

# Postgraduate Student Engagement - Case Study 3

## University of Strathclyde Doctoral Researchers Group

The following case study was provided to NStEP during the consultation process and is shared with kind permission from the Doctoral Researcher's Group (DRG), University of Strathclyde. The example below outlines a structure which combines core enablers in postgraduate student engagement discussed in this report. These include postgraduate representation, how representatives integrate within committee structures, challenges around identity in learning communities, as well as enhanced community.



Founded in October of 2018, the Doctoral Researcher's Group (DRG) offers the primary source of Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) Representation at the University of Strathclyde. With strong links to university senior management, primarily through the Strathclyde Doctoral School (SDS), the DRG ensures that every PGR at their university has a voice. Despite being a group in its infancy, over 550 Doctoral Researchers actively engaged with the group in 2020.

**The Challenge:** As is general across the sector, Strathclyde's doctoral researchers found themselves questioning if they were more akin to university staff or students, concluding that due to the nature of postgraduate research they actually fell between the two categories (Figure 1). Further owed to the distinct challenges and issues faced by PGRs, in comparison to other student cohorts, they felt that this prompted the need for a tailored approach to PGR representation and community building.

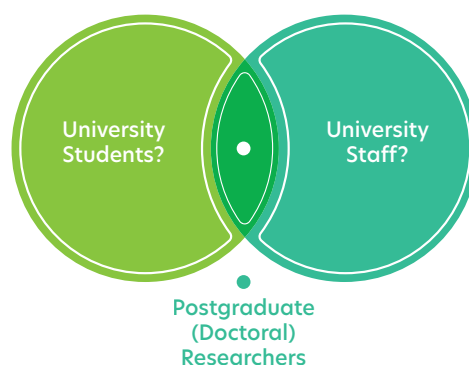


Figure 1: The blurred identity of the postgraduate researcher

**The Solution:** The establishment of the DRG. In its origin, the group was founded to provide representative voices for the SDS Management Board and other university senior committees. It was also founded outside of the university's Student Union (SU) but now, whilst remaining separate, works alongside the SU in some key areas.

## Aims and objectives of the DRG:

- To improve PGR representation throughout the university and its various relevant committees in collaboration with SDS.
- To improve the two-way engagement between PGRs and the SU in collaboration with the Student Exec. Team.
- To communicate to relevant parties within and outside the University the interests and successes of PGRs, and the constraints they face.
- To establish or enhance support frameworks and institutional policies, in collaboration with SDS, which benefit the quality of postgraduate research and improve PGR's experiences.
- To provide a platform for cross-Faculty, and interdisciplinary, events and training for postgraduate researchers of the University of Strathclyde.

## How does the DRG work?

<b>PGR Representation:</b>	The larger, general, committee of the group meets at least once a month at the group's Monthly General Meetings. These meetings bring the wider group together for updates on various projects and further create an opportunity for any PGR to raise points of discussion. Through these meetings every PGR is only one step away from university senior management (See Figure 2). Elected DRG Representatives then go on to attend regular university committees, and more recently the university's COVID response groups. DRG faculty reps also attend various faculty level committees.
<b>PGR Support:</b>	The group seeks to identify ways to improve the support provided to PGRs and if possible, work independently, or with SDS/SU, to provide this support. A recent example of this is the DRG's PGR Peer Support Program which provides regular support to over 150 of the approximate 300 first year PGRs.
<b>Events Organisation:</b>	Finally, the group organises PGR focused events. These events range from casual coffee mornings to the annual conference: Doctoral School Multidisciplinary Symposium (DSMS). This conference brings together PGRs from across the university to present their research in an accessible way. In 2020 DSMS had close to 400 registrations and a very strong social media presence.

