



Bowland Annex PGR Hub feedback from FHASS PGR Students

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Context

Since the summer developments of the FHASS PGR move to PGR Hub in Bowland Annex, LUSU has received numerous complaints and feedback from FHASS PGRs about the move itself. This has ranged from open letters to individual complaints through our internal complaints systems.

From this, Liz Gillett (Education Officer) has sought to find out the actual impacts the move has had, and continues to have, on FHASS PGRs and whether the move has achieved its desired aims. Indeed, as Ed Simpson has outlined, one of the principal aims was to help enhance the community amongst PGRs within the faculty itself.

Many of our academic reps appreciate the faculty is taking the issue of community seriously and have been appreciative of the recent improvements made to the space since the beginning of the move. However, based on our findings, PGRs still feel that the new space is limited in its ability to solve the issues it was designed to fix. Instead, it has created new or has merely exacerbated existing issues, prevalent across the FHASS PGR community; a move which students felt lacked any meaningful consultation or transparency throughout the process.

In this report, we outline the broad feedback we have received from FHASS PGRs, grouping it by theme. It will then highlight the potential risks we feel these issues pose within the University and beyond, illustrating why we recommend further action is required.

Contents

Bowland Annex PGR Hub feedback from FHASS PGR Students	1
Context	1
Contents	1
Methodology.....	2
The diminishment of the FHASS PGR experience	3
The limits on space use.	4
Community	6
Issues with the facilities themselves	6
A move underpinned by a lack of communication	7
Why does this matter? Recruitment and reputational risks	7
Conclusion.....	9
Appendices	10
Appendix A – Pictures of the PGR Hub Bowland Annex Kitchen Space	11
Appendix B - Chris Sanderson’s Open Letter	11
Appendix C - Chinese FHASS PGR Students Open Letter.....	11
Appendix D - Unison Inspection Report.....	11
Appendix E - Further complaints received by LUSU regarding the PGR Hub and the Move.....	11

Methodology

Much of our data was derived from qualitative sources, mainly predicated on firsthand accounts and experiences post the move to Bowland Annex.

The following sources:

- Conversations with 7 PhD students in the Bowland Annex space conducted by Liz Gillett.
- Focus Group consisting of 20 PhD students, a Unison rep, and the LUSU student Voice Team (13th November 2025).
- Evidence from numerous complaints and open letters we have received.

The diminishment of the FHASS PGR experience

One of the most, if not the most, common issue which has been raised is the continual and interconnected themes that the space itself is not fit for purpose, ranging from:

- the **limits on space use**,
- how it **seemingly fails to enhance the PGR community** and pushes PGRs off campus,
- and the **significant issues with the facilities themselves** which potentially pose significant health and safety risks to space users.

Throughout, the theme which comes up time and time again is the apparent **lack of communication and collaboration with students**, something which is evident throughout this report.

The limits on space use.

It is clear from feedback that the space itself struggles to be fit for the purpose it was designed for – housing many different PGRs with different space requirements and conducting different forms of research.

Besides the fact that there are far less desks than PhD students in FHASS, the space has proven a difficult for those with various bits of equipment and resources. An example of this is a student who is on the late stages of their PhD and has their references spread across 10 physical books. The space offers no room to store or utilise these books in an effect manner, and it is unrealistic for them to bring them in on the bus in multiple bags every day.

On the occasion that students were allocated a designated desk, problems were still evident. For example; one student was allocated a desk due to their need to regularly access and handle sensitive data. Whilst they were grateful for the space, and enjoyed meeting new people within the space, it was usually the same, small groups of people. Likewise, they acknowledge that they would probably have a more negative outlook of the space if they didn't have an allocated desk.

They go on to highlight the stresses they went through to acquiring said desk. This involved forgoing research for 3 weeks during the move as they weren't allowed to bring the computer off campus. This stress and apparent carelessness of the move itself was highlighted extensively by students we spoke to. Many highlighted the lack of consideration for student wellbeing especially considering that many students work full or part-time or have caring responsibilities.

