR experience, acknowledged by all university representatives and students. From an institutional perspective, supervision is an area that receives significant investment, containing established codes of practice, links to institutional structures, and professional development opportunities for supervisors. These approaches were further supported by flexibility in appointing supervisors based on discipline, seniority, dialogue with PGRs and supported by reviews and monitoring.

However, PGR students reported mixed experiences with supervision. Positive examples included regular and timely interactions, proximity to supervisors in labs or research centres with easier access to supervisors, having several supervisors with different skillsets, and the continuity highlighted by those PGRs who had continued studies from undergraduate onwards in the same institution. Negative experiences included perceived inconsistencies in selecting a supervisor, availability issues, lack of expertise, and EDI awareness gaps.

To support a more consistent approach to supervision, most institutions have introduced training for academic staff. Some institutions continue to provide ongoing training to adapt and incorporate funder requirements, and support greater involvement from, and liaison with, Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs). Other initiatives included pairing newer supervisors with experienced ones and sharing knowledge across departments.

Institutional representatives reported a range of informal and formal mechanisms in place to resolve disputes. These included regular reviews with directors of research, mediation opportunities and the option to change supervisor. While these are preferred routes, some cases are resolved through institutional complaints procedures. Student representative organisations also highlighted the importance of institutional structures and processes and taking on a mediation role where required.

However, some PGR students appear hesitant to submit complaints and this is an area that requires further research to gain a better understand of the scale of the issue and the reasons for any reluctance. This could involve trying methods other than a group discussion or spending more time specifically investigating the process of making complaints and whether more accessible informal routes should be developed.

> **HEFCW recommendation:** HEFCW should encourage institutions to support supervisors and other relevant staff with regular and effective PGR-related training and development.
>
> **Institution recommendation:** Institutions should identify and share good practice relating to PGR supervision, both within and between institutions, including implementing the UKCGE Good Supervisory Framework.
>
> **HEFCW recommendation:** HEFCW should consider commissioning research to explore PGR students' reluctance to submit complaints and potential new routes to support them.

IV. Academic support and development opportunities

Institutions offered various training and development opportunities to enhance PGR student experiences, covering research-focused subjects like ethics and research methods, as well as transferable skills such as time management and effective writing. Some courses focused on non-academic career paths like leadership, publishing, and entrepreneurship. The Researcher Development Framework (RDF) served as a guidance tool for most universities in designing their PGR training.

However, inconsistencies existed regarding aspects like cost, access and whether training is mandatory or optional. Some institutions offered a range of courses that were all optional, whilst others had core topics which needed to be completed by each PGR student. A few institutions offered a choice of modules but required their PGRs to complete a minimum number of credits within a timeframe. Some institutions and stakeholders perceived that transferable skills and employability-based training were not currently as accessible as research-based training.

PGR students are expected to collaborate with supervisors and other colleagues, including representative bodies, to identify their training needs. Some institutions also partnered with external organisations to offer additional training opportunities. However, not all students could access these opportunities due to ties to funders or eligibility criteria.

PGR students were positive about the amount and type of training provided by their respective institutions but there were, however, mixed levels of awareness and access, particularly around face-to-face training opportunities and an inconsistency of opportunities between funded and self-funded PGR students. Wider stakeholders agreed that training needed to be better publicised and PGR students better supported with funds to access new opportunities.

Another gap identified was tailored careers support and advice, with institutions and students noting a focus on academic needs rather than employability and non-academic career progression.

> **HEFCW recommendation:** HEFCW should encourage institutions to ensure that both funded and non-funded PGR students receive an equitable experience with regard to accessing training and professional development opportunities.
>
> **Institution recommendations:** Institutions should better publicise training and development opportunities, while also emphasising the potential for students to benefit from networking during these training events.
>
> Institutions should expand training opportunities focused on employability skills and career advice to support PGR students' progression into employment.

V. Teaching roles for PGR students

All institutions engaged PGR students in paid teaching roles largely in hourly-paid casual roles. Some institutions also offered Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) roles. Institutions acknowledged that those PGRs who teach operate in a grey area: viewed as members of staff by those they teach, working in collaboration with academic staff and in receipt of pay from the institution, yet still students themselves. Developing a consistent approach is further challenged by the diverse nature of PGR students, with those who were funded, part-time or international students often facing limitations in the hours they can work.

Recruitment methods vary, and some institutions acknowledged the need for improved transparency and consistency. This includes, for example, better centralised HR guidance to academic schools and promoting trade union membership and institutional HR policies to PGR students.

PGR students who teach have casual teaching contracts for the hours they deliver, including preparation time, and therefore operate without the full range of benefits and protections that permanent and fixed-term employees have. Representatives from student bodies outlined concerns that PGRs were being used by HEIs to 'plug gaps in the system' and a lack of consistent pay and contracts across different schools. A few institutions were in the process of addressing these issues, working with Unions to further support PGR employment rights.

PGRs who teach reported mixed experiences of recruitment, support, training, and pay. Overall, most found the experience positive, citing financial rewards and teaching experience as benefits However, those who had not taught mentioned challenges related to a lack of recognition for their skills and transparency in the recruitment process.

> **Institution recommendation**: Institutions should develop a consistent and clearly communicated approach regarding PGR students who teach, including pay, conditions, and recruitment to teaching.

VI.   Developing a research community

Developing research communities has been an integral part of some institutions' approach to supporting their students, through mechanisms such as research groups, festivals of research and dedicated spaces for students to meet, study and socialise. These research communities are more developed in some institutions than others, with smaller institutions generally offering more opportunities to engage directly with staff and other PGR students. PGR students who were affiliated with research centres reported that they had additional opportunities to network, however, these opportunities are not currently experienced by all students.

> **HEFCW recommendation:** HEFCW should work with Universities Wales and the Learned Society of Wales to support further progress in developing research communities, for example producing guidelines to support consistency of approach and sharing examples of good practice.
>
> **Institution recommendation:** All institutions in Wales should review the opportunities they provide for PGR students to become part of a research community, including cross-disciplinary opportunities and social activities. Alongside online opportunities, institutions should offer in-person interactions where possible to enable PGR students to build a research community.

VII.   Well-being challenges and support

Well-being and mental health were reported to be a key part of university and wider stakeholder support for PGR students. The issue of isolation and loneliness during a PGR degree emerged as a key concern.

Other well-being challenges included the current cost of living crisis and financial burdens, especially for mature and part-time students with additional responsibilities. International PGR students faced specific issues, including visa complications, delays with international sponsors, and EDI-related concerns.

To address these challenges universities have put a range of measures and activities in place to support PGR well-being. As with other elements of the PGR experience, some of this support forms part of broader measures aimed at all students while other areas are PGR-specific. The former included greater access to counselling, 24-hour helplines and student handbooks, while, for PGRs, well-being themed workshops and sessions are often

incorporated into training programmes, sometimes in partnership with students' unions. In some cases, some supervisors received training to signpost PGR students to these types of support.

PGR students acknowledged the supportive role played by their supervisors in some cases and efforts made by their departments, however, the general feeling was that well-being support is currently more targeted towards undergraduates. A consistent approach, recognising the diversity of PGR experience and their specific support needs, was considered to be a key focus for future strategies along with a recognition of the impact the cost of living was having on PGR students' finances.

> **Institution recommendation:** Institutions should ensure that PGR students have access to timely, quality support that recognises their specific wellbeing needs and academic journey.

VIII.   Developing a standard support offer

The different levels and variety of support structures that had been put in place were designed to address the diversity of the PGR cohort and their specific needs. While the support has led to a range of positive outcomes for PGR students the findings from this report indicate that there are still inconsistencies, differing levels of engagement and gaps in provision and this has had a negative impact on the overall experience of some students.

Further cohesion could therefore be supported across Welsh universities through the development of a standard offer for PGR students. In line with the key themes of this report this could include a consistent approach to providing well-being support, professional development opportunities, formal recognition of teaching status, access to a research community and frequent contact with supervisors. Universities could support this approach through the provision of frequent training for supervisors and other staff engaged with PGR students and the flexible alignment of support policies across departments and their respective institutions.

> **HEFCW recommendation:** HEFCW should work with institutions and wider stakeholders to design a standard offer of support for PGR students, which could provide a benchmark for a consistent approach in Welsh universities.

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1. Introduction

In January 2023, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) commissioned Arad Research to undertake a review on the Post graduate Research (PGR) Student Experience. This report presents the findings of the review. Section 1 begins by detailing the objectives of the research, followed by a broad discussion of the background of PGR students and the context in Wales. The methodological approach is then laid out including an overview of the participants.

1.1 Research objectives

The main objectives of the report are to provide HEFCW with insights and understanding of the **issues faced by PGR students,** see Section 1.2 for further details. The aims and objectives were to conduct research into:

1. The academic support available.
2. Access to development and training opportunities.
3. How, and to what extent, a community of PGR students is established.
4. Representation of PGR students at an institutional level.
5. How institutions deal with complaints from PGR students.
6. How the views of PGR students are taken into account by institutions.
7. Engagement of Welsh institutions with Centres for Doctoral Training (CDT) and / or Doctoral Training Programmes (DTP).
8. Early information on how institutions are implementing the recommendations of the Postgraduates who Teach report, previously commissioned by HEFCW.

The report also seeks to draw conclusions to understand whether institutions are effectively addressing issues experienced by postgraduate research students, including in the context of developments in other countries of the UK.

Make evidence-based recommendations to HEFCW and the Welsh higher education sector for:
- possible approaches to enhancing the postgraduate research student experience, including consistency within and between institutions, and
- how the experience of these students could be monitored at both institutional and sector level, to inform enhancement and enable accountability.

1.2 Background

PGR students make up the smallest proportion of higher education (HE) students across the UK (less than five percent of the total number of HE students)[2]. In the academic year 2021/22, UK HEIs had 113,315 PGR students enrolled across 22 subject areas, on discrete or interdisciplinary pathways[3]. PGR students predominantly undertake doctorate research

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[2] Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22 - Student numbers and characteristics | HESA
[3] Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22 - Subjects studied | HESA

degrees (including Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)) but these figures also include other research degrees such as Master of Philosophy (MPhil), Master of Research (MRes) and Professional Doctorates.

There are key differences between PGR students which could influence their experience and outcomes. These relate to personal and protected characteristics, as well as the different ways PGRs are funded. Some PGR students will receive funding for their research, either from external sources such as UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) or from the university itself, whilst others will self-fund their degrees. PGRs on studentships funded by UKRI research councils can be supported through Centres for Doctoral Training (CDT) and Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) which provide training and support for doctoral students[4]. Additionally, all PGRs may have the opportunity teach (depending on the availability of opportunities in their institutions) and some will form part of university research teams, leading to some PGRs having both staff and student status.

Whilst the level of overall satisfaction of PGRs has been found to be consistently positive over recent years[5], the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) reported in 2022 that PhD and other postgraduate students are over-represented in the number of complaints received. The OIA considered that this overrepresentation may be the result of personal and financial investment, challenges for international students and supervision issues[6]. In a 2019 study examining determinants of PhD student satisfaction, it was found that supervisor support has the largest impact on levels of satisfaction[7]. In data extracted from the Nature PhD Students Survey 2019, the top three concerns for PhD students were difficulties of maintaining a work/life balance, imposter syndrome and uncertainty about career prospects[8].

Financial issues and low pay have also been noted as a significant challenge for PGR students. The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) released a report in 2020 examining data drawn from two worldwide student surveys: the Nature PhD Students Survey 2019 as aforementioned, and a survey undertaken by the Wellcome Trust in 2019. HEPI examined data specifically relating to students studying in the UK: a total of 1,069 students responded to the surveys (526 from the Nature PhD Students Survey and 543 from the Wellcome Trust survey). It was found that PGR students were paid less than the National Minimum Wage for the work they carry out; the mean number of hours worked in a week was 47 hours and average pay was £6.65 per hour[8].

Findings from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) in 2022 established four key considerations for higher education institutions (HEIs): online versus in-person interactions, PGRs with disabilities, valuing and responding to PGR feedback, and access to development activities[4]. Whilst research such as PRES and individual institutional monitoring take place, there is an absence of a standardised system to monitor and explore the experiences of PGRs. Therefore, gaining a wider understanding of PGR experiences could

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[4] Doctoral Training Partnerships 2 (DTP2) – UKRI
[5] Postgraduate Research Experience Survey report 2022_1669210654.pdf
[6] OIA Annual Report 2022 (oiahe.org.uk)
[7] Determinants of PhD student satisfaction: the roles of supervisor, department, and peer qualities: Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education: Vol 44, No 7 (tandfonline.com)
[8] PhD-Life_The-UK-Student-Experience_HEPI-Report-131.pdf

contribute to the development of a consistent pan-Wales approach drawing on good practice across Wales and the UK.

