

**SOM Athena SWAN, Action Point 3.4**  
**Postgraduate Student Focus Groups, Spring 2018**  
**13<sup>th</sup> February 2019**

**1. Objectives**

A lack of understanding of postgraduate student experiences within the School of Medicine exists; therefore, Action 3.4 was included in the School of Medicine's (SOM) Athena SWAN action plan in November 2017: "Past and current postgraduate students will be targeted through the use of focus groups to establish their needs, experiences and aspirations, with specific consideration by gender."

The focus groups aimed to explore postgraduate student experiences and views around three major themes:

1. *Equality and diversity*: We wished to explore whether students regarded the School as a welcoming, inclusive and supportive place to study and work. We asked particularly about whether students had experienced or witnessed unsupportive language or behaviours in the School.
2. *Challenges and supports*: We sought to understand the major challenges facing postgraduate students, their awareness of the supports available to them in the School of Medicine, and what additional supports the School may be able to provide. We specifically asked students to comment on work-life balance and asked PG Research students about their experiences with the University's Graduate Research Committee (GRC) process.
3. *Completion and enrolment*: Differing trends in degree completion and enrolment on postgraduate courses between men and women have emerged in recent years, as outlined in our November 2017 Bronze Award application. Women have consistently higher completion rates than men and, while women have historically enrolled in larger numbers on postgraduate courses, uptake among men has been accelerating and the gap is starting to close. We wished to gain students' insights into these trends and their suggestions for why they might have emerged.

## **2. Recruitment and Confidentiality**

Nine PG Research and eleven PG Taught students (from six taught PG programmes) were recruited. Six focus groups were conducted (three PG Research, two PG taught, one mixed), as well as individual telephone interviews with two PG Taught participants who were unable to attend any of the scheduled group sessions. All groups and interviews were conducted between 30<sup>th</sup> April and 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2018.

It should be noted that recruitment was challenging, and that voluntary engagement was poor. A number of factors may have contributed to this. Students and departments are spread over multiple sites, the focus groups were conducted at a time of year when dissertations were due for submission, and many students study alongside holding full-time employment.

A number of channels were used for recruitment. The groups targeted were advertised to students through Blackboard and mailing lists, and supervisors and course directors were asked to nominate students (at least one reminder was also issued for each of these contacts). Direct invitations were issued by telephone and email to a number of students. Morning, lunchtime and evening groups were scheduled to maximise convenience for potential participants.

Only the group facilitator knew the identities of students who took part. Students' participation or non-participation was not communicated back to their supervisors or course directors, including for those students who were individually nominated to take part. Students were reassured at the outset that their comments would be anonymised and that the group facilitator was not involved in teaching or assessment in any capacity.

### **3. Findings – PG Research Students**

#### **3.1 Equality and diversity**

Participants generally reported positive perceptions of culture, equality and diversity in the SOM. While some students reported feeling isolated within the School as PhD students (*“at the moment, I’m the only one in the department”*), and disconnected from the higher-level School and College organisations, the labs in which students learn are diverse and friendly (*“It’s a great place to work in”*).

A majority of participants reported that they have neither experienced nor witnessed discriminatory behaviour or unsupportive language. Where students did report disrespectful behaviour, they said that it was *“the exception to the rule”* and that it came from *“senior people”*, while their student peers are *“generally more accepting”*.

While participants reported that there is substantial diversity among the student population, it was noted that this is not reflected at staff level *“when you look up the line”*. This was highlighted in relation to the travelling community, people with mental health difficulties, and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. There was a sense among some participants that this was a *“trickle-up”* phenomenon that begins at undergraduate level (i.e., lack of representation at student level leads to a lack of representation in the available candidates for staff positions), though there was no suggestion from participants of how this could be addressed.

Most participants said that they have not experienced gender-based discrimination at this stage in their careers (*“At our stage I feel like it’s fine ... even the post-doc, probably”*), but that it is *“obvious”* that men dominate at senior levels within the University. They described deserving experienced women within the SOM who have not attained professorships, despite significant contributions and achievements (*“One of the female lecturers has got so many grants ... has been on really high-profile, important projects, so many publications, so much impact. And you’re kind of like what does she have to do to move? The males on the corridor beside her haven’t half of it, it seems to me.”*). Male professors have been hired and promoted even after poor behaviour in Galway and elsewhere; they are hired, participants said, because they attract funding. One student said, *“They are still being hired as professors, so ... they can’t be kicked out. ... It’s very well known that in other places they were doing a very bad job. So what’s the selection? It’s the money.”*

One participant described a sense of impatience among staff around maternity leave, and reported *“insensitive comments”* about her having taken leave for more than one pregnancy. Participants noted that there is little support available for students intending to take maternity leave to work through the process and guide them, and that funders have differing policies on funding leave. One participant reported that a requirement to remain registered during her leave created a significant financial burden; *“You feel like you’re being penalised for going on maternity leave.”*

