

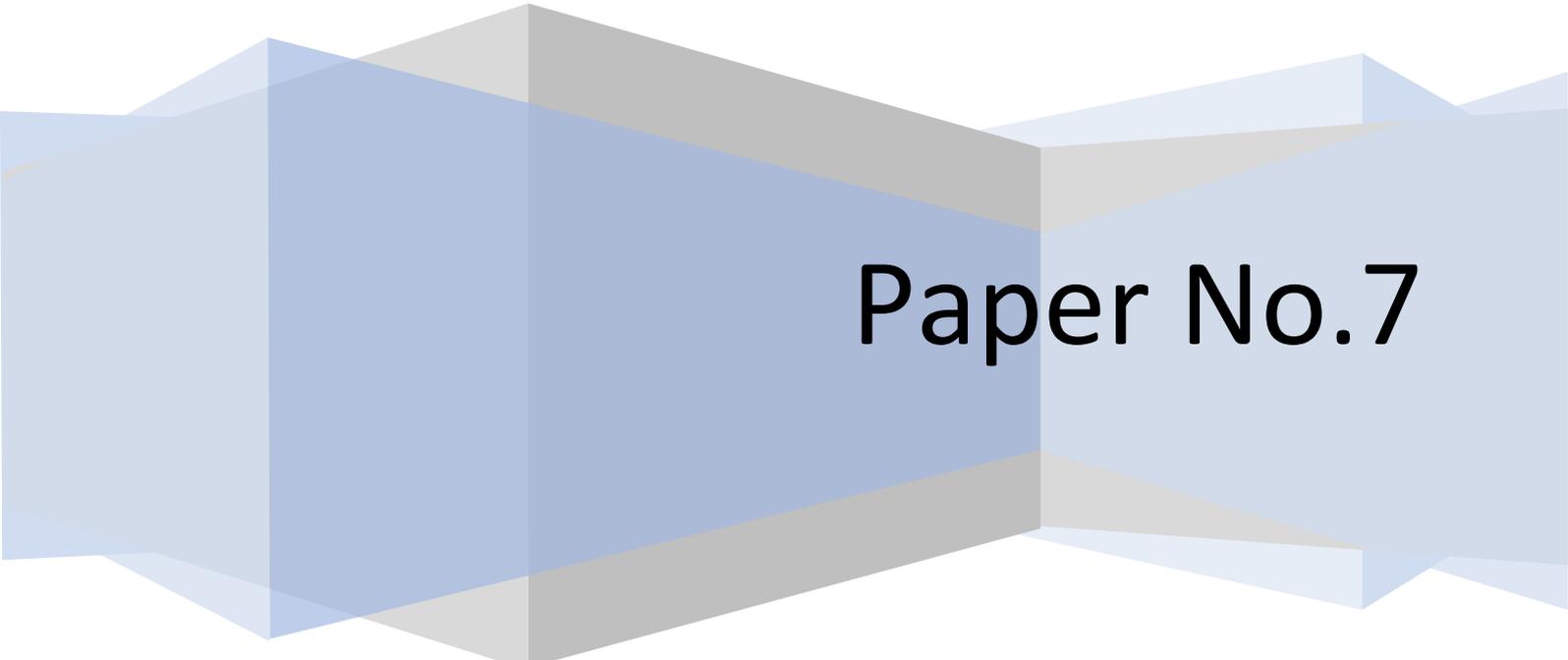
The Libertarian Ideal

Voice, Exit and Post-Libertarianism

Structural Fragmentation

**An Analysis of Administrative Organisation in
the EPS PGR Administration Team**

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Paper No.7

This study analyses the EPS Postgraduate Research (PGR) administration team within the University of Birmingham. Using ethnographic methods of office-based observation, surveys and an interview, a series of planned changes have been developed to help combat ossification and what I term regressive conservatism found within the administrative structure of the PGR lifecycle. The administrative team is a relatively new team brought in to direct the PGR activities within the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPS) at a college level, taking over from the traditional organising methods that saw PGR administrators housed within school-based Education Support Offices (ESOs). The current structure means that PGR activities are fragmented along school lines, with significant influence still maintained by academics within each school. This has limited the potential for reforming processes and centralising competencies, leading to a lack of cohesive team culture and a series of redundant, repetitive processes that need change. I propose three potential changes from my research and data, identifying a combined proposal to create a shared office for all PGR administrators and move PGR administrative work patterns toward a process-based split as the best means of centralising processes, creating team culture and reducing transactional activities. I then construct a theoretical monitoring system using Kotter's eight step change model and a Gantt chart which can be used to analyse the change and find any bottlenecks or potential failures in its implementation.

Key terms: regressive conservatism; fragmentation; team culture; transactional activity; shared office; process-based work patterns; PGR lifecycle; administration

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The Fragmentation of University Systems

Throughout the past few months I've written a number of essays on the ideas and junctures of organisation theory, specifically looking at the issues of flux and organisational ossification and how these are overcome across a number of settings and in a number of conceptual frameworks. The following ethnographic study I've conducted applies some of these theories to the area of student administration within a university setting, attempting to plan out and conceptualise the vectors for change and their potential success by attempting to create a cohesive team culture and radically altering the work patterns of an administrative team to maintain a proactive, dynamic stance in the face of an existing fragmented team structure and a higher education environment subject to substantial strategic change in the next five years.

The university system is going through a quick period of uncertainty and flux, changing from a purely academic organisation to one increasingly riven with administrative and bureaucratic systems. "Since universities are now in open commercial rivalry with one another, the functions essential to this competition - finance, marketing, fund-raising, estates, human resources - are strengthened, and the role of academics in decision-making processes weakened". There has been a "rise of occupations whose expertise lies in markets and regulation - accountants and auditors, corporate lawyers, public relations and human resource practitioners, contract managers, administrators - at the expense of the professions concerned with the 'primary tasks' of institutions, such as teachers, researchers and doctors. The professionals find themselves subordinated to these new managerial regimes"¹.

This new organisational structure has filtered throughout university systems, developing new administrative functions and departments that become the middlemen and information gatekeepers of the circuits of knowledge and paperwork of the student lifecycle. In the University of Birmingham, on top of the traditional structure of a Senate and governing board at the top, five colleges separated by disciplinary area, and each college separated into various schools based on subject divisions, are a series of administrative departments that help in the delivery of school, college and university objectives. Each school has an educational support office separated by undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research administrators. Then there are operations managers, quality officers, diversity officers, marketing officers, admissions administrators, etc. These positions also go up to the college level and then into various university-level committees and organisations, including the Graduate School, the Guild and the Senate. There are also several central services that duplicate and interact with these school and college teams, as with the central admissions office, Registry, communications teams and human resources.

