

**Heriot-Watt University**  
**Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support**  
**6-7 February 2023**  
**Report**

**Introduction**

1. On 6 and 7 February 2023 a Professional Services Review of Registry and Academic Support (RAS) took place.
2. The Review focussed upon on the effectiveness of the management of the on-campus student experience within Registry and Academic Support focussing specifically on two strands:
  - a. Effectiveness of existing contact points for students including Personal Tutoring, Student Success Advisors, Ask HWU/Student Services Centres
  - b. Effectiveness of student voice process which are managed by RAS, including student surveys and the Student Partnership Agreement and how effectively the outcomes are used to make improvements not only in RAS but in other areas.
3. The Review Team were provided with a reflective self-evaluation and supporting documentation and met with academic and professional services staff and student representatives across all campuses.
4. The review team comprised:
  - Dr Maged Youssef, Director of Academic Quality, School of Textiles and Design (Chair)
  - Stephen McAuliffe, Deputy Registrar, University of Nottingham
  - Dr Iain Morrison, Dean of Student Experience, University of Highlands and Islands
  - Molly Knight, Vice President Education, Heriot-Watt Student Union
  - Laura Johnstone, Quality and Academic Partnerships Manager
  - Russell Chisholm, Senior Administrative Assistant

**Overall judgment**

5. The documentation supplied, and the discussions that took place with staff and student during the review visit, demonstrated the effectiveness of the student experience managed through RAS.

**Effective practice commendations**

6. The Review Team commends the following examples of effective practice within RAS:
  - a. The clear commitment of staff and their maintenance of focus upon the student experience during a challenging period of restructuring and the Covid-19 pandemic.
  - b. The open and reflective engagement of all participants in the Professional Services review process.
  - c. The reflective and geographically inclusive evolution of the approach to the Student Partnership Agreement.
  - d. The comprehensive and inclusive approach of the NSS/PTES Task Force and the desire to reflect and learn from its work to create a proactive approach to the review of results from all forms of student feedback.
  - e. The continuation of the Learning and Teaching Operations Committee first established during the pandemic which allows for cross-functional planning and collaborative approaches.
  - f. The regular global meetings and partnership working with and between the Student Representative Bodies (SRBs) facilitating the development and alignment of global initiatives and shared experience.
  - g. The introduction of the Student Success Advisors (SSAs), where services were enthusiastically appreciated by most of the students the panel met.

## Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support

- h. The use of colleagues on one campus to support processes on another, for example, in support for board of examiners.
- i. The use of campus locations to develop practice and then share across other campuses (for example Watt Buds).
- j. The openness and willingness to engage in the personal tutor review.
- k. The use of push notifications through the student portal and the benefit that will bring to students.
- l. The sharing turnaround times for student enquiries so there is clarity for students on the length of time a query will take to resolve.

### **Recommendations for enhancement by Registry and Academic Support**

7. The review team recommends that RAS consider the following:
  - a. The development of Key Performance Indicators derived from the University's strategic plan to help drive the development of service delivery and prioritisation for busy teams.
  - b. The simplification of routes through teams where there is an overlap of similar activities taking place to provide clarity for both students and staff.
  - c. That during the on-going embedding of the restructure to consider the merit of a small number of centrally managed but locally deployed staff to support communication and feedback to and with academic staff and schools.
  - d. Explore means to make the best use of available resources for shared service delivery recognising the benefit of a one team approach across multiple campuses.
  - e. Explore the creation of a formal approach to closing the feedback loop with academic staff who refer students to central services.
8. The review team recommends the following areas for consideration within RAS in relation to Personal Tutoring:
  - a. Develop an agreed process with Schools for the allocation of personal tutees that is respectful of necessary disciplinary differences.
  - b. Explore how to increase engagement in the training for personal tutors across all campuses.
  - c. In addition to the above the Personal Tutoring Working Group should consider:
    - i. Exploration of suitable technology to support the personal tutor system including monitoring of engagement.
    - ii. The level of support provided to direct entry students who may require additional contact in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years.
    - iii. Exploration of the reasons why students do not attend personal tutoring sessions.
    - iv. Explore the role of Personal Tutors in proactively supporting disengaged students and the measuring of the impact of personal tutoring on student retention.
    - v. The clarity of understanding of the personal tutoring role and responsibilities amongst staff and students.
    - vi. The introduction of incentives for higher performing personal tutors.
    - vii. Recognition of the workload associated with the personal tutoring role.
    - viii. Explore the value of students having a Personal Tutor who has subject specific knowledge.
9. The review team recommends the following areas for consideration within RAS in relation to Student Success Advisors (SSAs):
  - a. Review the benefits and feasibility of increasing the Student Success Advisors pool to pick up elements of the Personal Tutoring role.
  - b. Ensure an equivalence of responsibility across the campuses for the roles.

## Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support

- c. Ensure there is clarity and awareness of the role of the SSAs amongst students and staff including developing a service level agreement (SLA) supported by clear management data on service delivery.
  - d. Devise a method of collecting and classifying the queries referred by the SSAs to other teams to identify where better messaging to students is required to help reduce the number of queries arising in the first place.
10. The review team recommends the following areas for consideration within RAS in relation the Student Service Centre and AskHWU:
- a. the interface for Ask HWU is reviewed to ensure it is written with no assumed knowledge.
  - b. All required student services should review their staffing arrangements to ensure their presence in the Edinburgh Student Service Centre as a priority.
  - c. Ensure the Student Service Centre service level agreements are clear to all students and set at reasonable timescales to avoid slow response and contact more than once.
11. The review team recommends the following areas for consideration within RAS in relation the student voice processes:
- a. Establish a systematic, pan-institutional approach to closing the feedback loop to students using appropriate and effective communication channels.
  - b. The publication of a comprehensive calendar of all student surveys issued across the institution.
  - c. Review the reasons for low student survey response rates, consider and implement alternative ways of gathering student feedback, promote survey completion and provide additional reassurances to students about the confidentiality of responses.
  - d. The review of the annual, non-NSS survey that was postponed at the start of the pandemic is reconstituted.
  - e. Consider ways in which students and staff are made aware of the Student Partnership Agreement, including during induction.
  - f. Work with the student representative bodies to simplify, clarify, and disseminate definitions and responsibilities of all the student representative roles.
  - g. Creation of in-depth analysis for the survey results, allowing staff to drill down into the data.

### **Recommendations to the University**

13. The review team recommends that University should:
- a. Conclude its budgetary review process and addresses the under-resourcing in RAS or provides a clear steer on the activities that should be stopped to fit current capacity.
  - b. Review the potential for investing additional resource in a PGR student experience enhancement post.
  - c. The university reviews its telephony to ensure the student helpline is an appropriate part of the response rather than the primary contact point for all manner of enquiries.

### **Overview and Context**

14. Registry and Academic Support (RAS) is the University's largest professional service within Heriot-Watt University operating across all campuses and covering a large number of activities which impact the overall student experience. Covering the whole of RAS within one review would not be possible and therefore this review focussed on two key areas.
15. The values of the University strategy run through the activities of the directorate, particularly in relation to Building Flourishing Communities and Being a Global, Connected university, however, activities are not currently measured by clear key performance indicators which allows RAS to measure

## Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support

success. The Review Team heard throughout the meetings with staff that a number of areas are under-resourced which is impacting the service that can be provided.

16. The Review Team recommend that the University concludes its budgetary review process and addressed the under-resourcing in RAS or provides a clear steer on activities that should be stopped to fit current capacity. The Review Team additionally, recommends to RAS that Key Performance Indicators derived from the University's strategic plan to help drive the development of service delivery and prioritisation for busy teams.
17. During the Covid-19 pandemic a senior decision-making group was established to manage the key issues arising, which included academic and professional services staff and the student representative bodies. As the University is moving out from the pandemic this group has been continued as the Learning and Teaching Academic Operations Committee (LTAOC) and this was identified as an element of effective practice as it provides a positive collegiate group which allows for cross-functional planning and collaborative approaches.
18. The Review Team were impressed by the clear commitment of the staff to the student experience through the open and reflective engagement in the review process through what had been a challenging time for the service following re-structuring, voluntary redundancies, and the Covid-19 pandemic.
19. The design of services is still evolving, particularly at the Scottish campuses, as these were more affected by the move to centralisation and taking on board the different expectations of students on return to campus. While there is work still to do to align practices across the campuses the Review Team were encouraged by the examples of using colleagues on one campus to support processes on another, for example with the support for Board of Examiners. The Review Team additionally recommend to RAS that it continues looks to make the best use of available resources for shared service delivery recognising the benefit of a one team approach across multiple campuses.
20. The Review team found in the meetings with staff and students that the lack of professional services staff within School Offices meant that students were unaware of where to go to ask questions and that academic staff were finding an increase in the level of queries they had. In some areas there was a lack of clarity of where responsibilities lie for certain aspects particularly where multiple services were involved and the Review Team recommend that there is a simplification of routes through teams where there is an overlap of similar activities taking place to provide clarity for both students and staff.
21. The Review Team also recommend that to help alleviate some of the issues raised during the review and during on the on-going embedding of the restructure to consider the merit of having a small number of centrally managed but locally deployed staff to support communication and feedback to and with academic staff and schools.