#### **3.2 Challenges and supports**

##### **3.2.1 Mentorship and skills**

Participants frequently described a desire for more mentorship from senior members of their labs, particularly around analysis and experiments: *“I think it’s a normal trend that in every lab, there is not much training before doing the ... manual work, and also the data analysis ... They would spend maybe five thousand euro to give you very nice software, but nobody would help you using it.”* Many students described running experiments incorrectly or with poor technique, leading to wasted time and resources:

*“You have the materials, the protocols and everything, but you develop your own skills alone ... you cannot be sure if you're doing something well or not.”*

Guidance and mentorship from more experienced researchers, including near-peers (more senior postgraduate students and recent graduates from postgraduate programmes), were noted as being of particular benefit. One participant said, *“It just makes such a difference to meet up with people who are at a similar level or maybe might be two or three years ahead of you or one or two years below you, just where you are on the research ladder. That's really helpful.”* Seeing the trajectory of more senior researchers is encouraging, as are intervarsity networks in small disciplines. Mentoring schemes in the UK and other countries were discussed, wherein students are assigned a *“buddy”* who is already on the programme. This system can provide social support (*“the first friend you make”*), especially for international students, as well as academic support and networking links. Student buddies are particularly valuable, as they can offer insights that supervisors and staff cannot (e.g., recommendations for useful taught modules).

### **3.2.2 Funding**

Funding is a significant concern for students (particularly international students, who pay expensive fees), and puts great pressure on students to complete as early as possible (see below, Section 3.3). There are few scholarship models for non-traditional and part-time students, which curtails the kinds of research that can be carried out and where students can publish. One student, who was balancing postgraduate study with professional practice, reported that the timing and manner (i.e., full-time) of their registration were decided at School level, that assumptions were made about their financial situation, and that they disagreed with the decision: *“They came back to me and they said verbally, it was never in writing ... they said that was adequate ... you're getting paid enough.”*

Students said that they were disheartened by the School's and College's responses to these challenges. Students commented that College funding for students (€12,000/annum) is not a sustaining wage (*“I mean, after rent, what would you have left?”*) and hasn't been increased in many years while the cost of living continues to rise. Some supervisors will *“top up”* student stipends by as much as €6,000, which creates a *“very demoralising”* situation where students are doing the same work for very different pay. Some students believe that the College should disburse fewer awards, in order to offer successful applicants a stipend on which they can reasonably live. Some students expressed a belief that it would be *“very easy”* for the SOM to top up student stipends as some supervisors do, particularly in biomedical science: *“They probably spend €6,000 a year on tissue paper in the lab. It's nothing, [to allow students] to feel valued.”*

### **3.2.3 Dual supervision**

Many research students in the SOM have a dual-supervision arrangement, which was noted to present challenges by several participants. For dual supervision to be successful, clarity and *“firm borders”* around roles are required. Students can receive conflicting advice from supervisors, and resolving this (even for small, practical issues, such as formatting in manuscripts) can be emotionally fraught and cause delays: *“You do tiptoe around, because these are people that are giving you references, future employers, so you don't want to offend anybody.”* Access to secondary supervisors for input and feedback can be problematic: *“I have to struggle hard for even a signature with some supervisors.”*

### **3.2.4 Work-life balance**

One student cheerfully remarked *“I’d definitely say I’ve got no life”*, which reflected the wry tone of the conversation around work-life balance for PG research students. Students are often allowed to manage their own time in a flexible manner, and students reported finding it hard to know when to take time off: *“The guilt is awful. You’re either coming back early or you’re not taking a break at all.”* Participants reported that thoughts about work spill into their free time and personal lives (*“You never finish”*).

Guilt around working hours was a very common experience described by participants. Participants described a culture of long work hours in the lab; knowing that other students are working evenings and weekends induces feelings of guilt and obligation to work similar hours, and students pass comments about other students’ practices (*“Oh, you’re off again? You’re going? I’m waiting until seven.”*). Conversely, some participants, particularly parents, also described feelings of guilt for working too many hours, leaving little time to devote to their families and even less time for themselves.

Financial concerns also motivate students, particularly international students, to work long hours and complete as early as possible, resulting in *“so much pressure to finish on time”*. Better supports for students who have not completed on schedule were highlighted as a potential measure to reduce pressure on students to work excessive hours.