This issue of stress and apparent carelessness can also be seen with the debacle of the table booking system which was recently implemented. As a student outlined, the system was far too clunky and unintuitive to use, creating a barrier to space utilisation. As one student puts it, *“the online booking system frequently fails, leaving me unable to secure a workplace”*. This along with the limited number of desks available to book, and the presence of “booking protests” from LICA students who are not happy at the reallocation of space, has caused frustration amongst the FHASS PGR cohort. Whilst this will be replaced by a LibCal system which should make booking tables easier, it might be too little too late, with some students having already given up.

The layout of the space has also had an impact on how students have been able to conduct their PhD research. For example, due to the inadequate numbers of private spaces, there have been reports of students having to hold their supervision meetings in The Marketplace.

The open-plan nature of the space ultimately poses significant problems for its use. For instance, due to the lack of an agreed noise level for the space itself, and the in-built inability of the space to accommodate the multiple noise and privacy requirements across the PGR cohort, it makes the space difficult for all PhD students to enjoy. Some students want to work collaboratively; some want to work in peace – something which can't both happen in the same space.

As one student states:

“On the occasions when I do get a space, the environment is not conducive to deep, focused work—distracting, cramped, and frankly suffocating. It is unacceptable that PhD candidates are expected to do their most cognitively demanding work in such conditions.” **[Appendix E1]**

Furthermore, students have also outlined how the new space fails to offer an adequate third space for students to socialise in. Whilst previously students would have used their departments' respective kitchens, the new one is not large enough to facilitate the needs of a designated social space **[Appendix A]**.

Whilst students have been offered to use spaces in County and the Roundhouse, this has posed a few issues. Firstly, the distance between these spaces and the Bowland Annex space makes the use of these spaces awkward. Secondly, these spaces are often used by different student groups and events, making such spaces inadequate for FHASS PGR use.

Students have been vocal in their appreciation for the PGR Hub staff, however students voiced that they believed that they were not adequately supported by upper management. For example, citing that the staff should not have had to spend their time advocating for

desks to have monitors, and that health and safety concerns have been dismissed by facilities.

Whilst the space has been marginally improved since the summer, the lack of flexibility of the shared space continues to pose significant challenges for those who use it.

Community

Whilst the move was marketed as an opportunity to enhance the PGR community, it can be argued that it has done the exact opposite.

The inflexible nature of the space, and lack of a suitable third space for students to use, as one 1st year PhD student puts it, has only seemingly made students feel more isolated or siloed in nature. They highlight how the dynamics of the space, the lack of any suitable FHASS PGR social space, and the lack of dedicated supervision space have made students less likely to use such facilities and thus, make the space sparsely used.

In combination with the rise in bus prices and parking on campus, and the decline of teaching opportunities, some PGRs have stated how it feels that the University is increasingly pushing PGRs off campus.

This feeling of “loss” with their sense of the community with the new space was also echoed by History students we engaged with. Here they cited how, whilst they maintained or even have started to form a small community with the students who regularly use the space, this was at the cost of losing connections they had prior within their department.

For instance, whilst they used to have a vibrant community with other PGRs, staff, and MA students, they feel that these connections have been severed. The small things such as casual interactions and the networking and academic development opportunities which came from it - students feel these opportunities are now limited, even showing concerns surrounding their graduate prospects.

As the History students highlight, they believe that, whilst it had the right intentions, the PGR Hub in the Bowland Annex does not positively contribute to the development of a PGR student community in FHASS. Indeed, as one PGR student put it, the move has failed to significantly address the concerns regarding the PGR community, with many issues being created or existing one exacerbated.

As summarised, it has made the pockets of isolated PGR students even more isolated, the limited existing research culture between discipline staff and PGRs even more limited and there is even less incentives for FHASS PGRs to come onto campus than before.

Issues with the facilities themselves

Beyond the practical limitations of the space, critical issues with the facilities themselves have been raised, both by students and by Unison themselves.

