



# SUMMARY

**THE POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT  
STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

## **Policy Inquiry: Postgraduate Taught Student Experience**

The Students' Union launched a Policy Inquiry into the postgraduate taught student experience at Royal Holloway in Term One of the 2022-23 academic year. As most courses last a single academic year, the Students' Union tracked the postgraduate taught student lifecycle through online surveys in Term One, Term Three and in the summer months while students worked on their dissertation or major project. We also ran a focus group in Term Two. This paper summarises some of the findings from different areas of the postgraduate taught student experience at Royal Holloway. A more detailed discussion of these issues with a full list of recommendations has been published in our [Student Voice Report here](#).

### **Inductions**

In our Term One survey for September starters and our Term Three survey for January starters we learned there are issues with the current provision of inductions for postgraduate taught students during their separate induction periods. 79 per cent of September starters and 83 per cent of January starters were satisfied to an extent with the support and guidance provided by the University to help them settle into their course. Many survey respondents explained staff were friendly and information was clear in the inductions, however, students felt the administrative aspects around inductions were poor. Time and dates of events were often not clearly stated or shared last minute, including enrolment information and student status. There were conflicting opinions from the September group about the material presented during the induction talks with some students stating it was repetitive from their undergraduate experience while others felt there were assumptions in knowledge. Royal Holloway postgraduate taught students based at the Central London campus have a very different induction experience to those who study in Egham. London students flagged there was a lack of support and guidance during their induction period, and there is a lack of communication about talks and dates. We learned there is room for improvement for making London students feel more included during this period of transition.

Finally, there is one area of the postgraduate student experience we believe needs to be added to the induction schedule for this community—financial advice. Our summer survey revealed that a proportion of students undertaking a postgraduate taught degree at Royal Holloway considered pausing or leaving their studies due to financial struggles while studying. The lack of government support for this community and high course fees contribute to this issue. The University should include an induction talk on financial advice which explains other ways students can access additional financial support. Signposting students at the start of their degree might help them feel better prepared and more empowered to seek help if they're struggling financially later in their studies.

### **Course Structure and Organisation**

Throughout the Policy Inquiry there were certain aspects of the student experience we wanted to track to see if there were any major changes while undertaking the degree. Timetable issues as well as course organisation were two of these areas. In the free text responses for our Term One survey, the most common issue raised by students were problems with their timetables. A high-frequency complaint was that there were major delays where class schedules were not available until after term started and teaching had begun. Errors were another common problem, and many students mentioned

classes were often held in a different location to what was stated on their timetable. Finally, multiple students mentioned problems with module registration, and this resulted in delayed schedules as well as an inability to sign up for modules they were interested in taking. These mistakes continued to occur throughout the academic year. Our surveys also flagged that many part-time and Continuing Professional Development students feel overlooked by university administrators, especially in terms of getting the correction information around timetabling, registration and changes to the course. Other marginalised groups within the postgraduate taught community like commuter students, those with work commitments or caring responsibilities also have more difficulty adjusting their schedules to accommodate last-minute timetable changes.

Despite the above issues, 90 per cent of September respondents in the Term One survey felt their course was well organised and running smoothly. In Term Three there was a decrease of 10 percentage points to this question, and just under 80 per cent of September respondents felt this way about their course. January starters were asked the same question in Term Three, and 70 per cent of students felt their course was well organised and running smoothly. This is likely a result of the above issues as well as other more specific incidents related to that cohort's course structure and communication around the different January teaching models. The insight we gained from the survey and focus group about the January course structure revealed there is potentially a huge gap in knowledge around January teaching dates, the dissertation or major project's submission and what exactly their course fees covered.