The team I have studied, the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences PGR Administration Team, sits within this organisational multiplicity. The team is nestled under the EPS college operations manager and is functionally a college-level team that manages each of the EPS school-based PGR administrators. The structure can be seen in the team organisation chart in figure 1.

¹ Rustin, M. 2016, 157

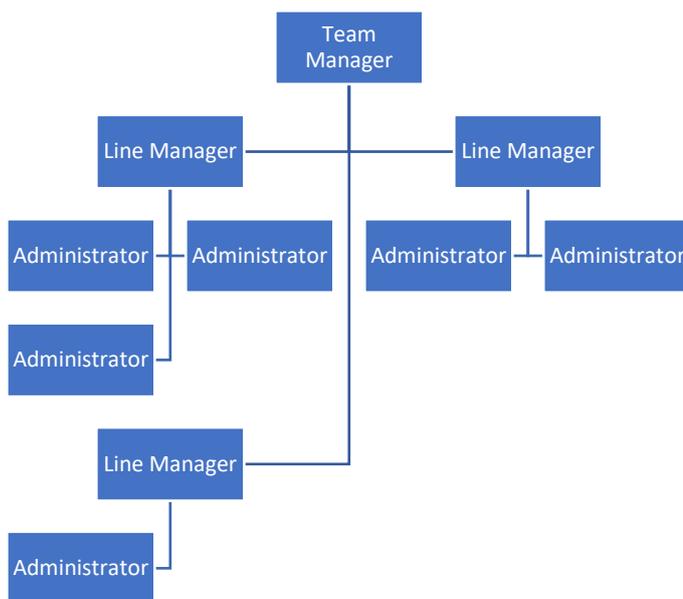


Figure 1

It is a recently created team that takes over the management of PGR (which includes PhD, MRes, MSc by Research and other postgraduate research degree programmes) activities from the education support offices in each of the six EPS schools (Metallurgy & Materials, Engineering, Computer Science, Chemical Engineering, Chemistry and Maths & Physics). A substantial organisational change has taken place at the college and school levels, mirroring changes in other colleges that recognises the unique position of PGR students in the university as having a degree of functional separation from the rest of the student body. Rather than being customers or consumers of a product, they are co-creators of their research and are a foundational part of the research and teaching environment of the university, helping develop innovative methods and provide teaching through seminars and support. The way PGR students interact with the wider student body and the university in general shows a wide range of autonomy, akin to a “smart mob”², a networked structure of loosely integrated members who collaborate selectively on projects and treat the wider system they are within (the university and its associated processes) as a conduit for their work (degree-based research and associated seminars). PGR students can effectively start their degree when they want (with certain caveats), are given a wide range of independence in the way they conduct their research and participate in events, and are only monitored through monthly meetings and yearly progress reviews (with each school having unique ways of doing these).

In this sense PGR administration should not be a highly bureaucratic, stratified structure of clearly delineated rules and regulations as the requirements for PGR students are highly fluid and variable. There are multiple departments involved in the delivery of PGR services, such as Admission’s involvement in the application process, each School’s decision-making over scholarships and progression decisions and Registry’s participation in attendance monitoring, registration and thesis submission. This level of flexibility and fluidity in the work patterns and concatenations of individuals working on similar processes requires an adhocratic structure, one characterised by a “highly organic structure, with little formalization of behavior; high horizontal job specialization based on formal training; a tendency to group the specialists in functional units for housekeeping purposes but to deploy them in small market-based project teams to do their work; a reliance on the liaison devices to encourage mutual

² Dolan, T. 2010, 44

adjustment - the key coordinating mechanism - within and between these teams; and selective decentralization to and within these teams, which are located at various places in the organization and involve various mixtures of line managers and staff and operating experts”³.

However, this organisational structure runs up against the innately bureaucratic decentralisation found within each of the schools and their ESOs. As they are geared toward a more structured series of processes focused around clearly dated term times, exam periods and student start times (which meshes with academic’s calendars and teaching hours), this runs against the grain of a PGR student’s lifecycle which has much greater variability. The below SWOT analysis begins to point toward the problems and opportunities for change this administrative fragmentation creates.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A varied team that can deal with variable problems and queries. • Strong links with Central Services (e.g. Admissions, Registry, UGS, etc.) • Strong links with ESOs. • A good understanding of the PGR lifecycle. • Having distinct capabilities that can help deal with PGR specific problems, such as having college-level team managers and maintaining a suite of administrative guides and processes that allow team members to be flexible and learn about best practice outside of their school. • Maintaining good relations with the Director of Graduate Studies in EPS and associated school PGR leads. 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of college oversight over school processes (i.e. funding, assessments, inductions, etc.) • Lack of team cohesion due to split loyalties between school and college requirements. • Inconsistent processes across schools (e.g. assessments). • Disruption from in-person student/staff queries, preventing staff from concentrating on complex tasks. • High levels of staff turnover.
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process-based work patterns introduce greater flexibility into administrator’s work, allowing greater interdependence that can help fill gaps in staffing and be less reliant on duplicated processes found in each school. • Development of a cohesive team culture. • Developing PGR careers, training and experience activities. • Increasing recruitment/marketing/admissions activity for PGRs in EPS. • Moving from paper to electronic data/processes. 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Grey area” activity (e.g. PGTA, desk allocation, tasks relating to PGRs taking taught modules) that aren’t fully defined, creating confusing work patterns for PGR administrators. • Staff turnover causing problems of continuity which erodes relationships with schools and ESOs. • The introduction of STARS+ and New Core further removing control from individual administrators, increasing feelings of

³ Mintzberg, H. 1979, 432

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing oversight of PGR processes within each school. • Raising the profile of the EPS Graduate School. • Using the introduction of STARS+ to greater reduce transactional tasks within PGR administration, allowing administrators to focus on more complex and interesting work. 	<p>alienation which create further turnover.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removing administrators from schools can potentially fragment relations further as schools feel ignored or overlooked.
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Centralisation as a Solution

Thus the current situation of PGR administrators being geographically based in their respective schools but functionally managed by a separate college administration team creates two problems: the fragmentation of processes across multiple planes of organisational capability, and the lack of a unifying team culture. Both these problems are interrelated and require similar changes. If the College of EPS aims to “make the environment in EPS conducive to researchers at all stages of their careers and use our resources purposefully to attract the brightest research students” achieving this “through targeted events and points of contact such as seminar series, by following up PRES outcomes, and by a review of PGR facilities across the College”⁴ then a recognition of the fragility of the current PGR administrative structure and the various bottlenecks within it is needed.

