

# Tailoring PGR Supports to Facilitate the Needs of Distance-Based & International PGRS: A Case Study

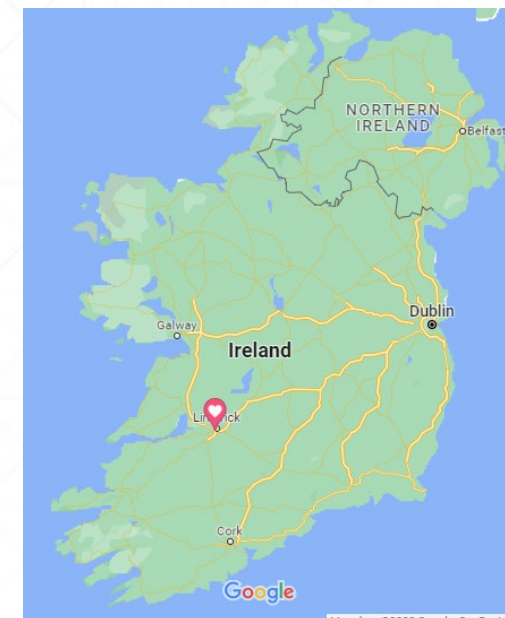
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# MIC Limerick – An Overview

- Founded in 1898
- University-level College of Education & Liberal Arts
  - 2 Faculties
- Academically linked with the University of Limerick
- Student population of > 5,000
- Undergraduate programmes in early childhood, primary and post-primary education and liberal arts
- Postgraduate programmes at diploma, MA and doctorate levels



# MIC Postgraduate Research Students (PGRS)

- First PhD in 2002 – 30 Doctorates awarded 2022
- Research and Graduate School in 2013
- Different programmes
  - “Traditional” PhD and MA by research and thesis
  - Professional Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology (DECPsy)
  - Structured PhDs in Education, Literacy Education and Applied Linguistics
  - Joint Awards with other HEIs
  - No part-time option
- Different formats
  - Monograph thesis
  - Article-based theses
  - Arts-practice based theses



# Same Issues as Bigger Institutions

- Supervisory capacity / training
- Funding
- Student mental health and well being
- Skills training and career development
- EDII
- UDL
- Internationalisation

Prog Type	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23
Access (Undergraduate)				5		1					
Certificate						3					2
Undergraduate Honours Degree						1	1				
Undergraduate Honours Degree	1	1	3	3	3	9	10	13	9	8	7
Masters Research (Postgraduate)							2	2			1
Masters Taught (Postgraduate)	10	1	15	10	8	12	8	12	33	21	26
Post Graduate Diploma			1					19		2	
Postgraduate Certificate					4		2	1		5	127
Structured PhD				1	4	6	8	6	9	9	8
PhD (Traditional)	12	12	11	11	13	9	18	9	10	14	17
Undergraduate Occasional	45	78	76	85	85	86	80	84		69	67
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>255</b>

# Same Issues as Bigger Institutions

- Supervisory capacity / training
- Funding
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- EDII
- UDL
- Internationalisation

Trying to ensure best practice in all these areas



Charter for  
Supervision and  
Co-Supervision of  
Postgraduate  
Research  
Students

