



University of Edinburgh: Understanding ways of working

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Dr Anne Rowan
Advance HE Researcher
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Executive summary

This report outlines findings from a qualitative study within the School of Informatics at the University of Edinburgh, and was intended to investigate key issues and concerns which arose from multiple staff surveys. These included communication, staff recognition and development, bullying and harassment, and effective leadership. From the initial staff surveys, there was a clear sense that colleagues enjoyed working in the school, and there is a clear sense of support and collegiality amongst colleagues.

However, data gathered from focus groups held with academic staff, Professional Services staff, research staff and Postgraduate Research (PGR) students, and interviews with key school leaders, revealed some challenges including communication and engagement, staff workload, management and integration of changes in systems and processes, staff development and progression, and bullying and harassment. It is evident that these key areas need to be addressed to minimise barriers and to increase colleague involvement, engagement and equity within the school.

It was evident from the research that colleagues have an overwhelming willingness to enhance inclusive practice and ways of working, and it was clear that there was an enthusiasm for transformational change within the areas of challenges. The data suggests that there is a need to continue to build relationships, enhance communication methods, increase transparency in decision making, build trust in university leadership, and to move forward with a sense of unity and collaboration.

This report provides insights into the challenges faced by colleagues within the school, including solutions and recommendations, and Advance HE have presented key recommendations in the following areas:

1. Enhancing communication and engagement
2. Supporting all-staff development and progression
3. Support for staff workload
4. Addressing issues related to bullying and harassment
5. Engaging and supporting PGR students

It was evident that these recommendations will be welcomed by all participants involved in the focus groups and interviews, and addressing the challenges and implementation of solutions will be met with enthusiasm and eagerness.

Introduction and method

This section describes the context under which this review was commissioned, and the methodology applied.

1. Introduction and method

1.1 Context

The School of Informatics at the University of Edinburgh have carried out a range of surveys over recent years, including for Athena Swan, which have brought to light several concerns that the school would like to address. These include communication, staff recognition and development, bullying and harassment, and effective leadership. Advance HE was commissioned to support the School of Informatics in:

- + Reviewing existing data gathered through a variety of surveys.
- + Conducting online focus groups with distinct populations – including academic staff, professional services staff, research staff and postgraduate research (PGR) students – to explore issues arising from the survey.
- + Undertaking in-depth online interviews with senior leaders to explore issues arising from the survey and gather data from a leadership perspective.

Advance HE also provided a set of comprehensive recommendations arising from the qualitative data collection. The recommendations provided cut across the various strands of data collection to provide the school with insight into its current state, strengths and areas for development, and future priorities.

The following report includes anonymized quotes from the focus groups and interviews. Participants consented to the use of anonymized quotes in the consent process of the focus group and interview sessions. Quotes may have been redacted in places to ensure participants' anonymity but are otherwise presented verbatim.

1.2 Method

To ensure that the review was thorough, holistic and rigorous, we adopted a multi-pronged mixed-methods approach, outlined below.

1.2.1 Focus groups with academic staff, professional services staff, research staff and PGR students

To complement the survey results, we conducted a series of focus groups and in-depth interviews with staff and students. Qualitative data provided the opportunity to contextualize insights into the unique experiences of students, professional services staff, research staff and academic staff.

The focus groups explored:

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- + Factors which contribute to a positive work environment.
 - + Perceptions and experiences of communication and engagement.
 - + Awareness and perceptions of supports within the school which tackle bullying and harassment.
 - + Staff development and career progression.
 - + Factors which contribute to effective and confident leadership.

The focus groups targeted four main populations: academic staff, professional services staff, research staff and PGR students. Table 1 summarizes the coverage of each of these populations. Advance HE provided the school with the recruitment materials and included contact details for the lead researcher.

Table 1: Participant population groups

Target group	Participants
Academic staff	18
Professional services staff	9
Research staff	5
Postgraduate research students	5

Interviews were 90 minutes in length and hosted and recorded on Microsoft Teams. Recordings were professionally transcribed for qualitative analysis.

1.2.2 Interviews with key staff members

This research included targeted in-depth interviews with four senior leaders in the School of Informatics. Our reason for conducting individual interviews was to avoid potential sensitivities between different levels of seniority within academic staff and Professional Services staff, which may not lend itself well to a group dynamic. Hence, individual interviews enabled us to gather the views of different seniority levels more easily.

The interviews covered the following topics:

- + What does 'good' look like in a work environment?
- + Perceptions and experiences of communication, collaboration and engagement.
- + Insights into staff development and career progression.

- + Factors which contribute to effective and confident leadership.

Interviews were 45–60 minutes in length and hosted and recorded on Microsoft Teams. Recordings were professionally transcribed for qualitative analysis.

1.2.3 Data protection

With regards to data protection, all information that participants shared in the focus groups and interview sessions are held confidentially by Advance HE in accordance with the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation. Advance HE has robust data storage policies, copies of which are available on request. All personal and/or special category data are held securely in accordance with the [Advance HE Privacy Policy](#).

1.3 Qualitative data analysis

The transcripts from the focus groups and interviews were analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Braun et al., 2019). Inductive thematic analysis is a widely used method that involves identifying patterns and themes in data that emerge from the data itself, rather than starting with a preconceived theoretical framework.

The process of inductive thematic analysis typically involved the steps below:

1. Data familiarization: Read and become familiar with the data (e.g., transcripts, field notes or other documents).
2. Coding: Generate initial codes by identifying interesting features, patterns or ideas in the data.
3. Theme development: Organize the codes into potential themes, grouping similar codes based on their similarities or differences.
4. Reviewing and refining themes: Examine the themes and sub-themes, refining or reorganizing them as necessary, based on the data and the research questions.
5. Defining and naming themes: Define and name the final themes and create a thematic summary.
6. Writing up the results: Write up the results of the analysis, including illustrative quotes or examples from the data.

Overall, inductive thematic analysis is a flexible and iterative process that allows reviewers to remain open to and generate new insights from the data. For the current review, this process was completed using the Atlas.ti software to record the frequencies of each code and extract illustrative quotes. Supported by research notes, themes were actively sought reflecting relevant key patterns within and across interviews and focus groups. These were continually checked and refined against transcripts, looking for similarities and differences within and across datasets. Themes were defined, described and labelled, and patterns were discussed.