Quality of work-life balance varies with the demands of the project, and is usually manageably good in the early stages. Some students reported that their supervisors are pro-active in promoting healthy work practices, and that clear shared expectations around the working week are important tools to improve work-life balance. Peer and near-peer support can help to promote work-life balance, particularly from former students who have progressed in their careers. Participants reported that former lab-mates encourage them to work healthy hours: *“Anyone that’s come out the other side, they do say I wish I hadn’t been as crazy or I wish I had taken more time out, I wish I hadn’t panicked as much as I did.”* In this way, peer influences appear to presently be more important than supervisor or college influences in this area.

### **3.2.5 School of Medicine supports**

Participants described a limited range of services available for postgraduate students compared to undergraduates; *“the college is for undergrad students.”* Career support and guidance for progression after graduation, especially with regard to industry careers, is lacking; appointments with the university career service are difficult to obtain and the service is mostly geared towards undergraduates.

The supervisor and lab group are the primary sources of support for students, and many students reported feeling disconnected from the wider College and University communities. One participant said, *“I feel like I’m part of ‘X’ research group and that’s it. That’s my place in the college, but there’s nothing broader than that.”* Another said, *“I feel I don’t have any connection with the College of Medicine. It’s been solely my supervisor and my group which have helped me.”*

When asked about the available supports in the SOM, students said that they were largely unaware of supports (*“I just don’t know what the School does for the research students”*). Some reported negative experiences with seeking support in the School, for example with supervision issues: *“I wouldn’t trust them as the place to look for help.”* Poor communication at School, College and University level came up a number of times (*“it’s huge”*, *“it’s frustrating”*), particularly in relation to taught modules (e.g., outdated information, cancellations not being communicated), GRC deadlines, orientation and induction. Emails often seem to go unanswered and students are forced to spend time going between offices to solve their queries that could be better spent working on their

own research or study (*"Nobody takes responsibility, I was kind of passed around from department to department and just wasted a lot of my time ... I was kind of fobbed off."*)

Two specific SOM supports were mentioned frequently. The first was orientation, which students described as being poorly timed (*"three months after I started"*) and unhelpful (*"I don't really remember, which is telling in itself, what I learned from it ... [The GRC] is the only thing that I have used from it."*). The second was the Thursday lecture series, which was positively regarded. However, with regard to this lecture series, students did note that more lectures for early-stage PhD students would be welcome, as the focus is primarily on writing grants, publication, viva preparation and academic progression.

### **3.2.6 GRC**

Participants generally reported positive experiences with the GRC, describing the members as supportive and approachable and their feedback as useful. The experience of presenting to academics who are unconnected to the project was perceived to be of benefit.

Detailed feedback is important to students; in particular, specific praise rather than no feedback or 'satisfactory' comments on the aspects of the project that are going well (*"If you're doing well, sometimes you get really no feedback."*). A structured feedback form was proposed to facilitate this. Scheduling was mentioned as a challenge; some students had to schedule their own GRC meetings and spent many weeks trying to confirm a date. Poor communication was also named as an issue, where students were not made aware of the deadline this year until a few days ahead of time.

Some participants raised concerns about the independence of the GRC. The supervisor has input into the selection of members, and it is difficult to appoint staff members who are both knowledgeable in the area and free from close professional ties to the supervisor. Students, therefore, may be less likely to raise concerns about their supervision with GRC members (*"If they have to complain to people who [are] obviously friends of their supervisor ... many people wouldn't, probably."*), and one participant described how the supervisor can request to see the student's GRC submission, including any complaints raised therein against the supervisor.

While students generally regarded the GRC favourably, they also described it as a stressful experience. At the outset, the GRC is presented to students as a check on the supervisory relationship and as an additional support, but it feels *"totally like an exam on you"* and it appears to students that the GRC is *"there to grill you or tear your work apart."* Most students say that it feels more like a *"mini-viva"* than a support structure, and only some GRC members clarify and emphasise the supportive nature of their role: *"They advertise it as something for the student, but nobody feels that it's something for the student."* Participants said that specific instructions to GRC members in this regard would be beneficial.

## **3.3 Completion and enrolment**

Thesis production was described by PG research students as the key challenge to completion. Thesis production is often seen as a piece of work that takes place at the end of the research process, but it needs to begin early; students can chase more or better results, run out of time and funding, and ultimately struggle to complete because they *"don't realise [they're] not hitting milestones until the end."* There was much interest among participants in completing the PhD by publication, which offers a useful protection against this problem; *"you're planning for papers as you go"* and *"you're writing all the time"*. This model, however, presents unique challenges; the timeframe for publication is somewhat out of the student's hands, and funding for publication in the best journals is lacking. In

addition, students find it difficult to find extant theses by publication to consult for guidance on formatting; *“because they're new, there isn't quite a consensus yet as to what the rest of the thesis should look like”*. Writing seminars and workshops may be helpful, participants said, in guiding students through this process. An intensive thesis bootcamp for articles and theses in the final year was also proposed.