Mary Immaculate College



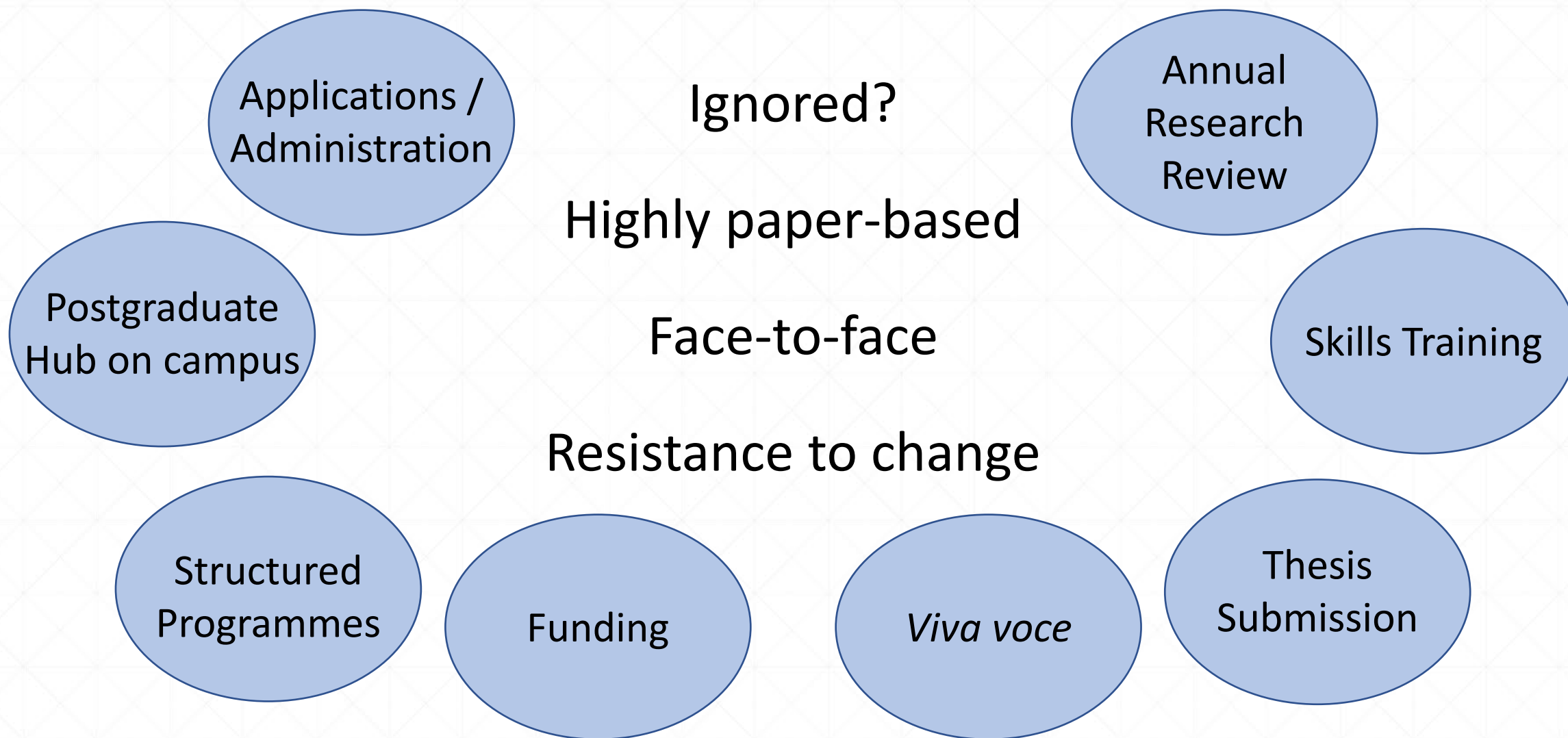
# Current PGR Cohort

- Current PGR Cohort ~ 200
  - 94 in Arts, 89 in Education
  - 13 MA, 23 Prof Doc, 55 Structured PhD, 92 PhD
- Majority of our students are working while studying
  - Significant personal responsibilities
- Ages range from early-20s to late-60s
- ~17% non-Irish
- At least half of MIC PGRS are distance-based learners, and growing



**NOT A HOMOGENOUS GROUP!**

# Distance-Based PGRS pre-COVID





# Covid-19 and PGRS

**ALL PGRS Became Distance-Based  
Learners Overnight**

# Immediate Response to COVID-19 – March 2020

- Summary
  - Some things were cancelled or postponed
  - **EVERYTHING** else moved online rapidly
    - Applications, administration, research review panels, thesis submission and examination, skills training
- Initial changes were made with a “temporary” mindset
  - But the situation dragged on