1.2.1 The context in Wales

In the academic year 2021/22, 4,315 PGR students were enrolled in Wales across eight HEIs[9]. Despite a slight decline in 2021/22 compared to previous years, the number of PGR students in Wales has remained static over the last five years[10]. The number of PGRs enrolled for the academic year 2021/22 for each institution is shown in Figure 1 below.
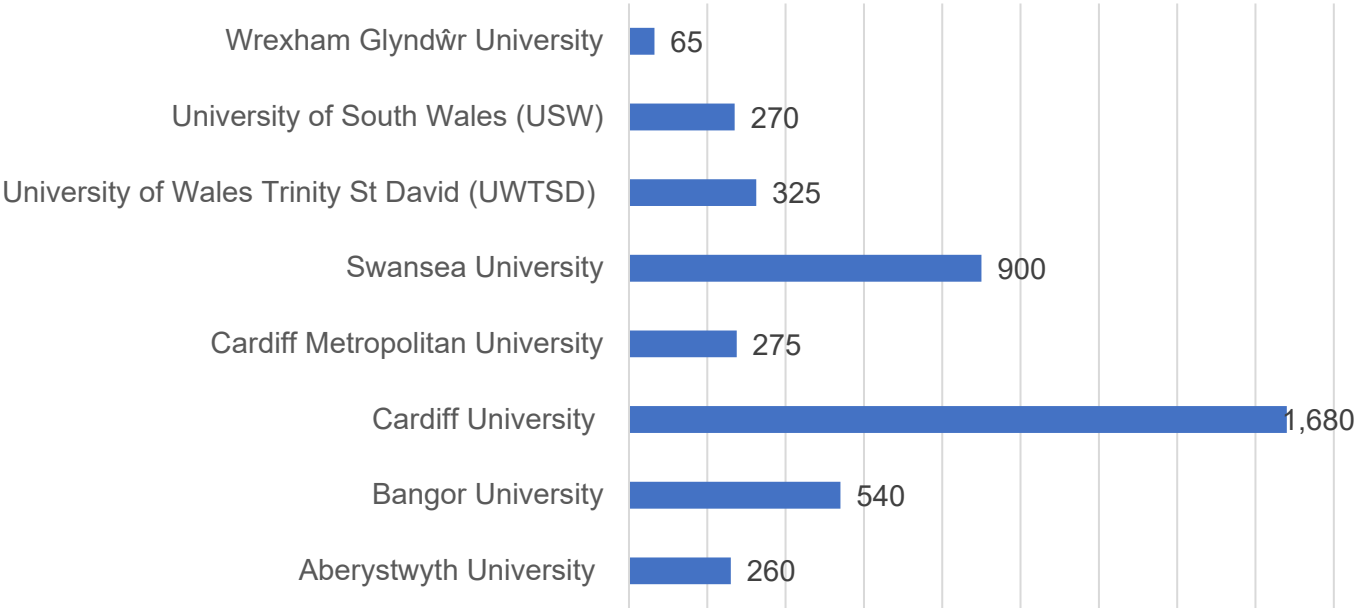
Figure 1: PGR students by HEI for academic year 2021[10-11]

The PRES offers HEIs the opportunity to gain an understanding of the experiences of their PGR students, which in turn could help inform areas that require development to improve experience. The number of HEIs in Wales engaging with PRES has varied over time and there was a decrease in engagement in 2022 from 2021, with only four Welsh HEIs participating[5]. Table 1 below shows the participation of Welsh HEIs in PRES since 2019.

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[9] There were no PGR students enrolled in The Open University in Wales for the academic year 2021/22.

[10] Who's studying in HE? | HESA

[11] Since this research was commissioned and the fieldwork carried out, Wrexham Glyndŵr University publicly rebranded to Wrexham University. HESA data for 2021/22 uses 'Wrexham Glyndŵr University', hence this name is used throughout this report. The past, present, and future of Wrexham University - Wrexham Glyndwr University.

Table 1: Welsh HEI PRES participation since 2019[12]

HEI	2019	2021	2022
Aberystwyth University	✓		✓
Bangor University	✓	✓	✓
Cardiff University	✓	✓	
Cardiff Metropolitan University	✓	✓	✓
Swansea University			
UWTSD	✓	✓	
USW		✓	✓
Wrexham Glyndŵr University			

HEFCW previously commissioned a review of policies and practices in supporting PGRs who teach in Wales, published in 2021[13]. This review was concerned with supporting the development of Welsh universities as leaders in teaching and learning practice and policy, and showcasing how institutions could develop a consistent university-wide approach to the training, support and monitoring of PGRs engaged in teaching and assessment.

The review included analysis of existing HEI policies, a survey of those involved in supporting PGR teaching, reviewing existing data from PRES, and roundtable discussions. Several policy and practice recommendations were made, including clarity around recruitment, pay and terms and conditions, enhancing PGR representation in teaching committees, EDI monitoring, and developing and facilitating networks for PGRs and staff. Later sections in this report detail the findings gathered from PGRs who were engaged in teaching and from university staff, exploring whether the policy and practice recommendations from the 2021 report were being realised on the ground.

Through speaking to all Welsh HEIs and engaging with PGR students directly, this research sought to build on these previous studies, reviews, and surveys, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the student experience for PGRs in Wales.

1.3 Methodology and participant overview

The methodology for the research involved a combination of qualitative interviews, focus groups and desk-based research. Details on the interviews with universities, stakeholders

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[12] The annual PRES report for 2020 does not include the names of participating HEIs.
[13] AdvHE-HEFCW-Review-of-policy-and-practice-PGR-who-Teach.pdf

and PGR focus groups are discussed in the subsections which follow. A breakdown of the participants by institution (HEI interviewees and PGR focus group attendees), discipline and degree programme can be found in Appendices 1-4. As no PGRs were enrolled at the Open University in Wales a PGR focus group was not held at this institution and only university representatives were spoken to.

1.3.1   University and stakeholder interviews

Qualitative online interviews were held via Microsoft Teams with staff from all nine HEIs operating in Wales. Contact details for key individuals from each institution were provided by HEFCW. For most of the interviews, more than one representative from each institution attended. Some staff had direct involvement with PGRs and others held non-student facing managerial/strategic positions in the institution, such as Pro-Vice Chancellor of Research. Directors of Doctoral Colleges/Schools and Postgraduate/School Deans were also involved in interviews. A total of 23 participants took part from nine HEIs in Wales; a breakdown of the participants is shown in Table 2 in Appendix 1. As well as interviews with staff employed within the institutions, interviews were also held with staff and student representatives from three Students' Unions.

Stakeholders external to the nine universities in Wales were also approached and invited to take part in an interview. A total of five stakeholders participated from five different bodies including funders, representative student bodies and other organisations with a link to the Welsh higher education sector.

1.3.2   PGR student focus groups

PGR student focus groups were held online via Zoom between April and June 2023. University contacts were utilised to advertise the focus groups to PGRs, as well as Arad advertising the focus groups via Twitter for two universities where there had been difficulties in reaching PGRs. The invite included a link to an online survey for PGRs to complete to express their interest in participating. Demographic data was collected via this survey and used as a basis to select the group participants and ensure they were broadly representative of the varied PGR cohort. This included information on degree programme (PhD, MRes, etc.), mode of study (full/part-time), discipline, funding arrangements and whether the PGR was an international or domestic student. Whilst this research did not attempt to be completely representative of the PGR cohort in Wales, it was ensured that the sample of selected participants reflected the diversity of PGR students.

Eight PGR student participants per university (excluding the Open University as outlined above) were invited to attend a focus group. The decision was made to hold two focus groups with Cardiff University PGR students as a high proportion of PGR students in Wales study there. A total of 50 PGR students took part in online focus groups. Table 3 in Appendix 2 outlines the number of PGRs in attendance for each university and Figure 3 in Appendix 3 displays a breakdown of the participants by degree programme.

Participants were undertaking degree programmes in a wide range of disciplines. For the purposes of this research and to ensure anonymity of the participants, these were grouped together in the categories of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Biomedical and Life

Sciences, and Physical Sciences and Engineering. Figure 4 in Appendix 4 presents the percentage of participants by these wider disciplines.

Of the 50 PGR student focus group participants, 31 stated in their survey response that they were a funded PGR student with the remaining 19 stating they were self-funded. However, it is worth noting that during the focus groups there were a few instances where PGR students who had stated they were funded went on to explain that they were in receipt of a student loan rather than direct funding for their studies from a funder or research council. 16 of the 50 PGR student focus group participants reported that they were international students.

2. Policies and procedures

This section sets out the research findings in relation to the support given to PGR students via institutional mechanisms, as well as support from other stakeholders such as representatives from funders and Students' Unions.

2.1 Universal and specific policies for PGR students

Senior representatives from all universities in Wales reported that providing good-quality student experiences for PGR students was an essential part of their mission and ethos. While all noted that some support for PGR students came under general institutional structures such as student codes of practice, HR and IT policies, there was recognition that PGR students are a unique and varied cohort of students requiring tailored support and guidance. This variety was acknowledged by institutional representatives when describing the diversity of their PGR student body, with reference made to older students, those with caring responsibilities, part-time and international students.

A mix of academic and well-being support is provided across the various stages of the 'PGR student journey' – from application to induction and onwards through their study along with support for potential careers once their qualification is complete. This support includes bespoke communications, events, activities and training to meet PGRs' specific needs. It was outlined that PGR students were generally made aware of both specific and more general policies during all stages of their recruitment and integration into university life, for example, though their offer letter, induction, handbooks and websites.

Institutional representatives highlighted a range of drivers for the breadth of support and guidance they had put in place. All universities in Wales had either undertaken their own research into the PGR student experience (such as running focus groups and surveys) or had promoted other mechanisms for gathering feedback (i.e. the completion and subsequent analysis of PRES) to better understand their PGR students' needs. All representatives noted the influence of research councils, funding bodies and other organisations, for example UKRI and HEFCW, in determining their support policies for students in areas such as parental leave and employment contracts.

Those stakeholders representing funders and wider strategic bodies in the higher education sector noted their support for a consistent and fair offer for PGRs. One representative of a research council outlined that they worked in partnership with other funders regarding their expectations on institutions, students and supervisors. They further explained that these standards were often in line with wider UK governmental policy relating to employment, parental and bereavement leave, and with other areas such as support for professional development.

These types of support were delivered through a range of frameworks and structures within institutions, some of it through centralised, institution-wide means to ensure a uniform approach while other elements of support were devolved to department level.

2.2 Graduate office/doctoral schools

Most universities had specific teams tasked with supporting PGRs; some were long-standing whilst others had been more recently established. Most commonly, these took the form of a graduate office or doctoral school, which was recognised by both interviewed staff and focus group participants as being the 'central point of contact' for all matters relating to PGR students; in essence, a 'hub' of information, communication and support.

Graduate offices and doctoral schools usually had rolling programmes of training and development opportunities for PGR students and provided guidance on university policies and procedures via events such as induction. Programme-specific matters, including academic standards and the coordination of offers to study were often outside the realm of these departments and instead dealt with at academic school / college level.

It was noted that graduate offices and doctoral schools were generally integrated within university structures yet also had some degree of autonomy and flexibility to more effectively engage with the PGR student cohort and design activities accordingly.

Two universities did not appear to have specific graduate offices or doctoral schools for their PGR students. Despite this, both of these institutions organised many similar training and development opportunities specifically for PGRs: one had a centre to support training and development, and the other had a researcher development programme which ran training sessions.

2.3 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

This section examines the EDI processes across universities, including what structures were in place to deal with any challenges and gives examples of where students had personally faced issues relating to EDI.

2.3.1 Views from universities and stakeholders

In terms of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), representatives from all universities reported a number of support mechanisms in place to ensure PGR's had an equitable experience. Most institutions highlighted that EDI structures and processes were set at a university-wide level and these recorded and monitored all students in areas such as recruitment, admissions and performance. Specific examples provided by institutions included awarding match-funded student positions to those from underrepresented groups to diversify the student population and embedding EDI across recruitment practices.

One institution highlighted a new role that had been created in their graduate school to look at accessibility to doctoral education, the doctoral access gap and doctoral recruitment policies and procedures. The institution noted this development was in the early stages but outlined it was an important step forward for the institution in helping to address gaps.

One wider stakeholder reported that their organisation directly funded projects to support diversity in the UK HEI research community. These projects were aimed at promoting access

and participation for doctoral researchers from ethnic minority backgrounds and also provided additional training to raise awareness of unconscious bias in supervision.

Most universities reported that EDI training was included as part of student induction and that EDI information was contained within student handbooks. This included how to be sensitive to EDI issues, as well as equipping students with knowledge of key institutional contacts should they face issues themselves. Some also noted that when PGR students enrolled, they were asked to complete monitoring information which would identify any EDI support needs that could be acted upon if necessary. It was noted that PGR students on programmes lasting for more than one academic year were required to enrol annually, and therefore universities had multiple points of contact with PGRs who disclosed needs and could subsequently provide ongoing support throughout the 'PGR student journey'.

Universities acknowledged that continuous work and review was required to embed EDI and ensure equitable experiences for students. One university used an example of the way in which courses had been made accessible through a variety of methods with online recordings and transcripts available rather than just face-to-face sessions, thus increasing accessibility for more PGRs such as the deaf student community or those with additional learning needs. Another university noted the importance of having an appropriate supervisory team in place who were sensitive to cultural differences, an issue which was picked up by PGR students in Section 2.3.2.

Universities reported a number of ways in which PGR students could raise EDI matters. Some mentioned that students were able to raise issues with doctoral schools, through feedback mechanisms, and the Students' Unions, as well as via committees (such as Athena SWAN steering groups and Women in Research groups) which PGR students sometimes attended. Another university interviewee commented on the importance of a process which allowed EDI issues to be raised by students directly. An example was given in the case of a PGR student raising concerns regarding ableist assumptions, specifically the requirement to print off a thesis on white paper as part of submission conditions. The representative went on to say that, as a result of this feedback, the university had changed its requirements.

> "*It comes from the students themselves and their own initiatives…* [Referring to the PhD student] *When it came to submitting her thesis, she queried, 'why do you have a lot of these requirements? There's a lot of ableism underlying this… And so we actually changed a lot of our descriptions about what the requirements of a submission are*." University staff

Students' union representatives reported anecdotal evidence of EDI challenges for PGR students, for example female students (regarding issues of dynamics), international students (language and culture), disabled students (access to resources and sites) and neurodiverse students and considered that there was more progress to be made in embedding support for, and awareness of, EDI across the PGR community. Several representatives noted their own work in supporting EDI, for example running campaigns, educational workshops and book clubs, and promoting PGR involvement with them.