The primary vectors for change are greater geographical proximity and greater centralisation of school-based PGR competencies toward the college level, which would involve a change toward process-based work patterns rather than school-based ones. This allows for the integration and streamlining of processes, learning best practice (and thus removing duplicated work), and inculcating a unifying team culture by pivoting organisational loyalties away from ESOs/schools toward the college by developing shared communication channels and a shared office environment.

Such a change should help maintain and even strengthen the good relations with central departments as competencies are better delineated and understood by team members as their work would split within these processes. One administrator would work on attendance monitoring and progression, another on marketing and events management, and another on admissions matters. This better integrates the administrator with the relevant central department, providing one point of contact for PGR matters rather than spreading that process over six schools. This should also decrease staff turnover as the frustrating ambiguities are ironed over, allowing for job descriptions to be modified so that they better describe what each person is doing, what team they’ll be working and how their work interrelates to their colleagues’ work. Face-to-face queries are reduced in one central office as those visiting would have one or two points of contact who can deal with simple queries, and then rely on the back-office team for complex matters that require further investigation. Work interruptions are reduced and those with better customer relations skills can prioritise front-desk work.

This then leads into better college oversight, as the direction and processes of work patterns are better defined and understood by college managers, and further reduces transactional

⁴ College of Engineering & Physical Sciences, 2015, 5

activity in line with university requirements in STARS+ and New Core. By pivoting from school-based administration and developing a shared office, the loyalties felt to ESOs and individual schools will be reduced which may strain relations with PGR lead academics and ESO administrators. However, such a change reflects the changing nature of the university workforce and works with it to deliver better outcomes. The university has had a proclivity in the last few years to move toward fixed-term contracts for administrative and academic staff.

This, combined with high turnover in the team, has meant the connection between a PGR administrator and their school has dulled as they are not in the role long enough to develop a rapport with students and academics. The nature of modern administrative work is such that placements are increasingly short-term and focused on finding opportunities for promotion. To maintain that rapport, moving competencies into the level of separable processes integrated in a geographically proximal team can better provide longevity as competencies are shared amongst a team with combined capacity. Instead of having one point of failure (a single school administrator), a team of administrators means multiple people helping maintain the flow of knowledge/information that are part of the PGR lifecycle. While moving toward a centralised model may dull those relations with schools in one sense, in the modern environment of increasing staff turnover (of which the team has experienced acutely in the past 2 years with 6 members leaving) this structure that can better deal with the fragmented and flexible nature of a PGR administrator's work and maintain a series of consistent processes and relationships with other departments which are functionally integrated in PGR administration.

A Fragmented Team

So, what is the central problem that is being diagnosed? As noted, there are two problems in the current structure of the administrative team, the fragmentation of processes and the lack of a team culture which boils down to one central problem, the fragmented nature of the EPS PGR administration team. Within this there are a series of nested issues. The primary reason for this fragmentation is the geographic dispersal of PGR administration across the 6 schools in EPS, which causes tasks to be compartmentalised into these schools. This is in line with the traditional method of organisation in the university, where the PGR administrator was part of the school's ESO. As a result, the source of team culture was through the school office. As the EPS PGR administration team is relatively new, it has awkwardly mapped onto this existing structure such that loyalties are divided and work patterns made ambiguous by the undefined nature of PGR administration i.e. is it school-based or college-centric? This also then links to the problem of integrating the PGR lifecycle in schools as it is so different to the other programme methodologies.

The university can be conceptualised as a garbage can of ideas, problems and solutions that are not linearly connected but instead produced endogenously through the interactions of a university's multiple systems and departments who are attempting to maintain a steady flow of information across the structure. In the fractured departmental interactions that make up PGR administration, the choice opportunities ("occasions when an organization is expected to produce behavior that can be called a decision"⁵) are constrained by the ambiguity created by a fragmented team as the pathways of the PGR lifecycle are not defined contiguously but instead spread into grey areas where departmental responsibility is blurry.

⁵ Cohen, M., March, J. & Olsen, J. 1972, 3

This can be seen in the duplication of tasks across each school's PGR administration, with each having unique but related ways of doing yearly assessments, recording data and maintaining archives, and doing key tasks like admissions processing and attendance monitoring. Further, each school has unique competencies that don't duplicate. Chemical Engineering is directly involved in the organisation of student offices. The Maths & Physics administrator has much greater involvement in PGTA matters than other schools. Chemistry records all attendance monitoring data while other schools focus exclusively on Tier 4 attendance data. This fragmentation means that best practice is difficult to cohere as each school maintains its favoured processes, leading to redundant practices and inefficient working patterns being maintained that can cause a loss of morale in the administrator working there. They are caught in a process of regressive conservatism where due to the traditional organisation of schools and departments within universities, the autonomy of each school is difficult to breach, preventing reforms that remove redundant practices and allow for greater flexibility in the way work patterns are figured out. Best practice across the college is ignored as each school views its methods as best, with administrators simply becoming a cog in a machine, endlessly being a middleman in transactional activities i.e. moving pieces of information from the school to the central departments and vice versa.

This then impacts the capacity to develop a coherent team culture. In Tuckman's model of group development (forming, storming, norming, performing), the PGR administration team is somewhere between storming and norming. There is both "group cleavage and conflict"⁶ and elements of cohesion. This has scope not just within the team, where split loyalties exist between the college and relevant ESOs, but also in relation to school's PGR leads who have resisted changes that further the centralisation of PGR activity toward the college level. Changes even to things like going paperless in relation to processing yearly assessment decisions (where many schools used outdated practices like sending out forms both via email and internal post) have met resistance.

Issues are also present in the departmental relations with central university departments like Registry and admissions. There is a high degree of misunderstanding about what Registry do and how they process information. This lack of knowledge becomes problematic as PGR administrators, being customer-facing, are frequently asked questions about Registry processes and decisions. The lack of clarity means a coherent team structure is difficult to develop as roles are not clear, and the lifecycle of PGR activities and information has substantial grey areas that have not been elucidated. This causes further resistance and alienation that makes cleaving toward a school-based structure more attractive than moving toward an experimental, college-level system that is untested.