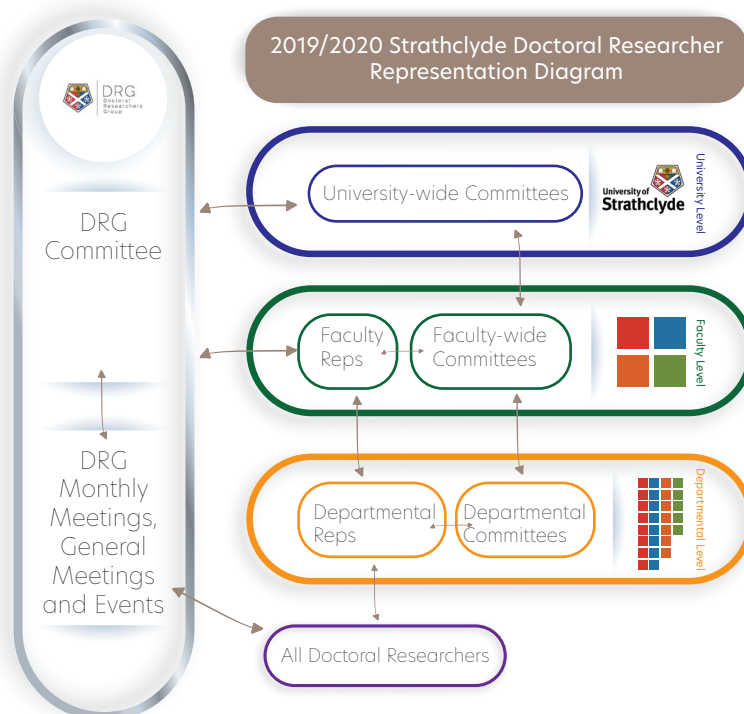


Figure 2: Representation Diagram (Reproduced with kind permission from the DRG)

## What is the structure of the DRG?

All doctoral researchers at the University of Strathclyde are eligible to join the DRG and its committee - which works to organise its various projects. The group's large general committee (Figure 3) is itself helped by a senior committee, consisting of the year's elected chair, co-chairs and faculty reps, often with the outgoing chairs also joining in an advisory capacity. This ensures consistency of support and direction. Sub-committees are also established annually to allow for spread of resource and focus.

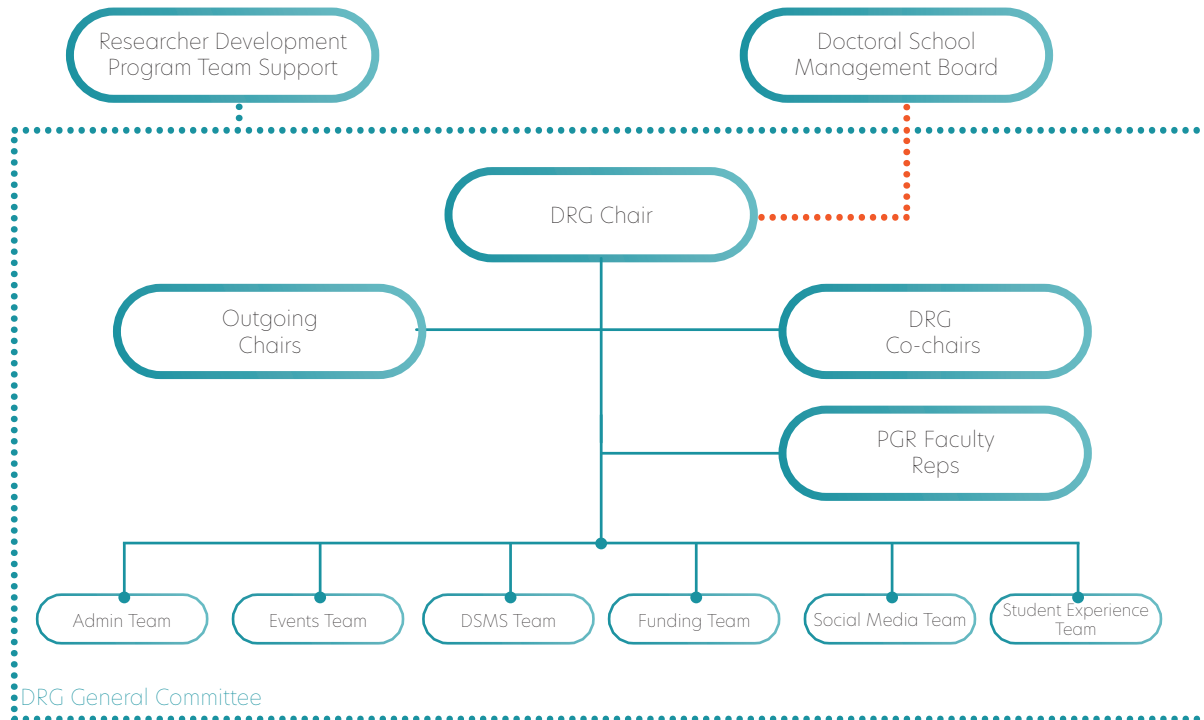


Figure 3: DRG Structure 2019-20 (Reproduced with kind permission from the DRG)