2.3.2 Views from PGR students

The majority of PGR students who participated in focus groups were aware of EDI policies and procedures at their institution. Most had participated in EDI training, but a small number reported they had not, and were unaware of any EDI training being available at their institutions.

With regard to EDI support, some students provided positive examples of the support they had received from their institutions. One student had been diagnosed with ADHD part way through their PhD and reported that the university "*was so supportive and kept me on track*" through help from supervisors, well-being services, disability teams and counselling. An international student reported feeling supported by their supervisor who understood their cultural background, while another student gave an example of having recently converted to Islam and feeling that the university was supportive in terms of providing access to prayer spaces.

Some students with minority protected characteristics, including international students, disabled students, and parents and carers, outlined a lack of support and felt their respective institutions were not doing enough with regard to EDI more generally. A couple of students made comments about a 'lack of connection' between narrative and action and felt that their university needed to do more to support and promote EDI. Another student felt change was required on a wider level, particularly by senior staff, as well as actions to support an increase in awareness of EDI issues from PGR students who were not from ethnic minority backgrounds.

> [About their institution's EDI statement]*" the statement seems fluffy and vague. It is good to say their intentions but what does that mean in reality?*" PGR student

> *"There are usually a few individuals who take a large amount of responsibility to make changes within the [department]. But on the whole, senior staff do not seem to make the effort to get students involved from my experience. And very few PhD students who are not from under-represented backgrounds have awareness of EDI issues."* PGR student

Several international students commented that they felt excluded from student-run or university social events, with perceptions that language and cultural barriers existed, contributing to those from ethnic minority backgrounds feeling left-out as PGR students. Instances such as not feeling included in meetings or not being invited to social events were given as examples. An international student also noted that there could be a lack of confidence from others when talking to international students and that more was needed to be done to raise awareness of different backgrounds.

Several female participants reported instances of sex discrimination. Some stated that their fields were mainly male-dominated and found this difficult. They reported not feeling listened to by supervisors or able to convey their perspective and have this acknowledged and responded to sufficiently. Another student reported being the only queer female on their team and did not feel very included, with a suggestion that staff need to "*be more open minded*". Another student also felt that male colleagues did not trust her "*to be able to lift heavy things*" and felt like she was treated differently as a result. There were also examples given of students not feeling included or supported due to being older students or parents.

"I'm a mum and it's been an ongoing issue for me as a student. There's no section on the website for student parents…It's quite often not taken into account. Not to say that staff in general aren't extremely understanding and flexible most of the time. But, institutionally, it's just not there I think." PGR student

In terms of accessing support for EDI related issues there was evidence that experiences could be quite different for students even within the same institution. For example, in one focus group two students both reported having neurodiverse conditions but received different levels of support from their university. One student, having received a diagnosis six months into their studies, had received information on where to get support, mainly from their supervisor, and was happy with this experience. By contrast the other student did not feel supported or know where to get advice from, despite having had a diagnosis for their condition from the start of their studies. This student had automatically been referred to the disability support service when first enrolling at university, but apart from a mandatory meeting to discuss their condition nothing else had been put in place and the student was unsure where else they could get support from.

Another student within the same institution had received a hypermobility diagnosis before starting their studies and felt that the pastoral care they had received was "*faultless*". To note, these three students came from different departments in the institution.

In another university, two students reported health issues and again, one student felt sufficiently supported by their supervisor who would always start their meetings by asking them for updates on their health, whereas the other student felt that their supervisor was "*awkward*" regarding their health issues and would avoid the subject.

In terms of suggestions to improve EDI at a wider university level, students mainly suggested there was a need for supervisors, other university staff and PGR students themselves to undergo more training at regular intervals in order to keep up to date. One student suggested that seminars or one-to-one meetings with those from different backgrounds could provide a basis to gain a better understanding of EDI needs across departments. It was also suggested by a couple of students that there should be more recruitment and retention of those with different, underrepresented backgrounds, which they considered could improve diversity within institutions.

2.4 Student feedback and representation

This section examines how student feedback was utilised and what opportunities there were for PGR student representation across universities, such as through the students' unions, PGR programme representation, and PGR presence on institutional committees.

2.4.1 Views from universities and wider stakeholders

University representatives reported that a range of formal and informal mechanisms were available for PGR students to provide feedback to institutions. The students' union was considered an important voice for PGR students, and it was noted the unions would regularly

meet with doctoral schools/graduate offices and high-level committees or groups to provide feedback to the university. The national students' union body, which includes PGR representatives across Welsh institutions, was also reported to be an important mechanism for the student voice to be heard at both institutional and national levels. Students' unions highlighted that alongside representation, they also provided free advice and advocacy for PGR students as part of their core work.

HEI staff also noted the importance of PGR student representatives in their institutions. These were students elected as representatives within academic departments, as well as those engaged in wider university-level representation. Part of the purpose of these PGR representative roles was to gather feedback from fellow PGR students and to be a conduit for the university in reaching their PGR cohorts. It was reported that PGR student reps sat on different internal committees and working groups which dealt with institutional matters, for example ethics committees, research innovation committees, and student and staff panels.

However, two PGR student reps identified challenges associated with PGR representation. This included a lack of connectedness and collaboration between PGR student reps in different schools/departments, and reps having limited time and capacity to carry out their representation roles effectively. Two universities also shared experiences of challenges regarding appointing PGR student reps to vacant positions, including difficulties in recruitment and having to provide representatives with more support than initially expected.

Most universities had participated in PRES during the last three years (before this research was commissioned: see Table 1, Section 1.2.1) to inform them of student feedback, while the remaining institutions focused on their own PGR internal surveys. Other modes of gathering feedback included progress reviews, internal student focus groups, forums and exit questionnaires. Feedback was also gathered in an informal way via ongoing conversations between staff and PGR students, and this was especially the case in universities with smaller PGR cohorts.

It was reported that feedback gathered was looked at by individual schools and departments, doctoral schools/graduate offices and at a wider university level. One university highlighted that it advertised changes made as a result of feedback via posters on campus: for example, one stated "*this is what you told us, and this is what we have done*". Another institution specifically reported creating action plans to implement changes with the feedback they received.

University representatives were confident that PGR students were given ample opportunities via different mechanisms to provide suggestions and raise concerns. They gave several examples whereby the student voice had helped the university to better understand the experiences of PGR students, which then resulted in changes to practice. These included changing some training courses from in-person to online following specific feedback from students about accessibility, as well as supporting inter-disciplinary events in response to student requests for better connectivity between schools. Additionally, a students' union representative gave an example of how PGR students who teach had fed-back on the issue of inconsistent contracts. As a result, the university was rolling-out new teaching contracts for PGRs across all departments and colleges.

2.4.2 Views from PGR students

The topic of feedback and student representation was not a primary focus of the PGR discussions: most students had not had contact with representatives and therefore had no views on these roles. In a few cases where PGRs had dealt with PGR student representatives, there were some positive examples. One participant who was a student representative, referred to formal student representative meetings which were held regularly with the research student director in their school. They were satisfied with the feedback process and the opportunity to address barriers. Specifically, they mentioned challenges faced by students with caring responsibilities, and that they were raising this with their school and discussing what changes could be made.

Several PGR students in another focus group explained how they felt that they were listened to, and that any reasonable requests or suggestions for improvement would be accommodated.

> *PGR student 1: "For the [request for a postgraduate room] I emailed the Dean of Research and asked, 'is there any chance as I really think we need this room for students and for networking as well?'. And very quickly that was arranged. So yes, I did feel that in that situation I was listened to."*

> *PGR student 2: "Yes, I was just going to say I do feel like the university as a whole, they want to improve. If you've got a good idea, that you know is going to improve the student experience, generally, they are always open to those sorts of suggestions."*

There appeared, in some cases, to be issues with engaging PGRs in order to gather feedback. In one discussion, a PGR student representative wanted to gather feedback on a decision to continue hosting an annual conference online, after it had been moved from an in-person event due to the pandemic. They felt that running this event online contributed to feelings of isolation for some students but found it difficult to engage other students in a discussion: a survey which attempted to gather feedback on the mode of delivery received a very low response.

2.5 Section summary

- A mix of academic and well-being support is provided to reflect the diversity of the PGR student body. This support was delivered through a range of frameworks and structures, some of it centralised, to ensure a uniform approach while other elements of support were devolved to department level.

- In most Welsh universities a graduate office or doctoral school acts as a 'hub' of information, communication and support for PGR students. These are generally integrated within university structures but have some autonomy to deliver targeted support.

- Two other universities deliver support through a centre and researcher development programme respectively.

- To understand and respond to PGR student needs, universities conduct their own research and use other mechanisms for gathering feedback (i.e. the completion and analysis of PRES). The work of research councils, funding bodies and other organisations was also an influence in designing their support policies.

- A range of formal and informal mechanisms were available for PGR students to provide feedback to institutions. The students' union was considered an important voice and PGR student reps sat on internal committees and working groups. Challenges around students' time, capacity and need for support were highlighted, however.

- In terms of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), most institutions highlighted that EDI structures and processes were set at a university-wide level and recorded and monitored all students in areas such as recruitment, induction, admissions and performance.

- Students' union representatives reported anecdotal evidence of EDI challenges for PGR students and considered that there was more progress to be made in embedding support for, and awareness of, EDI across the PGR community.

- Some EDI challenges were reported by PGR students with minority characteristics during focus groups. They suggested there was a need for university staff and PGR students themselves to undergo more training at regular intervals and greater recruitment of those from underrepresented backgrounds, to improve diversity within institutions.

3. Supervision

This section examines the supervisory relationship between PGRs and academic staff, notably the importance of an effective working relationship, training for supervisors and progress monitoring.

3.1 Procedures/guidelines in place

The supervisory relationship was reported by all university representatives and students as a crucial element of the PGR experience. This was the case both in terms of positive examples and good practice shared, instances where the relationship had proved challenging and therefore a negative experience, and also where challenges had been overcome through the procedures put in place by institutions and student representative groups. Wider stakeholders agreed on the centrality on this relationship to the PGR experience, with one commenting, *"the supervisor relationship is really unique - it is mentoring, coaching, pastoral and pedagogical."*

3.1.1 Views from universities

From the institutional perspective, supervision was viewed to be an area which was invested in and well-supported. All universities highlighted a range of institutional policies, procedures and guidelines which provided the framework for supervision arrangements. The relationship was governed by codes of practice that were approved by institutional committees, supported by supervisor handbooks and professional development, and overseen by internal mechanisms such as progress monitoring reviews. Responsibilities of research supervisors were outlined in PGR handbooks and communicated to students during induction activities.

Composition of the supervisory team varied across and within universities: there was variety in the number of supervisors required to oversee projects, sometimes with a mixture of internal, inter-disciplinary, or external supervisors depending on the scope of the research. There was also flexibility in the criteria applied when matching supervisors to PGRs, acknowledging the role required a mixture of academic and holistic support. This was highlighted as a beneficial approach, with one institution explaining, *"we look for a good fit – personality or discipline-wise."*

Two supervisors were generally the norm across universities with one often taking a lead in the academic guidance, and the other leading on more pastoral elements. One stakeholder noted, *"research supervisors accept it is their role to supervise the person not a project, provide pastoral support as well, and respond to mental health needs."* Examples were given of more junior and senior supervisors comprising the team, the former being the more frequent contact point for PGRs while the latter engaged at key points of the research.

Progress monitoring reviews formed an integral part of the PGR student journey and as such were embedded in supervision practices. Engaging a progress reviewer, a third party who oversaw a PGR's progress and reported to a separate university panel, was highlighted as an important part of the monitoring process. Universities highlighted how PGR students had dialogue with their progress reviewer, outside of the remit of their supervisors, and that any issues with the relationship could be picked up as part of this process.

3.1.2 View from PGR students

Students in the focus groups had mixed experiences of supervision and supervisory relationships. For some students, expectations were being met, whilst others highlighted challenges and difficulties which had impacted their progress, confidence, and studies.

Overall, there was consensus that supervisors had the required subject knowledge to guide and support PGRs in their research areas and in this sense were 'a good match', with some exceptions as outlined later in this section.

Those who spoke **positively outlined several elements which made for a positive PGR experience**, including the following:

Frequent and regular meetings (whether online or in-person) such as weekly, fortnightly or monthly. The certainty of regular meetings to check progress and set targets was deemed beneficial by students. They had the expectation that they would meet regularly with their supervisors and that meetings would be focused on their academic progress.

Being based in a laboratory, research centre or office near to supervisors and other academic staff. Having access to supervisors by working in proximity was outlined as a way to forge a close and beneficial relationship. Several students mentioned how this arrangement meant they could learn from supervisors on a day-to-day basis, ask questions and seek advice on their work.

Having more than one supervisor, usually two, each with different roles in the supervisory relationship and distinct but complementary skill sets. Often students mentioned that one supervisor was more senior than the other, with the latter being more available and able to offer broader, holistic support to the PGR besides academic guidance.

Additionally, some of the students in the focus groups had continued from undergraduate to postgraduate level at the same university. They reported that the continuity, familiarity with processes and existing good working relationships with their supervisors made for a positive experience.

Some participants noted their supervisors were not always supportive when it came to a broader understanding of them as individuals, on their journeys through the postgraduate process. It appears that, while universities largely provided quality supervisors in terms of academic support, there were fewer positive examples of enhanced holistic support for the overall PGR experience. For some students in the focus groups, the supervisory relationship had been difficult, and was a negative aspect of the PGR experience. In these cases, challenges were highlighted as sometimes being personal to the individual student, or as a reflection of more generic matters, such as the application of university policies and procedures.

