

SCHOOL OF INFORMATICS

Strategy Committee – Wednesday 24 February 2016

IGS Focus Group Feedback

Following the recent PRES 2015 results, while there were many areas of success, the School identified areas which it felt merited investigation centred around three themes:

- Do you know who to approach for support?
- Are there barriers to completion of your PhD that result in the need for extensions?
- Do you receive adequate guidance/ support for teaching?

The feedback from the surveys on these topics was negative and it was unclear why this may be the case. In order to try to quantify this, focus groups were set up for PhD students within each institute with all reps invited to attend.

Attendance at the groups varied but there were common answers given to the investigated areas that helped give a better picture of the issues in hand.

Do you know who to approach for support?

Students were clear that they realised that their primary supervisor was their key contact for support, however their knowledge as to who else was available varied. Some students recognised that they had a second supervisor but commented that they were not necessarily the same person who had been on their offer letter and often had little or no contact with them at all.

Some recognised that Alex Lascarides within the Graduate School was available for support although that was mainly as they received active emails from her rather than knowing that through an induction process. Only a couple were able to identify that there was a defined personal tutor for PhD students although they did acknowledge that that could be that they didn't need to. They also noted that they knew that there was a great deal of information on the IGS website, they just didn't use it that much.

Issues here could be resolved with a more thorough induction, however with PhD students having staggered starting points this will be challenging. Those who had engaged with printed/ published materials had positive comments. For the September 2016 induction, physical posters of when events are taking place were encouraged as students found out after the events that things had happened as they went through emails.

Students speculated that the reason that this query received poor feedback was relating to services offered by central services and that they didn't feel that they could comment on those provisions.

Are there barriers to completion that result in the need for extensions?

It was generally noted that there is an inconsistency in expectations on when someone has done enough to complete. From supervisor to supervisor, students receive varying feedback. It is unclear whether the School can create a more standard position on this.

Teaching is not seen to be a distraction as it is clear there is not an expectation to teach.

Some students were not aware of the interruption process and therefore were exceeding timeframes due to a lack of awareness of their options. It was also commented that in some corners interruptions carry a stigma as being representative of evidence of someone 'not coping'.

Do you receive adequate guidance/ support for teaching?

Students considered themselves well informed on how they would go about accessing information and that staff were available for support. There was a query about what students were entitled to do without permission from supervisors. Some expressed that they had been told that they could not teach at all. This is being investigated through IGS.

Overview

Clearly within the School, from those polled, it could be assumed that issues are about the transmission and receipt of data, not the actual services that are available. All students noted that their email inboxes received a great deal of information that they simply discarded. A sustained information campaign can lead in future to a greater knowledge within the student community.

Recommendations for consideration

In order to try and address the issues, three actions can be taken forward-

- To arrange a meeting in November of each year through the institutes to introduce/ re introduce PhD students to the PGR personal tutor and the IGS team.
- To create a 'family structure' concept within institutes where students will have a defined 'parent' and 'siblings' (taken from different year cohorts) who they will be in contact with to induct into the School cohort.
- To greatly increase the volume of printed communications distributed around the School Forum building notifying PGR students of IGS inductions/ events (to overcome the issue of email overload).

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24 February 2016 (revised)