## How does the DRG fit in with the Student's Union?

The DRG, while separate, collaborates frequently with the SU. PGRs often view themselves as professionals/researchers, not necessarily students, and this can create a barrier between the SU, which is often perceived to be undergraduate (UG) focused, and the PGR community. The DRG hence strongly seeks three-way collaboration between themselves, the university (primarily SDS), and the SU (Figure 4). The DRG believes that there is a wealth of support that SUs can provide to PGRs, but this needs to be communicated in the right way, with tailored language. A main benefit of collaboration between the SU and the DGR is the provision of effective communication to the PGR community.

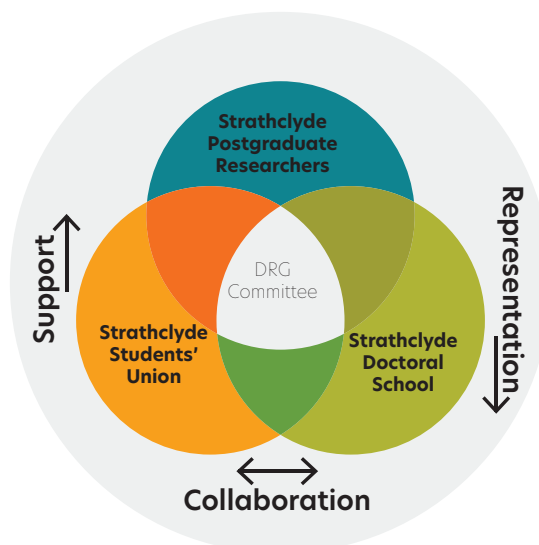


Figure 4: Relationship of the DRG Committee with Strathclyde Doctoral School, Students' Union, and Postgraduate Researchers

### **What are the main benefits of the DRG?**

- The main benefit is a genuine sense of community for an often-isolated PGR cohort.
- This is predominantly achieved through the organisation of both academic and social events such as the annual research conference DSMS and the PGR peer support network.
- Further to that, the DRG provides a platform which recognises the differences between PGRs and UG and postgraduate taught students. It indirectly addresses the blurred student-staff role by working closely with both university staff and the SU, raising the profile of PGRs throughout the institutions with a strong representation structure, thus imbedding the PGR voice and perspective in ongoing university developments.
- While PGRs themselves are the main recipients of the benefits offered by the DRG, it is recognised that many of the projects and events which are organised are also of great benefit to the university, such as DSMS being used to advertise and showcase the research completed by the institution.

### **What advice would the DRG give to other institutions looking to develop a similar initiative?**

- It is key to have buy-in from both PGRs and the university itself, especially in the form of 'championship' from a senior university staff member. The DRG was fortunate to be founded simultaneously with SDS, currently directed by Prof. Eleanor Shaw, Associate Principle, and this relationship has been fundamental to the impact created by the DRG. This senior management connection is also extremely useful in terms of providing recognition of effort, thus motivating PGRs; in 2020 Strathclyde's Principal & Vice Chancellor Prof. Sir Jim McDonald spoke at the DRGs AGM, providing recognition from the highest institutional level.
- Also of high importance is a robust pipeline of group leadership and succession planning. PGRs are typically enrolled with a university for 3-4 years. This means that a PGR who becomes involved in the group in their first year can grow their involvement as their knowledge and experience develops.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, institutions must recognise that PGRs, in terms of their age demographic, experiences, day-to-day work, and more, are different to PGT and UG students. Institutions should tailor their language and events to reflect this; by name alone SUs may present a barrier for PGRs who no longer identify as students.

This case study was published as part of the Postgraduate Student Engagement project in April 2021 by the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP). To find out more visit [studentengagement.ie](http://studentengagement.ie)