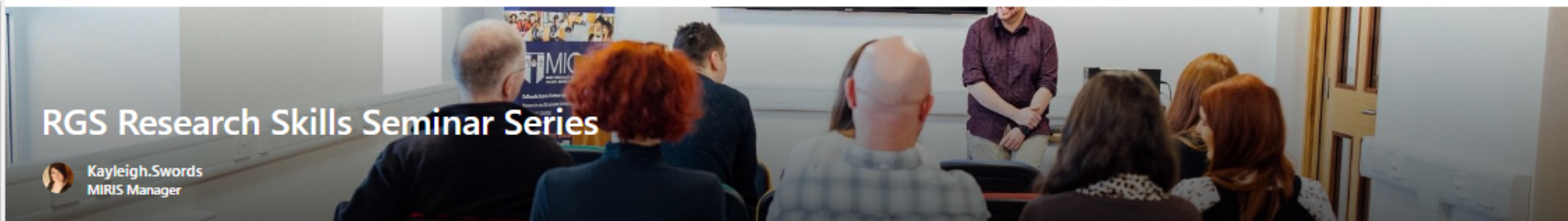
# Covid-19 – Autumn 2020

- Toll on the students increased – focus on reducing isolation
  - Online PGRS coffee mornings / afternoons,
  - Online cohort meetings (one-to-one follow-ups as required)
  - Seminars from Counselling Service on academic resilience, etc.
  - Hugh Kearns - *“Staying well and writing (while social distancing)”*
- Support in pivoting research online – workshops; resources;
  - Increased communications from Research and Graduate School
    - FAQs; newsletter
    - Major overhaul of website

- Research Supports & ...
- PGR Forms & Related ...
- Research Resources
  - Important External ...
  - Research Training ...
  - RGS Research Ski...**
  - Research Integrity
  - Research Supervis...
  - Research Ethics Tr...
  - External Research ...
  - Research Assessme...
  - Other Useful Resear...
- Research News Oppor...

New Send to Promote Page details Immersive Reader Analytics

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The Research & Graduate support the development of Research Skills in the MIC postgraduate and academic staff communities through the provision of a Research Skills Seminar Series, in addition to other useful links and documentation.

To skip to each of the following sections, click on the relevant button below:

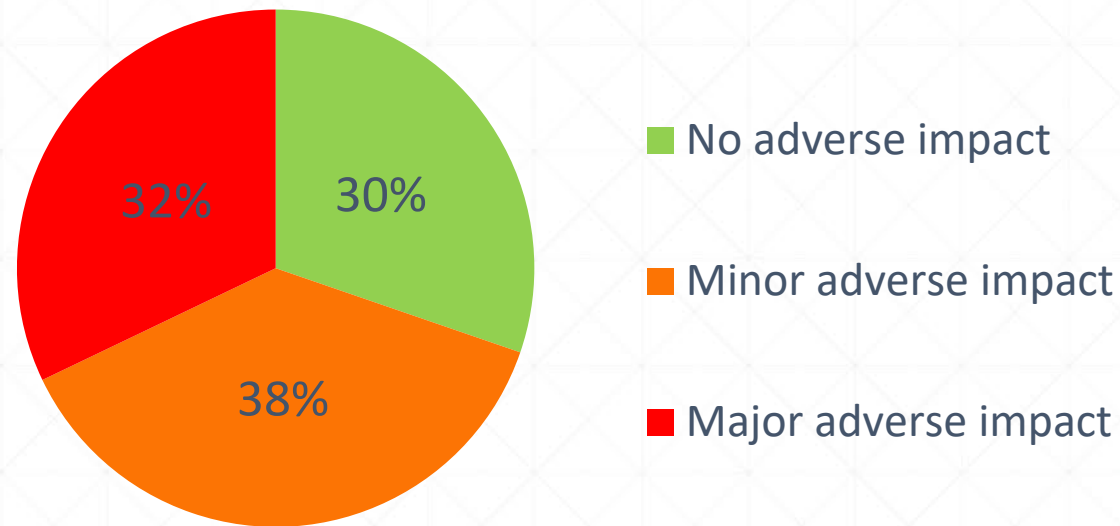
- |  |   |   |  |
|--|---|---|--|
| <a href="#">RGS Research Skills Events this Semester</a> | <a href="#">Recordings &amp; Presentations - RGS Research Skills Seminar Series</a> | <a href="#">Research Skills - Useful Documents and Information</a>      | <a href="#">RGS - PGR Orientation</a>  |
| <a href="#">PGR Virtual Coffee Mornings / Afternoons</a> | <a href="#">ALC Writing Workshops</a>   | <a href="#">Postgrad Chats - facilitated by MIC Counselling Service</a> | <a href="#">Most recent presentations - RGS Research Skills Seminar Series</a> |