The influence of the supervisor was also mentioned as a key factor in timely completion. Students described how, in some ways, they are *“at the mercy of [the supervisor] because [they] don't know what's expected”*, and that there can be a *“conflict of interest”* for the supervisor. A student may have completed enough work to submit, but the supervisor may have a vested interest in having them stay on as a student to complete further studies, rather than allowing them to submit and then complete a six-month postdoc to carry out the additional work. Many students submit after five or six years, to the benefit of the supervisor and the detriment of the student. This concern was reflected in other comments around student mental health; senior academics do good, worthwhile research, but at the cost of the students who do the work on the ground.

Regarding changing trends in enrolment on postgraduate courses among men and women, students described how *“the bar has been raised for everyone”*; where previously women required advanced degrees to progress, that requirement is now falling on men too. Higher completion rates for women than for men mirror achievement trends at undergraduate level, and participants perceived a generally *“high drive and focus”* for women at third level.

## **4. Findings – PG Taught Students**

### **4.1 Equality and diversity**

Postgraduate taught courses have a “*very healthy mix*” of students from different national backgrounds and gender identities, and staff were perceived to provide equal opportunities to everyone. Relations between students are largely collegial, pleasant and respectful. Very few students reported witnessing or experiencing discriminatory behaviour or language in the classroom. Where intolerant comments were reported, these were described as one or two “*fleeting moments*” during stressful times. Harsh or angry language is more likely to be encountered in the hospital setting (some participants worked as interns or SHOs alongside their studies).

This positive atmosphere in the School appears to arise organically among the students. Participants reported that organisationally, the SOM appears to be neutral in this regard, neither promoting nor inhibiting equality and diversity. This was sometimes well received by students, in that it does not “other” any particular group: “*I think it's actually good that there isn't a thing about it ... It is what it is, we're all the same.*”

Potential language barriers were mentioned as a concern. The pace of conversation, both online and in person, is fast, and some participants (both native and non-native speakers of English) reported picking up on some resentment or resistance from other students towards those with poor English, and impatience with repeating themselves if they weren't understood. Computer literacy was also mentioned, and that few supports exist for older students who may struggle in this regard.

### **4.2 Challenges and supports**

#### ***4.2.1 Timetabling and logistics***

Time management and handling multiple assignments simultaneously is a challenge for students, particularly when timetables are not finalised until relatively late. Many students stated that advance notification of their timetable at the start of the semester would be advantageous. Further, modules are not always well-balanced across semesters, according to students. Modules hosted online also present unique challenges; Wi-Fi on campus is weak and not secure, and the online setting is not very conducive to interaction between students and lecturers. Distance learning can lead to feelings of isolation and uncertainty as to whether the student is approaching the work correctly (“*I don't really have a clue what anyone else is doing. I don't know if I'm on the right track sometimes or not*”). Commuting to campus for midweek lectures can also be challenging for students who live far away.

#### ***4.2.2 Work-life balance***

For PG Taught students who work and study simultaneously, work-life balance is a significant challenge. More than one student described their work-life balance as “*horrific.*” One participant noted that “*I have no annual leave; every bit of annual leave I've used for college*”, while another commented that “*You're going from one thing to the next, going from an assignment to an exam to a professional exam to on-call this weekend to nights next week, and that's my life.*” For students who work in clinical settings, taking leave to attend to their studies is very difficult due to lack of cover on the ward, and leave is frequently cancelled at short notice for this reason.



Like PG Research students, many participants described feelings of guilt and shame around taking time off, both for how it impacts on their colleagues on the ward (“*You’re guilted into it*”) and how it affects their self-image (“*It’s such a competitive environment in the hospital, where people are saying, ‘Oh no, I’m not taking my annual leave because that means I’m weak’*”). This appears to be a culture problem within healthcare settings, at every level of seniority, and one participant commented, “*It’s a lot tougher the higher up you go, I think.*”

Advice from the university on managing work-life balance was described as “*laughable*”; the traditional advice to ensure proper sleep, a healthy diet and regular exercise is simply not practical with such a heavy workload. There was some acknowledgement among these students that “*you just have to put some things on hold, you can’t do everything*”, and one participant noted that “*I don’t think you can get to the top or achieve excellence if you’re looking to balance all aspects of your life ... it’s about what you want, essentially.*”

Full-time students, meanwhile, reported better work-life balance. Light scheduling of contact hours, flexibility in working times, a good mix of foundational and advanced modules, and good organisation on courses contribute to good work-life balance. No work was assigned over holidays and expectations were clear at the outset for many participants. With good time management, full-time students appear to be able to complete their studies during the normal working week and maintain a good separation between work and personal time (“*If the person can just manage time well ... by evening you’re free*”).

#### **4.2.3 School of Medicine supports**

Reports from participants on the availability of support within the SOM were mixed.

