Imperial College London

Postgraduate Research Quality Committee

10 February 2015
Confirmed Minutes

Present
Professor Sue Gibson (Chair)
Mr Hassan Ahmadzadeh (Student Representative)
Professor Andrew Amis (Mechanical Engineering)
Dr Simon Archer (College Tutor)
Professor Erkko Autio (Business School)
Dr Anil Bharath (Bioengineering)
Dr Gerard Gorman [for Professor Peter Allison] (Earth Science and Engineering)
Dr Niki Gounaris (Life Sciences)
Professor Debra Humphris (Vice Provost, Education)
Professor Henrik Jensen (Mathematics)
Professor Peter Lindstedt (College Consul)
Mr Pascal Loose (ICU Deputy President, Education)
Professor Tony Magee (NHLI)
Professor Stefan Maier (Physics)
Dr David McPhail (Deputy Chair)
Dr Felicity Mellor (School of Professional Development)
Dr Alessandra Rosso (Computing)
Dr Kevin Murphy (Department of Medicine)
Mr Dean Pateman (Academic Registrar)
Professor Michael Seckl (Surgery and Cancer)
Dr Mark Ungless (MRC Clinical Sciences Centre)
Dr Ahmer Wadee (Civil and Environmental Engineering)
Professor Xiao Yun Xu (Chemical Engineering)

In Attendance
Ms Sally Baker (Senior Assistant Registrar, Senate and Academic Review)

Invited
Mrs Chris Banks, Director of Library Services
Ms Hilary Glasman-Deal, Senior Teacher of English for Academic Purposes, Centre for Academic English (for item 10)
Mr Gerry Greyling, Senior Assistant Registrar (Systems & Student Financial Support) (for item 11)
Dr Julie King, Director, Centre for Academic English for item 10)

1.   Welcome
The Chair welcomed new members to the Committee.

2.   Apologies for absence
Professor Ferri Aliabadi [and alternate] (Aeronautics)
Dr Tim Albrecht (Chemistry)
Professor Peter Allison (Earth Science and Engineering)
Dr Donna Brown (Crick Doctoral Centre)
Dr Bernadette Byrne (Chair of the Postgraduate Professional Development Committee)
Dr David Dye (Materials)
Professor Andrew Holmes (Electrical and Electronic Engineering)

Professor Marjo-Riitta Jarvelin (School of Public Health)
Ms Nida Mahmud (GSU Chair)
Dr Mike Tennant (Centre for Environmental Policy)
Professor Denis Wright (Director of Student Support)

3. Minutes of the last meeting
The minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2014 were approved.

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PRQC/2014/14

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4. Matters arising
There were no matters arising not appearing elsewhere on the agenda.

ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

5. Review of Departmental Research Degree Provision: Periodic Reviews
The Committee was reminded that the Quality Assurance & Enhancement Committee had agreed a transitional procedure for consideration of periodic review reports, intended to simplify the consideration of review reports prior to implementation of new monitoring and review processes in 2015-16. The agreed procedure was outlined to the Committee and it was noted that the Chair of the Review Panel and representatives of the department under review would not normally be required to attend the Committee for discussion of the report. The discussion would now be led by the Committee Chair.

5.1 Department of Medicine
5.1.1 The Committee considered the periodic review of research degree training in the Department of Medicine, including the reports of the assessors, the internal Chair's completed Reviewer's Comments Form and the Department's response to the assessors' comments.

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5.1.2 The Committee was advised that, in accordance with the new procedure, the Departmental response had been sent to the internal Chair who had confirmed that the Department had satisfactorily addressed each of the Panel's recommendations.

5.1.3 The reviewers had rated the Department of Medicine "compliant" with seventeen of the eighteen precepts. The Department was considered to be "non-compliant" with Precept 14 [Early Stage Assessment], but was working towards compliance in this regard and the panel therefore concluded that the Department was "compliant" overall. The panel considered that the research programme provided very good research training and support for postgraduate students, and noted that there were several areas where the provision was truly excellent and reached the highest standards of good practice.

5.1.4 The panel had commented that the students had been very positive about their overall experience and had reported excellent relationships with their supervisors.

5.1.5 The review panel had made three specific recommendations which had been thoroughly considered and responded to by the Department. The Chair of the panel had confirmed that he was satisfied with the responses presented. The Committee noted in particular that the Department had addressed the poor ESA and LSR submission rates by reminding supervisors and students of deadlines well in advance and by changing their reporting practices.