### **Assessments and Feedback**

Our Policy Inquiry revealed there are currently issues with the scheduling errors and poor communication of assessments as well as recurrent deadline stacking within departments. We additionally asked students in our Term One and Three surveys about feedback they receive on their work and whether they have been given the opportunity to provide feedback on their experience with the course. Student comments around marking criteria and whether it was clear were mixed with just under half of the students in both surveys maintaining marking criteria was readily available and explained by academic staff. Student complaints about marking criteria were mixed throughout our Policy Inquiry. Those with positive experiences stated it was clear and returned in a reasonable amount of time while student complaints about often highlighted the information was too generic, it was inconsistent across modules in the same department, too subjective by academic staff and their work was not returned within the stated timeframe. When it comes to opportunities around student voice, most student comments in both surveys indicated they had been provided with the chance to give feedback on their experience with the course, although it remained mixed in students' responses as to whether the University, Schools or departments had acted on that feedback.

### **Careers and Employability**

One comment which recurred throughout all three surveys and our Term Two focus group was that a large proportion of postgraduate taught students at Royal Holloway want more practical, real-life experience and careers support while undertaking the degree. This comment cropped up with both January and September starters in different themes for each of the surveys like teaching, skills development, overall satisfaction and degree expectations. The Students' Union wanted to learn more about postgraduate taught students' engagement with the Careers Service. Less than half of

the September cohort answered they had engaged with the Careers Service since starting their degree, however, 73 per cent of those respondents answered they were satisfied to an extent with their experience using the Careers Service. 67 per cent of January respondents were satisfied to an extent. While not many students discussed their experiences with the Careers Services in detail, there were recurring comments throughout all our surveys and during the focus group from postgraduate taught students stating they want more support in this area of the degree from both the University professional service teams and their departments.

### **The Dissertation or Final Project**

In our summer survey we asked both the September and January cohorts about their experiences with the final stage of their degree—the dissertation or major project. September and January students who identified positive experiences with receiving support from their department discussed their general satisfaction from the preparation they received, students mentioned staff were helpful and students were given access to previous dissertations to better prepare for their own project. Student comments which discussed high satisfaction with their supervisor stated they had received good support and provided regular feedback. There were also recurring comments that their supervisor communicated regularly, and students had consistent meet ups online or in person to discuss the project.

Students who discussed their negative experiences maintained they received no support, or they would have liked more detailed guidance about the dissertation or final project. There were also a handful of comments which highlighted the negative impact the UCU strikes had on their preparation for their dissertation or major project both from a department and supervision level. Students who explained their negative satisfaction rating about the help they received from their supervisor maintained it was because their supervisor was often busy and slow to respond to queries.

### **The Postgraduate Taught Community**

Our Policy Inquiry revealed there is a strong consensus among postgraduate taught students that there is a real need for Schools, departments, the University and the Students' Union to run more regular events throughout the academic year and increase engagement with postgraduate taught students to help foster a stronger sense of community within this cohort while studying at Royal Holloway. The table below presents student agreement as to whether they felt part of an academic community.

<b>How much do you agree with the following statement? 'I feel like I am a part of an academic community within my department.'</b>					
<b>Cohort, Term and response number</b>	<b>% of survey respondents</b>				
	<b>Definitely Agree</b>	<b>Mostly Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Mostly Disagree</b>	<b>Definitely Disagree</b>
September, Term One (116)	34.48	37.07	18.97	6.03	3.45
September, Term Three (81)	18.52	33.33	23.46	19.75	4.94
January, Term Three (12)	33.33	33.33	16.67	8.33	8.33

We learned full-time students had stronger agreement compared to part time students in Term One, and Home students had the lowest rating. Students stated the postgraduate taught community was supportive and inclusive through student-led initiatives and events. There were also recurring instances revealed there are students in this community who had no interaction with other students, and they feel more social events would help them feel more involved within their department and the community. Agreement saw a huge decrease in Term Three, and international students had the lowest score. and just under half presented students' strong sense of belonging within their department. Comments discussed the ways students felt included within their department because of its size, organised activities and events, and opportunities to engage with other students. There were more instances which highlighted students lack of belonging because they had too much work to socialise, there were no events, students felt a part of the course but not the department, the small size of the course meant there was no sense of community and, finally, students based in London felt excluded.

### **Next Steps**

We have shared our findings and recommendations with the University, and it is our hope this report creates positive, impactful change for postgraduate taught students at Royal Holloway.

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