The attitude of the course director appears to be a key factor in how supported students feel. Course directors and lecturers were described in very positive terms: helpful, approachable, “*hands-on*”, and “*wonderful*”. International students received helpful, timely advice from the SOM and university to assist in their transition to living in Ireland; “*I couldn’t have asked for more; I was prepared.*”

Some students, however, feel very unsupported and more than one participant said that “*you’re on your own*” in the SOM. This view was most clearly stated by students who work and study simultaneously and who described the most severe difficulties with work-life balance.

Participants commented that available supports are sometimes highlighted in emails, but many students manage multiple email addresses and receive a substantial number of messages every day. It is easy, therefore, for announcements to get lost.

### **4.3 Completion and enrolment**

Most participants who commented on degree completion said that factors that keep students from completing on time are most likely to be unrelated to the course (e.g., family obligations, financial difficulties). However, delays in submission can occur where supervisors don’t provide timely feedback on theses (“*I’ve known people who have been finished ... but they’ve been held up because their supervisor wouldn’t sign off on it ... People are getting held up on that a lot.*”).

For some courses, the second year, when the student is working independently on their thesis with fewer formal contact hours, can see a loss of momentum. A student may begin a two-year course, obtain a new post, and abandon their course now that they have progressed to a new stage in their career. The second year puts greater responsibility on the student to manage their own work and seek guidance

from the supervisor as needed. Some students desired a firmer guiding hand from supervisors in this regard: *“Sometimes you just need to be told this is what’s happening. You need guidance.”*

Women’s purported greater ability to multitask was cited as a possible factor in women’s higher completion rates, as was their greater willingness to seek help from faculty when they encounter difficulties. A number of participants also believed that women simply work harder and are more organised: *“We’ll study harder, we’ll put in more time and effort, and we’re better at balancing.”* One participant commented that attendance among men at classes was poor until the final class before the exam, when they would ask many questions in an effort to catch up: *“they like to leave it to the last minute and hope they can wing it.”*

Regarding changing trends in enrolment among men and women on postgraduate taught courses, participants said that there is now an increased emphasis on academic skills for any career path in medicine, including mandatory continuing professional development (CPD) requirements. Where previously women required advanced degrees to progress, that requirement is now falling on men too; *“The bar is kind of raised for everybody.”* One participant said that differences in self-confidence may also be a factor in the preponderance of women on postgraduate courses. While women doubt themselves and feel that they need to learn more, *“the guys are pretty confident that they know it all. They don’t go on as many courses because they’re comfortable with the knowledge they have.”*

## 5. Key issues

Five key points emerged from the analysis of the discussions with postgraduate students, upon which the SOM may act to support students in their work.

First, participants generally reported positive experiences around equality and diversity. While unequal representation of men and women at staff level does not go unnoticed by students, their immediate experiences with their peer groups and lecturers are generally positive, and few students reported experiencing or witnessing discriminatory behaviour or language. The School was perceived as being relatively neutral or passive in this regard. A small number of students said that they saw this not as a failing, but rather as a sign of equal respect for all students and a stance that avoids “othering” any group.

Second, mentions of psychological distress arose a number of times across the discussions. Feelings of guilt and shame around taking appropriate time off appear to be extremely common and indicate underlying problems with local culture in labs. Students who work and study simultaneously are under more severe pressure and feel unsupported in the SOM. Participants repeatedly expressed a desire for closer support links with former students and postdocs – people who have recently experienced similar challenges and succeeded in overcoming them, and who may be able to offer guidance and support. The establishment of a “buddy system” or similar peer or near-peer network, such as those that exist in UK universities, presents an exciting opportunity to develop informal but highly effective supports for students.

Third, communication at School level appears to be an area in need of improvement. Students reported difficulties in finding information and obtaining practical assistance from the SOM, and were generally unaware of supports available in the SOM beyond their supervisors, course directors and the Thursday seminar series. It is hard for students to identify a clear chain of escalation where they wish to raise a concern or complaint.

Fourth, a related issue is the student perception of the SOM’s capacity and willingness to finance student supports and priorities. These perceptions contribute to low morale among students and feelings that they and their work are not valued. It is important to note that whether or not these perceptions have basis in fact, they nevertheless have real impact on the student experience and should, therefore, be taken seriously. Similarly, the actual existence of supports is of little benefit if students are unaware of them.

Finally, the relationship between the supervisor or course director and student is a key determinant of the student’s experience; one participant described the supervisory relationship as “*make or break*”. While we did not ask specifically about this issue, it arose again and again across every aspect of the discussions. Students see their supervisor and peers, not the wider SOM, as their primary support network and point of reference.