## Personal Tutoring

22. A number of divisions within RAS are responsible for elements of the Personal Tutoring system including the Student Experience Team for policy, procedures and guidance and training for staff, Academic Quality in relation to survey data and the SharePoint site and Academic Operations for the allocation of personal tutors.
23. The University has convened a Personal Tutoring Working Group to look at a wide-ranging review of the system including staff and student consultation and a review of practice at other institutions. The Review Team recognised the openness and willingness to engage in the personal tutor review from all stakeholders as a positive development.
24. The Review Team met with a range of students across the campuses, and it was clear that there was a variation of experience in relation to personal tutors. Many indicated that they had a good positive relationship with their personal tutor, while it was noted for others that no contact had taken place with tutors or that there was a lack of awareness of who their tutor was. Some students indicated that

## Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support

there was the perception that the role was not useful particularly where the allocated tutor had no academic connection to them, and they would seek academic advice elsewhere.

25. The student representatives highlighted that there was perhaps a lack of awareness of the role of the personal tutor and what aspects it was appropriate to contact them about. Personal Tutoring is now built into induction sessions and students are contacted through email and social media to remind them of the importance of making use of the 3 contact points per semester.
26. It was highlighted that direct entry, PGT, international students, January cohort and late starters to the University may need more targeted support. In one discipline area it was noted that for direct entry students a personal tutor was identified who met with the group once a week to ensure that students were both academically and pastorally integrated into the University.
27. One key area identified in both the review meetings and through the initial work for the Personal Tutoring Working Group was the support available to tutors for their role. Training and guidance have been enhanced with additional information being made available on SharePoint with signposting to the most appropriate service. Academic staff often feel that the approach of the personal tutor being the first point of call can mean they are inundated with queries that would have been answered by staff in School Offices prior to the centralisation of professional services or are unequipped to deal with, such as in situations where students are distressed.
28. Undertaking the online training module for personal tutors is a mandatory task, the figures provided to the Review Team showed at 25% take up by staff eligible. There is no monitoring system in place and other than a feedback request after the completion of the training no further follow up is carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of the training. The recent survey undertaken by the Personal Tutoring Working Group has indicated that there has been higher level of take up of training which will also include face to face sessions including sessions at the Scottish Borders Campus and in Orkney.
29. Academic staff the Review Team met indicated that while the online training was useful it did not always provide information on the more challenging situations that could be faced; the School of Social Sciences have set up a Teams site for all Personal Tutors to share experience and responses which provided a collegiate support mechanism. It was acknowledged the online training modules may be more Edinburgh focused and required updating to tailor for other campuses.
30. The allocation of personal tutors is a task undertaken by the RAS teams and delays in the allocation was highlighted as an issue. In Dubai work was undertaken with Schools to understand how the allocation within each area was carried out and based on these rules new students are allocated a personal tutor within 24-48 hours. The team in Edinburgh currently do not have the capacity to undertake a similar approach and taking time to understand the nuances of the approaches to allocations, for example in relation to the need to have a discipline specialist allocated or the existing workload of staff, can mean that this is not completed as quickly as the Academic Operations team would like.
31. The Review Team also noted the following points for consideration during the Personal Tutoring Review which are not directly tied to the how RAS manages to the student experience in relation to personal tutoring:
  - i. Exploration of the reasons why students do not attend personal tutoring sessions.
  - ii. The role of Personal Tutors in proactively supporting disengaged students and the measuring of the impact of personal tutoring on student retention.
  - iii. The clarity of understanding of the personal tutoring role and responsibilities amongst staff and students.
  - iv. The introduction of incentives for higher performing personal tutors.
  - v. Recognition of the workload associated with the personal tutoring role.
  - vi. Explore the value of students having a Personal Tutor who has subject specific knowledge.

