

School of Physics and Astronomy Diversity Committee
Focus Group with Female Postgraduates
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Introduction As tasked by the Diversity Committee, I held a focus group to gather opinions and experiences of the 39 female postgraduates in the School, who were invited by direct email. Only six students attended so while we had a good discussion, the resulting opinions are not necessarily reflective of the whole body. The research groups represented were: Astronomy, Particle Theory, and MRI. No one attended from the main building. There was a good split over all years, but no international students. Most were aware of the Diversity Committee but only a few knew about Athena SWAN. Overall the students were content and most issues were generic in nature (until I specifically steered the conversation towards gender-related issues).

- *Recommendation:* ask students to RSVP and then chase more proactively if attendance looks likely to be low or unrepresentative. Emphasize (more) that it's worth attending even if there are no issues. Contact a representative from each research group directly and ask them to encourage others to attend. Non-attendance likely reflects a larger pattern of the postgraduate cohort being hard to reach. Conduct a follow-up survey online to find out reasons for non-attendance.

School culture All students present had a positive or very positive view of the school culture. All reported a supportive professional and social environment in their own groups/buildings. However none said they had much of a link to the main building and didn't know any staff or students outside their own groups, but They did attend some colloquia and social events like the PhysSoc Christmas party (free food was an effective incentive!). They highlighted the value of staff-free events like the astronomy journal club and the old MPAGS conferences as being good opportunities to practice talks and discussions in a low-pressure environment.

Support Structures I circulated the slide used in the postgraduate induction this year indicating all the different support routes available within and outside the School (attached). Some students were not aware of who their second supervisor is, or had never spoken with them. For jointly supervised students, some were unsure of who they would approach if they had a problem and needed someone independent to talk to.

To my surprise some seemingly quite confident students who have been in Nottingham for a long time felt they would be wasting staff time by asking to talk to someone they didn't work with directly about an issue, and needed an explicit invitation to feel comfortable approaching staff (even those they deemed 'approachable'). Several students fondly remembered the unofficial pastoral role that Julie Kenney played, but did not have the opportunity to interact with the current admin staff in the same way. Only the first-year students were aware of the presence of a Welfare Officer in the school.

- *Recommendation:* include a formal meeting with the second supervisor as part of the induction and/or progression processes. Explicitly address network building (identifying mentors, advisors, go-to people inside and outside the School etc) as part of postgraduate training. Consider refresher sessions for postgraduates at different stages. Task the PG reps with writing an informal insider's guide for students by students along side the PG student handbook.

PG reps The group acknowledged that the focus of the PG reps varied depending on the personalities involved. Previous reps organized more social activities, but they felt the reps had been particularly effective in advocating on their behalf when there were problems with UniTemps registration in Autumn 2017.

UG Demonstrating When I probed about specifically gender-related issues, few were raised. However, there was nearly universal agreement that when the female postgraduates demonstrate in the lab, male undergraduates tend to avoid asking them questions, seeking out male demonstrators instead. Computing labs (e.g. SCO) were thought to be a particular problem. This dismissal was low-level but clearly made the students feel diminished and annoyed. On the other hand, female undergraduates often preferentially asked the female demonstrators for assistance, and the demonstrators reported deliberately seeking out the female undergraduates to see if they needed help. Given the skewed gender balance of the population, this was seen as a positive situation.

- *Recommendation:* while changing attitudes in the male undergraduate population is a big task, it would be possible to include a mention of the issue in the demonstrator training. For example, expand the current unconscious bias training to encourage male demonstrators to be aware of when their female counterparts are being sidelined, and act accordingly.

Harassment Despite the intense recent media coverage, the more junior students were not aware of some of the major stories of harassment in academia that have emerged in the past 18 months. All students agreed that it wasn't something they thought much about within the School, feeling very secure with regards to the staff and their peers, even when they were outnumbered. However, when we discussed travelling to conferences, fieldwork, or collaboration visits, all mentioned spending time worrying about issues like what they should wear to be taken seriously, whether or not to drink alcohol in social situations to stay safe, and how they would respond or seek help if a negative incident took place. Fear of harassment was also cited as a reason to stay in Nottingham from undergraduate to postgraduate study: the local environment was known to be 'safe', whereas other departments carried unknown levels of risk.

