

Clarity and Communication for Postgraduate Research Students

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Glossary of Terms

HSS = Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

PGR = Postgraduate Research Student

PGT = Postgraduate Taught Student (eg MA, MSc or similar)

PhD = the qualification a Postgraduate Research Student studies for

Russell Group = The Russell Group is a self-selected association of twenty-four public research universities in the United Kingdom with a focus on world-class research-intensive impact, of which QMUL is a member

What do you want?

1. Assurance that all PGRs receive QMSU emails, and a commitment to assess that this remains the case every three months
2. Creation of a PGR area of the QMSU website to feature communication links and chains of representation between PGRs, Schools/Institutes, the QMSU, and the Doctoral College
3. The development and implementation of an 'Introduction to the QMSU for PGRs' session, to be delivered to PGRs across QMUL every year to ensure PGRs have a sound understanding of how QMSU supports and represents their interests during their course of study
4. For the QMSU to carry out a documented feasibility investigation into the establishment of an Executive Officer Position with specific responsibility for both postgraduate taught students and postgraduate researchers, to be held by a current or recently graduated postgraduate

Why do you want it?

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed a lack of support and representation for postgraduate research students at QMUL. We and many of our colleagues were not aware of the extent to which QMUL Senior Management and the Doctoral College rely upon the QMSU representative system for PGR feedback, particularly given the lack of involvement of PGRs within the QMSU. This has been compounded by the fact that the role of PGR HSS representative has been unfilled for several years — with seemingly no serious investigation given into why this might be by QMUL or the QMSU — which has created further disparity in representation. The QMSU Student Council and Executive Board is also dominated by non-PGRs, which undoubtedly further contributes to a lack of understanding of the specific issues faced by PGR students.

The current QMSU Executive Board has recognised this underrepresentation of PGRs in QMSU structures and events, and the introduction and scope of 'Project Doctorate' is noted and appreciated. However, we feel that interventions must go beyond existing structures such as listening forums and student consultations.¹

This motion intends to present a starting point from which to begin addressing this underrepresentation, founded on the ongoing substantial issue of communication between PGRs and the QMSU. Principally, the importance of the QMSU for lobbying on behalf of the PGR student experience with the Doctoral College.

To demonstrate this, Figure 1 represents the current reality of the School of Geography's representation chain between PGRs, the School, the QMSU, and the Doctoral College. To be clear, this only exemplifies one PGR course experience. However, we are aware communication chains remain poor across the university for PGRs in other Schools/Institutes.

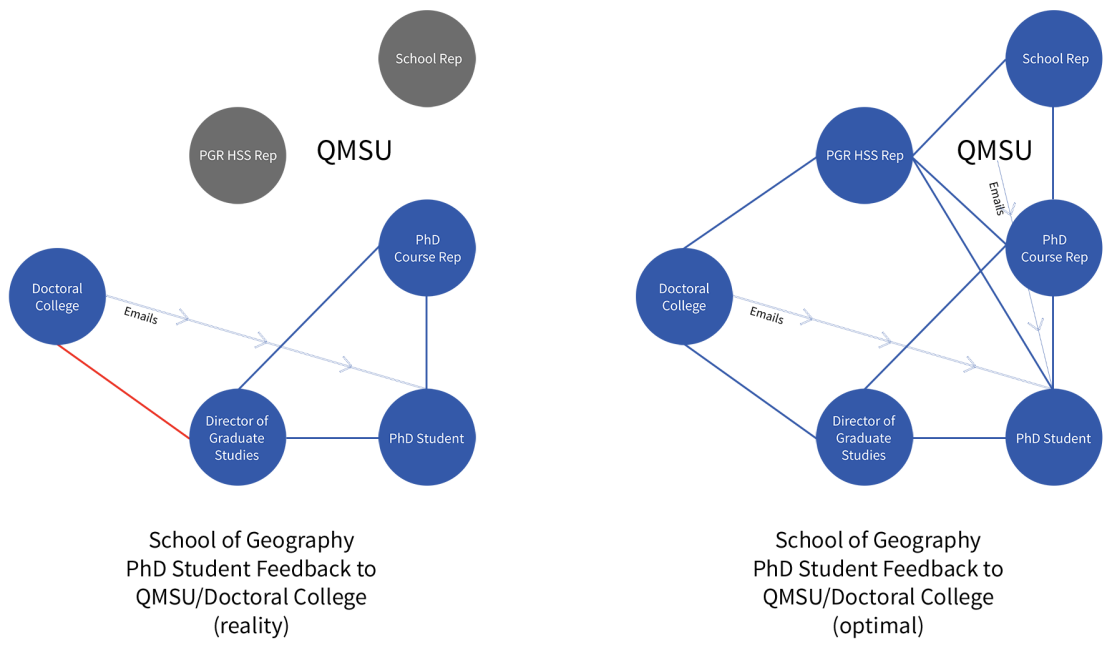


Figure 1. Reality and optimal view of PhD Student Feedback Chains to the QMSU and Doctoral College within the School of Geography

Optimally, there would be overlap between the PhD Course Reps, and the School Rep and the PGR HSS Rep within the QMSU, who would liaise with the Doctoral College on behalf of all HSS PGRs. With the HSS Rep role currently empty, and the School Rep so far declining to engage

¹ We would like to note here too that as two Geography PGR students, we have not received any correspondence via email from the QMSU about Project Doctorate, or through existing chains of communication such as our PGR Course Rep Matthew Beach, who is the seconder of this motion. A survey of our current PGR cohort who continue to receive the QMSU emails showed there did not appear to be emails sent regarding listening events for Project Doctorate.

with PhD Course Reps in the School, the only remaining avenue for representation at the level of the Doctoral College is through the School's Director of Graduate Studies.² Recent exchanges querying the level of acceptability making use of this portion of the chain between the School and Doctoral College revealed hostility against not going via the QMSU in the first instance (hence the red line of correspondence in the 'reality' diagram).