There was variance in the ways in which supervisory teams were put together. Some PGRs spoke of being able to select their supervisors, or influence the process, but others were allocated supervisors by their departments and did not have a say in who they were given. This variance appeared to be down to a range of influencing factors, such as supervisor

expertise and co-production research projects. PGRs did not seem to be aware of these nuanced factors and the decision-making which fed into supervisor allocation. For example, in one focus group a few participants had been told they had to have supervisors from within the department, whilst others were able to draw on appropriate expertise from outside of the department.

> *"I'm just really amazed that you were allowed to have supervisors that not only were outside your department, but were outside the university as well, because I was point blank refused that. "No, you can't do it." So there's some differences there, rules…who sets those rules? And are they all just departmental rules? Or is it not a university decision to do this?"* PGR student

PGRs who reported **negative experiences of supervision outlined the following** examples:

Supervisors being unavailable to meet or guide the student on an ongoing basis, essentially being too busy with other responsibilities to supervise effectively. In these instances, the supervisor seemed, more often than not, to be a senior figure in the school / department with many competing duties and little time to devote to supervising and guiding PGRs on their research journey.

Being assigned supervisors who were not experts in the PGR's research area, and therefore limited in specific and detailed knowledge of the topic.

A small minority of students mentioned **having multiple supervisors, beyond the usual two**; for example, one PGR mentioned they had six supervisors, two of whom they had never met or had any contact with. These PGRs reported being unclear of the different roles these academics took in their project, and spoke of having to navigate competing viewpoints and different perspectives on the direction of their research.

> *"It's very hard to manage so many people and they often don't agree with each other, they all have different opinions of what I should be doing. And a lot of my PhD is just spent communicating for them because they won't actually go and speak to each other. And that does cause a lot of issues."* PGR student

Having too few supervisors. Several participants spoke of the difficulties when supervisors left mid-way through the PGR's studies and there was a delay in them being replaced, leaving only one supervisor to oversee the research. Some of these same students were seeking replacement supervisors themselves through their own networks rather than waiting for the institution to do so. In one example, a student's first supervisor had retired and the second had been busy working on a book.

> *"My supervisor was therefore not available for me and expected me to get on with it. I feel like I need a little bit more hand holding but now I've got two very supportive and more suitable [supervisors]…they're more my age. And it's a much better match. But it was a very difficult, painful process. I felt like I'd wasted my time and money coming."* PGR student

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Limited supervisor EDI knowledge and understanding. As also discussed in Section 2.3.2, a small number of students spoke of frustrating experiences whereby their disclosures relating to protected characteristics were unknown or overlooked by supervisors. PGRs spoke of having to 'educate' academic staff about their needs, even if they had disclosed these beforehand to the institution. Three PGR students spoke of personally challenging issues related to their sex/race/disability but noted they did not raise complaints with their institutions. This was reported to be for a variety of reasons, such as not wanting to be distracted from studies or being seen to be 'creating a problem'.

3.2 Dealing with complaints

3.2.1 Views from Universities

In cases where the supervisory relationship had been challenging or was at risk of breaking down, institutions explained they encouraged and supported informal mechanisms first and foremost as a means of attempting to resolve disputes early on. These measures included PGRs being able to confidentially speak with their progress reviewers and / or departmental directors of research, providing mediation between all parties, and the option for a change in supervisor(s).

Pro-active attempts to avoid breakdowns in the relationship and complaints were noted: one institution reported running bi-annual events to bring supervisors and PGRs together to discuss any issues, give feedback and make changes which were then fed into supervisor training; others outlined how they utilised and promoted additional advisors and support workers to PGRs, such as from the students' union, for access to confidential support and guidance if problems with supervisors arose.

Universities stressed formal routes were available to all students via institutional complaints procedures, which PGRs were made aware of in their handbooks and at induction events. However, universities cited informal resolution as being their preferred route to resolving issues, noting this was a successful approach in most cases which enabled the PGR to continue with their studies and minimised further disruption.

Other stakeholders also provided views on supporting PGR students to address any issues with supervisors. A research council representative explained their focus was to ensure that PGR students first went through their respective institutional processes to seek resolution. They went on to highlight that they would expect institutions to notify them when there were complaints and to identify what the final outcome was. The representative added "*We are not equipped and resourced to go into the detail of each case so there has to be a balance. We can withdraw funds [from institutions], but it would be a last resort.*".

Other stakeholders from student representative organisations also highlighted the importance of institutional structures and processes and spoke of taking on a mediation role where required within these structures.

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3.2.2 Views from PGR students

During discussions on the difficulties PGRs had faced in their institutions, the students were asked whether they had any experience of submitting a complaint. Whilst there was an awareness amongst the PGRs of formal systems in place to raise issues, there seemed to have been a reluctance to do so. Two students explained that there was a perception that making formal complaints about supervisors was to be avoided. One explained that *"rocking the boat"* would potentially lead to getting a "bad name" in their small sector.

> *"I also think that very often if there is an issue that you might be experiencing with your supervisor, [a person] is so afraid of going above or to somewhere else because it just gets swept under the carpet and we know there's enough instances where that happens."* PGR student

Whilst several PGRs spoke in the focus groups about the challenges they had experienced during their studies, none had taken formal steps to complain to their institutions. A few PGRs followed up with more details on email to the research team after the group sessions had taken place to give more details, but again none reported having formally complained to their institutions.

This may illustrate that there is hesitancy amongst PGRs to make official complaints which could lead to a potential under-reporting of PGR disputes in higher education institutions through established complaint monitoring systems.

The apparent reluctance of PGRs to submit complaints is an area that requires further research to gain a better understand of the scale of the issue and the reasons for any reluctance. This could involve trying methods other than a group discussion or spending more time specifically investigating the process of making complaints and whether more accessible informal routes should be developed.

3.3 Professional development for supervisors

3.3.1 Views from Universities

Institutions highlighted a raft of training and support available for academic staff who supervise PGR students. Besides having guidance laid out in supervisor handbooks, these academics accessed training and workshops which covered practical academic requirements as well as information about supporting PGR well-being via institutional policies, procedures and services.

A few institutions mentioned they utilised the UK Council for Graduate Education's (UKCGE) Good Supervisory Practice Framework [14], designed to set expectations for supervisors and support supervisor development programmes. The Framework outlines 10 key components of supervisory practice such as managing the supervisory relationship, supporting PGR's personal, professional and career development, and monitoring progress. One institution

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[14] UKCGE | Good Supervisory Practice Framework

specifically highlighted how they had incorporated this framework into revisions to their supervisor handbooks and updated procedures accordingly.

Supervisors were required to attend training when they first began to supervise PGRs, and some institutions provided follow up refresher training every few years. One institution noted they covered the nuances found in supervisory relationships in the training they offered to academics.

"We do general agenda setting, well-being, never leave meeting without setting next date, minimum 6 per year but ideally monthly etc. It is also important supervisors set expectations and know the power relationship as students will be a little nervous pushing for things. [We] remind supervisors that students won't feel equal when they start"' University staff

Besides formal training, institutions highlighted activity designed to strengthen their supervisors' professional development, with a view to ongoing improvement and enhancement of the supervisory relationship. Several outlined how they would 'buddy-up' newer supervisors with experienced ones when allocating supervisory teams as a way to train-up academics and share knowledge within the institution. Others reported holding events and activities for supervisors to come together, learn from each other and share good practice as a means of peer-support. One institution also spoke of running training for students to support them in the supervisory relationship.

"We have [courses] about how to get the best out of your supervisor, how to actually manage that relationship yourself and take the responsibility for doing that. We add in that we're really expecting them to do something like a learning contract so that the relationship is explicit, what their requirements are for it, how it should work, etc. Because it's often the non-explicit nature that gives you problems late."' University staff

Universities highlighted that the role of a supervisor had changed in recent years and that professional development to support these academics had subsequently evolved. Newer requirements included keeping abreast of changing rules and regulations (both internal and external to the institution), adapting and incorporating funder requirements and T&Cs, and greater involvement from, and liaison with, CDTs and DTPs. Some noted this could at times be challenging in terms of workload but was an essential element of supporting academic staff who supervise PGRs.

3.3.2 Views from PGR students

PGR students recognised that supervisors were experts in the field and felt their supervisors provided them with high quality subject-specific knowledge and support. Regarding professional development for supervisors, student feedback on this specific-element was focused on wanting supervisors to be better trained in non-academic areas such as EDI and pastoral support, as shown in Sections 2.3.2 and 3.1.2.

3.4 Summary of section findings

- The supervisory relationship between academic staff and students was a crucial element of the PGR experience. All universities highlighted a range of institutional policies, procedures and guidelines which provided the framework for supervision arrangements.

- Composition of supervisory teams varied across and within universities, with a mixture of internal, inter-disciplinary, or external supervisors, acknowledging the role required a mixture of academic and pastoral support.

- Universities highlighted that the role of a supervisor had changed in recent years and that professional development to support these academics had subsequently evolved.

- Two supervisors were generally the norm across universities. Examples were given of junior and senior supervisors comprising the team, the former being the more frequent contact point for PGRs while the latter engaged at key points of the research.

- Key success factors identified by PGRs to deliver a positive supervisory relationship included frequent and regular meetings, being based in a laboratory, research centre or office near to supervisors and having more than two supervisors, each with different roles and distinct but complementary skill sets.

- There was variance in the ways in which supervisory teams were put together. Some PGRs spoke of being able to select their supervisors, or influence the process, but others were allocated supervisors by their departments and did not have a say in who they were given.

- Key areas for improvement identified by PGR students included supervisors being unavailable, being assigned supervisors who were not experts in PGRs research area, having too few or many supervisors and limited supervisor EDI knowledge.

- Informal and formal procedures to resolve disputes were put in place by institutions and student representative groups. Reluctance to make formal complaints was nevertheless reported by a minority of PGR students and further research is required in this area.

4. Academic support

This section explores key aspects of academic support available to PGRs, outside of the academic assistance received from supervisors. It covers training and development opportunities, support for postgraduate researchers who teach, and key services provided by institutions such as library and information support.

4.1 Training and development opportunities

4.1.1   Views from universities

Institutions reported offering their PGR students a range of different training and development opportunities to enhance the student experience and prepare students for work post-study. Training topics varied between research-based subjects such as preparing for the viva, ethics, and research methods to more generic and transferable areas, including time management and writing effectively. Some courses were also designed to prepare PGR students for non-academic career paths such as leadership, publishing, and entrepreneurship.

Several institutions noted they followed the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)[15] and used this as a tool when designing their PGR training and development offer. In some institutions the RDF was reported to be fully integrated, with modules and courses specifically marketed as meeting different elements of the Framework. For instance, one institution spoke of using the RDF to support their in-house delivery.

"We do an annual return survey, we ask [PGR students] if there are any particular training or events they would like to see in the RDF Programme. We are part of a wider Research and Innovation Services department, with a calendar of events for all researchers, staff, and students, and we have PGR-specific courses." University staff

Other institutions appeared to use the RDF more loosely, sometimes as a guidance tool and not always with explicit cross-referencing to the Framework. In addition to the RDF, some institutions highlighted that they promoted external funder training to PGR students, where appropriate, and that this supplemented what was offered in-house. Institutions with graduate offices and doctoral schools offered extra courses and opportunities to what PGR students would otherwise have access to through departments. In some cases, these departments had links with other universities which enabled their students to access external training for free, for example two departments reported links with a university in England.

Representatives from these departments also spoke of also being aware of the need to provide a variety of training and development opportunities which would support PGR students into a range of career pathways in the future. They noted they were now taking a more proactive approach to supporting PGR student progression into careers beyond academia, highlighting the wide range of transferable skills PGRs develop and the current challenges of securing job opportunities in the academic sector.

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[15] The Vitae Researcher Development Framework — Vitae Website

This was seen to be in-line with research council policies, with one of their representatives reporting that they were aiming for the sector to have *"greater harmonisation around core elements such as employability training"* to support PGR progression into a range of careers.

Most universities highlighted their training programmes were well-attended and, in some instances, over-subscribed. However, there were differences in the amount of mandatory training universities expected their PGR students to complete, if at all, which illustrates a varied approach across Welsh HEIs. Some institutions offered a range of courses that were all optional, others had core topics which needed to be completed by each PGR student, and others reported offering a mixture of compulsory and optional courses: in one example, a university outlined that they had core training sessions for PGRs to complete within the first year of their studies, such as research impact and writing literature reviews and methodologies, and offered additional, optional courses which PGRs could choose from according to their interests and training needs.

All institutions highlighted that training formed an integral part of the progress monitoring of PGR students, many noting specific sections regarding PGR student training needs in their monitoring paperwork. It was reported that PGR students and supervisors identified and agreed training needs together, with PGR students generally responsible for following up their own progress by sourcing relevant courses. A few institutions reported students had fed-back that they felt the training element of progress reviews could be strengthened and monitored more closely by supervisors; these institutions indicated that they were looking to make this aspect of progress monitoring more meaningful in practice.

All universities advertised their courses via emails or central portals such as the student intranet and had developed a rolling calendar of training events which students were able to book onto directly. Courses were delivered via a mixture of face-to-face or online sessions, sometimes pre-recorded for students to watch in their own time or live-recorded and then made available thereafter. Universities highlighted that deciding on the mode of delivery was challenging, with many students preferring one style of delivery or another and some had therefore adapted by running courses in different ways at different times of the year.