Research & Data

In my ethnographic research of the administrative team, I used a combination of observation, online surveys, and an interview of the least satisfied team member to understand the problems and potential solutions within the team structure. Through observation I've been able to note the tensions and bottlenecks present, whether it is the disaggregation of school from college priorities or the lack of coherence between central departments and the administrative team in determining and understanding the PGR lifecycle. From these observations two possible solutions have emerged to restructure the team to prevent fragmentation and develop team culture. 1. Move the administrative team into greater

⁶ Tuckman, B. 1965, 391

geographic proximity using a shared office facility. 2. Alter the work patterns of PGR administrators so that instead of it being split along school lines, it is centralised at a college level and split along process lines.

The online survey carried out provides further evidence of the need for change and the lack of a coherent team culture. Two interesting results came out of the online survey⁷. The first was the low scores for the question “I feel my work matches my capabilities/aptitudes” which received scores of 7/10, 9/10, 2/10, 6/10 and 6/10. Despite the 9/10, the other scores show either an ambivalence toward the work, as it only matches their capabilities to a certain degree, or in the case of the 2/10 score it shows a dissatisfaction with the way work patterns are currently structured. This adds credence to option 2 as work processes are neither particularly demanding nor complex, which matches with observations made of the PGR administrative role. It is highly based on transactional activity and reduces the capacity to influence work processes or have meaningful control over one’s work patterns. In shifting work patterns toward a process-based split, much of this transactional activity is reduced as the administrator is no longer simply a conduit for information between different departments, but a co-creator of the process they have expertise and influence over. This can mean reshaping redundant processes, removing duplicated work and spending more time constructing elements of the PGR lifecycle with interdependent departments. The individual who works on admissions can work both within the team and alongside the central admission department and the school admissions tutors, proactively steering the work of these interrelated structures so that one coherent system can emerge.

The second interesting result were the comparative scores between the two following questions: “I feel I have a strong working relationship with my School's education support office” and “I feel I have a strong working relationship with the EPS PGR administration team”. Of the five responses, only one scored their relationship with the EPS PGR administration higher than their relationship with their ESO. 3 of the respondents scored their relationship with their ESO as higher than that of the PGR administration team (with the other respondent rating them both equally on a score of 10/10). While the differences in the scores are only minor, they do point toward the issue of split loyalties between school priorities and college ones. While strong relations with the ESOs are important, the different nature of the PGR lifecycle requires a degree of separation which these scores suggest isn’t there, and which subsequently may hamper fully utilising a team structure at the college level to deliver PGR activities and processes.

These issues are further elucidated in the interview I conducted with what I identified as the least satisfied team member based on their scores. As they stated in the additional comments part of the survey, “I am unsatisfied in my job as it doesn't challenge me or leave much room for creativity. I enjoy the EPS PGR team, but we don't see each other often or interact much in our roles so there isn't much of a culture established between us”. In the interview⁸ they note there is a significant degree of ambiguity in their role. Often, they are searching for the right person to contact rather than proactively engaging in PGR processes. This then denigrates activities related to their PDR as transactional activities like answering email or face-to-face queries become paramount in the day-to-day realities of their role. “I feel like at

⁷ The online survey surveyed 5 members of the EPS PGR administration team and asked 10 questions, with answers ranked from 1-10 on a Likert scale.

⁸ See appendix.

the moment on a school basis we are just putting out fires rather than doing things proactively”.

And as things are organised on a school basis, this means finding the solutions to problems is a guessing game of figuring out which person knows what in the relevant department. This increases the areas of grey activity and has knock on effects for the experience of PGR students. As they note, “there is a student experience officer in our school, but they aren’t responsible for PhD students. Instead that’s our job. But really a student experience officer’s entire job is student experience so why have we been given this. This causes problems as undergraduates and masters students are provided events, but these aren’t done for researchers. And as I’m not told about these events, I can’t organise similar things for PGRs. I’ve discussed with the student experience officer liaising more, but this can take time which means events aren’t as good”.

This adds further weight to the proposed changes. A shared office environment means having a wider range of experience to draw upon, reducing the need to spend time finding the right person and sending communications to them. A process-based method of work organisation means that things like events organisation and planning are better delineated within the team, as one administrator would have responsibility over that area and thus would be geared toward working with equivalent colleagues in other departments, sharing best practice and finding systemic solutions that integrate PGR activities.

Three Potential Solutions

The survey and interview data lends support to both options, as does analysis of each school’s process documents. Each shows a series of split loyalties between school and college management. As the interviewee laid out, “either moving to central office for all PGR admins or being managed directly by our relevant school would work better. The school overlooks the students which means responsibilities aren’t clear”. The team is fragmented along geographic and process-based lines, with management and responsibility unclear in areas.

The first way of resolving this is to move toward a shared central office where all the school’s PGR administrators would be based. It would provide front and back office functions so there is both customer-facing roles and a back office where the rest of the administrators would be based. This begins to solve the problem of team culture as the administrators are based together, sharing knowledge and best practice and acting as a functional unit. It means instant communication between manager and employee and the ability to inculcate relations between the administrators. This also addresses the issue of duplicated and redundant work practices that the process guides brought up. Having administrators centrally based allows for repeated processes to be identified and streamlined.

However, as the interviewee observed, moving toward a shared office would be “tricky as students do regularly ask questions face-to-face so it is a big part of our role. I also think moving to a different building means PhD students would be even more segmented/separated from other students in their schools”. Therefore option 2 comes in, where instead of relying on a school-based split for work patterns things are based on the processes PGR administrators use. Each PGR administrator, instead of being assigned to a school, would work on a number of processes based on competency and preference. With the survey data showing a gap between perceived skillset and the demands of their role, a process basis for dividing work patterns across the team means moving away from the simplistic tasks that

frustrate administrators toward a co-creative environment focused on innovating tasks, increasing efficiency and delivering for PGR students, academics and the objectives of the college and university.

Dividing by process allows for ownership and expertise over clearly defined tasks and systems. An administrator's role would not be divided across several elements, leading to confusion and suboptimal prioritisation. As noted in the interview, first-to-hand tasks like emails and interruptive queries predominate over complex tasks that require greater time and involvement. And as the process guides make clear, there are many groupable areas in the work patterns of PGR administration. Committee management, admissions processing, attendance monitoring and assessments organisation, among others. Each take significant time for PGR administrators and are reliant on multiple departments. In rationalising these work patterns, communication channels are streamlined so that one administrator is contactable for one policy area. Further, it means the capacity to expand and innovate on these administrative processes, as with expanding attendance monitoring to monitor all PGR students in the college and use this as a platform for better focusing on welfare and cause for concern issues in the student body, or through increasing the presence of PGR activities in marketing and events planning which as pointed out in the interview are neglected.