Insights from the focus groups

This section describes the main themes present in the focus groups, including key challenges and solutions.

2. Focus groups with academic staff, research staff and professional services staff

A number of key themes arose in focus groups with academic staff, research staff and professional services staff (Figure 1). These will be discussed in more detail in the following section, including enablers and solutions to key challenges encountered. The transcripts from the focus groups from the four stakeholder groups (academic staff, professional staff, research staff and PGR students) were coded in tandem as there was a high degree of overlap in the content of the questions and the themes identified in the responses. An inductive approach was applied to identify key themes emerging from the data, with a view to pinpointing constructive recommendations.

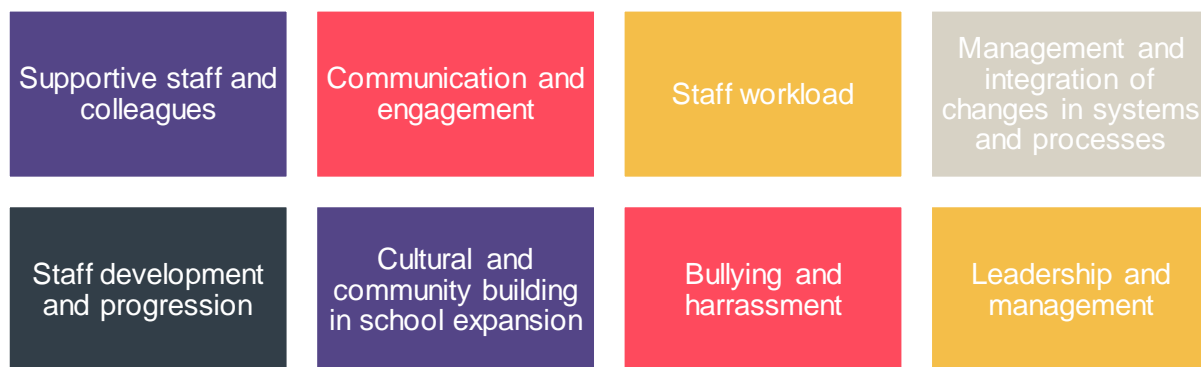


Figure 1: Key themes in focus groups with academic staff, research staff and professional services staff

2.1 Supportive colleagues

Participants noted that having good relationships among colleagues in the School of Informatics was key to a positive working environment, and contributed to managing work–life balance effectively. Participants praised their colleagues, noting that they were “helpful”, “supportive” and “kind”. Personal connections and informal mentorship from colleagues were also considered valuable for professional growth.

I think the support that I get from my colleagues for career development is good, but that feels like it’s not coming from the university, that’s coming from my colleagues being very kind, nice and helpful and wanting to give career advice because they’ve been in that position. [Academic Staff member]

2.2 Communication and engagement

Stemming from concerns raised within existing survey data regarding challenges in being kept informed and having necessary information, focus group participants also reported that challenges continue in relation to clarity, transparency and consistency of communication within the School of Informatics and wider university.

At school level – despite the school itself having numerous methods of communication, such as the use of emails, Microsoft Teams, the school newsletter and the school general meetings – concerns were raised regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of the channels and methods used. Several participants also mentioned that using email alone is not always the most suitable form of communication as important emails are often missed or ignored, or the communication is not concise, regular or focused.

For internal most things are sent by email too randomly, so you can be missed out easily. [Professional Services Staff member]

However, one positive point mentioned was the ‘Friday email’ which was distributed by the previous head of school on a weekly basis.

Some of the best communications were probably our ex-head of school’s ones which were sent regularly 5:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon or something like that. Which I would imagine almost everyone read, or at least you’d get a reasonable guarantee that most people would have read that, also because they were relatively short. They were not huge reams of stuff, and they tended to focus on a few things of the week that were relevant to people. [Academic Staff member]

The Friday emails were considered effective because they were short, focused and sent at a specific time.

At university level, it is apparent from the data that there is a lack of communication and a separation between staff within the school and university leadership, leading to a feeling of imposition and not being heard. There were indications that decisions made by the university often impact the school without clear ownership or communication, causing confusion and a sense of ‘being caught in the middle’. There is a significant issue of distrust due to discrepancies between what the university claims and what it actually does, contributing to a negative atmosphere. Participants highlighted the importance of clear, transparent and consistent communication to avoid confusion and misunderstandings.

The university management and very often the leadership kind of feels distant. It feels as though it’s not part of our community, if you see what I mean? And it seems to be a group of different people that are trying to very often impose things on us or get us to do things that, very often, in a way that we think makes no sense as well. [Academic Staff member]

I think because of that top-down approach that the university itself has and the senior leadership of the university, it's so difficult because we end up being somewhere in the middle of the process [Professional Services Staff member]

Information is kind of bundled up, absorbed, and then you just kind of get whatever comes out anywhere. And there's kind of no engagement and consultation. [Professional Services Staff member]

Participants expressed challenges related to the communication practices of university leadership and involvement in decision-making processes. Participants highlighted the issue of structural changes being imposed without consultation, leading to dissatisfaction and a sense of change happening at all levels without input from staff. It was stressed that there is not a clear feedback system in place to express opinions or concerns, highlighting a significant challenge in communication.

It is in management's interests to consult and to listen to consultations, not just to hear but to act on them. I think there's a whole unspoken pact that that is being broken more and more. [Research Staff member]

There needs to be far more consideration, more time into project work or just kind of changes in general around consulting with staff, checking that that information that they've gathered and implementing is actually correct. Then working with those staff to communicate, upskill and embed that change within processes. [Professional Services Staff member]

Issues also existed in fostering a sense of community and inclusivity within a larger school environment and in maintaining a culture that fosters creativity, inclusivity and support due to the school's growth. Participants stressed the importance of creating a culture of collaboration and communication between students and academics in the school. Participants reported that regular, frequent and predictable communication builds trust and keeps staff informed about ongoing issues and developments. Overall, the data suggests that effective communication is essential for fostering a positive working environment, enhancing collaboration and ensuring that staff are well-informed and engaged.

Multiple suggestions for improvement were noted by participants that would improve communication within the school including establishing a centralised online information source within the school to address the challenges of accessing information across multiple platforms, and ensuring regular, frequent and predictable communication within the school, including implementing structured formats like weekly bulletins for school-wide updates.