4.1.2   Views from PGR students

Students reported in focus groups that they were provided with high-quality and varied training and development opportunities by their institutions. Overall PGR students were satisfied with the range of training courses they could attend and felt these would be directly beneficial to their studies and post-university careers. They outlined that they had access to modules and workshops that enhanced their academic experience including research methods and software packages, as well as more holistic aspects of the PGR experience such as well-being and mindfulness, time management and overcoming procrastination. They reported they were made aware of training via doctoral schools/graduate offices, university intranets and internal emails.

Where inconsistencies arose in experiences, this appeared to be linked to whether PGR students were funded or not. Funded students reported having access to additional training and development opportunities via their funders and CDTs or DTPs, including being able to apply for paid internships in external organisations. Some PGR students had sought

additional funding from their institutions to apply for external training (in cases where the institutions did not provide courses on certain subjects), and others had access to grants from their funders which they could use to attend training, workshops and conferences deemed helpful to completing their studies. However, despite reports of there being additional funds available for courses, some self-funded PGR students noted difficulties in getting permission to attend training that they had identified as being central to their research.

"Supervisors should play more of a role in encouraging attending training courses. I had to ask for a budget to go on a course and learn how to use machinery used for the PhD but had to keep on at supervisors by email about how important the training is. There doesn't seem to be willingness to send [us] on courses." PGR student

In addition, a minority of PGR students expressed dissatisfaction with the frequency and mode of delivery of training at times: some preferred in-person courses where they could meet and network with PGRs, whereas others wanted the flexibility of online courses that would fit-in with other commitments. This was especially the case for those who were distance-learners or part-time students.

Although the training offered was usually varied and comprehensive, PGR students did not always know how to prioritise which courses to attend. Despite progress monitoring reviews featuring a training needs analysis, PGR students highlighted they sometimes felt overwhelmed with the range of courses on offer and wanted more guidance on what sessions they ought to concentrate on. Some students however, particularly those already working towards an identified career path such as remaining in academia, spoke of attending courses they knew would contribute to their development and help them on their career trajectory.

Only a few PGR students mentioned the Vitae RDF, and most appeared to attend training on an ad-hoc basis rather than as a result of strategic decision-making. It was also noted that not all PGRs wanted or needed employability training and development opportunities: in a minority of cases, PGRs spoke of undertaking postgraduate study for personal fulfilment and were not therefore intending to utilise their PGR qualification for career development.

4.1.3   Views from wider stakeholders

Wider stakeholders provided some additional comments regarding training opportunities for PGR students. There was strong support for the role of training in improving the PGR experience, enhancing personal and academic development and progression into employment. Students' unions wanted certainty that the training offered was effective in meeting these different purposes, and for PGRs to be made aware that training provided both networking opportunities as well as professional development. For these representative bodies of PGR students, liaison with academic directors about training was therefore an important element of their work, as was communicating with students to identify their specific needs.

Representatives from funding organisations highlighted the importance of mobility in academia and the importance of inter-disciplinary skills. A key gap identified was regarding tailored careers support and advice, which was considered to be well developed for undergraduates in comparison with PGR students. Funders and representative bodies both highlighted this gap with one funder noting, *"we are trying to support institutions to develop this, but there is a lot more to do."*

This was in-line with institutional and student perspectives, with training opportunities generally well designed and relevant to academic need but lacking a focus on employability and progression in career paths beyond academia. One stakeholder commented that their organisation supported PGR students in transition from finalising their PhDs and moving onto their next career steps.

> *"How do we get realistic expectations for students on their outcomes? We want them to have a range of provision during their doctoral studies to help them in career afterwards."*
> Stakeholder

4.2 PGR students who teach

HEFCW's 'Review of Policy and Practice in Supporting Postgraduates Who Teach' report provided several policy and practice recommendations for HEIs to improve the experience for PGRs engaged in teaching, as outlined in Section 1.2.1. Besides this report, universities reported additional influencing factors which had led them to make changes to their policies and procedures, including internal reviews and trade union negotiations. It should be noted however that the experiences reported by PGR students, in Section 4.2.2 below, showed a lack of consistency and sector-wide approach regarding recruitment, training, pay and support for PGRs who teach.

4.2.1 Views from universities and wider stakeholders

All institutions engaged PGR students in paid teaching roles, to a lesser or greater extent depending on the availability of opportunities. Mainly this was in the form of hourly-paid casual roles referred to interchangeably as 'Graduate Tutors', 'Tutors' or 'Hourly-Paid Tutors'. In addition, some institutions also offered Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) roles, were trialling them, or were considering introducing these positions in the future. Institutional representatives acknowledged that whilst PGR students were formally considered to be students and not members of staff, those who teach found themselves in a grey area: viewed as members of staff by those they teach, working in collaboration with academic staff, and in receipt of pay from the institution yet still students themselves.

Some institutional representatives were vocal in highlighting the range of expertise and experience their PGRs have, and spoke of wanting to harness this for the benefit of undergraduate students.

> *"There's nothing like having a researcher in front of you to really encourage undergraduate students. And our [PGR] students have professional expertise they'd like to bring – they want to be in front of that class."* University staff

This same institution was considering how best to involve Professional Doctorate students in teaching on modules, many of whom were part time and still employed in their fields.

> *"We have people doing doctorates who aren't in front of students, but they've got huge amounts of professionalism…We really want to move that forward. We have some incredible people on our programmes who want to share their expertise, because often that's the whole reason they are doing a Professional Doctorate - to give back to their profession."* University staff

Institutions recruited tutors in a variety of ways including through union websites and 'Jobshops', on their intranets, as part of university initiatives such as placement schemes, and at departmental level via academic schools.

Some institutions spoke of the need for greater transparency around teaching recruitment practices and had taken steps to cohere internal approaches. This included rolling-out centralised HR guidance on graduate tutor recruitment to academic schools, and promoting trade union membership and HR policies to PGRs. It was felt this helped to ensure that localised procedures for recruiting PGRs were aligned with university practice and would also lead to greater consistency between the different departments and schools within institutions.

Some university representatives nevertheless pointed out difficulties in offering tutoring opportunities equitably to their PGRs due to constraints because of funder restrictions: one highlighted how some PGRs in receipt of a stipend were limited to six hours per week paid employment by their funder's T&Cs, whereas other PGR students who were self-funded were permitted to work more hours. Similarly, there were limitations when engaging international students to teach as these PGRs were often subject to immigration rules restricting their working hours.

Generally, PGR students were provided with casual teaching contracts for the hours they delivered, including preparation time. They were therefore without the full range of benefits and protections which permanent and fixed-term employees benefitted from. Some institutions reported that internal discussions were taking place regarding signing the University and College Union's (UCU) and National Union of Students' Postgraduate Employment Charter[16] which aims to raise the profile of postgraduate employment rights and professional development in higher education. For example, one institution had recently approved changes to pay and conditions, which would subsequently place PGR tutors on more of an equal footing to staff members and would provide them with access to staff training.

Institutions had developed codes of practice for postgraduates who teach to ensure they were supported to deliver sessions effectively. Universities provided training on teaching, often covering aspects such as marking and providing assessment feedback which were delivered either at school level or through centralised departments. Many highlighted they did not permit PGRs to take up teaching roles until certain mandatory training courses had been undertaken.

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[16] UCU - Postgraduate employment

Other training opportunities were also mentioned such as health and safety courses. In addition to training, universities with very limited teaching availability provided a range of development opportunities to PGR students to upskill them and provide parity. These initiatives included shadowing lecturers and promoting external schemes such as The Brilliant Club[17] which enables PhD students to develop their own teaching materials to be delivered in schools.

Several institutions spoke about promoting the Associate Fellowship (AFHEA)[18] scheme to their postgraduates who teach, awarded on evidence of personal professional practice that meets standards of teaching and learning support for the higher education sector. This was cited as a popular course with very good uptake levels, and one which would support the career development of PGRs who intend to stay in academia.

As aforementioned, some institutions reported having GTA roles in place, with students required to teach as part of their funding arrangement. One institution reported they took an active role in ensuring there was balance between the GTA's commitments to both teaching and the completion of their own research. Another institution had extended the standard length of time permitted to complete a PhD to four years if GTAs were required to spend 25% of their time teaching. These examples showed there appeared to be an understanding that GTAs may need discrete measures in place to ensure they had a positive and successful postgraduate experience.

Representatives from student bodies outlined concerns that PGRs were being used by HEIs to 'plug gaps in the system', given demands on institutions' own staff time. These representatives also highlighted concerns regarding a lack of consistent pay and contract structures across different schools, which was considered to be part of the wider lack of coherent support and structure for PGRs. It was also noted that part-time PGR students could lack the time and capacity to teach as well as study and these students were at risk of missing out on opportunities, both professional and skills-focused, to develop this aspect of their PGR experience.

4.2.2   Views from PGR students

Several of the PGR students in focus groups had undertaken teaching or demonstrating within their schools or departments. Some PGR students worked as hourly paid demonstrators or tutors, whilst a minority reported being on GTA contracts and therefore required to teach.

The PGR students who taught reported mixed experiences of recruitment, support, training, and pay, although overall most said the experience was a positive one. All said teaching gave them financial reward, which was welcomed, as well as invaluable experience especially for those who intended to pursue a career in academia.

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[17] The Brilliant Club
[18] Associate Fellowship | Advance HE (advance-he.ac.uk)

"I want to go into academia so participating in teaching and mentoring programs can be valuable. They cover effective teaching techniques, classroom management, and how to mentor undergraduate students." PGR student

PGR students reported various ways they had been recruited into teaching: sometimes lecturers approached them directly and asked them to work on specific modules without the need to complete an application form or attend an interview, and other PGRs saw roles advertised on internal portals and applied through a recruitment process. Similar variance was found in the amount and depth of training provided to these PGRs, with some highlighting mandatory completion of core modules/workshops before they were allowed to start teaching.

"The only way you can teach in the department is if you attend the compulsory training workshops they put on. I had three workshops and they were very scaffolded, so it was really nice. I get paid in a timely manner. I get a lot of support. I even get feedback and I did my AFHEA because of all of it, which was fantastic. The support I have is good, I've had a really lovely teaching experience" PGR student

Of the PGR students who taught, few mentioned undertaking the AFHEA fellowship and some had not heard of it. Other PGR students said the training they received was very minimal but reported that they had access to academic staff to refer to if needed. In addition, some GTAs and PGR students who teach had benefitted from additional institutional support, such as mentoring schemes, which they reported had been a valuable source of support and guidance in their teaching journeys. However, again inconsistency was noted, as it appears that these schemes were not always available to all PGR students who teach within the same institution and there was a lack of clarity in some focus groups about pay and what types of work could be claimed for.

The majority of PGR students in focus groups who had not undertaken teaching were keen to, and of these many felt there were not enough opportunities available to meet demand. In addition, some were frustrated that they had professional backgrounds in their subject areas and reported wanting to share their knowledge and expertise with undergraduates in their institutions. Some students who had not engaged in teaching mentioned a perceived lack of transparency regarding how temporary teaching opportunities were advertised and recruited for. Some reported they had been offered teaching work directly by lecturers in their department, without applying through a formal mechanism and there was a sense of "*it is who you know.*"

"The process has some grey areas because it seems like it's open to all for everyone to apply. But maybe there's some kind of favouritism in how they are selected for the job, regardless of what qualifications they have." PGR student

A minority of students in the focus groups were GTAs contracted to teach a number of hours as part of their funding terms and conditions. Whilst it is difficult to draw out commonalities between the experiences, given the low number, it was noted these GTAs had additional considerations to contend with, particularly around time management and balancing the dual roles of teaching and research. In addition, they voiced uncertainty about their security in the GTA role if they fell behind with their studies and were not able to complete on time.

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One GTA had received some training, mostly in the form of online resources they were to familiarise themselves with, and had subsequently found much of their first year of the PhD was in fact taken up with the demands of the teaching element of their role. They reported it was hard to set time aside to watch the online training resources and adequately commit to the teaching role whilst trying to progress with their research.

"The GTA takes up more time than the PhD. One of the lecturers used to be a GTA and she told me that she used to do the GTA stuff during the semesters and then over the summer she would concentrate more on her PhD. It's part-time […]the GTA contract, but sometimes I do more […]." PGR student

4.3 Other services

4.3.1 Views from universities

Universities reported having extensive library services available to all students which offered a mixture of online and hard-copy resources and extensive online catalogues to support PGR students in their research. Some institutional representatives noted they had reviewed their systems to ensure these covered the diverse needs of PGR students. One institution highlighted ongoing work to redesign their intranet pages which previously had no specific links for doctoral students. Others had focused on providing PGR-specific events and speakers utilising key departments and services such as the students' union, careers services, IT support and library and information services.

Several universities mentioned internal funding pots which PGRs could apply for to support their own studies or encourage networking. Types of activities which could be supported included funds to put on conferences at the institution, applying to go to conferences (noted as particularly useful for self-funded students) and holding competitions and profile-raising events.

4.3.2 Views from PGR students

Almost all PGR students in focus groups spoke highly of their institution's library services, both in terms of access and availability of resources as well as library staff themselves. Students were generally very content with the range of expertise, help and guidance available to them, and most reported regularly using library workspaces or other PGR-designated office space within departments where it existed.

4.4 Summary of section findings

- PGR students were provided with a range of different training and development opportunities to enhance their experience and prepare them for work post-study. However, there were differences in the amount of mandatory training universities expected their PGR students to complete.

- Overall, PGR students were satisfied with the range of training courses they could attend and felt these would be directly beneficial to their studies and post-university careers. A minority expressed dissatisfaction with the modes and frequency of training delivery.

- Funded students reported having access to additional training and development opportunities via their funders and CDTs or DTPs, however some self-funded students noted difficulties in getting permission or additional funding to attend training.