But difficulties come in if processes are to be split across the administrative team without consequent centralisation within a shared space. If administrators are still based in their school ESOs it makes the customer-facing role extremely difficult, as students and academics will need to know the competencies of the administrator they're visiting to know if their query will be answered. This creates a merry-go-round effect for them, going from one administrator to the next until the right one is found. This would also create significant tension with ESOs and school PGR leads, as their ability to contribute to PGR activities is diminished if the administrator within their school is not purely school-focused.

Therefore, a third option presents itself from the potential failures of these proposed changes. If the two options are combined, they can begin to obviate the risks inherent in both. Geographic centralisation means greater managerial control over PGR administrators' processes, meaning implementation is easier when moving from school-based to process-based competencies. A unifying team culture can be inculcated as school-based loyalties are significantly diminished, task allocation by preference and expertise is bolstered, and best practice and a shared social environment are encultured. By having one central office, PGR leads and central departments can directly contact the front office and talk with the administrator with the needed skillset/particular expertise. The office would act as one central point of contact, with queries then moving to the specific area where they can best be dealt with. The benefits of both options neatly combine to produce a fundamental change to the structure of PGR administration in EPS.

To begin to determine the best overall option of the three selected, a force-field analysis for each option has been constructed to understand the driving and restraining forces that such change faces when implemented. Each point in the force fields are ranked out of 10, with a final score giving an overall perspective of the driving and restraining forces present in each change vector.

Implementing a shared office environment for all PGR administrators

Driving Forces	Restraining Forces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development of a team culture by having a shared work and social environment where interaction is maximised (10). • Best practice can be shared, meaning more time spent on improving processes and making more things efficient rather than relying on outdated methods of working (7). • The ability to have a shared front as a team which bolsters the strength of the recommendations when implementing changes to PGR processes and gives a unique space to dedicate toward PGR activities (6). • Greater support and integration for new team members (5). • Stronger managerial oversight which can better integrate team member's work (6). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased alienation in the team as significant loyalty is felt by administrators toward their schools and ESOs as the survey data demonstrated (9). • Team culture may not necessarily develop simply out of a close working environment. If colleagues find it difficult to work together, this could further fragment the team (8). • The cost of moving office and the time taken setting everything up (3). • The lack of a direct school contact for PGR students in their relevant school (7). • Straining relationships with PGR leads and ESOs who resist the move (7).
Final score: 34	Final score: 34

Implementing a process-based division of work patterns in the PGR administrative team

Driving Forces	Restraining Forces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving away from repetitive, transactional tasks and toward co-creative processes that better integrate the various departments involved in the delivery of PGR activities (9). • Allowing for preference selection in an administrator's work patterns (7). • Better linking individual team member's expertise with particular processes (8). • Better linking the team's work with relevant central departments i.e. an admissions-based administrator linking with the Admissions office (7). • Greater organisation of PGR activities/lifecycles as one person has ownership over a process area (7). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The complexity of organising along the existing office-based lines (10). • The loss of a school link between the PGR administrator and the PGR lead (9). • Making face-to-face queries more difficult as customers must know the full extent of their query to approach the right administrator (9). • The difficulty of integrating grey activities into clearly delineated process/policy areas, creating further ambiguity (6). • A significant amount of groundwork needed, from process mapping to reorganising team structure, that is a long-term process and will take time to implement (8).

Final score: 38	Final score: 42
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Combining these two options

Driving Forces	Restraining Forces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to integrate two interrelated team dynamics: a division of labour based around processes and a shared space through which administrators can interact and share knowledge, increasing flexibility and adaptability in their work (10). • This combines the short and long term of both original proposals for change: the office move in the short term lays the groundwork for a shared culture and the process division of work sets the long-term framework for integrating PGR administrators into a streamlined, efficient work environment (9). • Combines the front and back office functions most effectively, as one office provides a central location for all queries while a process-based work pattern means expertise and ownership are better defined (8). • Potentially better integration with central departments as these departments have a contact with relevant expertise in their departmental area (6). • The ability to better define and streamline job descriptions for administrators. In recruitment this means a greater capacity to match skillsets to processes, rather than relying on ambiguous measures that the current job description does (4). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Places significant strain on the relations with schools, as administrators are both removed from their school and then removed from their school basis as they work on processes instead (9). • Such significant change could easily alienate current team members, leading to greater staff turnover (8). • This change requires a degree of integration with central departments as process-based splits must relay with their relevant departmental equals, which is difficult to attain (8). • The restraining forces related with the previous 2 options that were identified, such as the complexity of organisation, a large amount of groundwork and pre-implementation planning being necessary and the straining of relations with other departments are potentially exacerbated due to the radical nature of the change proposed (10).
Final score: 37	Final score: 35

From these force field analyses the best solution to emerge with greater driving forces over restraining forces is the combined solution. However, the weaknesses associated with this solution are substantial, particularly as it integrates the restraining forces from the first two options and proposes a more fundamental change to the organisation of PGR administration in the college. The problems of ambiguous working patterns identified in the survey and interview, and present in the administrative guides with redundant assessment processing and repetitive practices surrounding admissions and attendance monitoring with added school mechanisms that ignore best practice, show the need for change however. For example in the

School of Chemistry they conduct attendance monitoring for all their students, using a tracking log with a matrix system to identify problematic cases and better target support for students from the relevant person (wellbeing officer, supervisor, head of school, etc.). This system has not moved into the other schools despite being a useful way of monitoring progress (thus feeding into other processes like yearly progression decisions and academic achievement). This is primarily due to the inability in the team's fragmented structure to share best practice and compare different working methods, modifying systems to match more efficient patterns.

Such a change also makes best use of the primary resource of the PGR administration team, its members. So long as team members believe their skillsets are being underutilised and see their schools/ESOs as more effective areas for support, the PGR administration team is a mechanism for unnecessary complexity by adding another layer to the PGR lifecycle. In having this team structure, the need is there to use this to centralise competencies and remove processes from the regressive conservatism that I have identified in school structures, where PGR leads have been resistant to processual change. Such was witnessed with the recent combination of the schools of Mathematics and Physics. A proposal was made to combine their student-staff committees to further integration, which was rejected by the Physics PGR lead as unworkable. Another proposal was made to match the Physics assessment period with the Maths period to better integrate and streamline progress decisions for PGRs in both schools. This again was rejected as impossible as Physics academics were too busy during the period when Maths assessments are organised (despite both school's academics having similar calendars for their exams and summer terms).