5.1.6 The panel had highlighted several examples of good practice, including:

a) An excellent website which, together with the student handbook, provided excellent access to information

b) State of the art facilities at Hammersmith

c) The Department's work in developing cohort building activities at various levels - in particular the Research Day for Young Researchers which was an excellent opportunity for all students to discuss their work and meet other students and staff

5.1.7 It was agreed that the report would be presented to Senate with the recommendation that the Department of Medicine be invited to report to the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee on developments since the periodic review as part of the next precept review in three years' time.

6. HEFCE Consultation
Consultation on the Future of Quality Assessment Arrangements

6.1 The Committee received the HEFCE discussion document concerning the forthcoming consultation on the future of quality assessment in higher education.

PRQC/2014/16

6.2 The Committee heard that, based on the feedback to the consultation, the HEFCE would then put its contract for quality assessment out to competitive tender.

6.3 The Committee had a broad discussion around the importance of identifying the most appropriate indicators for the sector. Members were invited to send any particular comments to Sophie White to help inform the College response to the consultation.

7. QAA Consultations
7.1 Qualifications Awarded by Two or More Degree Awarding Bodies
The Committee considered the draft College response to the QAA consultation on the new document which had been developed to provide information and guidance about qualifications awarded by more than one degree-awarding body.

PRQC/2014/17

7.1.1 The Committee noted that the College response had highlighted concern about inclusion of "concurrent qualifications", the situation with regard to the double counting of work/credit for separate awards and had asked for further guidance on franchised, accredited and validated provision.

7.1.2 Members were invited to send any further comments to Sophie White, and in the meantime the Committee was happy to endorse the response as presented.

7.2 Doctoral Degree Characteristics
The Committee considered the draft College response to the QAA consultation on an updated and revised version of the Doctoral Degree qualification statement.

PRQC/2014/18

7.2.1 Within this context, the Committee noted that the QAA was consulting on their Qualification Characteristics Statements for foundation, Master's and doctoral degrees. These had all been re-organised to follow a consistent structure and to cover a similar range of information (as relevant to the particular qualification). The content had been updated to reflect sector developments and changes in context.

7.2.3 The Committee noted that the College response had asked the QAA to consider some minor amendments to the text.

7.2.3 Members were invited to send any further comments to Sophie White, and in the meantime the Committee was happy to endorse the response as presented.

7.2.4 The Committee thanked Sophie White for her work in drafting the College responses presented.

8. PhD Thesis Format
The Committee received a paper from the Department of Computing, presented by the Director of Postgraduate Studies, Dr Alessandra Russo. The Committee was invited to discuss the proposal for an alternative PhD thesis format.

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8.1 Dr Russo presented the case for the "alternative format" thesis where a doctoral student may incorporate into their thesis sections that have been published prior to submission of their thesis and/or were in a format suitable for publishing in a peer-reviewed journal or conference proceeding.

8.2 The Committee was interested to discuss this "alternative format" and agreed that there were many, but not all, departments in the College where formally publishing work in a journal or

conference proceeding prior to completing a research degree was encouraged. The Committee was however, mindful that time given over to writing papers and getting publishing may affect the student's timely completion of the thesis and that it may prove additionally time consuming to seek permissions from the co-authors of papers for inclusion of papers in the thesis.

8.3   There were also some concerns from the Committee about copyright constraints.

8.4   The Committee noted that some universities, for example the University of Manchester, had now introduced this "Alternative Format" thesis and agreed that there would be merit in pursuing the concept further. The Committee agreed that if this was introduced as an alternative to the standard Imperial thesis, that students should receive clear advice and guidance on submission.

8.5   It was agreed by the Vice-Provost (Education) and the Academic Registrar that the discussion should be taken forward under the auspices of the academic standards framework consultation and that the Committee would be involved at each stage as the discussions progressed.

9.   Extending Open Access to Theses

The Committee received a paper presented by the Director of Library Services, Mrs Chris Banks, and was invited to discuss the proposal for widening open access to theses.

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9.1   Mrs Banks presented the proposal to widen full text open access to e-theses dating from before March 2013, subject to certain criteria and safeguards which were discussed in the paper.

9.2   The Committee noted the current closed/open assess status of electronic theses held in Spiral, as agreed by Senate in 2011, and subsequently as directed by senior College staff.

9.3   The Committee noted the current funder expectations in terms of RCUK requirements where there is an expectation that theses will be made openly available.

9.4   The Committee noted Imperial's practice compared to that of other Russell Group institutions and considered the perceived risks in making pre-March 2013 full text theses open access.

9.5   The Committee was supportive of the proposal to widen full text open access to e-theses dating from before March 2013, subject to the following safeguards:

(a) For theses deposited electronically between July 2007 and February 2013: with consultation on a department by department basis. Where an existing embargo is in place, departmental advice will be sought as to whether to contact individuals and/or funders with a request to remove the embargo, or whether to continue to keep the theses under embargo.