2.3 Staff workload

Academic staff participants expressed difficulties in maintaining a healthy work-life balance due to the demanding nature of academic jobs. Pressure to work beyond regular hours and a lack of flexibility in working patterns both lead to compromised work-life balance.

An academic job is kind of like a 24/7 sort of thing and partly we opt into that and some people have more difficulty with that than others. [Academic Staff member]

There is no good balance between the professional life and the personal life. You cannot afford a good balance if you want to progress in the academic career. [Academic Staff member]

There was a general consensus that balancing teaching, research, and administrative duties is challenging.

One key issue noted by Professional services staff was that although the school is very supportive in terms of personal development, their workload often hindered attendance at training opportunities.

It's not that the school doesn't support that but I just don't feel like I have time to do that on the top of managing other people and also planning their CPD. It's not really, I mean it is in my job description, but do I really have that, I don't know have much time. [Professional services staff member]

A further observation noted by both academic staff and professional services staff was that workload was often amplified by increased administrative burdens. Academic and research staff expressed that the increase in bureaucracy and administrative tasks was a significant contributor to workload challenges, with participants spending significant time dealing with forms and procedures. This hinders productivity and creates obstacles in getting work done efficiently. Furthermore, the necessity to complete teaching administration tasks often detracts from more focused responsibilities, leading to frustration and overload.

I find that I spend a lot of time just dealing with forms and procedures, it's just people blocking things, applying to do some kind of research. [Research Staff member]

It's just an enormous administration job, and I feel like I don't do a lot of it efficiently because it's the only course I do it for, all the things we've been saying before. It really increases workload and it takes me away from the things not only that I want to do but that I'm really here to do. [Academic Staff member]

The amount of paperwork of one sort or another that surrounds the various tasks that we do, the teaching tasks, the various management or organizational tasks that we're involved in, various tasks that as academics we have to carry out. Those have become over time much more loaded down with various sorts of paperwork, reporting and things of this kind. [Academic Staff member]

The focus groups revealed that there is a high level of respect between Professional Services staff and academics, and an understanding that both groups undertake their roles to a high standard. However, there arose a slight concern between academic staff and Professional

Services staff that additional administrative tasks are being imposed upon them by the opposite group, resulting in as somewhat antagonistic environment,

We can end up feeling like the professional services staff are the people imposing the bureaucracy, and that often feels like the less productive part of the workload that stops us getting things done, and vice versa. I think that is just because both groups are constantly feeling overloaded. [Academic Staff member]

Resource constraints was also a major contributing factor to increasing workloads. Participants expressed that understaffed and underfunded university teams – particularly in professional services departments – contributed to delays in responses and interactions, affecting the ability to manage workloads efficiently. Turnover among professional staff also necessitates continuous training on complex systems, adding to the workload.

Most of the teams that are supporting us in various capacities at the university are completely understaffed and overloaded, underfunded. I by default, I assume if I'm asking one of our professional services teams for something and they don't even reply or take weeks to get back to me, it's because they don't have time. [Academic Staff member]

The effect of workload and administrative demands also raised challenges in communication and collaboration within the school, often hindering community-building efforts, as individuals do not have the time to engage in informal interactions necessary for building relationships.

You don't create communities if you overwork everybody, because they don't have the opportunity to talk to each other, to have the exploratory chats or to meet up with other people regularly not for a particular purpose, but because you want to build those working relationships with them. [Academic Staff member]

We are constantly feeling overloaded. It's a consequence of the workload, and that basically we don't interact in a collegial research type way or a collegial type way, the way we do with one another. The interactions tend to be around things that a member of one group wants from a member of the other group, and nothing else. [Academic Staff member]

There were some indications in the data that growth in school numbers, resulted in increased work overload and issues in administering effective systems – although caution must be applied with this finding due to limited data.

To mitigate and resolve some of the challenges of workload, participants in all groups emphasised the need for better support and resources to manage their workload effectively. This included streamlining processes, role clarity, as well as reviews of workload allocation models.

I don't really have the answer other than you pretty need to assess people's workload and your own workload. If you are the person communicating change, you have to assess how long it's going to take you and incorporate it into your

planning because if you don't do it, then it's just not going to happen. [Academic Staff member]

2.4 Management and integration of changes in systems and processes

Several participants, both academic and professional services staff, expressed frustration with the administrative and bureaucratic nature of support systems, which are seen as inefficient and burdensome. It was noted that new university procedures for procurement, financial management and travel management were poorly implemented, causing delays and inefficiencies. As illustrated by the quotes below, in particular, the 'People and Money' system and 'Diversity Travel' appear to have created considerable disruption and amplified staff frustrations with university systems. Participants described the People and Money system as a "total and utter disaster" and a "nightmare" causing significant problems in HR and finance processes. Additionally, there were concerns about privacy issues and inefficiencies within the People and Money system, such as unnecessary approvals and complex procedures.

We've had a lot of issues with the systems that we're using, particularly the People and Money system's been a total and utter disaster which, that is a huge issue anyway and that's been a nightmare. [Academic Staff member]

I was trying not to just bring up P&M (People and Money) straightaway, but that's really one of the main issues for me and my colleagues who work in finance. There were so many issues, it caused so many problems, even now two years down the line almost, I mean, there's progress but it's very, very slow. [Professional Services Staff member]

Participants highlighted a lack of effective communication and follow-through regarding consultations and system upgrades related to People and Money. There were indications that these systems were implemented by the central university management, with limited understanding of the impacts on basic operations, resulting in staff feeling excluded from decision-making processes. This frustration was echoed in regard to Diversity Travel, with some participants, particularly academic staff, noting higher costs, cumbersome reimbursement processes and a lack of follow-through and awareness at higher levels regarding persistent issues with travel systems.