Some of the human and financial factors have begun to be elucidated by the force field analyses. The significance of both moving administrators to a shared office and changing the basis of their work toward a process-based set of patterns means that the capability to alienate members of the team is increased compared to implementing either of the other two options. Striking the balance between forceful change and a light touch is imperative if implementation is to be a reality. The model of dynamic conservatism points toward the kind of balance that needs to be struck when implementing these changes. In conceiving universities as institutions, they and their subunits are imbued with a particular "character" composed of "habits, dependencies, interests, and values"⁹. In maintaining that character, neither a regressive conservatism that ossifies the organisation nor a constant dynamism that endlessly aims at change and flux are useful characteristics when planning change.

The former, as has been noted, simply leads to inefficient working practices and a slew of unnecessary, repetitive transactional activity that ignores best practice and can hinder the PGR lifecycle. This is what is beginning to be seen in EPS PGR administration, with increasing staff turnover in the past 2 years and a lack of work on improving the processes and work patterns that define PGR administration. In this situation the team is little more than another bureaucratic layer through which information flows, becoming a potential bottleneck rather than an adhocratic structure that can understand and plan change. With external changes like Brexit potentially altering the intake of overseas students (as well as potentially classifying EU students as overseas), the available funding seen in schools today is not necessarily stable or constant. This has knock on effects for the type of work PGR administrators may be doing in the next five years, as things like financial planning and

⁹ Ansell, C., Boin, A. & Farjoun, M. 2015, 95

admissions processing become part of the flux rather than being stable elements in a simple work pattern.

Equally a constant state of dynamic change for its own sake is setting the groundwork for further alienation and a fracturing of the team. As noted in the force field analyses, the extent of the change proposed requires substantial groundwork that alters the perspectives and expectations of team members such that they move away from transactional work toward co-creative work that focuses on improving processes and adapting toward best practice. Some of this groundwork is already being laid with the STARS+ consultation as well as with internal reforms, such as the successful change to electronic data organisation in the EPS PGR administration team. But as noted in the School of Mathematics PGR annual review, “in the past, the postgraduate administrator has formed part of the “glue” which cemented the PGR students within the school”. Without PGR administration being that glue that connects the rules and regulations of the university with the needs of PGR students, it has the same problems as when it does little more than engage in transactional activity.

Similar implications are present on the financial side. The cost of the proposed change is potentially substantial. Sourcing and moving into a shared office is expensive and requires time to plan, as well as taking away time from work to move and settle into a new office. However further cost comes in when implementing a process-based work pattern. This involves everything from rewriting job descriptions and process guides (the former of which require College Post Approval Group ratification) to potentially requiring administrators to shadow departments related to their assigned process so as to gain a better understanding of the overall system of PGR activity in their area. This costs time lost on their normal work as well as the cost of organising secondments, which require HR and CPAG approval and may also necessitate re-banding for payment purposes. On top of this there would also be the cost of temporarily covering the roles lost to secondments which could last one or two weeks. This potential cost requires substantial planning as well as significant communication both within the team and with other departments/actors for implementation to work.

Communicating, Monitoring and Analysing Potential Reforms

Using Kotter’s eight step change model, the implementation of a unified team culture through short-term (moving toward a shared office) and long-term (moving toward process-based work patterns) change can begin to be planned. Starting with establishing a sense of urgency, the groundwork for this has already begun to be built. The administrative environment has already started to change with the introduction of New Core and the planned phasing of STARS+, both of which aim to reduce transactional activities and increase the time spent on improving and reforming processes. New Core aimed to reduce the complexity and multiplicity of financial activities, centralising them into one database through which expenses and payroll data are processed. STARS+ has a similar aim in the area of student-based activities, like exam timetabling and automating the leave of absence process (which affects PGR administrator’s work). Similar policy changes have been affected within the team as well. Every school has begun the process of writing up and mapping their unique processes for the purposes of analysis and potential change. Further the college team has recently introduced an electronic data organisation policy that aims for PGR administration to go paperless and for electronic data to be streamlined into useable, navigable network drives.

From this base the ability to form a coalition through which this change can be enacted can be seen. The operations managers within EPS have been keen for the processes of PGR

administration to be mapped and proposals for change have received support from the EPS PGR administration team manager, particularly the proposal to move to a shared office as well as exploring potential process changes that can be implemented in the short to medium term. The base for a coalition begins to be seen here. From there creating a vision becomes a matter of aggregating the desires of the management with the framework that has been elucidated by STARS+ and the existing process mapping. This then grounds the future vision as these existing changes encourage two important reforms to the work patterns of PGR administration: dynamic response to change and greater flexibility in the way one deals with queries and processes. Of course, moving from this to a much greater change envisioned in both centralised geographic proximity and process-based work patterns is a big gap to breach, but the feasibility and necessity can already be seen. The staff turnover in the team is too high, requiring sacrifices from the remaining team members to cover work and put more focus on mundane tasks like email and face-to-face queries. The processes surrounding things like assessments and progress decisions are time-consuming and monotonous. These realities create a focus through which these significant reforms are made feasible and communicable.

The communication then follows on from this and can again be grounded in the previous work done. Having administrators map out their processes or help construct the data organisation policy in the college team develops a sense of co-creation in those changes. It isn't simply a matter of dictating these changes from the top-down, but instantiating these changes through multiple consultations, 1-2-1 meetings and team meetings that allowed for opinions to be shared and integrated into the changes. The STARS+ process has been slow but has attempted to integrate not just the quantitative elements of things like the leave of absence policies (like the processes Registry work through to make decisions) but also the qualitative elements such as the potential bottlenecks that have regularly emerged when completing the process, or key contacts that have developed overtime who help speed up the leave of absence process (like particular academics or wellbeing officers). Communication like this is useful for proposing these radical changes, as they can be broken down into steps and put through multiple consultation periods, embedding them along a staggered track relative both to the processes being changed and also the administrator's acceptable level of change at any one time. This then provides a wider map of which changes are possible in the short term and where the potential obstacles for change exist.

Identifying the obstacles to change is quite clear currently. The major obstacles are the school's PGR leads who have previously resisted changes to assessment periods and committee management. As they take a school-based frame for their decision-making, this is difficult to gel with the college-based perspective that is being taken in the changes proposed. Removing these obstacles becomes a matter of integrating PGR leads in the consultations made. Some of the short-term changes being proposed, particularly the office move, will be opposed without any leeway. One option would be to have a two-office system for each administrator, where they are based in the shared office two days a week and in their school office for three days, while increasingly directing student queries in all schools toward the shared office. This experiment can provide stability so that schools are not left out while also beginning to embed a shared team culture and a collective front for PGR administration.