- There was strong support from wider stakeholders for the role of training in improving the PGR experience. A key gap identified was regarding tailored careers support, which was considered to be better developed for undergraduates in comparison with PGR students.

- PGR students were mainly employed through hourly-paid casual roles referred to interchangeably as 'Graduate Tutors', 'Tutors' or 'Hourly-Paid Tutors'. In addition, some institutions also offered Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) roles. PGR students were therefore without the full range of benefits and protections that permanent and fixed-term employees benefitted from.

- Universities highlighted difficulties in offering teaching opportunities equitably to their PGRs due to constraints of funder restrictions and visa limitations when engaging international students to teach. Some recognised the need for greater transparency around teaching recruitment practices and had taken steps to cohere internal approaches.

- PGR students who taught reported mixed experiences of recruitment, support, training, and pay, although overall most said the experience was a positive one and appreciated the financial benefits and the opportunity to gain experience.

- The mixed experiences highlighted by PGR students indicate a lack of consistency and sector-wide approach with regard to recruitment, training, pay and support for PGRs who teach. Representatives from student bodies outlined concerns regarding consistent contract structures across different schools and student's time and capacity to teach.

5. Developing a research community

This section examines universities' progress in developing research communities, environments which have the potential to support PGRs to integrate effectively into academic life. It covers the actions taken by universities to support these communities, the perceptions of students in university life, and the impact that research communities had on the PGR student experience.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland provides a broad definition of a community, which is useful for understanding the context of this section.

"'Community' implies something shared between people: a place, connection, experience, identity or set activities or practices."[19]

In 2017, QAA released a report regarding research communities for PGRs and identified that, while there was no definitive definition or approach to research communities, there were several key areas that contributed to developing and maintaining research communities. These included: supervisors; physical space; developing academic identity for PGRs and for those who teach; centralised and online communities; and the use of training in developing a research community[19].

Discussions with PGRs and university staff centred around being a part of three different types of communities: (1) a PGR community at the HEI; (2) departmental communities within the HEI; and (3) a wider research community within the institution and beyond. In some cases, there were overlaps between these three areas, as shown in Figure 2.
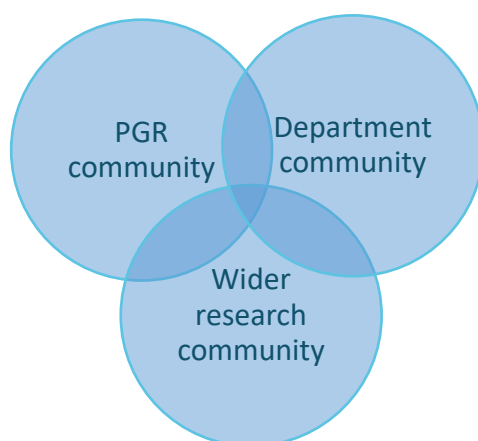
Figure 2: Research communities for PGRs

5.1 Views from universities and wider stakeholders

There were generally positive views with regard to the development of research communities from university representatives, with some reporting that this was an integral part of their institutional approach to supporting their research students. Strategies and activities

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[19] Building a Research Community - Examples of Policy and Practice (qaa.ac.uk)

designed to foster these communities included formal mechanisms such as developing inter-departmental crossovers, as well as disciplinary activities including supporting reading and research groups, holding festivals of research and award ceremonies. Most universities also noted they provided dedicated spaces for PGR students to meet, study and socialise.

One university explained that their graduate school provision aimed to create "*a sense of a cohort*" amongst PGR students to make them feel a part of a research community. There seemed to be little difference between institutions that had graduate offices and those that did not regarding developing research communities for PGRs, although some differences are noted in Section 5.2 below. This was similar to the findings shown in Section 2.2; institutions without graduate offices organised similar development opportunities for their PGRs to those with dedicated departments.

> *"We are trying to build more of a community [with] more opportunities for PGRs to have a peer support network and [give] opportunities for students to come together."*
> University staff

Several HEI representatives reported that their approach to building research communities was partly influenced by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting a desire to re-establish an alternative to remote working culture and to improve student networks which had been negatively affected. One university noted that the shift to remote working meant they needed to do more to support both online and in-person PGR communities, recognising that both approaches were valuable and suited different PGR needs.

Some smaller institutions reported already having a strong PGR community in place, with PGR students having numerous formal and informal opportunities to engage with fellow students as well as university staff. Students' unions at smaller institutions concurred with this view, reporting that their respective research communities made an important contribution to the well-being and positive experience of their PGRs. They commented more generally that greater investment in this element of university life would be of great benefit, if properly resourced. It was felt that doing so would empower PGRs and place them at the centre of university life.

5.2 Views from PGR students

The PGR students offered a mixed picture regarding their engagement with research communities at their institutions. It was clear that being a part of a community, and the sense of belonging which accompanies this, was multi-faceted. PGRs reported varying levels of connection to other PGRs, both in their department and university-wide, to the department and/or university itself, and to others within their discipline but external to the university. Some reported connecting with PGR peers from the wider research community and others highlighted they were part of organised groups within their institutions that were discipline-specific.

> *"My research group is my supervisor, a postdoc, one or two PhD students. I'm in that community as a researcher, I just belong to that circle. I don't know what people outside my office or even in the other office [in the subject area] are doing. So, I feel like I belong in a really small part of the community."* PGR student

Students affiliated with research centres within institutions appeared to have access to facilities as a matter of course, which helped them to feel embedded in the department and able to form a community with other PGRs and academic staff.

> *"My department every week does some sort of research thing and researchers will get together and someone puts on a lecture about what they're currently doing in their research. Maybe it's because it's more of research driven department."* PGR student

For those who did not have these pre-existing communities to integrate with, the experience was more challenging, illustrating a lack of consistency in the PGR student experience in Welsh institutions. A focus group participant highlighted there was not a research community in their institution that they could integrate with as their subject area did not have a research centre on campus.

> *"I don't feel part of the research community. I don't feel like I'm part of a network of researchers. I feel this has been the most lonely and isolating experience in my life."* PGR student

Physical spaces were a key area identified in the QAA report, referenced earlier in this section, as facilitating a PGR community[19]. In addition to having general amenities available to all students, many PGRs spoke of benefitting from facilities specifically allocated to them. Dedicated PGR office space, workstations, tea and coffee-making facilities, and easy access to bathrooms were recurring themes in the focus groups and the provision of these had positive impacts on student experience. Without such facilities, some PGRs felt their ability to form connections and have a sense of community was undermined.

> *"I had expectations of sharing an office with a few people. But I had to set up my flat so I could work at home. There's one shared office in the whole department and there are about six big computers all crammed in, there's no cohesive feeling of togetherness in the department either. It has been an exceptionally lonely experience being here."* PGR student

Access to dedicated workspace on campus alongside other PGRs and/or staff was noted by PGRs as being beneficial to feeling part of a research community. Having library and office space accessible outside normal 9-5 working hours was deemed very useful for PGRs who worked irregular hours and could take advantage of quieter times on campus.

A small minority of students had relocated to attend their university, believing, from the application process, that they were required to live near the campus and to be on-site for much of the time. These students subsequently found they did not have office space provided and - not being connected to a research centre - they often worked remotely by themselves, factors over which they expressed strong frustration and disappointment. Added to this, the increase in remote working post-pandemic negatively impacted opportunities for PGR students to feel part of a community.

"Since Covid, I was without a [working space] for two years which was far from ideal…and the university has not made any move whatsoever to facilitate a [research] kind of community." PGR student

It was noted that PGR students in the focus groups had started their degrees at different time periods, with some being more directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic than others. However, the lasting impact of the pandemic was seen to contribute to isolation amongst the majority of PGR students, particularly around missing out on building a network and ties to a research community.

Whilst the PGRs did not identify that graduate schools had facilitated research communities, funded students reported they were better networked due to the range and frequency of funder activities available to them, including placements, internships, training courses, and newsletters. It was noted that these students had access to opportunities outside of their institutions which was additional to what other, non-funded PGRs could apply for.

"[The funder] has this whole community which they get you involved with, it's through this Teams channel and I'm trying to take advantage of all of it. And so there is that kind of access outside of the university. I think that really helps." PGR student

Although opportunities for PGR students to be involved in a research community did exist and universities were aware of the need to foster activities, many PGRs expressed a desire for universities to do more. Several were keen to establish better networks with researchers working on similar topics across disciplines, and felt the university was best placed to bring about these connections (rather than the PGRs themselves).

"More things to bring us all together [rather] than keeping us separate because a PhD is a lonely journey, as many people say…just having those opportunities of meeting people within the first semester, more networking opportunities outside of the [department] - more interdisciplinary work would be helpful." – PGR student

The isolation of undertaking a PGR degree was identified as a significant issue throughout the focus groups. As well as a lack of involvement in research communities leading to a feeling of isolation, other areas of the student experience contributed to this feeling. For example, several PGRs reported that it was difficult to find appropriate housing and they therefore ended up unintentionally living alone, thereby worsening their isolation, as one PGR noted.

"I have found just living on my own to be quite isolating and that's probably fed into why I haven't made too many contacts. More suitable attached accommodation would make a huge difference for the more mature person, to have people of your own demographic - you have more in common and it can be more of a social experience. It's just been the loneliest experience for many, many years for me." - PGR student

5.3 Summary of section findings

- Strategies and online and in-person activities to foster research communities included inter-departmental crossovers, supporting reading and research groups, and holding festivals of research. Most universities also noted they provided dedicated spaces for PGR students to meet, study and socialise.

- Smaller institutions reported already having a strong community in place, with PGR students having numerous formal and informal opportunities to engage with fellow students as well as university staff.

- PGRs reported varying levels of connection to other PGRs, both in their department and university-wide. Students affiliated with research centres felt embedded and able to form a community with other PGRs and academic staff. For those who did not have these pre-existing communities to integrate with, the experience was more challenging.

- Funded students reported they were better networked due to the range and frequency of funder activities available to them, including placements, internships, training courses, and newsletters.

- Many PGRs spoke of benefitting from facilities specifically allocated to them. Dedicated PGR office space, workstations, tea and coffee making facilities, and easy access to bathrooms. Without such facilities, some PGRs felt their ability to form connections and have a sense of community were undermined:

- The isolation of undertaking a PGR degree was identified as a significant issue throughout the focus groups. The lasting impact of the pandemic was seen to contribute to this isolation for PGR students, particularly with regard to missing out on building a network and ties to a research community.

6. Well-being challenges and support

The challenges that PGR students faced were discussed within the focus groups as well as in interviews with universities and stakeholders. This section outlines the key issues raised by PGR students and notes what institutions had been put in place to support well-being outside of that offered by academic staff as part of the supervisory relationship.

6.1 Challenges: Views from universities and stakeholders

Supporting well-being and addressing mental health-related issues concerning PGRs were key priorities for institutions. University representatives acknowledged the potential isolation and loneliness associated with undertaking a PGR degree, as outlined by PGRs themselves in Section 5.2. This was also raised as a significant concern by wider stakeholders. Unlike students on taught degrees, it was noted that PGR-level study was often a solitary and isolating process which created difficulties for universities in identifying individuals who were struggling. Institutional representatives also noted that supporting PGR well-being post-COVID-19 posed a significant challenge, and all spoke of an increased focus in this area.

> *"We're still seeing the tail end of Covid and it's had an ongoing impact on their (PGR student's) ability to study and having to manage difficulties…Things like health, mental health, I think have been really significantly affected."* - University staff

Although the development of remote working provided students with wider access to resources and flexibility, its impact had in many cases exacerbated isolation amongst PGR students according to university representatives. There was also recognition of the negative effects of the pandemic on research itself with PGR students not being able to access labs and restrictions on data collection.

The demographics and personal circumstances of PGR students were also noted to have contributed to challenges in this area for universities. University representatives reported that their PGR students were generally older and part-time with commitments and responsibilities outside of their degree.

> *"They are at a stage in their lives where they may have children, caring responsibilities for parents [and] when there are difficulties they are hit by life events in a way that maybe some of our younger students aren't. I'd say that's one of the big adjustments that we find we have to make for PGR students."* - University staff

Another significant issue identified for PGR students were the financial implications of undertaking a postgraduate degree. The negative impact of the cost-of-living crisis across the UK was identified as a challenge for PGRs; with one representative commenting, *"it's a big squeeze for them."* Universities reported introducing support to PGR students in light of this, such as providing 'warm room' spaces and discounted meals. A students' union representative highlighted that research funding councils have increased their stipends for students to help with the cost-of-living crisis. Other financial issues highlighted by PGR representatives included delays in receiving expenses claimed, which is further covered in the following section.

6.2 Challenges: Views of PGR students

PGR students across all focus groups detailed the specific issues that they faced as part of their experience, ranging from financial to well-being challenges.

6.2.1 Financial challenges

As illustrated in Section 1.2, previous research found financial issues to be a significant challenge for PGR students and the findings of the research supports this view. Many PGR students cited financial concerns and difficulties during the focus groups. Some participants highlighted how they'd had to liaise between their university and funder and/or Student Finance to have payments made, and outlined that they could not rely on the processes within institutions to resolve delays and complications if they arose. This was an issue which affected students whether they were self-funded or in receipt of support from a funder/research council.

PGR students who were funded noted other challenges, including rules set by funders over the maximum amount of paid work they were permitted to undertake.

> *"I receive a stipend and because of my funding I'm not allowed to take on any other work because I'm doing my PhD full time… it's not really enough to live on… I've had to move home to be able to live so that's been really hard. I've got friends in the postgraduate community who are really struggling because they've got rent or they've got a mortgage and it's just not enough to make ends meet."* - PGR student

Other difficulties which were reported included uncertainty over whether PGRs would be supported to take up additional opportunities during their studies such as presenting at international conferences; trips which came with added expenses like attendance fees, travel and visas which were not covered by their stipends. For those who were entitled to reimbursement of expenses for such trips, some reported issues in not receiving these expenses back in a timely manner, with one PGR student waiting several months to receive the money back, creating financial difficulties.