(b) For retrospectively digitised theses: with consultation on a department by department basis. Currently, no embargoed theses are being digitised. At the point where we move to digitise theses where an existing embargo is in place, departmental advice will be sought as to whether to contact individuals and/or funders with a request to remove the embargo, or whether to continue to keep the theses under embargo.

(c) For both proposals, to use alumni contact networks to inform alumni that all non-embargoed theses are being made available open access unless discussions with individual departments results in a request to contact specific groups of individuals. Once theses are open access, alumni will be able to track the use of their work through the item level metrics and altmetrics facility embedded in Spiral.

9.6   In discussion regarding the future digitisation of print theses, some members commented that many print theses may already exist in electronic format which the library services staff may be able to be gain access to.

9.7 The Committee agreed to recommend that Senate should approve the proposal to widen full text open access to e-theses dating from before March 2013, subject to the safeguards outlined above.

10. English for Research Students

The Committee received a paper from the Centre for Academic English (CfAE) presented by the Director, Dr Julie King, and the Senior Teacher of English for Academic Purposes, Ms Hilary Glasman-Deal. The Committee was invited to discuss the proposals for the review of the English Language Requirement for Postgraduate Research Students.

PRQC/2014/21

10.1 Dr King reminded the Committee of the current Postgraduate English Requirement and explained the difficulties faced by the CfAE in being able to identify and support students with weaker English linguistic ability.

10.2 The Committee was supportive of the changes proposed by the CfAE, in particular that it should be compulsory for all non-native speaker students to take the Initial Test within one month of their programme start date, so that the support needed could be provided at a very early stage. The Committee agreed that the only category of students who should be exempt from taking the Initial Test should be students who had a minimum English language proficiency of IELTS 8.0 or equivalent.

10.3 The Committee agreed with the proposal that those students scoring below 45% on the Initial Test would be required to take a minimum of two (maximum three) core Academic English modules prior to being assessed at the ESA point.

10.4 The Committee agreed with the proposal to change from a pass/fail test to a learning-oriented progress assessment which would indicate a student's academic literacy competence in relation to PhD study.

10.5 The Committee agreed with the proposal to assess and report students' progress and proficiency at the Initial Test and ESA stages only, and to remove any assessment at the LSR stage unless it was specifically requested by the department.

10.6 In further discussion the Committee noted the variability in language help and support provided to students by supervisors and also the tenancy for some groups of students not to mix with English speaking students.

10.7 The Vice-Provost (Education) stressed that a special case for admission should not be made for any student who does not meet the College English language entry requirement.

10.8 The Committee agreed with all of the proposals for immediate changes to the English Language Requirement for doctoral students as presented by the CfAE, and noted the proposals for longer term developments.

11. Late submission of Theses
11.1 Data on cases of late submission in 2013/2014.

The Committee received a paper on cases of late submission in 2013/2014 presented by the Deputy Director of the Graduate School. The Committee was invited to consider the analysis of factors affecting the timely submission of theses in 2013/2014.

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11.1.1 The Committee was reminded that the submission rate metric was used as a benchmark by Research Councils and in REF (The Research Excellence Framework) and that submission within 4 years was one of the performance indicators that they used. The Committee was also reminded that the percentage submission rate for students who submitted their thesis within 4 years of registration was taken into account as part of Research Council studentship applications when the figures also had to be reported at a College level. It was suggested that Research Councils may, in future, impose penalties on institutions with an overall submission rate below 90%.

11.1.2 The Committee was reminded that some cases for late submission could be dealt with by interruption of study. However the Committee was mindful that an interruption of study could have funding implications for students, as well implications for student visas and accommodation.

11.1.3 The Committee noted the range of factors which contributed to requests for late submission which were outside the student's control such as where a student had had to move labs, had had trouble with equipment or had had problems recruiting patients. Occasions where a new supervisor had had to be appointed also accounted for a number of delays.

11.1.4 The Committee thanked the Registry Research Degrees Team for providing the data. It was agreed that this report should be presented to the Committee on an annual basis.

11.2 Financial Hardship during an Interruption of Studies

The Committee had noted (above) that there were many legitimate reasons for wishing to activate an interruption of studies due to circumstances relating to personal and health reasons, as well as environmental and personnel reasons. The Committee had also noted (above) that an interruption of study could have funding implications for students, as well implications for student visas and accommodation, meaning that some students were reluctant to follow this route. The Committee went on to discuss mechanisms for supporting students who had taken an agreed interruption of studies during their completing research period.