Moving to process-based work patterns will also meet resistance from PGR leads, but again slow implementation is the best way forward. For example, having PGR administrators do work in different schools would begin to allow PGR leads to understand the particular expertise each team member has in a particular policy area, learning who to approach instead of relying on one school administrator. This can be done through shared through inboxes for

answering queries, beginning to give school administrators ownership over processes they have preference for and expertise in, and directing queries toward the shared office as well as their school offices.

In the context of Kotter's eight step model, we can use a Gantt chart¹⁰ to map out the length of time it would take to implement the proposed change and where the potential bottlenecks would occur. This chart maps out the course of change over a two-year period, as this is a feasible length of time through which implementation is possible.

As the chart is theoretical in application, the timings are based on the obstacles and bottlenecks that potentially arise in each step. Things like consultations and even the initial office move have the potential to be quick as they meet varied expectations and require basic planning to implement. Things like the initial implementation periods of process-based working or the various mapping processes and organisation of secondments take much longer, requiring HR and CPAG approval as well as operational signoff. They potentially can be done in 4 months but could take up to 7 months.

The first steps of the Gantt chart are implementing the office move and beginning the process mapping of PGR administrative activities. This embeds the short-term wins that Kotter describes as important to implementing successful change. By quickly implementing policies like a shared office and process reforms caveats can be added in that mean change isn't too drastic. This also starts the process on a co-creative footing, as mapping involves all PGR administration team members as well as the other stakeholders (PGR leads, ESOs and central departments).

In terms of consolidating improvements and beginning to institutionalise change, this is where the consultation periods detailed, and the communication channels used for determining preferences, are most important. These allow for the integration of aberrant opinions and mean that holistic systems of process reform can be constructed that aren't managerial diktat. Building on the work done in the process mapping and team-based reforms that have already been achieved in the administration team, the communication developed for these (team meetings and 1-2-1s specifically, as well as informal conversations to determine acceptability) has applicability to these wider changes as they are introduced in steps.

The consultation period with external stakeholders would follow a similar process for team meetings, using these to air opinions and gain an understanding of the potential success or failure of proposed and/or implemented changes. With the recent issues around staff turnover particularly concerning the School of Mathematics & Physics, this allows the PGR administration team to better integrate with the needs and demands of PGR leads and their school-specific perspectives. This then lays the groundwork for explaining the benefits of these changes to all related stakeholders and how they can stabilise the PGR environment and expand upon the benefits of having one PGR administrative unit by increasing the number of events held and activities done (such as expanding the attendance monitoring or marketing activities specifically for PGR students). This moves the expectation of radical change away from the resistance characteristic of regressive conservatism that sees these changes as unnecessary interventions that damage the influence of PGR leads in the PGR lifecycle toward a dynamic conservatism where the desire for stability is balanced with the necessity of

¹⁰ See appendix

change that staff turnover and transactional activity predominating over creative process building instantiates.

The requirements for change fall variably across the range of actors involved in the PGR lifecycle. PGR students will need to deal with the changing office environment, as queries are geared increasingly toward shared inboxes and the front desk of a shared PGR administration office. This changes the nature of the “glue” that PGR administration provides in the process of delivering PGR activities and expectations, as it revolves around a collective office rather than individual administrators. A similar change will be felt by academics who must also rely on a collective office rather than one specific administrator who is a jack-of-all-trades. This is where effective monitoring systems in line with consultations and meetings are most important as these will gauge the successes of these changes.

The monitoring and review techniques come into this plan within the consultation periods and in the experimentation phase of the process-based work pattern implementation. This is where constant feedback is possible as the implementation is moved through. Team members can feedback to managers about their preferences and perceptions on how they find working on processes as opposed to schools. Similarly, PGR leads and students through student-staff committees and consultations can feedback and provide reviews of the success of change.

The best means of doing monitoring and feedback outside of the team meeting framework can be done through 1-2-1s and informal communication with team members to gauge feelings toward the change. They can also be monitored in comparing the reality of the change in its enactment with the description found within process guides. Connecting these two polarities allows for a better understanding of the working environment and a decreasing feedback loop between theory and reality which connects the expectations of team members or stakeholders with the ideal situation of a process running its course. Real-time collaboration such as SharePoint tools present another means of review, as they allow for feedback at the moment changes are processed and used. A shared office allows for these means to a much greater extent, presenting another feedback loop that is real-time. By being in a shared office, administrators can quickly and easily share their opinion of the change within it.

These feedback and review techniques can then provide an understanding of the overall effect of these changes, both in the time their enacted and once they’ve been settled and the process is near its end. The nature of the change of moving to a shared office in the short term and laying the groundwork for process-based work patterns as the mode of doing PGR activity in the medium to long term are very open to real-time feedback that can be responsive. Instead of using these as milestones through which change is implemented and then reviewed, they need to be viewed in light of the garbage can model. The success of these changes isn’t the ability to simply linearise PGR administration, but instead to increase the number of solutions and create more nodes for creative work and the innovation of processes relative to the growing problems found within the EPS PGR administration team as well as the problems of treating PGR activities as unique and separate from the wider student body and its administrative processes. This means that even in cases where the change were to fail in its full implementation, with either a fully shared office being found to be too difficult to maintain without some school support or fully process-based work pattern being too complex to be implemented, the lockstep nature of the change means that compromise is possible and halfway measures can be built in through feedback and consultation sessions. This could look like a shared office space that is used part-time, or a mixture of process and school-based

work patterns, where uniform things like admissions and attendance monitoring are treated as process-based and assessments and events planning are school-based, allowing for integrated relations with PGR leads that don't alienate the schools.

The success of these changes comes in the form of grounding a team culture that is separate to school offices and responsive to the collective needs of PGR students across the college. The accomplishment comes from using processes as the means through which the PGR lifecycle is improved, integrating with other departments so that a holistic understanding of the lifecycle can be mapped out and used for reducing redundant practices and transactional activities, falling in line with university changes and proactively building a shared structure that can integrate new team members and recognise the many fault lines and bottlenecks that are found in PGR administration. Finally, by incorporating the opinions and ideas of stakeholders (from PGR leads to central departments), the EPS PGR administration team can move away from being another bureaucratic element in a complex structure that frustrates rather than innovates working practices toward a team that strikes the balance of dynamic conservatism in an uncertain higher education environment.

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Appendix

Interview transcript with Interviewee 1

CS: What do you think makes a good organisational culture?