Therefore, in the effort to support students, the need to support their supervisors must not be overlooked. Supervisors are highly trained researchers, but have not necessarily received instruction as educators. Additional training and resourcing for supervisors to more effectively support students through the challenges outlined above, particularly around awareness of and willingness to engage with cultural problems within their own research groups, pro-active and explicit negotiation of dual supervision arrangements, training in the use of online systems, facilitating training of lab-based students in technical skills, and careful consideration of conflicts of interest as the research nears its conclusion are all areas that may yield dividends in improving the student experience. In a nutshell, ‘helping the helpers’ and bolstering the primary support networks of the students should form an important part of any strategy arising from this work.

## 6. Recommendations / Actions

Based on the issues outlined above, the Student Matters Group recommends the following actions be carried out **by the SAT**. Relevant details (responsibilities, timescales and success measures) will be agreed with the SAT.

Issue identified	Action - Description - Steps	Responsibilities	Timescale	Success measure
Lack of support and guidance for PG Research students taking maternity leave	<b>1. Develop supports for PG Research students taking maternity leave</b>			
	1.1 Develop PG Maternity Handbook for students.		Q4 2018	1. Draft ready for circulation to SAT. 2. Draft approved by School Board and available to students.
	1.1.1 As no university PG Maternity policy available, review other HEA institutions as benchmark.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead	May 2018	
	1.1.2 Liaise with Vice Dean of Graduate Studies, Student Matters Workgroup, registration, fees, HR and student support to collate existing supports and prepare draft.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead	Q3 2018	
	1.1.3 Collate nursing mother facilities at NUI Galway, Clinical Science Institute, Medical Academies and Associated University Hospitals.	SAT members, Medical Academy Admin, Equality Manager	Sept 2018	
	1.1.4 Prepare draft PG Maternity Supports Document for Student Matters feedback.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead	Sept 2018	
	1.1.5 Prepare draft PG Maternity Supports Document for SAT feedback.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead	Oct 2018 Jan 2019	
	1.1.6 Prepare draft PG Maternity Supports Document for School Board approval.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead		

Issue identified	Action - Description - Steps	Responsibilities	Timescale	Success measure
	1.2 Explore options for financial supports during leave.		Q1 2019	1. Clarification if there are supports available or the potential for introducing supports. 2. Supports to be added to Maternity Handbook.
	1.2.1 Arrange Chair of School of Medicine SAT & SAT volunteer to meet with Head of Researcher Development Centre and University Management Team.	Chair of School of Medicine SAT & SAT volunteer	Q1 2019	
			Q1 2019	
	1.2.2 Communicate supports to students.	Chair of School of Medicine SAT & SAT volunteer; Communications Workgroup	Q1 2019	
	1.2.3 Any additional information added to maternity supports document.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead		
	1.3 Consider advocating for lifting the student levy for PGT_students taking maternity leave of absence.		Q1 2019	1. Response from Equality Office. 2. Issue included in presentation for President's SAT meeting.
	1.3.1 Reach out to Central Equality Office to voice support for their advocacy on this issue.	Head of Equal Opportunities Chair of PGT committee, PGT Coordinator	Q1 2019	
	1.3.2 Highlight issue at President's SAT meeting	Student Matters Workgroup Lead	Q1 2019	

<b>Issue identified</b>	<b>Action - Description - Steps</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Success measure</b>
Student awareness of gender discrimination at staff level within the School	<b>2. Communicate work of Athena SWAN team to PG students</b>			
	2.1 Offer five-minute presentation on SAT's work at induction.		Q2 2019	1. Work of Athena Swan presented to PG students at Induction. 2. Slides available.
	2.1.1 Prepare 4/5 slides for presentation at induction.	Vice Chair of School of Medicine SAT	Q1 2019	
	2.1.2 Email Induction organizer to request 5 min slot.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead		
	2.1.3 Member of SAT to attend PGT Induction.	Volunteer from SoM SAT	Sept 2019	
	2.1.4 Member of SAT to attend PGR Induction.	Volunteer from SoM SAT	Sept 2019	
	2.2 Add PG-specific section to e-zine.	Communications Group / Learning Technologist	Q1 2019	1. PG Section in e-zine
Lack of scholarship options / models for non-traditional and part-time PG Research students	<b>3. Explore scholarship and bursaries options / models for non-traditional and part-time PG Research students to ensure student access and increase participation</b>			
	3.1 Advocate for opening up of School of Medicine scholarships to part-time and non-traditional students.		Q1 2019	1. Receipt of information acknowledged and response provided.
	3.1.1 Contact Vice Dean of Graduate Studies and University Management Team representative, provide with relevant data, explore feasibility of opening scholarships to part-time students. Explore incorporating wording in scholarship call that explicitly	Chair of School of Medicine SAT & SAT volunteers	Q1 2019	