In one institution several participants explained how they had been left in financial difficulties due to administration errors and experienced delays with their funding being paid. In one case a three-month lag caused a PGR to seek support from the university's hardship fund whilst waiting for their stipend, despite efforts to resolve the matter with departmental offices. Issues arising from administrative processes causing funding problems was clearly a source of immense challenge for the affected PGRs, impacting on their ability to settle in a new location, keep afloat financially, and progress with their research.

> *"If I'd have just stayed on the career path, I probably would have been better off. I don't know that [with] the cost of living at the moment, if they're making PhDs worth it."* *PGR student*

Some PGR students explained that they had taken on extra work to earn additional income. International students commented that they faced additional financial pressures, especially those who were self-funded, and had to source income for themselves annually in order to

continue their studies. These students spoke of working part time to make ends meet and lacking financial security.

> *"Because the college has got lots of demonstrating work, I registered and get some pocket money. But it can't support my own living costs, and some other international students from other colleges they don't have much demonstrating work. So, they just go to work at takeaway restaurants during the weekend to earn [money]."* - PGR student

6.2.2 Academic challenges and demands

Comments were noted about the academic demands of undertaking a PGR degree by students across the focus groups. Imposter syndrome was mentioned by some PGRs in this research, in line with findings from the Nature PhD Students Survey (2019), referenced in Section 1.2. PGRs who had taken on work or teaching reported these factors added additional pressures and time constraints to the completion of their research, as did the difficulties of balancing caring roles with academic responsibilities.

> *"I really think being a part-time student has its own challenges because I work four days a week. I'm also a single parent. So I do work a lot in the evenings as well and constantly juggling and I know I've got half of my tuition fees covered, but I'm still responsible for the other half. I do balance and work with it, but there is a lot of pressure."* PGR student

Regarding the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, besides the negative effect on PGR well-being, students reported the significant challenges and restrictions they faced when carrying out their research. This involved limits being placed on collecting data in-person, an inability to recruit participants for their research, and restrictions on using dedicated research space on campus, such as labs. One PGR student outlined that they "*had lost an entire year to COVID-19*" and had adjusted their research as a result.

6.2.3 Specific challenges for international students

In addition to the financial challenges for international PGR students detailed above, this cohort of students reported facing unique challenges, as reflected in the OIA report referenced in Section 1.2. International PGR students provided examples of visa issues, delays with international sponsors leading to limited access to university resources, and delays with acceptance letters being sent out which subsequently created travel issues. Two international students explained that their universities did not have the expertise to support visa applications for international students; one reported feeling unsupported by their university after attending an international study event, and subsequently becoming stranded after having been given an inadequate visa.

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6.3 Support for PGR student well-being

6.3.1 Views from Universities and wider stakeholders

University staff outlined several types of well-being support that was available to PGR students such as counselling and 24-hour phone support services. Handbooks, inductions (both university-wide and school-based), university intranet pages and 'bulletins' were used to inform PGR students of the support available to them.

A key issue raised was that of access to PGR-specific support. For some universities, well-being support was noted to be universally available to all students, regardless of level of study, while others had discrete structures in place for PGR student well-being. The importance of providing PGR targeted provision was noted, and two universities explained that their PGRs had access to both student and staff well-being support services; addressing the diversity of PGR need as well as reflecting the dual role which some PGRs had in some institutions.

Students' unions were also identified as a source of well-being provision for students, but there were perceptions from several union representatives that PGR students might have felt that students' unions were more focused on undergraduates and not the postgraduate cohort.

> *"PGRs are not often the most active students on campus, they fall through a gap of being seen as students not staff, treated like students but not given support that should be expected for students."* - Stakeholder

Some institutions had taken steps to invest in PGR-specific support officers to oversee well-being at an institution-level, mainly through increased awareness-raising and supportive events and activities. One university had invested in allocating a member of staff for this purpose, explaining that the role had been developed in response to evidence of need and a prior lack of capacity in managing PGR student mental health support within the institution. In addition to allocated staff members, student-led support was also highlighted, with student support officers, community support officers and well-being champions drawn from the student body.

Universities also highlighted incorporating well-being themed workshops and sessions into their training programmes (for example building resilience, managing uncertainty, confidence building), and reported running these in conjunction with other stakeholders such as student voice and the students' union.

As outlined in Section 6.2, universities recognised that the impact of COVID-19 created the need for mechanisms to be put in place to ensure PGR students had appropriate support to address any pandemic-related issues. Examples included the implementation of no detriment policies (ensuring that student outcomes were not adversely affected by the impact of the pandemic), and extensions being offered to PGRs. It was noted that some institutions reported receiving requests for COVID-19 related extensions from their PGRs, long-after many Covid-related restrictions had been eased.

As detailed in Section 3.1, supervisors also played a key role in providing well-being support to PGRs, with one stakeholder commenting, *"the supervisor relationship is really unique, it is mentoring, coaching, pastoral and pedagogical."* Supervisor training was therefore key to the provision of effective well-being support. Some university representatives explained that this training included elements of well-being/pastoral support, such as the roll-out of suicide awareness training, though several explained that they encouraged supervisors to signpost PGRs to the relevant HEI services when serious matters arose. In addition to training, a minority of institutions reported that supervisors were referred to the UKCGE Good Supervisory Practice Framework to develop their own knowledge and ability to support PGRs, as referred to in Section 3.3.1.

In addition to policies and procedures in place for PGRs, there were instances of more informal and student-led well-being support for PGRs. Examples included coffee mornings, activities such as running and knitting and clubs, and 'speed friending'. For some institutions, this was organised by individual schools rather than being university-wide. Examples of doctoral schools/graduate offices being used to facilitate well-being support and foster research communities were also shared, as outlined in Section 5. One university representative highlighted the importance of providing PGRs with the opportunity to develop support within their community.

> *"There will also be [activities] which are run within schools for postgraduate communities, that they organise themselves… it is all about giving them access to space and funding to organise events that would support them in the ways they want to be supported, not ways that we thought they should be supported."* University staff

The views of wider stakeholders were closely aligned with those reported by university representatives and PGR students themselves. Stakeholders were unanimous in highlighting that mental health and well-being and the cost of living were major issues for PGRs, and that their attention was focused on supporting them through challenges. Stakeholders did, however, raise a note of caution on developing blanket policies and strategies, considering the diversity of the PGR cohort. They outlined that students were often impacted differently, particularly whether studying part or full time, and highlighted how there would naturally be inconsistencies in experience when accommodating the needs of a diverse group of students.

Although universities outlined different measures in place to support PGR students, there was some recognition of areas for improvement. One PGR course representative explained that they had received feedback from some PGRs about not being able to access centralised institution services for support. Another PGR course representative highlighted the significant well-being impact for international students moving away from their home and outlined that there was no provision in place to support this specific issue in their institution. One stakeholder emphasised that communication with PGR students needed to be more tailored and information needed to be consistently available throughout the academic year, rather than only having an "*information dump*" during inductions in the first semester.

6.3.2 Views from PGR students

As Sections 6.1 and 6.2 illustrate, PGR students faced distinctive challenges, however only a few PGR students shared experiences of accessing well-being support through their university. One PGR student expressed that their university did not support PGR student mental health enough, especially for those researching sensitive topics; "*I've just been expected to just get on with this PhD that's looking at really, really extreme and difficult subjects*". Section 2.3 referenced two examples of disparities in PGR students accessing well-being support in terms of EDI. Similar to the representative body views noted in the previous section, several PGR students felt that support was more directed towards undergraduate students.

> "*I think there's overwhelming support for undergrads. I think PhD students are just left to get on. We need more support with our lives and mental health. We need more support with networking and making contact with [other] students.*" PGR student

Several PGR students shared positive views on the support provided by their supervisors. One PGR student emphasised the dependence on PGRs supervisors for a positive experience.

> "*I've got really great supervisors. They're constantly supporting me. I've had a really good space and environment to go into different ideas and develop things more. This PGR experience is very dependent on supervisors.*" PGR student

Aside from supervisors, one PGR student reported that their graduate office provided pastoral care in addition to the usual academic support. The graduate office at their institution had arranged informal coffee mornings where PGR students could raise issues and meet senior staff in a relaxed environment.

6.4 Summary of section findings

- Supporting well-being and addressing mental health-related issues concerning PGRs were key priorities. It was noted that PGR-level study was often a solitary and isolating process and students often have responsibilities outside of their degree.

- Universities incorporated well-being workshops into their training programmes and supervisor training was also key to the provision of effective support. Student-led support was also highlighted, with student support officers, community support officers and well-being champions drawn from the student body.

- Although the development of remote working provided PGR students with wider access to resources and flexibility, its impact had in many cases exacerbated isolation. There was also recognition of the negative effects of the pandemic on research itself with PGR students not being able to access labs and restrictions on data collection.

- Another significant issue identified for PGR students were the financial implications of undertaking a postgraduate degree. The negative impact of the cost-of-living crisis was identified as a further challenge for PGRs and a range of support measures have been put in place.

- Many PGR students cited financial concerns during the focus groups, with some highlighting funding administration errors and delays and there were additional issues with visas for international students.

- Impostor syndrome and taking on work or teaching added additional pressures and time constraints to the completion of their research, as did the difficulties of balancing caring roles with academic responsibilities.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

This section presents conclusions and recommendations for each of the areas discussed in this report.

7.1 Policies and procedures to support PGR students

All Welsh higher education institutions reported that they are committed to providing good quality student experiences for PGRs. There was recognition from across the sector that PGR students are a unique and varied cohort needing tailored support and guidance. Most institutions use PRES and have carried out their own reviews to better understand PGR student needs as well as being guided by research councils, external funders, funding bodies and governmental standards in areas such as parental leave and employment conditions. PGR student representatives also sit on institutional committees and groups, in line with efforts to increase PGR student representation across institutions.

This has led to a range of bespoke policies, activities, communications and training to meet the skillset required to be an effective PGR student, promoted during all stages of their recruitment and integration into university life. This range of support comes through two main channels. One is a set of centralised, institution-wide measures to ensure a uniform approach. The second is where elements of support are more devolved to a department level or, in some institutions, Graduate Offices or Doctoral Schools, which is viewed by university representatives as offering a more flexible and responsive approach.

In terms of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), most institutions highlighted that EDI structures and processes were set at a university-wide level and recorded and monitored all students in areas such as recruitment, induction, admissions and performance. Students' union representatives and some PGR students considered nevertheless that there was more progress to be made in embedding support for, and awareness of, EDI across the PGR community.

> **Institution recommendation:** Institutions should ensure that the EDI policies and structures that support PGR students are aligned across all departments / schools to ensure a consistent and equal level of support.

7.2 Supervision

The supervisory relationship was reported by all university representatives and students as a crucial element of the PGR experience. From an institutional perspective, supervision is an area that receives significant investment, containing established codes of practice, links to institutional structures, and professional development opportunities for supervisors. These approaches were further supported by flexibility in appointing supervisors based on discipline, seniority, dialogue with PGRs and supported by reviews and monitoring.

PGR students nonetheless reported mixed experiences of supervision and supervisory relationships, outlining the inconsistencies that can impact on their student experience. Positive examples of good practice cited by PGRs included regular and timely meetings and communications from supervisors, being based in a lab or research centre with easier access to supervisors, having several supervisors with different skillsets to support different elements of their academic and well-being needs, and the continuity highlighted by those PGRs who had continued studies from undergraduate onwards in the same institution.

Negative experiences included perceived inconsistencies in the selection of supervisors – some institutions offered PGR students a say in this, others did not, along with issues regarding lack of availability, expertise and/or EDI awareness, particularly with regard to recognition of protected characteristics. Projects promoting access and participation for doctoral researchers from under-represented groups and additional training to raise awareness of unconscious bias in supervision were suggested as ideas to enable further progress within Welsh HEIs.

To address these challenges and support a more consistent approach to PGR student supervision, most institutions have introduced training for academic staff who supervise PGR students. Some institutions then continue to provide ongoing training to adapt and incorporate funder requirements and T&Cs, and support greater involvement from, and liaison with, Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs). Other initiatives included pairing newer supervisors with experienced individuals and sharing knowledge across departments and wider institutions.

To resolve disputes between PGR students and their supervisors, institutional representatives reported a range of informal and formal mechanisms. These included regular reviews with directors of research, mediation opportunities between PGR students and supervisors, further professional learning opportunities for supervisors and options to change supervisor. Institutions highlighted that these are the preferred routes, however some cases are resolved through institutional complaints procedures. Student representative organisations also highlighted the importance of institutional structures and processes and spoke of taking on a mediation role where required within these structures.

The apparent reluctance of some focus group PGRs to submit complaints is an area that requires further research to gain a better understand of the scale of the issue and the reasons for any reluctance. This could involve trying methods other than a group discussion or spending more time specifically investigating the process of making complaints and whether more accessible informal routes should be developed.

> **HEFCW recommendation:** HEFCW should encourage institutions to support supervisors and other relevant staff with regular and effective PGR-related training and development.
>
> **Institution recommendation:** Institutions should identify and share good practice relating to PGR supervision, both within and between institutions, including implementing the UKCGE Good Supervisory Framework.
>
> **HEFCW recommendation:** HEFCW should consider commissioning research to explore PGR students' reluctance to submit complaints and potential new routes to support them.

