

# Library Services building our PGRs' sense of belonging

## Transcript

Hello. Welcome, and thank you very much for your interest. My name is Georgina Hardy - I'm the Postgraduate Development Officer at the University of Birmingham and over the next 7-8 minutes, I'm going to talk about how our Library Services have taken a number of different approaches to making PGRs feel valued as members of the research and University community.

A global top 100 university, the University of Birmingham is a research intensive university with campuses in Birmingham and Dubai, and is a member of both the Russell Group and Universitas 21. The postgraduate research community is a large and diverse group, with over 4000 PGRs from different backgrounds and at different stages of their lives. Nearly a third of our PGRs are international, and many have caring and work responsibilities alongside their research. Many visit campus rarely, even without COVID restrictions, either due to being enrolled on a formal distance learning programme, or simply because they don't feel the practical need to do so.

This diversity of situation, alongside the fact that their research involves a lot of independent work, can enhance feelings of isolation and create challenges to PGRs feeling a sense of belonging. Of course, these challenges have all been magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Library Services have been working to counteract these challenges and to make PGRs feel welcome and valued.

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One of the simplest ways we do this is to ensure that we are clear when we refer to PGRs on our webpages. We can't assume that they will identify themselves as either students or staff when navigating our pages, so we refer to "researchers" or "PGRs" explicitly to help them identify pages and resources relevant to them.

We maintain a regular presence at PGR staff-student committee meetings, demonstrating that we value PGR feedback and are keen to maintain a dialogue with this group.

Our Research Skills Advisors are offering 'Tea with a Research Librarian'. With a regular weekly time-slot, it's advertised in an informal way to encourage questions big or small and to help PGRs feel librarians are fellow professionals who enjoy learning about their research and get reciprocal benefit from their engagement.

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Communication with PGRs has always been a challenge for us. We had multiple channels, including committees and social media, but the messages didn't always seem to reach everyone.

For the 19-20 academic year, we auto-enrolled all PGRs onto a PGR-specific course on our virtual learning environment, Canvas, as a source of truth about the Library, and since October 2020, we have been using weekly announcements via this course to communicate directly with all PGRs. The announcements are received by e-mail by all PGRs who have set their Canvas notification settings to do so. This has cut out reliance on intermediaries (such as administrators, and PGR reps) from our communications, and we have been able to monitor engagement with the messages via Google analytics and Canvas page views as well as proactive action taken by PGRs – such as signing-up to

workshops or visiting our blog. The most popular stories have been about research skills, especially the PGR development workshops, and we've had positive feedback, for example one PGR noting that the Library does a great job at "keeping [PGRs] in the process" through this route.

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A key component of the workshops run by the Research Skills Team in Library Services has always been the opportunities for discussion between participants, and this is particularly true for the PGR development workshops. I'm a firm believer that sharing experiences and challenges helps to both combat feelings of isolation and enhance the learning experience on the day.

When lockdown hit, it was really important to me to try to maintain these opportunities in the online-only environment. Almost all of my online workshops therefore make use of breakout rooms for discussions. Much of the feedback we have received, which you can see examples of on the slide, has really justified this decision.

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The Postgraduate Researcher Writing Summer School was delivered online in 2021, as it had been in 2020. The programme of 8 live workshops and one full day's shut up and work was delivered via a Canvas module. The shut up and work day was run bi-modally, with PGRs able to participate online or in a socially distanced group in the Library Training Room. All communication about the programme was via announcements in this Canvas module, and participants were encouraged to contribute to asynchronous discussion boards within the module. In our feedback survey, 63% of respondents agreed they felt like they belonged to a community during the summer school.

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The Researcher Suite, a reserved space for PGRs and staff on the first floor of the new Main Library, opened in September 2016. Very quickly, we started to receive feedback, often contradictory, about the way the space was managed: noise, saving spaces with belongings, the temperature, and so on. The Suite has both a silent space and a more informal space, and there is tension between users who prefer even the informal area to remain silent and those who want to use it more socially.

Following a failed attempt to set up a user group, we started to display anonymised comments, with their replies, on a notice board displayed in the Suite. Many of the issues were easy to fix (e.g. providing blankets) but the key thing was that the notice board clearly showed the range of views of users of the space. Regular users of the Suite became more aware of others' comfort, and complaints fell to zero. PGRs felt they had been heard, and it helped us to build trust and rapport with our regular users.

The Suite continues to be well-used by PGRs when COVID restrictions have allowed, demonstrating the value of this space to the PGR community.

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As we head into the new academic year, we are hoping to build on many of the initiatives I have outlined. We will be offering our Research Skills workshops online, as well as returning to face-to-face when it is safe to do so. Our Canvas announcements will continue to contain a variety of stories that appeal to the differing needs of our diverse PGR community, and we have established a small group, including PGR representation, to look at PGR wellbeing.

Often PGRs see themselves as merely consumers of Library Services rather than co-creators of services that work for them. And of course, PGRs don't always have the time or the energy to engage in user groups or feedback. I hope we have demonstrated that at the University of Birmingham Library Services, we have been proactive in trying to find ways to really understand how we can develop our services for the benefit of our whole PGR community.

Thank you.