# Covid-19 Supports – early 2021

- Laptop lending scheme
- Individualized support
  - Mentoring, project management, problem-solving and inter-personal support by phone and email
  - Improved access to library and ICT resources from home
  - Increased access to the PGR spaces on campus (in line with restrictions)
  - Assistance with direct COVID-19 research costs
  - Extensions to thesis submission deadline for PGRS
  - Close liaison with the Finance Office on fees issues
- Access to College counselling services from home as required
  - Online “PGR Chats” weekly drop-in session:

# Covid-19 PGR Survey (May 2021)

- 199 PGRS contacted - 109 respondents
  - 70% respondents reported some degree of adverse effect on their research
  - Also asked to provide details about the difficulties they were experiencing, if any



*Note: These responses are the self-declared circumstances of the PGRs in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on their studies and their own perceptions on how they had been affected.*

Types of adverse impacts reported by the PGRS	% Respondents
Mental Health issues (including motivation to study, productivity, anxiety, stress, depression & reduced support from peers)	36%
Family / Work responsibilities	26%
Physical access to the Library (due to work/home schedules/travel restrictions)	15%
Potential extension to course duration required (delay submitting thesis)	15%
Financial issues	13%
Access to other facilities e.g. museums, archives etc.	12%
Recruiting / availability of participants for research	11%
Inadequate study facilities at home (travel restrictions mean cannot avail of MIC Campus)	8%
Physical health issues	7%
Broadband issues	6%
Difficulties accessing supervision	5%
Work placement difficulties	1%

***Note:** Many students reported more than one adverse effect, with more than one third of respondents experiencing mental health issues and 26% reporting increased work / family responsibilities.*

# PGR COVID-19 No-Cost Extension of Registration Scheme

- A system whereby PGRS whose research progress has been significantly impaired due to Covid-19 can apply for an extra year\*\* to complete their studies without cost

\*\*After normal duration of programme

- 2 years for MA
  - 3 years for DECPsy
  - 4 years for PhD / Structured PhD
- 
- A “sunset” Screening panel (Chair: Graduate School Director; Members included Director of Student Life, Student Union, Finance Office and Faculty representatives) set up for AY2021/22



# PGR COVID-19 No-Cost Extension of Registration Scheme

- Scheme advertised extensively to PGRS over AY2021/22 (4 deadlines)
- **ALL** PGRS (including non-EU, externally funded and those on LOA) eligible to apply
  - Research and Graduate School contacted all PGRS individually to brief them on scheme and encourage them to apply (simple declarative note)
  - Panel considered all submissions with empathy, flexibility and confidentiality
- 60 submissions (including 17 from PGRS on LOA) – 57 approved
  - Very positively received by PGRS and supervisors
  - Removed a lot of anxiety and worry