If People and Money had gone well, possibly people would have accepted this move to centralization had some benefit. But because it went so wrong, and it went wrong for all the reasons that we've discussed here, lack of, you know, absolutely no real consultation with stakeholders across the various parts of the university. [Academic staff member]

They force you to use Diversity Travel, which is a whole other subject, and also it doesn't save the university anything. It's more expensive than going direct to the airlines or direct to the hotels. [Academic Staff member]

We have a travel agency that we're required to use their websites, it doesn't work. Sometimes you'll book something, it'll say it's booked and it wasn't, you turn up at the railway station, there's no ticket, and I've had staff with exactly this problem. That's a clear problem and it was reported back up. The university set up somebody to look at this, a named person to handle it. Then six months later, our head of school is talking to other people and ... "That's still a thing? I thought we sorted that." No, I mean if they cared or not, you couldn't tell because they do not know that the thing is still broken. It doesn't matter if they care or not, we don't necessarily think they can do it. [Academic Staff member]

Overall the data suggests that issues remain in university processes and systems, particularly People and Money and Diversity Travel, suggesting that better support and guidance need to be considered in this area. There was an agreement amongst participants that increased involvement and continued consultation with those affected by procedural changes would ensure better alignment with actual needs, increase staff confidence and reduce dissatisfaction. A minority of participants noted that adequate training events on procedural training would help staff adapt to new systems and processes effectively.

2.5 Staff development and progression

Challenges and opportunities arose in the data related to staff development, training and career progression. It was highlighted that the Institute for Academic Development does offer valuable resources for staff development, but more encouragement and support is needed from the school to utilize these resources. Furthermore, workload and competing priorities often hinder staff from attending training courses, leading to a lack of skills development. Academic and research staff participants highlighted the challenge of attending mandatory courses due to unsuitable timing, which affects their ability to participate effectively.

I think we have the Institute for Academic Development, that offers a lot of resources, so I think that's good. But I have to say it depends on the person, so you have to decide if you want to take advantage of that. [Research Staff member]

I'd say the biggest impact there is lack of time and control over their own time and staff to go on these things [training] and do that. [Academic Staff member]

One key area raised by professional services colleagues was the hierarchical grading system which limits individuals to progress and develop, affects how capabilities are perceived and restricts opportunities for advancement. In some cases, it was noted by some participants that lower grading makes others interpret them as less valuable. Participants expressed frustration

with the grading system, highlighting issues such as lack of transparency, unfair treatment and difficulty in career progression within the university. The grading system is seen as a barrier to effective collaboration and respect between professional services and academic staff, leading to feelings of exclusion and undervaluation. The lack of clear career progression paths for professional services staff leads to a 'revolving door effect' where staff move between departments seeking promotion.

Some very similar posts in other parts of the university are on a different grade from the ones that are here, for that reason, I've seen a couple of members of staff leave, I think mainly because of the pay. [Professional Services Staff member]

The grading system in the university just, you know, immediately puts you in a box. [Professional Services Staff member]

I find that people get referenced to by their grades. So like, oh they're a Grade 5, they're a Grade 7, and that's kind of how, I suppose the capability of people get kind of judged a little bit or sift, "Oh they can't do that, they're a Grade 5." [Professional Services Staff member]

Professional services participants suggested that the grading system should recognize and value the individual skills and contributions of professional services staff, rather than categorizing them solely based on their grade or level. At a broader level, there is a need for standardization of job grades across different parts of the university to prevent pay discrepancies and staff turnover.

Data also revealed issues and barriers faced by research staff in advancing their careers within the university. In some cases, research staff reported a lack of clear progression structures and formal processes, hindering career advancement. Additionally, there arose comments regarding uncertainty about promotion criteria and long timescales for promotions that create barriers for career progression. Postdoctoral researchers also expressed they feel like 'workhorses' without a sense of belonging due to short contracts, emphasizing the need for recognition beyond material rewards.

One of the most important things for research staff is the fact that they don't have permanent positions and they're always having to look for new jobs or hope that their PI (Principal Investigator) will be lucky with their next grant and fund them. [Research Staff member]

The first thing that I can think of is maybe recognition of contribution of staff regardless of their position in the hierarchy. My perspective as a postdoc, so a researcher, is that in a way we are like the workhorse for the department if they need us to complete projects. [Research Staff member]

A number of suggestions to support career development and progression were made by participants including ensuring the contributions of all staff are recognised and celebrated, and guaranteeing increased access to training courses and professional development opportunities for all staff. At university level, it was suggested that measures need to be taken to ensure clear career pathways, especially for non-academic staff.

2.6 Bullying and harassment

In the 2023 staff engagement survey, it was reported that 10% of academic staff and 9% of professional services staff reported experiencing bullying and harassment. Although non-compulsory training¹ is provided its effectiveness was questioned, with multiple participants commenting that further training and workshops are required to raise awareness and provide tools to combat bullying and harassment effectively. It was reported by some participants that training of this nature is difficult to find and there was uncertainty regarding what training needed to be completed.

I suspect we do have that training [Bullying and Harassment training]. But it's just, well finding training is like, you know, a needle in a haystack. We can't actually – it is there and we are meant to do it but it's very difficult to know what it is that we're meant to do. [Professional Services Staff member]

I am aware loosely where that there is training and quite possibly I'm required to go on it. [Academic staff member]

All staff expressed dissatisfaction with how bullying reports are handled, citing inadequate responses from management. Furthermore, it was raised that there is a lack of clarity and transparency in the procedures for addressing bullying incidents.

I were to notice or to be on the receiving end, I would have absolutely no idea where to begin. If it was someone other than my line manager, I might talk to my line manager, but if it was my line manager, I wouldn't know where to go. My guess is that probably a lot of people are in a similar situation; they don't really know what the procedures would be. [Professional Services Staff member]

Participants also reported on the need for ongoing mutual respect and recognition between professional services and academic staff. Some instances of inappropriate behaviour and lack of respect towards professional services staff were highlighted, emphasizing the importance of equal treatment for all team members. There is a perception that academic staff are given more autonomy and privileges compared to professional services staff.

There are some of the professional services staff who I do talk to on a friendly level rather than because I want things from them, and I think there is definitely friction

¹ Active Bystander training and “Where do you draw the line?”

going the other way as well that they often feel like the academics don't treat them with the respect that they deserve. [Academic Staff member]

One area where I have noticed a little bit of, let's say, inappropriate behaviours between academic staff and professional services staff. You know, they're part of the team as well, and their skills and their job is different and you should treat them all, you know, same respect that you should treat, you know, one of your academic colleagues. [Academic Staff member]

In some cases, it was noted that management and leadership do not facilitate or promote better relationships between academic staff and professional services.

They're not actually taking the time to really focus and effectively empower their direct reports and their staff and integrating academics and professional services. I've spoken to academics as well and they don't like the divide between professional services. [Professional Services Staff member]

Participants stressed that further mandatory training on how to address harassment could be effective in raising awareness and tackling bullying; including training for managers on what constitutes harassment and how to avoid it is crucial, as well as clear reporting mechanisms and support systems.