Indeed, students highlighted issues with ventilation, and the subsequent toxic smells which come directly from the work studios from the floors below in and around the corridor areas. Here, students have cited throat pains as a result. Despite complaining to the University over 2 months ago and promises for an industrial deep clean of the facility, students have reported no change to the situation. Lingering bad smells are also evident in the bathrooms and shower spaces, with lack of proper ventilation likewise evident. In combination with the windows being said to be broken, this has caused significant discomfort for users of the space.

Besides this, other issues were raised. For example, some students have complained about the main room (D25) itself being noisy, especially from the overhead gantries and the doors. Likewise, the heating is said to not work past 7pm; with colder temperatures due soon, this is of great concern.

More issues such as wheelchair access, and potential further fire safety breaches have been outlined in the inspection report carried out by Unison **[Appendix D]**.

A move underpinned by a lack of communication

The theme of “lacking in consultation” was prominent when speaking to FHASS PGRs. As highlighted by many, most PGRs only knew of the move after it was decided and, what consultation there was, was tokenistic at best. Indeed, a meeting between FHASS PGRs and Ed Simpson, which was held after the move was announced was cut abruptly after 30 minutes.

As highlighted above, whilst FHASS PGRs overall are sympathetic to the overarching aims of the move, the lack of any real communication was, and continues to be, a significant barrier to making this a success. Indeed, as PGRs mention, the space continues to not suit the users’ needs, with the feeling that the University are not trying to understand the needs of PhD students.

The top-down, and seemingly tone-deaf, approach by the faculty remains the overarching issue which continues to plague the move to Bowland Annex.

Why does this matter? Recruitment and reputational risks

Beyond the negative effects this move has had on current FHASS PGRs, we argue that this could pose significant recruitment and retention risks to the University itself – with general dissatisfaction manifesting into something more serious.

This can be evident in an open letter written by Chinese FHASS PGR students **[Appendix C]** who feel that, despite many being self-funded, paying much higher fees compared to home students, and seeing fees rise year on year, they feel that the move to Bowland Annex represents an “erosion of fundamental support”. They state how “*This decision calls into question the fairness of the tuition we pay and undermines the university’s commitment to supporting its researchers*”.

The general sentiment can be captured below in these two separate statements:

“Our parents work so hard to send us to study in a developed country from developing countries that earn far less than here. Their intention is not for us to experience how unstable and bitter life can be. They could never have imagined that, after paying such high tuition fees, students wouldn’t even be guaranteed to be allocated a dedicated desk. Let alone being told halfway through our studies — without any prior indication at the time of admission — that these fixed PhD study rooms would be withdrawn midway through our time here. Our conditions were downgraded, all while tuition fees continue to rise. This is not fair to us”

[Appendix C]

“So, this is how you treat your cash cows? Are you seriously suggesting that, after everything we contribute financially, we’re not even entitled to a fixed study office during our time here? It’s hard not to feel as though we’re being taken for granted: tuition fees go up when more money is needed, and when space is limited, we’re the first to be cut.” **[Appendix C]**

This idea of mismatched expectations can also be seen with the 1st year PhD students we spoke to. Indeed, one student outlined how they expected to have a smaller, share office in their department when they applied and didn’t know about the changes until they arrived. From this, they cite they were struggling with creativity and meeting people in the same discipline.

It is no surprise that many students we spoke to feel the sense that the University is working against FHASS students, whether it be the downsizing of the PGR space, the consequences of the LU futures plan, or the perceived lack of care of student wellbeing from senior leadership.

With this sense of feeling “hard done by” by the university, one can only question the effect both how this could affect future PhD recruitment and, perhaps more importantly, future

retention of talented researchers within world leading research disciplines. Indeed, with recent developments, what incentives do existing PhD researchers in pursuing a post-doc at Lancaster? Likewise, why shouldn't potential PhD candidates from pursuing their PhDs at other comparable institutions?

Whilst one could argue that this is all hyperbole, the issues of value for money from self-funded students, the mismatch in expectations, and the rise in student complaints from a wide range of student groups may be symptomatic of deeper concerns.