## Student Success Advisors

## Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support

32. The students that the Review Team met were positive about the role of the Student Success Advisors (SSA). The Review Team noted that there seemed to be a variation of what the students considered the SSA's role, particularly from the Malaysian campus, and recommend that there is a clear understanding and equivalence of responsibility across campuses for the roles.
33. The SSA role was a valuable one in relation to increasing student retention and engagement and the use of systematic learning analytics would help to identify students at risk and enable early interventions by the SSAs.
34. Making more use of data would help to support a business case for increasing the SSA resource and could additionally be considered alongside the Personal Tutoring review on whether there were non-academic support aspects that could be picked up with the SSAs. Noting that the resource model and grading level of the staff would not support that shift in emphasis currently.
12. Academic staff indicated that awareness of the SSAs varied across programmes. Further work was needed to ensure that the SSAs are embedded into induction and other activities taking place during the year such as during lectures to introduce the SSAs and explain their role. The Review Team recommended that RAS should ensure that there was clarity and awareness of the role of the SSAs amongst students and staff which should include the development of a service level agreement and the monitoring of data on service delivery.
35. The SSAs provided a number of examples where they were unable to respond to queries, for example around course registrations and finance, which were then referred onto the Student Service Centres or to the Academic Operations Team. The Review Team recommended that a method of collecting and classifying the queries referred by the SSAs to other teams be devised to identify where better messaging to students is required to help reduce the number of queries arising in the first place.
36. It was indicated that when a student had been referred to the SSA by academic staff that there often there was no feedback on what had happened with the student in question. It was additionally highlighted that with the centralisation of professional services academic staff were dealing with more routine enquiries and that there was a lack of clarity on where to go to for help.
37. The SSAs have been involved in the developing of the WattBuds peer mentoring initiative on the Dubai campus which was well received by students, and it was noted that the initiative was due to be rolled out the at Scottish Borders Campus. The Review Team found the use of campus locations to develop practice and then share across other campuses as an example of effective practice.

### **Student Service Centre/AskHWU**

38. The Student Service Centre (SSC) is a well-used resource across all campuses and was appreciated by the student representatives the Review Team met.
39. The service centre in Dubai and Malaysia has always operated on a more centralised approach and the Review Team heard how key services which traditionally sit outside the RAS structure are available with increased presence at key points of the year, for example at enrolment more finance and visa desks are available in Dubai.
40. The Edinburgh campus has seen an increase in the use of the SSC due to changing student demographics for example with the increase of more self-funded students which has led to increase in the volume and complexity of queries around finance. This academic year also saw increase demand around academic status queries due to the number of people involved in decision making in relation to academic misconduct which had knock on effects in relation to enrolment.
41. The SSC has a rota of staff from services across the University, including those who are not within RAS, who spend time in the centre to respond to face-to-face queries from students. In some cases, the number of hours is limited or can change at last minute with other priorities which can present a challenge in meeting student expectations if queries are unable to be answered straightaway. The

## Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support

Review Team recommends that all required student services should their staffing arrangements to ensure their on-going presence in the Edinburgh Student Service Centre as a priority.

42. There are service level agreements in place with all teams who use the Student Information Desk which indicates the timescale within which a query should be responded to, this varies from 48 hours to 5 days for more complex issues. The Review Team recommended to RAS that they ensure the Student Service Centre service level agreements are clear to all students and set at reasonable timescales to avoid slow response and contact more than once.
43. Students were positive about the use of QR codes at the Edinburgh SSC to book appointments and reduce waiting time. The Dubai student in a particular noted at time the waiting time could be long and such a system there would be beneficial.
44. Initial feedback on the experience of using the SSC is sought and it is felt that low results are due to the responses provided to the student not being quite right, the Review Team were provided example of issues with incorrect invoices or students not being provided with the response they wanted. It was recognised that much more could be undertaken to drill down into the experience of using the service to drive improvements but the resource to undertake this was not available.
45. Students are provided with information regularly about key deadlines, however, these messages can at times be overlooked particularly during busy points in the academic year. In response to this push notifications through the student portal have been developed to provide key messages about events which are crucial to the academic journey. The Review Team highlighted this a positive development which will bring benefits to students.
46. The Student Helpline was introduced on the Edinburgh campus as a pandemic response and is manned via a rota of teams from across RAS. Most of the queries are around accommodation, finance and visas which are outside the core functions of RAS which means staff on the helpline log the calls and pass them onto the relevant team which is not a good use of resource or rewarding for the staff involved. The Review Team recommended that this activity should be a corporate level activity and recommends that the University reviews its telephony to ensure the student helpline is an appropriate part of the response rather than the primary contact point for all manner of enquiries.
47. Student awareness and use of the Ask HWU resource was mixed but it was felt that it could be a useful first step to resolve more straightforward queries freeing up staff time to focus on the more complex areas. Student feedback suggested that the long drop-down lists could make it difficult to find the answer needed particularly where there was unfamiliarity with how the University grouped topics and the Review Team recommended that the interface for ASK HWU is reviewed to ensure it is written with no assumed knowledge.