<b>Issue identified</b>	<b>Action - Description - Steps</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Success measure</b>
	welcomes applications from part-time and non-traditional students.			
	3.2 Consolidate information on Publication Costs support.			1. Information on eligibility gathered.
	3.2.1 Explore if applications for Publication Costs support are open to PG students.	Student Matters Focus Group Lead & SoM SAT Volunteers	Q2 2019	2. Response provided regarding clarification of eligibility requirements.
	3.2.2 If PG students are eligible, advocate clarifying eligibility and requirements (e.g. IRIS profile) in call. Contact Chair of SoM Research Committee.	Student Matters Focus Group Lead & SoM SAT Volunteers	Q2 2019	
	3.3 Consolidate information on University bursaries for journal publications.			1. Information on eligibility gathered.
	3.3.1 Explore if applications for University bursaries for journal publications are open to PG students.	Student Matters Focus Group Lead & SoM SAT Volunteers	Q2 2019	2. Response provided regarding clarification of eligibility requirements.
	3.3.2 If PG students are eligible, advocate clarifying eligibility and requirements (e.g. IRIS profile) in call.	Student Matters Focus Group Lead & SoM SAT Volunteers	Q2 2019	
	3.4 Disseminate information gathered on bursaries.			1. Information forwarded for inclusion in student handbooks.
	3.4.1 Recommend inclusion of information on any relevant bursaries in student handbooks.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead & Student Matters Focus Group Lead	Q2 2019	2. Information available on Athena SWAN
	3.4.2 Make information available on Athena SWAN webpage and in e-zine.	Communications Group	Q2 2019	

Issue identified	Action - Description - Steps	Responsibilities	Timescale	Success measure
Concerns around work-life balance and supervisor expectations	<b>4. Establish guidelines around after-hours emails and signatures</b>			webpage and in e-zine.
4.1	Establish guidelines around after-hours emails and signatures.		Q1 2019	1. Automatic signature rolled out in SOM.
4.1.1	Explore if automatic notice can be applied university wide to emails sent out of hours (Liaise with ISS).	Communications Group	Q1 2019	2. 50% of culture responses to confirm they added notice to email signature.
4.1.2	Email staff outcome of automation. If automatic notice is unfeasible then SAT to send email with instructions to request SAT and SoM staff to add note to email signatures.	Communications Group SAT and Communications Group	Q2 2019	
4.1.3	Include in culture survey if staff added notice to email signature.	Communications Group	Q2 2019	

The Student Matters Group additionally recommends the following actions be carried out **by other groups within the College and University**. The Student Matters Group commits to communicating these recommendations to the relevant parties.



Highlight Issues raised to College and University Level	<b>1. Provide report with actions and recommendations to SAT and relevant bodies.</b>	Student Matters Focus Group Lead	Q1 2019	1. Meeting takes place
1.1 Arrange meeting with Dean and Vice Dean of Graduate Studies, Chair of PGT Committee, Chair of SoM SAT and representatives of SAT and Student Matters Workgroup, to discuss issues outlined in Items 2-5 below				
CMNHS Series is popular; students raised additional topics that it should cover	<b>2. Advocate for expansion of CMNHS Academic Career Support and Development Series</b>	Student Matters Focus Group Lead to communicate data and recommendations at meeting (Item 1)	Q1 2019	1. Recommendations communicated at meeting
2.1 Recommend potential topics for inclusion: Careers in industry, postdoctoral researchers, topics aimed at early-stage research students, work-life balance (recommend a senior lecturer to present), PhD thesis by publication.				
Lack of mentoring for students and strong desire for more contact with near-peers	<b>3. Advocate for establishment of peer and near-peer support networks for PG Research students</b>	Chair and Vice chair of School of Medicine SAT & Student Matters Focus Group Lead to communicate data and recommendations at Action 1.1 meeting.	Q1 2019	1. Recommendations communicated at meeting
3.1 Advocate for resources to formally coordinate and implement a peer support network for PG students. Recommend in particular the establishment of a 'buddy system' to match Year 1 research students with Year 2 and 3 students who volunteer to serve as an informal point of contact for questions and advice.				