A further explanation for the lack of PGR engagement with QMSU may be the ongoing (for at least two years) issue that many PGRs do not receive QMSU emails. This means that they are unaware of events, elections, and this meeting. QMSU acknowledges this, and are apparently waiting for the university to make changes to their system before the issue can be resolved. This problem is furthered by the fact that the only all-PGR email list within QMUL is held solely by the Doctoral College, who have to date declined to share the list with the QMSU.

We present four points of efficacy aimed at addressing these current shortcomings:

1. The QMSU must ensure that all PGRs receive QMSU emails, and assess this continues to be the case on a regular basis (arguably no more than three months at a time). The QMSU have acknowledged that this is an ongoing problem. In this sense, surveys and listening events remain incredibly important, but if PGRs are not aware they are happening, then only a portion of PGRs' views and opinions can be represented. In the interim, arrangements should be made with the Doctoral College to ensure that all PGRs receive relevant QMSU communications.³
2. A section of the QMSU website dedicated for PGR students is desperately needed. There must be a new page or section created that outlines the following:
 - The specific relevance of the QMSU with regards to PGRs, including the optimal representative and communication chains
 - An account of how PGR voices are represented within QMSU, as well as to the Doctoral College and the wider university
 - How PGRs can find out who represent them, including course reps, school reps, and faculty reps
 - How PGRs can campaign to be elected to representative roles not only related to their course of study, but wider student engagement roles as well (e.g. engagement officer, LGBT+ representative, student council chair, etc.)
 - How the QMSU communicates with PGRs

It must be clear that the QMSU is there for PhD students not only for support if problems arise in their studies, but also as a mechanism of involvement to supplement their student experience through engagement. This website page or section must also be developed with input from PGRs.

² The Postgraduate Research Representative Role Description states 'Compulsory attendance to the School Forum chaired by School Rep.'. However, correspondence from the QMSU stated School Reps are not mandated to interact with all Course Reps, and the School of Geography's PhD Course Rep has not received any information about School Forum meetings.

³ A precedent for such an arrangement has already been set with the Doctoral College sending notification of the January QMSU Annual Student Meeting to all PGRs on 13/1/21.

3. In addition to point two requesting a specific page or section on the QMSU website, there must be a pre-designed session, either in-person or online, delivered to new and existing PGR cohorts by a QMSU Executive Officer. This session will explain the role of the QMSU, chains of communication across the university specific to their School/Institute, and the relevance of this to PGRs. There exists an untenable amount of assumed knowledge within the Academy, and it is clear that the QMSU is not an exception. People enrol on PhD courses at different stages of their lives from diverse areas of the world and experiences. Even students embarking upon a doctorate in a linear fashion directly following undergraduate and postgraduate study may not have engaged with a Student Union at their previous institution(s).
4. A paid position would allow someone with relevant experience to ensure the representation of all postgraduate issues at the top-level of the QMSU. Further, we believe it is an unreasonable expectation for undergraduates to be responsible for the postgraduate experience across faculties. While we understand that postgraduates are permitted to run for most if not all of the part-time representative roles, the reality is that these are currently dominated by undergraduate students. The QMSU has itself recognised a lack of postgraduate engagement, given the implementation of Project Doctorate. This position would go further than the aims of Project Doctorate, creating meaningful continuity that would allow the postgraduate engagement to outlast the position, wherein a record of work completed in the role would be maintained; a paid position would also ensure a safety net of continued representation if pertinent positions are not filled annually. We also note here there is a precedent set by other Russell Group universities, many of whom already have a similar role in place.⁴ To be clear, we are not asking QMSU in this motion to commit to establishing this role, we are requesting a documented feasibility study into the possibility of this role by the end of this academic year — ideally establishing the role if it proves to be feasible by Spring of next academic year.

What Impact will this have?

The QMSU will significantly improve its understanding of the PGR community and the unique issues faced by those undertaking PhD study. The QMSU will be able to better represent the voices of PGRs to the QMUL Senior Executive Team, the Doctoral College, and the wider community. Equally, QMUL PGRs will be better informed and represented throughout the lifecycle of their PhD with a greater awareness of the support that their QMSU can provide to them. The QMSU will achieve and exceed the proposed aims of Project Doctorate, in addition to demonstrating its commitment to the Russell Group aims of establishing and maintaining world-class, robust institutions of study and support for the next generation.

⁴ Cardiff University (<https://www.cardiffstudents.com/about-cusu/postgrad/postgrad-officer/>), Newcastle University (<https://www.nusu.co.uk/yourvoice/officers/postgraduate/>), and Queen's University Belfast (<https://qubsu.org/YourUnion/MeettheTeam/StudentOfficers/Postgraduate/>) all maintain postgraduate officer positions.