I1: Everyone knowing what everyone else does; each person having a defined role and knowing who they can/need to talk to.

Currently within the uni it feels like people aren't sure what they are meant to do, particularly with New Core and STARS coming in. For example, non-staff expenses. It isn't clear who does what and the rules change quite frequently.

CS: Would you say that relates to looking for advice as well?

I1: Yes. I feel like a lot of my role is finding the right person to ask a question and there isn't always a clear answer.

Organisational culture should also include good management. This includes people caring about your career progression. In PDRs, it is emphasised that you are valued and you could get a pay rise but there isn't much room for promotions in our team at the moment, or across the university. You can apply for other jobs in the uni but apart from the occasional secondment, there isn't much to develop your career.

CS: So you would you say that there's problem a culture within the team and within the wider university?

I1: Yes

CS: How do you think the team culture within the EPS PGR Administrative Team could be improved?

I1: We see each other once a month for team meetings, but we don't talk to each other outside of that. We are stuck within our Education Support Offices and it means we aren't really sure who we can talk to within our office. Either moving to central office for all PGR admins or being managed directly by our relevant school would work better. The school overlooks the students which means responsibilities aren't clear.

CS: So it's fragmented both within the school and within the team?

I1: Each school has different ways of doing things so if you're covering someone it is difficult as there is no continuity across school's processes.

CS: The next two interview questions are based around hypothetical situations about ways to improve team culture. Do you think moving all PGR administrators within one office, away from their schools, with the managers, would fix some of the problems you've noted?

I1: I think it could work. It could be tricky as students do regularly ask questions face-to-face so it is a big part of our role. I also think moving to a different building means PhD students would be even more segmented/separated from other students in their schools. But it would

be good for team culture as at the moment I can't ask someone within my office for support because they don't do the same thing I do so I have to phone 3 different people to get an answer. It would also make it easier to have similar ideas and processes and work along the same lines. At the moment our work is disjointed.

CS: Do you think moving work to a process basis where work is assigned on competency and preference would work rather than currently being split by school? So for example one administrator would work on attendance monitoring and someone else would work on assessments or finance. They would work on a specific set of processes rather than working exclusively in Engineering or in Physics.

I1: I think that would be a good idea. I feel like at the moment on a school basis we are just putting out fires rather than doing things proactively. On a process basis, that might give a bit more of an opportunity to work on certain things. Now when people are off sick or emails build up we end up spending much of our time answering emails while other things like doing process documents or organising events or financial matters are ignored.

CS: Would you say things in your PDR get knocked back and your wider objectives aren't done?

I1: Due to staff changes in my school, I haven't been able to keep up with my PDR objectives. It's only been in the last couple of weeks I've been able to catch up with them. It's all very nice setting objectives, but if I don't have the time or support to do them they don't get done.

Other things in the department would be better if organised by process as many things are done by other teams like Admissions or Marketing and it would be good if someone had a role which focused on liaising with those teams. I went to the postgraduate open day but I wasn't told about it until quite late. I asked how many PhD students were going and I was told 30 were so I thought it was necessary to attend it. I went and talked to a few people but it is better than there not being any administrative presence.

CS: In terms of the issue of fragmentation, would you say this is the problem not just in our team but also in liaising with other teams in the university?

I1: There is a student experience officer in our school but they aren't responsible for PhD students. Instead that's our job. But really a student experience officer's entire job is student experience so why have we been given this. This causes problems as undergraduates and masters students are provided events but these aren't done for researchers. And as I'm not told about these events I can't organise similar things for PGRs. I've discussed with the student experience officer liaising more but this can take time which means events aren't as good.

CS: How do you think your current role could better connect to your skillset? Not just your skillset but also what you want from the job.

I1: Being able to have time to focus on other things. When I am given objectives I'm really interested in doing them but I don't have the time to do them. I'm interested in admissions or marketing. I could shadow someone in that department but I and they don't have the time. I'd like the opportunity to develop my own ideas instead of just following processes, which is the

worst part of the job. I don't really use my brain. I'd like the opportunity to do more things and get more skills to further my career.

CS: So the issue is that the job is very reactive. You're given a problem which you resolve and then move onto the next problem.

I1: Yeah so their isn't time to develop projects. When I meet with the postgraduate lead academic we both come up with all these ideas which sound great but neither have the time, so when we next meet these ideas haven't been developed.

CS: Just to throw a few more ideas your way, what do you think of the idea of shared inbox for all PGR administrators where each can dip in and out of instead of individual school inboxes where one or two people deal with those specific queries? I ask because as you say if you're covering another school you have to learn a whole new set of processes in a very short period of time.

I1: It could work but inboxes can pile up very quickly. However more people dipping in means important things don't get postponed.

The other thing I'd note is that the PhD students themselves are very much a separate entity in the university. I feel like PhDs aren't giving the weight other programmes are despite it requiring much more commitment than a regular degree. This requires greater levels of administrative support which would be helped by better task allocation and management of emails and projects.

Another problem is supervisors aren't always proactive and having a bigger administrative team means having more clout to enforce rules and create better quality for students.

Signed interview consent form

Project Consent Form		Yes	No
CONSENT FORM FOR Team Culture ILM Project			
Please tick the appropriate boxes			
Taking Part			
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I agree to take part in the project. Taking part in the project will include being interviewed and recorded.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Use of the information I provide for this project only			
I understand my personal details such as phone number and address will not be revealed to people outside the project.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I understand that I will be anonymous within the project and any quotations will be attributed to "interviewee 1".	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Use of the information I provide beyond this project			
I understand that other genuine researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I understand that other genuine researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
So we can use the information you provide legally			
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to Chris Shaw.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Name of participant [REDACTED]	Signature 	Date	13/3/20
Researcher Chris Shaw	Signature 	Date	12/01/2026
Adapted from UK Data Archive (2011) 'Managing and Sharing Data: Best Practice for Researchers (available at http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/media/2894/managingsharing.pdf).			

Links to relevant process guides, survey data and Gantt chart

[CHEMISTRY PGR ADMIN HANDBOOK.docx](#)

[Computer Science PGR admin processes.docx](#)

[Maths PGR admin processes.docx](#)

[PGR Administrator Chem Eng.docx](#)

[Physics PGR admin processes.docx](#)

[Gantt Chart.xlsx](#)

[Survey Responses.xlsx](#)

[Metallurgy & Materials Process Document](#)

[STARS+ Leave of Absence Process Map](#)

[Maths PGR Annual Review 18_19.docx](#)