Increased interest in PhD by publication not met by current resources	<b>4. Advocate for development of PhD by publication resources</b>			
	4.1 Recommend expansion of existing guidance in handbook (if any), signposting to external resources, and compilation of list of relevant extant theses in NUIG library to be made available to students and updated as appropriate.	Student Matters Focus Group Lead to communicate data and recommendations at Action 1.1 meeting	Q1 2019	1. Recommendations communicated at meeting
Need to raise awareness of student experiences for supervisors	<b>5. Communicate student experiences and recommendations to research supervisors</b>			
	5.1 Preparation and dissemination of report for supervisors			1. Report disseminated to relevant staff
	5.1.1 Compile a report (“What Students Want You To Know”) for circulation to all supervisors of postgraduate students who carry out research (PG Research and Taught students). Report to include key issues raised by students in this report as well as the action points listed at the end of this document.	Student Matters Focus Group Lead	Q1 2019	
	5.1.2 Explore options for dissemination at School, College, University levels with Dean and Vice Dean of Graduate Studies who is member of University Management Team.	Chair and Vice chair of School of Medicine SAT & Student Matters Focus Group Lead to communicate data and recommendations at Action 1.1 meeting.	Q1 2019	
Need to raise awareness of student experiences for Course Directors	<b>6. Communicate student experiences and recommendations to Course Directors for PG Taught programmes</b>			

	6.1 Preparation and dissemination of report for course directors			1. Report disseminated to relevant staff
	6.1.1 Compile a report (“What Students Want You To Know”) for circulation to all Course Directors of PG Taught programmes. Report to include key issues raised by students in this report as well as the action points listed at the end of this document.	Student Matters Focus Group Lead	Q1 2019	
	6.1.2 Forward report to PGT Strategic Committee for dissemination.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead		
Lack of awareness among students of existing supports	<b>7. Updates to PG Research and PG Taught Handbooks</b>			
	7.1 Compile information listed at the end of this document and any relevant resources identified through the completion of any actions listed above.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead	Q2 2019	1. Information forwarded for inclusion in handbooks.
	7.2 Forward this information to Vice Dean of Graduate Studies and PGT Course Directors for inclusion in handbooks.	Student Matters Workgroup Lead	Q2 2019	
Emphasis on evaluation function of GRC and underutilisation of support functions	<b>8. Follow up with Discipline of Health Promotion pilot for new GRC model</b>			
	7.1 Follow up with Discipline of Health Promotion pilot for new GRC model (two separate committees for support and progression, respectively). Present their findings to SAT and, if findings are favourable, consider advocating for a similar system.	Student Matters Focus Group Lead	Q2 2019	1. Outcomes reported back to SAT.

#### **Action points for inclusion in Item 4 report (Report for supervisors)**

- Recommend extra consideration for dual supervision arrangements and explicit establishment of shared expectations for supervisory roles
- Recommend CELT research supervision module (CEL6103, basic outline here: <http://www.nuigalway.ie/media/celt/files/courses/PgDip---CEL6103---Research-Supervision-and-Development.pdf>)
- Recommend that supervisors pro-actively encourage healthy work-life balance and establish clear shared expectations around working hours
- Provide guidance for supervisors serving on GRCs (dual support and evaluation roles, meeting with student in support capacity, provision of comprehensive positive and negative written feedback)
- Highlight importance of supervisory role for timely completion for PG Taught students
- Highlight importance of timely submission for PG Research students and promote awareness of potential conflict of interest in keeping students on
- Encourage supervisors to signpost students to English for Academic Purposes Support Programme where necessary
- Recommend supervisors to develop resources for technical skills (e.g. video resources for equipment, Blackboard Collaborate, CELT, Blackboard Festival resources)
- Encourage supervisors to highlight the student handbook as a key resource throughout the year – first point of reference for School-level queries

#### **Action points for inclusion in Item 5 report (Report for Course Directors)**

- Highlight computer literacy resources (e.g. Inclusive Practice and Universal Design for Learning – Jane Ennis) and encourage Course Directors to signpost students to available training and supports
- Remind lecturers to slow down their speech to support students for whom English is a second language
- Encourage Course Directors to signpost students to English for Academic Purposes Support Programme
- Prioritise advance notification of timetables (establish July deadline for September start)
- Recommend balancing modules as far as practicable and addressing this as part of quality review process
- Highlight work-life balance issues for students who work alongside their study. Recommend that Course Directors provide additional information about workload and expectations for prospective students who intend to work alongside their course (including indicative hours along with an advance timetable) and encourage students to seek clarity early on available study leave for postgraduate study.
- Encourage Course Directors to encourage students to form their own inclusive support networks (WhatsApp, emails, Classroom sessions on Blackboard).
- Highlight challenges of distance learning and potential for isolation. Encourage Course Directors, lecturers and staff to provide introduction videos for students and host online office hours.
- Highlight importance of supervisory role for timely completion for PG Taught students
- Encourage Course Directors to highlight the student handbook as a key resource throughout the year – first point of reference for School-level queries

**Information for inclusion in handbooks**

- Signposts to financial supports, including write-up bursary
- Signposts to career supports (e.g. Head of Research Development)
- Signpost to computer literacy and English language supports
- Highlight WiFi options on campus, including Eduroam, and encourage students to refer issues to IT ServiceDesk
- Provide students with Directory of Support Services within NUI Galway and in the Community