2.7 Leadership and management

The data revealed that there are concerns about the effectiveness of university leadership, with participants expressing a lack of confidence in university leadership's decision-making abilities and issues linked to accountability. It was emphasized that university leaders should acknowledge mistakes, take ownership and actively work to address issues raised by staff to build trust and morale.

As soon as you get leaders that acknowledge that they made the mistakes and then start working with people to try and fix them, then they get a much better collaboration rapport going, people understand, accept the mistake's been made and they're working towards solutions. [Academic Staff member]

You are more likely to follow somebody who admits their mistakes, admits that they are vulnerable, and has the courage to say, "Oh, I just really screwed something up, I'm really sorry, I had no clue." [Professional Services Staff member]

Participants noted that building a leadership culture that is visible, approachable and responsive to staff needs and concerns is crucial, and that staff should feel safe raising concerns without fear of retaliation or inaction.

To mitigate these challenges, university leadership should aim to foster clear, consistent and transparent communication to promote visibility and trust among staff. Participants noted that leaders should facilitate problem-solving and actively work towards solutions with employees. Furthermore, involving staff in decisions and keeping them informed about changes reduces the sense of dislocation and enhances confidence in leadership.

Furthermore, a key point noted by participants was the overall managerial approach of being focused on 'being busy', rather than understanding and empowering staff based on their skill sets, or striving to integrate academics and professional services,

If I can see you doing work, you're doing work and I've done my job as a manager. I think because they're so occupied with this kind of busy work they're not actually having the time to really focus and effectively empowering their direct reports and their staff and integrating academics and professional services." [Academic Staff member]

Participants reported that school leadership should be facilitating and encouraging teams to be more integrated and collaborative, suggesting a shift is needed towards a more supportive, collaborative and solution-oriented approach.

In a similar vein, numerous participants suggested that school leadership should communicate changes effectively e.g. changes to processes and systems, emphasizing the importance of strategic and thoughtful consultation with colleagues to ensure understanding, transparency and engagement.

I noticed over the years the change, the support should be to facilitate you and to get you through the problems. I've seen it being more and more administrative and bureaucratic and what they do is just tell you the barriers but they don't help you break through them or deal with them. Whereas if they're going to say there is this problem, let's work through it or find the problem and find the solution as well". [Academic Staff member]

3. Focus groups with PGR students

Focus groups were held with PGR students studying in the School of Informatics. All PGR students were completing a PhD in their field. The main themes arising from the focus groups are outlined in Figure 2 and described in the following sections.



Figure 2: Key themes in student focus groups

3.1 Interpersonal relationships and communication

The data revealed challenges in communication, interpersonal relationships and the overall sense of community among PGR students. Multiple PGR students felt a sense of isolation due to the lack of community compared to other schools who are perceived to have a stronger sense of community. Participants stressed the need for more connections between senior and junior PhD students to improve the working environment, with one participant commenting on the benefits of having a structured mentorship programme, for example, more experienced PhD students assigned to mentor new students.

I think there could be a stronger mentor system and if there was better communication between the layers of the years of PhD students. I think that can be helped a lot. [PGR student]

Additionally, it was noted that the decreased staff presence post-Covid has led to reduced access to supervisors, affecting student engagement and presence.

I suppose one thing is that when the staff engagement goes down, the student engagement goes down, because one of the perks that I was always told my supervisor sometimes says, like, oh, one of my past students was so good because he'd always come and visit my office if he got stuck on something. But now, post-Covid, my supervisor is less in the office. So I don't have access to my supervisor in the same way that that person did. [PGR student]

Students noted the importance of social interactions, culture and collaboration within the student community, and having both a lively environment for social interactions and quiet spaces for a good working environment.

3.2 Workspace and cleanliness

PGR students noted issues related to physical workspaces and the overall environment within the school. Most noted that there was a lack of stable workspaces, and overcrowding in offices hampered students' ability to have a stable base and form social connections. There was a desire for fixed desks instead of hot desking to make life easier for students.

I've got one thing that's like an absolute pipe dream, which is fixed desks for all students in the community. [PGR student]

The data also revealed issues with cleanliness, particularly in the toilets and office areas. There was significant dissatisfaction with the cleanliness of the bathrooms in the Informatics Forum, including issues within the unisex bathrooms such as a lack of spare toilet rolls and the placement of feminine hygiene bins. The current state of the bathrooms was referred to by students as "disgusting" and "unwelcoming", highlighting the need for improvements to enhance cleanliness and student experience. Students stressed the importance of ensuring colleagues observed etiquette in terms of cleanliness and behaviour in shared workspaces.

Observing etiquette in terms of cleanliness and also behaviour, just it being a work environment. I think a lot of people don't really necessarily understand how to interact with the work environment. [PGR student]

3.3 Bullying and harassment

Experiences and perceptions of bullying and harassment included subtle forms like micro-aggressions and exclusion, rather than explicit name-calling or aggressive behaviour.

I would say I usually, in terms of a negative experience, experience things that are more on the micro-aggression level and maybe exclusion. Maybe that's a little bit bullying, exclusion, but it's not explicit like calling names or putting me down or something. [PGR student]

For female students, this tends to be in the form of being asked to do menial tasks.

I've had plenty of times where I've been asked to do menial tasks. And it's like, so many times, why do you keep asking me to do the menial tasks? [PGR student, female]

The data suggests that there were efforts and suggestions to improve the handling of bullying and harassment through support systems and initiatives. Some participants felt comfortable approaching the Informatics Graduate School representatives if faced with harassment, indicating trust in the support system, while others noted not feeling comfortable reporting

bullying or harassment unless they were close to the person. Participants emphasized the importance of courses to help individuals learn how to not discriminate and stand up for others in cases of bullying and harassment. This included, a shift from traditional training approaches to engaging discussions is suggested to address issues like bullying and harassment effectively.

Lastly, there was a perception that PhD students are treated differently depending on whether they are part of a CDT or not. A number of participants referred to "the poor PhD students".

I've heard multiple different school students refer to themselves as like the poor PhD students, which is so sad and so unnecessary. [PGR student]

3.4 Gender inequality and representation

Participants noted challenges related to gender disparity and lack of female representation in higher academic positions. Female participants commented there is a noticeable lack of female postdocs and senior PIs, indicating a gender disparity in higher academic positions.