## Student Voice and Representation

48. Following the pandemic there has been a slight drop in student engagement with surveys such as the early course experience response rate dropping to 21% from 35% last academic year and a reduction in the number of candidates and engagement with the Student Union elections. Student willingness to undertake roles in core quality assurance processes has also been highlighted as an issue.
49. Work is beginning in collaboration with the SU to look at how to engage students in different ways and alternative methods are being explored to increase response rates to surveys with a more visible presence across campus both in person and on screens.
50. A central survey schedule is produced annually which includes the key dates for institutionally managed internal and external survey activity. The students across the campuses felt that there were many surveys to be undertaken and it was suggested that one single calendar of all surveys should be published so that busy points of the year can be avoided, while noting that particularly in the Dubai and Malaysia campuses surveys by regulatory bodies were often announced with little notice.

Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support  
Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support

51. The Review Team heard from the student representatives that feedback had been provided that some students were wary of providing open views in surveys as there was a lack of trust over the anonymity of the responses and the potential for any negative feedback to impact grades.
52. The Review Team recommend to RAS that a review be undertaken to explore the reasons for the low student survey response rates, including the consideration and implementation of alternative ways of gathering student feedback, how survey completion is promoted and the provision of additional reassurances to students about the confidentiality of responses.
53. Feedback from the students suggested that at a course level they were informed about actions taken to address their comments, however, they were unaware of the outcomes and actions taken from the institutional level surveys. This experience was likely to impact their engagement with surveys as there was a lack of incentive to complete if they did not see the value in the survey.
54. The University has recognised that closing the feedback loop is key area to improve upon which has been impacted by resource challenges, but work is on-going in raising awareness of survey outcomes working with the internal communications team and publishing on SharePoint 'you said, we did' information and articles on how data is used and why feedback is important. The Review Team recommended that a systematic, pan-institutional approach to closing the feedback loop to students using appropriate and effective communication channels is established.
55. The University has been developing dashboards for the dissemination of institutional level survey results and the Review Team heard feedback that staff would find it more useful if they could drill down into the data to identify groups of students or courses and recommended that the University should explore the further creation of in-depth analysis for survey results which also allow staff to access and drill down into the data as required.
56. Following the outcomes of the NSS2022 a taskforce was established for monitoring and acting on the key issues identified. This has been effective particularly for immediate and mid-term actions bringing key stakeholders together and is a model that will be continued to consider all forms of student feedback. It was highlighted that the results of the NSS 2022 had in some ways been useful to provide focus and bring together people across the institution working in a proactive collegiate manner.
57. The PGT and PGT student experience, including the follow up from the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), has not had as much focus as the UG student experience. Currently the resource in Academic Quality is limited to one Quality Enhancement Officer, additional resource has been requested to support the PGR student experience and a PGT experience group has been established. The Review Team recommends to the University that it reviews the potential for investing additional resource in a PGR student experience enhancement post.
58. The Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) was at the outset in 2018 was very much Edinburgh driven but this has evolved over time to be more global in nature and outlook and Review Team highlighted the reflective and geographically inclusive approach as an element of effective practice.
59. The Quality Enhancement Officer works and coordinates the three Student Representative Bodies during the development of the SPA and the on-going regular monitoring of progress. The Review Team commended the regular global meetings and partnership working with and between the Student Representative Bodies (SRBs) facilitating the development and alignment of global initiatives and shared experience.
60. The timing of the SPA has been changed from the covering an academic year to running from December to January to allow more continuity in the changeover of the SU sabbatical teams.
61. The student representatives the Review Team met were unaware of the SPA. Until recently the University's approach had been that it did not matter too much if people were aware of the agreement itself if the impact of it was felt but that has started to shift, and more work is being undertaken to raise student and staff awareness including news articles and a dedicated SharePoint site. The Review Team



Professional Services Review – Registry and Academic Support

supported this shift and recommended that this work on making both students and staff aware of the SPA is continued.

62. The majority of the students the Review Team met were involved in student representation in some form, for example as class reps or as a School Officer, however, there appeared to be a lack of clarity and understanding of the different roles and how they interacted with each other. The Review Team recommended that RAS work with the student representative bodies to simplify, clarify, and disseminate definitions and responsibilities of the student representative roles.