Conclusion

Overall, the move to the Bowland Annex for the FHASS PGR community has exposed many failings throughout the process, whether it be lack of any meaningful communication or consultation, or the perceived lack of care or awareness of student's needs.

Whilst the move was designed to enhance community across the PhD space, it has failed to achieve this in any meaningful way whilst also generating new issues which are having an adverse effect of the FHASS PGR experience. With the perceived lowering of quality of on-campus provision and the increased costs of commuting to campus, this has only sought to disincentivise FHASS PGRs to come onto campus.

Beyond the critical health and safety concerns which have been raised, what has been clear from the PhD students we have spoken to is that the space is not fit for purpose. The space tries to be many things at once without being good for anything. It isn't effective as a research space or as a social space, nor does it effectively encourage collaboration as a result.

In essence, the space in its current iteration fails to capture the needs and wants from the over 160 FHASS PhD students who rely on its space.

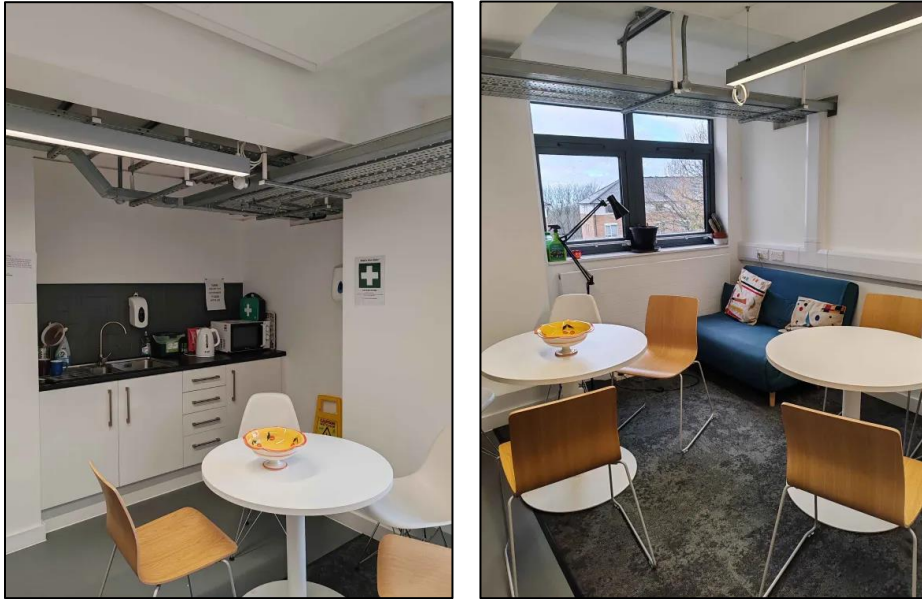
We call on the University and the Faculty of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences to collaborate with FHASS PGR students and the Students' Union to:

- find the best possible study space(s) that meet students' study and funding requirements, and*
- create social spaces that develop a strong learning community, create networking opportunities, and bolster the work of the PhD Forum to combat isolation.*

Meaningful student consultation and collaboration is critical for ensuring that future changes are executed effectively. This is something both LUSU and the wider FHASS PGR community are willing to engage in as valued partners.

Appendices

Appendix A – Pictures of the PGR Hub Bowland Annex Kitchen Space



A space which is meant for around 160 FHASS PGR students

Appendix B - Chris Sanderson's Open Letter

[Reconsider Changes to FASS PGR Office Space](#)

Appendix C - Chinese FHASS PGR Students Open Letter

[Concerns and Requests Regarding Recent Workspace Changes for Chinese FHASS PhD Students.pdf](#)

Appendix D - Unison Inspection Report

[Inspection-Report-Bowland-PGR-Hub-November-2025.pdf](#)

Appendix E - Further complaints received by LUSU regarding the PGR Hub and the Move

E1 [Complaint 1.pdf](#) - Sent 16th November 2025

E2 [Complaint 2.pdf](#) - Sent 4th September 2025