We don't have that many postdocs anyway, but certainly not a lot of female postdocs. And at the PI level, especially the senior PI level, they all disappear off the face of the earth. [PGR student, female]

The importance of having a supportive community and networks for female students was expressed. One participant highlighted the issue of isolation and separation among female PGR students, suggesting a potential challenge for female students who may struggle with finding a supportive community.

The School of Informatics here is very, very minority women, so a lot of my friend groups tend to be guys. Then within their friend groups they include each other in collaborations and stuff, so then naturally there is this feeling of exclusion because I'm not the person they think of, even if I'm in the same field as them. So, for social events or for academic collaborations, there's this general feeling of exclusion. [PGR student, female]

One participant noted the university policy on bringing children on campus creates barriers for parents, particularly impacting women in the workplace. This ultimately hindered the students' desire to work in the school.

I think, every other school in the university, do not allow children in the building, which means new parents. Is that welcoming women and parents to work? Does it make me feel like I could stay in this line of work and be a parent at this university? Not really. [PGR student, female]

One participant noted the addition of initiatives promoting discussions on gender violence, and involving men in the conversation, would be seen as a positive step towards creating a more inclusive environment. There were also calls to address the lack of female PIs within the school.

3.5 Career development and progression

Students were praising of the initiatives in place to enhance their career, including accessing workshops and training sessions at the Institute of Academic Development for career development. The majority of participants also utilized the career service for advice on applications, résumés and mock interviews, as well as the Graduate School. The Graduate School send out monthly reminders of support contacts, which are helpful for career progression.

The university has the Institute for Academic Development which sometimes has workshops on various things like career advice or just how to write a paper or something. I think those have mixed reviews, I think some people find them very helpful. [PGR student]

The Institute for Academic Development has many like workshops and training sessions about these things like about how to start to write or how to improve your presentation skills, or how to do your first year review. [PGR student]

Students were also appreciative of the support they received from their supervisors.

I guess the first things that come to mind would be frequent support and check-ins from the people you would expect, so your supervisors, the Informatics Graduate School. I think that does happen. [PGR student]

However, there were some differences in career development support between specialized programme students and regular students. There seems to be a lack of support for career development and progression within the School of Informatics, especially for students not in specialized programmes like CDT or DTP.

With regards to like accessing mentorship and support, we have CDT officers in the building. So if you're on one of the school CDTs you have a point of contact to go to. If you're stuck on something, even if it's really random. If you're a school student, figure it out by yourself. Because the information is so disparate that's going to take you a long time. [PGR student]

Overall, there is a desire for the school to organize career events for all students, not just those in CDTs.

Insights from Senior Leader interviews

This section describes the main themes present in the interviews with key senior leaders, including challenges and solutions.

4. Qualitative data analysis: Senior leader interviews

A number of key themes arose in interviews with senior leaders (Figure 3). These will be discussed in more detail in the following sections, including enablers and solutions to key challenges encountered.



Figure 3: Overarching themes identified in the interviews

4.1 What does a 'good' working environment look like?

Interview participants were asked to comment on the question, “What does ‘good’ look like in regard to the working environment?” Interestingly, the comments reflected the data collated in the focus groups, demonstrating that senior leaders recognise and acknowledge staff needs and challenges.

Participants noted the importance of feeling respected and valued in the workplace, where individuals should feel comfortable, happy and respected without fear of bullying or harassment. Additionally, the role of clear communication and collaboration was noted as a crucial aspect of a positive work environment, in which there is clear communication and open channels within the organization, especially from leadership. This culture of communication is largely set by those in leadership positions, such as the head of school.

A good working environment is where people are respectful to each other and we talk through any particular issues we might have.

Senior leaders also noted the significance of a balanced work environment and adequate resources, highlighting that staff require adequate resources to fulfil their roles and feel a sense of collegiality, both of which contribute to a positive working environment. Lastly, the participants stressed the necessity of opportunities for personal development in the workplace.

A good head of school who communicates and sets the right standards within that group of people, encourages that group of people to do the same thing within their own spheres of influence.

4.2 Ensuring all staff are recognized and valued

Interviewees noted that it is vital to ensure that staff skills are acknowledged and appreciated within the school and this can include factors such as providing funding for staff development, raising awareness of development opportunities, or implementing small initiatives like staff awards and recognition.

I think we are pretty good at supporting people when they wanted those development opportunities and then lobby within the university for a change.

The systems that we have should be fair and open and not only fair, but also seem to be fair. It's really important with things like promotions, which I think in the school are open and fair and genuinely merit based.

Addressing the challenges related to promotion processes and career progression within the school also ensures staff recognition. Similar to the focus group data, the interviews revealed that promotion processes for professional service staff are a university-wide issue, and there is a need to provide clear paths for career progression while acknowledging individual preferences and role development. One potential proposition to this issue was to promote conversations between professional services managers and their staff to explore potential opportunities and how staff can progress.

I think we do have a gap with our managers in terms of working with individuals to explore with them what is it that they like about the role they've got? How could that role be developed? If in fact the person's just wanting to expand that role and provided that meets business needs, then there's regrading opportunities there.

Additionally, it was observed by interviewees that a healthy environment with respect for each other's opinions and expertise is essential for recognizing and valuing staff skills. Similar to the focus group findings, one participant noted that this can be challenging between academic staff members and professional services in regards to the delegation of bureaucratic tasks and if there is not clear communication or acknowledgement of job roles.

I have a very strong view that professional services staff are there to provide support to academics and take the bureaucracy away from them. But we don't always have the respect of the expertise in what professional services staff do.

Finally, communication and visibility are significant in maintaining a culture of collaboration and engagement, as they influence how skills are recognized and utilized.

4.3 Promoting effective communication, collaboration and engagement

Participants noted various challenges that hinder effective collaboration between different groups within the school. Collaboration between professional services staff and academics can be challenging due to disagreements or unclear policies, as well as staff existing in 'silos'.

I think there might be some kind of element of those groups working in silos and maybe there being less communication between them. But then there's probably some communication that happens within the professional services strand of the school that I don't see because I'm not on those mailing lists.

Transparency and breaking down silos are important for fostering collaboration and engagement, as well as providing opportunities for teams to interact, share information and understand each other's challenges.