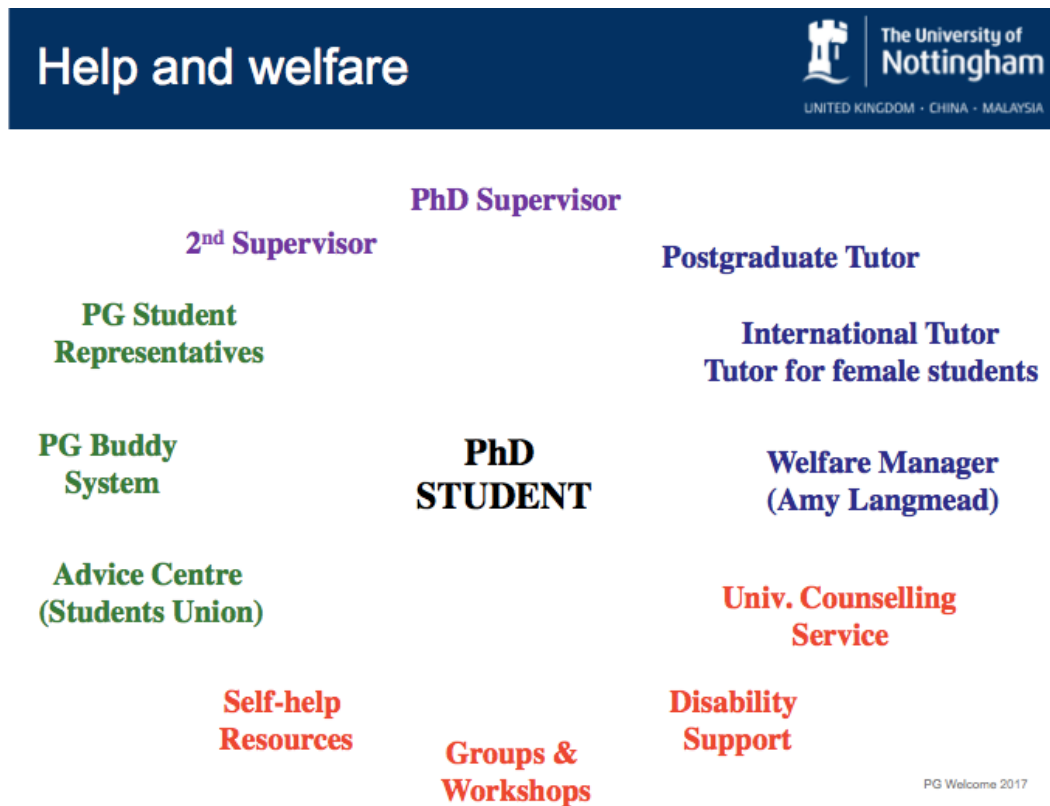
- *Recommendation:* include discussion of harassment in postgraduate supervisor training and postgraduate induction. Include discussion of what risks might be entailed by students while they are away from the university and how supervisors could help identify external support.

Ada Lovelace Day All students attended the colloquium on Mary Somerville by Dr. Karen Masters last term, and spoke extremely highly of it and the discussion that followed. They appreciated the high turnout from the school and the email sent directly by the Head of School advertising it. There was some mild expression of interest in holding social/networking events for women in the School, but it was thought this was something the PG reps could organize rather than the School.

- *Recommendation:* the students were reminded that the School provides the PG reps with a budget for events, and that they could always ask for additional funds.

Attachment:

Welfare slide from PG induction and PG supervisor training, Autumn 2017



Relevant Links

- May 2015 IoP/RAS report on PG female experience in Physics and Astronomy
http://www.iop.org/publications/iop/2015/page_65643.html
 - Survey highlighted differences between male and female postgraduates regarding: satisfaction with supervision, and deterioration of relationships with supervisors, evolution of career ambitions, and social isolation.
- Clancy et al., 2013, "Survey of Academic Field Experiences (SAFE): Trainees Report Harassment and Assault", PLOS One
<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0102172>