# Post-Covid – Where are we now?

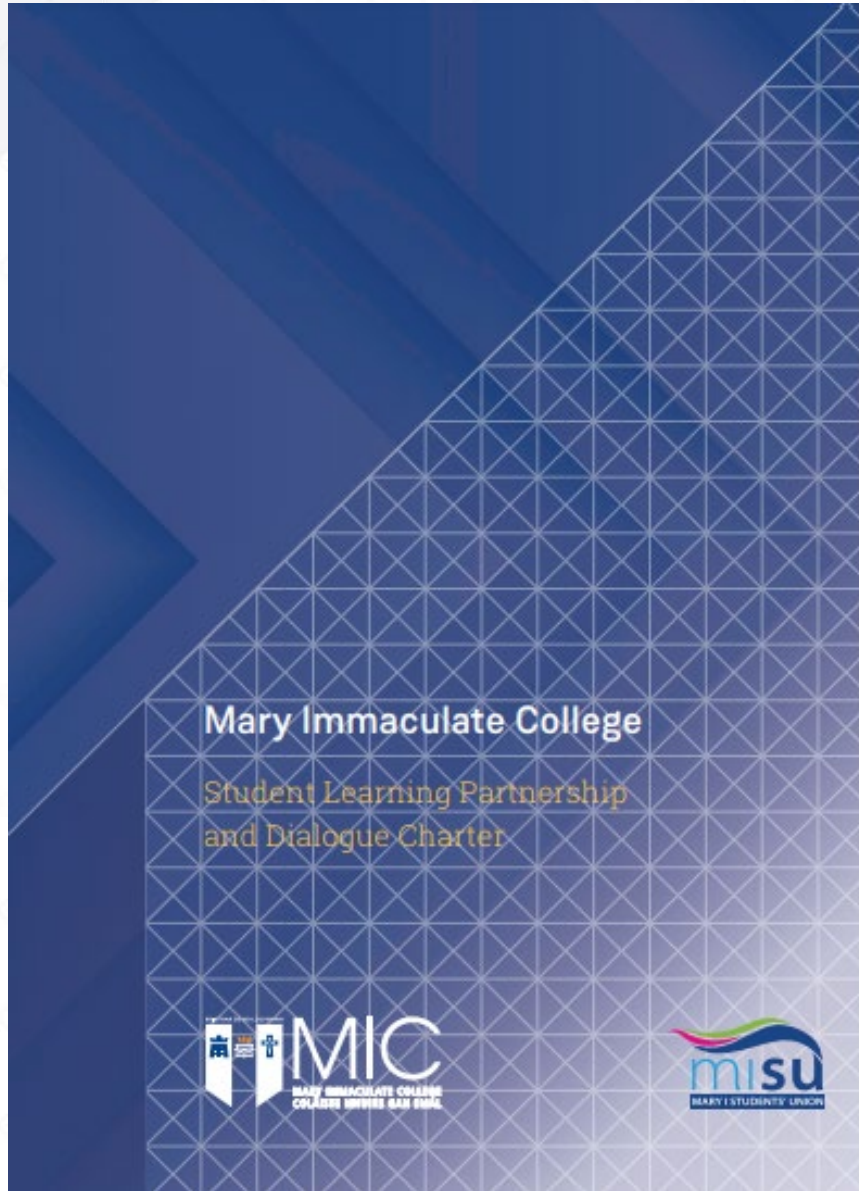
- PGR COVID-19 No-Cost Extension of Registration Scheme now closed
  - Replaced by LOA scheme and other supports
- Initial “temporary” changes in Graduate School are now embedded
  - Most changes to practice have been retained
    - Refined/updated SOPs, policies and regulations to reflect new practices
  - Online academic processes / skills training are continuing (blended)
  - RGS Intranet is now a major resource
  - Benefits to our international and distance-based PGRS apparent
  - Structured PhD programmes have moved entirely online
- Graduate School works closely with Counselling Service
  - Increased visibility of mental health supports (seminars, facilitated peer support group)
  - Helping PGRS and staff support PGRS – SAFETalk (Health Service Executive)

# Post-Covid – Where are we now?

- MIC EDII Director appointed
- Designated writing support for postgraduate students
  - English for academic purposes; WOW (blended); Cite It Right training; one-to-one and group sessions
- Postgraduate Hub – very quiet; PGRS have not (yet?) come back on campus
  - Trying to protect the space and rebuild
  - Wider conversation on how third level education will look in future
- Distance-based learners have increased massively – here to stay!