You know, you get people into the same room and they share information and so on, and they actually then realise that of course everyone's having a rough time, everyone's got heavy workloads.

All participants noted that school and university leadership plays a pivotal role in setting the culture and ensuring effective communication and collaboration. This not only includes ensuring effective channels of communication, but also listening to staff and ensuring involvement in decision-making processes.

I'm a firm believer that culture comes from the top. It's set by whoever is really running the show.

4.4 Ensuring effective leadership

All interview participants noted that effective leadership requires strong communication skills, including listening and reflective listening, alongside having clear explanations behind decisions which affect staff. In addition, effective leadership involves being present and addressing issues faced by the organization, to ensure individuals feel connected and informed. Figure 4 outlines key factors noted by interview participants regarding effective leadership qualities.

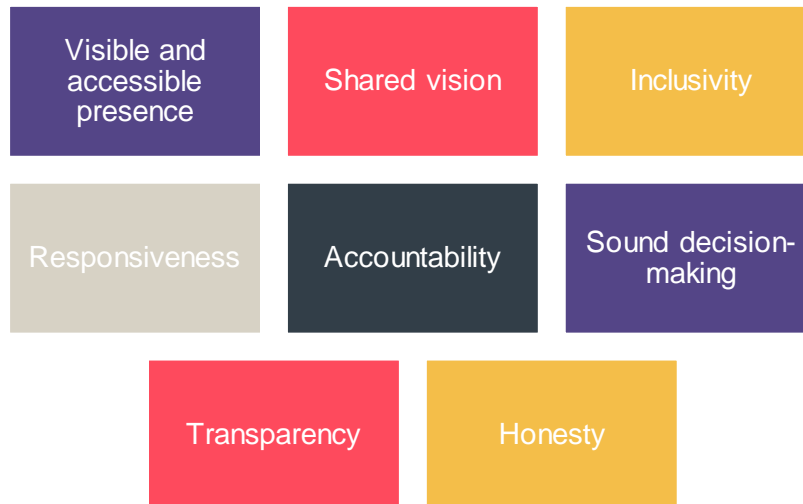


Figure 4: Effective leadership qualities

Interviewees acknowledged that challenges have arisen for leadership, particularly in managing change, financial cuts and process centralization (e.g., People and Money). Issues related to decision-making processes and genuine engagement with staff and students, as well as poor decision-making at top levels, have led to significant criticism from various university stakeholders. It was noted that the university's responses to criticism have been defensive and lacked genuine engagement, and this has led to a loss of faith in university leadership and a culture of resentment.

The change management was just atrocious. It was absolutely atrocious. I think it was one of the hardest leadership challenges that head of school and myself have had of trying to keep that balance between what was going on in the school, representing the school, but also trying to defend the university leadership. I think all faith in the university was lost at that point. It's pretty hard to deal with at the school level of what looks like all of our money that we generated, you know, going to the university to fund all these change projects without really a clear communication about what the benefit is.

Poor decisions that were made at the top level in university to do with People and Money, to do with procurement, to do with travel arrangements. There seems to be then a disconnect between university as a corporate entity and the university as a seat of learning, of academia, and as a place where people do research and teach students.

One participant noted the importance of leaders in fostering a positive environment and maintaining morale. There was a general agreement that poor decision-making has led to a lack of confidence in university leadership, and it is important this is addressed to rebuild confidence in leadership. By focusing on communication, visibility, collaboration, addressing concerns constructively, empowerment and maintaining a respectful environment,

leadership can become more effective within an organization like the University of Edinburgh.

To conclude the interviews, participants were asked to state one factor they would like to change in the next year within the school. One senior leader would prioritize improving communication. The other three would like to see increased opportunities for more platforms on which staff can voice their concerns and have them addressed, including continued use of the staff meetings as an outlet.

Conclusions and recommendations

This section synthesizes the findings from the individual strands of the review into a comprehensive overview of the key themes and lessons learned, and offers recommendations for ongoing improvement.

5. Putting it all together: Synthesis of results

5.1 Conclusions

Overall, it is clear that all colleagues, including school senior leadership, are keen to ensure that the School of Informatics moves forward with a sense of unity and collaboration, harnessing good practice in areas such as colleague engagement and communication. The current research highlighted a number of good practice examples, occurring both across the university and specifically in the School of Informatics. It is clear from the data that staff do feel a sense of belonging among their peers, coupled with a clear willingness to be supportive in the workplace. Staff enjoyed working in the school and stressed this throughout the data collection sessions, however it was clear that some challenges were present. The evidence collected does raise some apprehensions within key areas such as communication, staff development and university leadership.

As reported by multiple participants, a positive working environment was linked to good relationships with managers, supportive colleagues, clear communication channels, recognition of achievements, support for career progression and reporting mechanisms. However, there is a significant need for improved communication channels, particularly between university leadership and staff. Effective communication was also emphasized as crucial for collaboration and decision-making processes. Furthermore, enhancing collaboration among teams was suggested, through fostering social activities outside formal settings. Participants also highlighted the lack of clear feedback systems and the importance of knowing who to talk to for their concerns to be heard.

Additionally, many participants expressed frustration with increased administrative workloads, which detract from their primary responsibilities of teaching and research. The implementation of new procedures for procurement, financial management and travel management has been poorly executed, leading to inefficiencies and additional burdens on staff. Effective change management practices were deemed necessary to handle ongoing changes within the university. This includes continuous consultation with staff to incorporate their feedback into decision-making processes.

In regard to leadership, effective management was associated with transparency, honesty, accountability and competence. There were concerns about University leadership visibility and a lack of trust in leaders' ability to deliver on promises. Participants stressed the importance of leaders being approachable, engaging in meaningful dialogue with staff, acknowledging mistakes and acting on feedback.

These themes collectively point towards areas needing attention to improve the working environment at the University of Edinburgh's School of Informatics. Advance HE has endeavoured to provide a concrete and robust set of recommendations to enable senior staff members to enhance and improve the working environment for all staff and students.

5.2 Recommendations

This final section discusses in greater detail specific recommendations for the School of Informatics to consider as it draws from the primary data collected in this review and the desk-based research examining what other colleges and institutions offer in this space (Table 2).

