

Save our PGR space

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Summary:

Postgraduate Researchers were given one week's notice to evacuate the largest of two interdisciplinary office spaces for arts and humanities PGRs for a "workspace relocation project," after no consultation with desk users in the room. It is well-documented that PGRs experience high levels of isolation and poor mental health, and a recent Courage Project report shows that PGRs benefit from a stable sense of belonging. The alternative spaces are not fit-for-purpose as office environments, and there is no guarantee that the alternative spaces will remain as PGR space in the future. We believe the SU should commit to saving PGR-dedicated space, support any action by PGRs to save the space, and ensure there is consultation with workspace users before any changes like this in the future.

Council Notes

1. There has been no consultation with desk users in office 01.13 about the "workspace relocation project" and the alternative space is not fit for purpose (there has been no indication of how this space will be improved).
2. The "workspace relocation project" references findings of the Courage Project's Space and Place report (<https://www.uea.su/pageassets/postgraduate/courage/reports/Courage-Project-PGR-Space-Report.pdf>). However, key findings of the report run contrary to the relocation project's aims, including the following:
 - a) there is a need for PGR consultation at the centre of any distribution of PGR space
 - b) ownership of spaces is key for PGRs to feel they have a 'place' in the university.
3. PGRs experience high levels of isolation and poor mental health (e.g. Nature's 2019 global study <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03459-7> and Vitae's 2020 report <https://re.ukri.org/documents/2020/catalyst-fund-programme-evaluation/>).
4. Many PGRs are currently experiencing heightened financial uncertainty due to the cancellation of most Associate Tutor (AT) contracts at UEA, which are typically a reliable income stream for PGRs.
5. The alternative spaces are not fit-for-purpose as office environments, and this represents a significant risk to the security of overall space that is allocated to the PGR community as **there is no guarantee the alternative space will remain as PGR office space in the future**, when social distancing is no longer needed for teaching.
6. Since 2015, PGRs and PGR representatives have been pushing for dedicated PGR spaces to foster a sense of community and support for typically isolated students. This building of community space benefits the university through the creation of a research community, which influences the future output of research to the REF by new researchers and academics. The significant push for space in 2015 provides historical precedent for the need for secure, bookable office space for PGRs.
7. A petition calling for dedicated PGR space from 2015 received 63 signatories, including PGRs and staff from the Humanities.

Council Believes

1. The workspace relocation project will undermine PGRs' abilities to continue their research effectively and to maintain support networks and research communities. All of these are increasingly needed as the pandemic continues to negatively impact both work and personal lives for students in material and substantial ways.
2. The relocation project will exacerbate existing concerns for PGR mental health and wellbeing due to the reduction of a secure sense of ownership over place and the undermining of PGRs' sense of

belonging. This comes at an already precarious time given the increased financial pressures that PGRs are currently experiencing due to AT job losses.

3. The current feedback from PGRs and historical precedent of PGRs pushing for dedicated PGR space both demonstrate that this is a key issue for postgraduate students that is in the interests of the SU to support PGRs on this issue.
4. If the SU does not commit to saving PGR space then there is a significant risk that the PGR community will lose this vital space.
5. The SU should support any and all action to oppose these changes or ensure there will be a like-for-like alternative space.

Council Resolves

1. To commit to saving PGR dedicated space.
2. To mandate the PG Education officer to lobby the university to reverse their decision on relocating the office workspace.
3. To support any and all action taken by students to oppose these changes.
4. To ensure there is consultation with PGRs prior to any changes to a space that is dedicated for the PGR community.