7.3 Academic support and development opportunities

Institutions reported that they offered their PGR students a range of training and development opportunities to enhance their student experience and prepare them for work. These ranged from research-focused subjects such as ethics and research methods preparing for the viva, to more generic and transferable skills, including time management and writing effectively. Some courses have also been designed specifically to prepare PGR students for non-academic career paths such as leadership, publishing and entrepreneurship. Most universities cited the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) as a guidance tool when designing their PGR training and development offer.

While these types of training were broadly valued by students, there were still some inconsistencies with regard to aspects of training such as cost, access and whether training is mandatory or optional. Some institutions offered a range of courses that were all optional, whilst others had core topics which needed to be completed by each PGR student. A few institutions offered a choice of modules but required their PGRs to complete a minimum number of credits within a timeframe. Some institutions and stakeholders perceived that transferable skills and employability-based training were not currently as accessible as research-based training.

PGR students are expected to work with their supervisors and other colleagues, including representative bodies to identify their training needs however there appeared to be inconsistent monitoring of take-up and progress. Some institutions additionally worked with external partners to provide further training and development opportunities while funders and other stakeholder organisations, including representative bodies, also provided opportunities. Institutions, stakeholders and students reported that this range of opportunities enhanced the PGR experience, however not all students can access all opportunities, as some are tied to funders or lack eligibility criteria.

PGR students were generally very positive about the amount of training provided by their respective institutions. Examples of beneficial practical training provided included sessions on use of software, ethics and writing. There were, however, mixed levels of awareness and access, particularly around face-to-face training opportunities and inconsistency of opportunities for funded and self-funded PGR students, with concerns expressed about

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additional costs by the latter. Wider stakeholders agreed that training needed to be better publicised and PGR students better supported with funds to access new opportunities.

A further gap identified by wider stakeholders was regarding tailored careers support and advice, which was considered to be better developed for undergraduates in comparison with PGR students. Institutions and students believed that training opportunities were generally well designed and relevant to academic need, but in some cases lacked a focus on employability and progression in other career paths beyond academia. This was a key concern also outlined by PGR students in the 2022 PRES report.

HEFCW recommendation: HEFCW should encourage institutions to ensure that both funded and non-funded PGR students receive an equitable experience with regard to accessing training and professional development opportunities.

Institution recommendations: Institutions should better publicise training and development opportunities, while also emphasising the potential for students to benefit from networking during these training events.

Institutions should expand training opportunities focused on employability skills and career advice to support PGR students' progression into employment.

7.4 Teaching roles for PGR students

All institutions engaged PGR students in paid teaching roles depending on the availability of opportunities, largely in hourly-paid casual roles. In addition, some institutions also offered Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) roles or were considering introducing these positions in future. Institutions acknowledged those PGRs who teach operate in a grey area: viewed as members of staff by those they teach, working in collaboration with academic staff and in receipt of pay from the institution, yet still students themselves. Developing a consistent approach is further challenged by the diverse nature of PGR students, with those who were funded, part-time or international students often facing limitations in the hours they can work.

Recruitment takes a variety of forms and some institutions acknowledged that more transparency and consistency is needed, for example better centralised HR guidance to academic schools and the promotion of trade union membership and institutional HR policies to PGR students. PGR students who teach are provided with additional training opportunities and initiatives such as the Brilliant Club and the Associate Fellowship (AFHEA) were highlighted as further positive upskilling opportunities.

PGR students who teach have casual teaching contracts for the hours they deliver, including preparation time, and therefore operate without the full range of benefits and protections that permanent and fixed-term employees have. Representatives from student bodies outlined concerns that PGRs were being used by HEIs to 'plug gaps in the system' and a lack of consistent pay and contracts across different schools, which was considered to be part of the wider lack of coherent support and structure for PGRs. A few institutions were in the process

of addressing these issues, working with Unions to further support postgraduate employment rights.

PGRs who teach reported mixed experiences of recruitment, support, training, and pay, although overall most said the experience was a positive one. PGR students highlighted the positives of financial reward and teaching experience, while those who had not had the opportunity to teach reported challenges with regard to a lack of acknowledgement of their skills and a lack of transparency around the recruitment to these roles.

> **Institution recommendation**: Institutions should develop a consistent and clearly communicated approach regarding PGR students who teach, including pay, conditions, and recruitment to teaching.

7.5 Developing a research community

Developing research communities has been an integral part of some institutions' approach to supporting their students, through mechanisms such as research groups, festivals of research and dedicated spaces for students to meet, study and socialise. These research communities are more developed in some institutions than others, with smaller institutions generally offering more opportunities to engage directly with staff and other PGR students. PGR students who were affiliated with research centres reported that they had additional opportunities to network, however, these opportunities are not currently experienced by all students.

This can lead to a lack of consistency in the PGR experience, both within and between institutions, and this was further negatively impacted by COVID-19, which prevented some PGR students from feeling part of a research community. The 2022 PRES report highlighted the need for in-person interactions and several students taking part in fieldwork for this research expressed a preference for more in-person events. There were also calls for more cross-disciplinary opportunities to develop research communities.

> **HEFCW recommendation:** HEFCW should work with Universities Wales and the Learned Society of Wales to support further progress in developing research communities, for example producing guidelines to support consistency of approach and sharing examples of good practice.
>
> **Institution recommendation:** All institutions in Wales should review the opportunities they provide for PGR students to become part of a research community, including cross-disciplinary opportunities and social activities. Alongside online opportunities, institutions should offer in-person interactions where possible to enable PGR students to build a research community.

7.6 Well-being challenges and support

Well-being and mental health related issues form a key part of university and wider stakeholder support for PGR students. Challenges with regard to isolation and loneliness associated with undertaking a PGR degree raised significant concerns amongst universities and stakeholders. These challenges were reported to have been exacerbated by COVID-19, which saw a greater focus put on online learning and a lack of access to labs and data collection activities during lockdown periods.

Other challenges to well-being included the current cost of living crisis and the financial implications of undertaking a post-graduate degree, particularly for those mature and part-time students with other responsibilities. International PGR students also faced a range of specific challenges and provided examples of visa issues, delays with international sponsors limiting access to university resources, and issues relating to EDI.

To address these challenges universities have put a range of measures and activities in place to support PGR well-being. As with other elements of the PGR experience, some of this support forms part of broader measures aimed at all students while other areas are PGR-specific. The former included greater access to counselling, 24-hour helplines and student handbooks, while, for PGRs, well-being themed workshops and sessions are often incorporated into training programmes, sometimes in partnership with students' unions. In some cases, some supervisors received training to signpost PGR students to these types of support. Institutions also responded to the impact of the pandemic through no-detriment policies and study extensions.

Areas for improvement were highlighted by institutions, wider stakeholders and students. PGR students recognised the positive supportive role played by their supervisors in some cases and efforts made by their departments, however, the general feeling was that well-being support is currently more targeted towards undergraduates. A consistent approach, recognising the diversity of PGR experience and their specific support needs, was considered to be a key focus for future strategies along with a recognition of the impact the cost of living was having on PGR students' finances.

> **Institution recommendation:** Institutions should ensure that PGR students have access to timely, quality support that recognises their specific wellbeing needs and academic journey.

7.7 Developing a standard support offer

The different levels and variety of support structures that had been put in place were designed to address the diversity of the PGR cohort and their specific needs. While the support has led to a range of positive outcomes for PGR students the findings from this report indicate that there are still inconsistencies, differing levels of engagement and gaps in provision and this has had a negative impact on the overall experience of some students.

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Further cohesion could therefore be supported across Welsh universities through the development of a standard offer for PGR students. In line with the key themes of this report this could include a consistent approach to providing well-being support, professional development opportunities, formal recognition of teaching status, access to a research community and frequent contact with supervisors. Universities could support this approach through the provision of frequent training for supervisors and other staff engaged with PGR students and the flexible alignment of support policies across departments and their respective institutions.

HEFCW recommendation: HEFCW should work with institutions and wider stakeholders to design a standard offer of support for PGR students, which could provide a benchmark for a consistent approach in Welsh universities.

8. Appendices

Appendix 1

Table 2: Institution staff participant numbers by institution

University	Number of participants
Aberystwyth University	2
Bangor University	2
Cardiff University	6
Cardiff Metropolitan University	1
The Open University in Wales	2
Swansea University	5
USW	2
UWTSD	2
Wrexham Glyndŵr University	1
Total	**23**

Appendix 2

Table 3: Number of PGR participants by institution[20]

University	Number of participants
Aberystwyth University	6
Bangor University	7
Cardiff University	13
Cardiff Metropolitan University	5
Swansea University	8
USW	4
UWTSD	3
Wrexham Glyndŵr University	4
Total	**50**

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[20] A focus group with PGR students from Open University in Wales was not held as the majority of students study on their Milton Keynes campus.
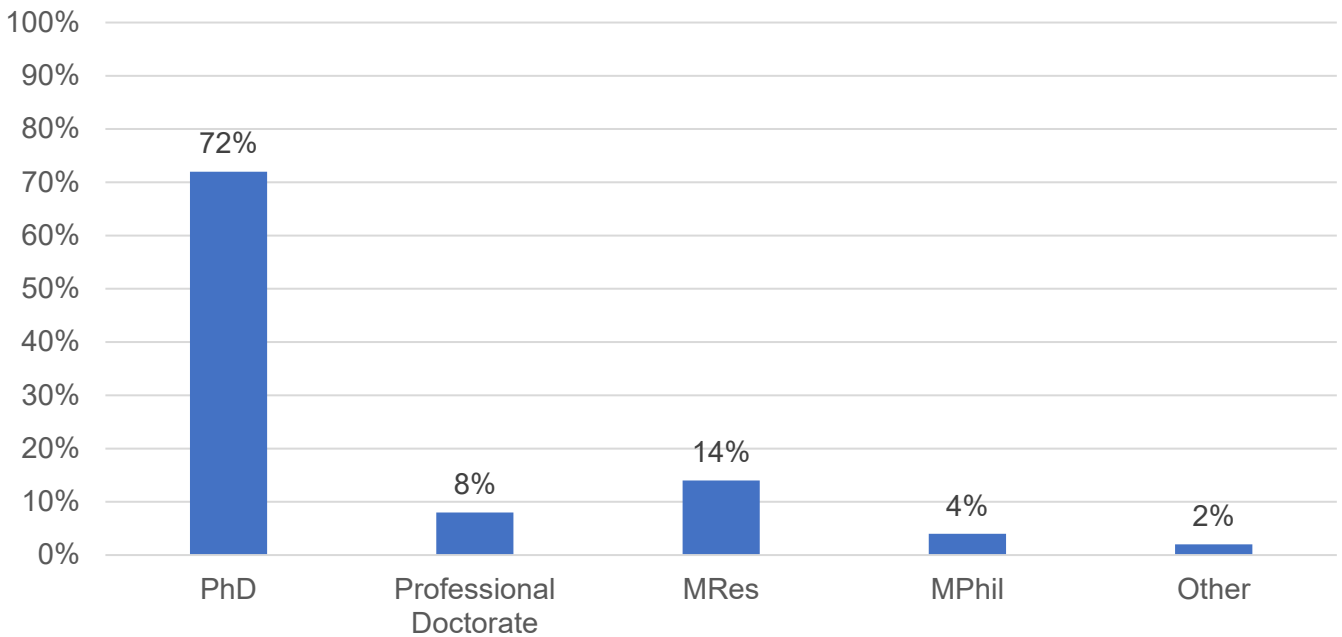
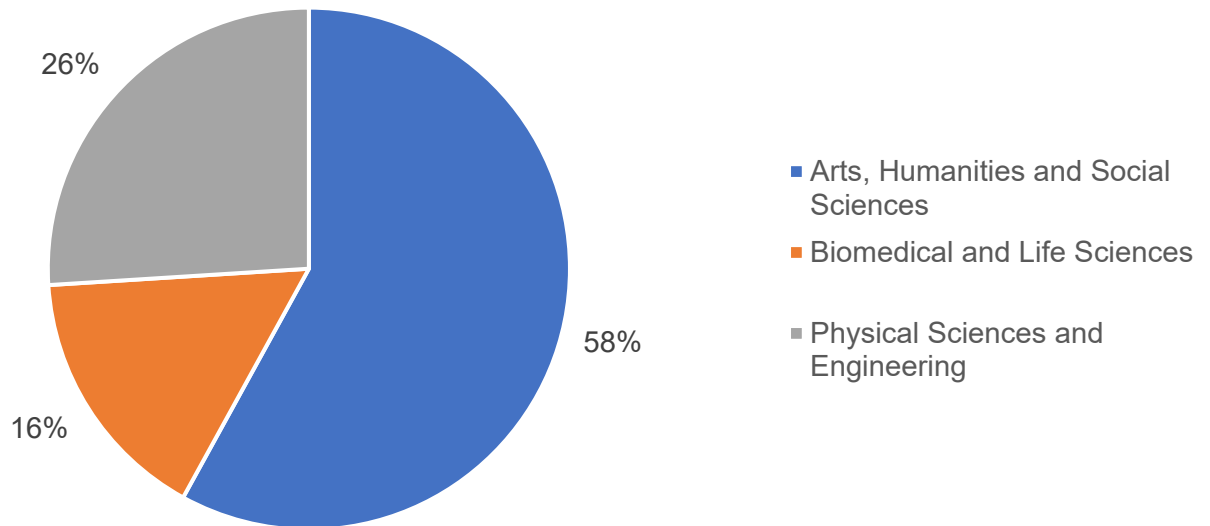Figure 3: Percentage of degree programmes of total PGR participants[21]

Figure 4: Percentage of wider disciplines of total PGR participants

[21] One PGR student stated in their demographic information that their degree programme was 'MSc by Research', this student has been included in the MRes data.