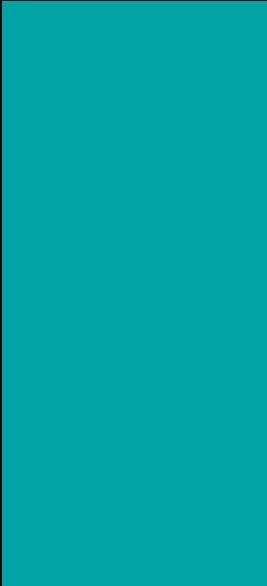
Table 2: Key recommendations for future best practice

Enhancing communication and engagement	<p>At school level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Ensure regular, frequent and predictable communication. This helps staff know when to expect updates and reduces uncertainty. This could include emails, continuance of the monthly newsletters, school bulletins, continued regular staff meetings.+ Consider distributing information in 'bite-size' formats (delivering content and information in smaller, more focused and manageable ways) as this is deemed to be more effective and desirable for colleagues rather than receiving large amounts of information which may be overwhelming. This might include information that is focused on one topic at a time, headlines or key takeaways, with the provision of extra resources for those who wish to engage more.+ Target or theme communication to ensure that specific colleagues receive the appropriate and relevant information.+ Create a centralized platform for information dissemination to avoid confusion caused by multiple platforms. This would help staff access necessary information more efficiently. Information should be easily sourced, labelled and stored within appropriate communication systems to allow colleagues to refer back to or revisit information. Various platforms could be considered such as SharePoint, MS Teams, Asana, or Slack.+ Encourage face-to-face meetings, especially for complex or sensitive issues. Personal interactions can build trust and ensure clearer understanding.+ Implement more initiatives or engagement events, to allow colleagues to build relationships and develop a sense of community (e.g., continued promotion of the colleague coffee mornings, staff away days or team-building days).
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Ensure the development and awareness of a school communication strategy to enable colleagues to understand why decisions are being made and to improve 'buy-in'. A clear strategy would also improve the clarity of areas of accountabilities of staff and senior leaders. <p>At university level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Create structures to enhance opportunities for staff to engage in decision-making processes. This may include topic-specific committees to engage staff in decision-making processes to promote a sense of shared responsibility and the delegation of decision-making. + Encourage senior leaders to foster an environment where colleagues feel able to speak up about issues and contribute their voices and experiences to decision-making. This could include increased engagement with colleagues through informal conversations and increased visibility 'on the ground', for example, having an approachable presence and engaging with colleagues across the school offices and buildings.
<p>Supporting all-staff development and progression</p>	<p>At school level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Continue to implement mechanisms to ensure that colleagues are recognized for their performance, contribution and accomplishments within the school. This could include verbal and written praise within communications, or colleague excellence awards. Decisions regarding awards could be made through nomination processes by other colleague members to ensure transparency and fairness. + Increase awareness and accessibility of training resources such as those offered by the Institute for Academic Development and Learning and Development. + Encourage all staff to take advantage of these opportunities by promoting them more effectively within the school. This include in weekly emails, newsletters or staff meetings. + Ensure that line managers support their team members' career development by encouraging participation in training courses and providing necessary resources, including an exploration of how roles can be developed based on individual interests and business needs.

	<p>At university level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Ensure information and guidance on routes of progression and colleague development opportunities are available and accessible to academic and professional services, and are communicated widely across all colleague groups. + Standardize job grading across the university to ensure fairness and reduce turnover due to perceived inequities in pay and job roles.
<p>Support for staff workload</p>	<p>At school level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Ensure that workload models are accurate and robust, and understood by all colleagues (both academic and Professional Services staff) across the school. This could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Engaging all staff in a collective consultation process to get some broad agreement on the scope of the workload allocation model. ○ Continue to ensure there are mechanisms in place to communicate issues and feedback and, if necessary, to negotiate compromises. Ensure staff are fully aware of these mechanisms. ○ Regular monitoring and recording of workload through informal conversations with line managers ○ Leaders and managers need training in developing workloads models and review processes ○ Promote a culture of effective work–life balance <p>Resources and Links:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Management of Academic Workloads: Improving Practice in the Sector - Final Report - https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/management-academic-workloads-improving-practice-sector-final-report ○ HR contribution to business efficiency: management of academic workloads: Case Study - https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/hr-contribution-business-efficiency-management-academic-workloads-case-study
<p>Addressing issues related to bullying and harassment</p>	<p>At school level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Create a ‘one-stop-shop’ web page for identity-based harassment and discrimination reporting and complaints processes available to staff and students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ a statement encouraging disclosures

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ a flowchart outlining the various routes available to staff and students to raise incidents ○ information around how and by whom reporting and complaint data will be used (for example, use of demographic data for statistical purposes). ○ A designated 'Support' bookmark should be provided on the central reporting and complaints landing page, which will outline all the internal support sources available to staff and students related to reporting and complaints <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Ensure the visibility of the 'code of conduct' for all staff and students, as this establishes the expectations of how all members of the School should be treated. + Review of Bullying and Harassment processes and reporting processes. + Continue to regularly monitor the effectiveness of anti-bullying and harassment policies through surveys and feedback mechanisms to ensure continuous improvement + Implement mandatory training programmes focused on recognizing, preventing and addressing bullying and harassment. This includes training for all staff on what constitutes inappropriate behaviour. + Increase transparency about how cases of bullying and harassment are handled while maintaining confidentiality where necessary. + Ensure robust support structures for victims of bullying and harassment, including counselling services and peer support groups, are communicated amongst all staff. <p>At university level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Ensure that University leadership visibly commits to tackling bullying and harassment by actively participating in awareness campaigns and taking decisive action against perpetrators.
<p>Engaging and supporting PGR students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Embed more inclusive social activities to foster a sense of belonging among PGR students.

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- + Ensure all students are aware of the social events taking place in the Graduate School, and promote these regularly.
 - + Ensuring the office etiquette charter is read and understood by all.
 - + Ensuring that information about career development and available resources is clearly communicated, including those offered by the Institute of Academic Development
 - + Address the lack of (senior) female Principal Investigators (PIs) at school level.

Advance HE recommend a 'deeper dive' into these recommendations in collaboration with colleagues across the school. This would allow a greater understanding of how these recommendations could be addressed – in collaboration with colleagues – to inform future action planning.

Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201
enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk
www.advance-he.ac.uk

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500
communications@advance-he.ac.uk
www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

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+44 (0) 3300 416201 or publications@advance-he.ac.uk