# Distance-based PGRS – part of MIC community?

- *‘The major challenge with the [sic] most research postgrads from Masters and PhD is distance becomes a barrier, you know, especially [since] they [are] really spread across the world.’* – MIC Students’ Union Postgrad Officer, March 2023
- Easier to build a “PGR community” within defined programmes
  - Group work, monthly peer seminars, journal groups, summer schools, student-led finishers groups
- On foot of MIC report to Postgraduate Student Engagement Working Group (HEA and QQI), initiatives are planned in relation to EDII and PGR Mental Health in AY2023/4 with a focus on our distance-based and international community



- College's Engagement of Student Voice in setting priorities to enhance the student experience, including that of its PGR and PGT students.
  - Initiative led by MIC Director for Student Life, MIC President, Vice-President of Academic Affairs, MISU
- Each Faculty established Staff/Student forum 'for the purposes of facilitating dialogue and constructive feedback from students.'
  - two fora per year, feed into annual task force

# Challenges

- Fostering a community of PGR students that will advocate for itself
  - Challenging in the online environment where isolation is a lived experience and communication is oftentimes delayed since it is overly reliant on email
  - How to foreground PGR student voice via alternative structures since PGR SU representative roles are very often unfilled
- Representation of that community problematised by its diversity
  - Concerns are not necessarily shared, or only in small numbers.
- Furthermore, the PGR student, even if full-time registered, will have other family and/or employment commitments that are prioritised over RGS engagement activities (Monday-Friday business hours)

# Nuanced Supports for Distance-Based Learners

- Applications
  - Wholly online, electronic signatures, increasingly wide range of language competency certification accepted (also online interviews with Head of Dept accepted in lieu of certification requiring payment)
- Annual research review panels – done online
- Confirmation of registration every semester –
  - requires all PGRS to “check-in”; particularly important for distance-based learners as it is easier for them to “disappear”
- Supervisor Training

# Nuanced Supports for Distance-Based Learners

- Visible (and named) support persons in Graduate School
  - Consistency of communication; blended cohort meetings
- Processing of LOAs – statement of need (no burden of proof required)
  - Evidence that our numbers of PGRS returning from LOA is increasing (less drift)
- Thesis Submission and Examination
  - Only accept electronic versions of thesis, *viva voces* face-to-face, blended or online as suits the student/examiners
- Funding
  - Tailored to support distance based and international PGRS



# Funding Supports for MIC PGRS

- Covid-19 No Cost Extensions Of Registration
- External Funding mentorship
  - Offered to intending students, not just current; online meetings with students from all over the world; builds their relationship with the College in advance of their registration;
  - College “tops up” the fee waiver offered by e.g. the Irish Research Council (IRC) which does not cover the full non-EU fee;
- MIC Funding Schemes (Teaching Assistantships / Postgraduate Awards / Conference Funding)
  - Does not discriminate between EU and non-EU applicants (i.e. all Awardees get same stipend & full fee waiver)
    - Nationality is not taken into account when considering the applications (No limit or cap on number of non-EU DAs/Awardees)
    - All DAs/Awardees must have Irish bank account and PPS number (Equivalent to UK National Insurance number) to be paid
      - However, DAs/Awardees do not have to reside in Ireland
- Postgraduate University of Sanctuary Scholarship Programme Awards
  - Eligibility: international protection applicants or have been granted Refugee Status, Subsidiary Protection or Discretionary Leave to Remain
  - Two PGRS currently funded under this model, with more being actively recruited
    - Awardees do not have to live in Ireland

# Where Next?

- Distance-based PGRS now the majority?
  - New Normal
- Supports and services for these PGRS have been **REACTIVE**, and **NOT BY DESIGN**
  - Are they fit for purpose? Best we can do? Best use of resources?
  - How to build an inclusive PGR community?
    - Need to ask and listen to our PGRS
- Graduate School is planning a period of consultation and (re)design
  - Review of our funding supports (underway)
  - Surveys and focus groups of PGRS, supervisors, support services
    - How best to recruit distance-based and international students?

# Acknowledgements

- Co-authors – Prof Michael Healy (Vice-President for Research, MIC) and Dr Rebecca Breen (Research Postgraduate Coordinator, MIC)
- PGRS and their supervisors
- PGR COVID-19 No-Cost Extension of Registration Scheme screening panel members



# THANK YOU

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