**Graduate School Review**

**College of Social Sciences**

**28, 29, 31 May 2024**

**Commendations:**

- **2018 Graduate School Review**: The panel noted that the Graduate School has taken the recommendations from the 2018 Graduate School Review (GSR) very seriously and has responded constructively. It was acknowledged that some of the initiatives taken are relatively recent and their implications are not known yet and it is important to keep monitoring them and make course corrections where needed. Overall, the Graduate School is functioning well.

- **Reflective Analysis and Data Pack**: The Graduate School presented a very detailed and helpful reflective analysis. The panel was very complimentary on the use of data for understanding the PGR cohort and graduate school activities.  It is an example of good practice that can be shared with the other graduate schools as much as possible.

- **Strong leadership**: The Graduate School has a strong leadership, and it was noted that the Dean, PGR Directors and support staff have invested in their role and in enhancing their students' experience. They have built a strong culture and a community where staff members have a platform to express their views openly.

- **Streamlined processes and communications**: Following the recommendations in GSR 2018 the Graduate School has taken various initiatives to streamline the processes, improve communications, develop a proactive marketing plan, enhance scholarship and funding opportunities and tackle the APR process and completion rates productively.

The panel acknowledged that there are some factors and challenges which are impacting not just the Graduate School but also the university and the sector and actions to tackle them are to be taken collaboratively at the institutional level.

**Recommendations:**

- **Remodelling of the APR process** – The panel noted that the APR in year 1 aims to improve the completion rate, student retention and student wellbeing and support. The College has taken a good initiative to tackle any issues in the early stages of the PhD and assess if there is a need to take any corrective actions. The panel recommended that it is very important to articulate and communicate effectively to the staff and students that the process is constructive, supportive and is to provide the opportunity to students to express their views freely and in

turn enhance student experience, wellbeing and career development. Going forward, the Graduate School should monitor the implications of this initiative whether it is delivering the intended results or not. There should be consistency and coherence amongst the schools when the changes in the APR process are implemented.

- **Widening Participation (WP) at PGR level:** The university is keen to access the full talent pool but recognised that responsibility shouldn't sit with only the Graduate School and should also be addressed at the institutional level. Generally, the institution has focused on WP at undergraduate level. Nevertheless, it is recommended that the College identifies and understands the WP issues for PGRs within its disciplines and how to address any issues this raises. The panel commended the data being collated and the dashboard the graduate school has developed as it provides a good platform to investigate more complex questions and issues and can initiate wider conversations at institution level as widening participation is a very important topic for the funders and the sector.

- **Pastoral and Wellbeing support:** The panel appreciated that this is a complicated issue and there is difference in practices within the college. The panel felt there is a scope to review and get a better understanding of the practices and resourcing for wellbeing support to ensure that the initiatives are effectively implemented. The panel noted that there is a lack of awareness in some areas of the college and recommended that the college can improve the communication about its practices and provision through better signposting, integrating it in supervisor training etc. School of Education has good wellbeing support in place, thus being example of good practice within the college which could be shared further.

- **Careers and Employability support**: The Business School offers a good careers and employability support which can be extended to other schools. It was noted that students felt that the employability support available isn't fit for purpose and careers beyond academia wasn't within the focus of the College. The career advice does not take into account what stage of the professional career the student has joined the PhD at, as it normally addresses the needs of students who are beginning their career.

- **Communication:** The quantitative data in the PGR surveys indicates that the PGR students have a positive experience with respect to communication. However, it was observed by some in the GSR student meeting that the university has become somewhat faceless post pandemic which has brought a sense of isolation and lack of community within the student cohort, and between the students and support staff /academic staff. Students also felt that information could be difficult to access and to get responses to email queries. Support staff also expressed being overwhelmed by the volume of emails. It is therefore

recommended that the graduate school explores mechanisms to make information more accessible. A working group comprising both staff and students could be an effective mechanism to engage the student body on identifying, understanding and addressing issues.

- **Functional alignment:** There is a need of stronger functional alignment between the Graduate School and school-level PGR administration to bring more resilience and cohesion in the overall PGR administrative structure. Building a community of practice for the PGR administrators could be an effective mechanism for knowledge exchange and collaboration, using, for example, MS Teams channels.

- **Training needs analysis (TNA):** The panel noted that this is an increasingly important subject for funders. The panel observed that TNA practice is not embedded uniformly across the schools. There are some examples of good practice but students in some areas are struggling to find appropriate information on training. TNA should be included in the APR process and incorporated in the supervisor training to emphasize its importance to the staff and students and bring a consistent approach across the schools. ESRC is moving from training needs analysis into development needs analysis. Training requirement is a discipline specific topic and should be a living document for each PGR, embedded and updated at different stages of their student journey. TNA should be made more visible and valuable element and be built into standard supervision.