11.2.1 Mr Gerry Greyling, Senior Assistant Registrar (Systems & Student Financial Support) gave the Committee an overview of the Student Support Fund. The Fund offers a one-off payment of up to £1,000 to cover such emergencies as last minute accommodation and travel necessities, equipment and childcare. It does not have to be repaid. The Student Support Fund replaces the former Access to Learning Fund for home students and the College Hardship Fund for EU and international students, and thus all students are eligible to apply for financial support.

11.2.2 The Committee agreed that this was not a practical way of supporting, to completion, research students who were in the final stages of writing their thesis. The Committee advised that students should nevertheless be encouraged to apply to the Student Support Fund if they were in need.

11.2.3 The Committee went on to consider other mechanisms for supporting students such as hardship funding from Faculties or Departments. The Committee heard from one department that they were able to budget within core funded studentships to extend a student's funding for up to six months if the circumstances warranted this.

11.2.4 There was a suggestion that the College should support students whose external funding was suspended due to an interruption of studies in the same way as a member of staff would be entitled to receive pay during leave of absence.

11.2.5 The Committee noted that more evidence would be needed to project the likely cost implications of providing College funding to support this group of students.

11.2.6 As above, the Committee was mindful of implications for international students in cases of interruptions to periods of study.

11.2.7 The Committee was advised that a review of the processes and support for the Interruption of Studies period was likely to become part of the work covered by the Operational Excellence Programme and the consultation on the Academic Standards Framework.

12. Working Party for World Class Supervision

The Committee received a verbal report on the progress of the Working Party for World Class Supervision.

12.1 The Committee was reminded that the Working Party had been established to develop a strategy for the delivery and implementation of the doctoral proposition, including the consideration of what constitutes world-class research supervision from a staff and student perspective, and how best to ensure that this ideal is delivered to every doctoral student.

12.2 It was reported that the Chair of the Working party had met with Heads of Departments, Directors of Postgraduate Studies, PG Tutors and award winning supervisors, and had held academic focus group sessions in January. The information gathered at these meetings had resulted in the development of a world-class research supervision academic staff survey. It was reported that the academic staff survey would be open from 2 March – 8 May 2015.

12.3 It was reported that the world-class research supervision student survey had been run from 17 November 2014 until 23 January 2015. It was noted that the findings of the survey would be presented to the Working Party shortly and that the Working Party would consider how best to disseminate the findings across College.

13. Admissions 2014-2015
The Committee received a report on research degree application and enrolment numbers for 2014-15 compared with figures for the previous two years.

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13.1 The Committee was asked to note that the data was presented by year of entry.

13.2 The Committee was asked to note that the 2014-2015 application cycle for research students was still open and that therefore no direct comparison with 2013-2014 was possible.

14. Postgraduate Professional Development Committee: update
The Committee received the unconfirmed minutes of the Professional Skills Development Committee meeting held on 26 November 2014.

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<u>**ITEMS FOR REPORT**</u>

15. Graduate School Annual Report 2013-14
The Committee received a copy of the Graduate School Annual report 2013-14

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16. Senate
Members noted that the latest executive summaries from Senate were available <u>here.</u>

17. Quality Assurance & Enhancement Committee
Members noted that the latest executive summaries from the QAEC meetings were available here

18. Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Updates
18.1 Publication of UK frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies
18.1.1 The Committee noted that the QAA had now published an updated and revised version of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications. The document brought together the FHEQ (framework for higher education qualifications of degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and the FHEQIS (framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland) into a single document, The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies.

18.1.2 The Committee noted that the frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies provided important reference points for higher education providers, assisting them in setting and maintaining academic standards.

18.1.3 The Committee noted that the framework document would become a reference point for the purpose of reviews carried out by QAA from August 2015.

18.2 Higher Education Review: Themes for 2015-16 announced
18.2.1 The Committee noted that the QAA had announced their themes for the HER as: Student Employability, and Digital Literacy.

18.2.2 The Committee noted that arrangements for 2016-17 were still to be confirmed, but that the employability theme had been in place for 4 years, whilst digital literacy was a new theme.

18.2.3 The Committee noted that the QAA had published "Emerging Practice on Employability Findings from QAA Reviews 2010-14" http://www.qaa.ac.uk/newsroom/emerging-practice-on-employability

18.2.4 The Committee noted that this document provided an overview of emerging effective practice in relation to the engagement that takes place between higher education providers and

employers, businesses and industry. The report had been based upon an analysis of published reports arising from QAA reviews that had taken place since September 2010, and covered over 200 reports, supplemented by an analysis of a sample of providers' self-evaluation documents submitted in support of their QAA review.

18.3 Student Engagement Partnership

The Committee noted that the Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) had been set up to support, develop and promote student engagement activity in the higher education sector in England. The unit was a central resource for practitioners and institutions, and coordinated the sharing of knowledge relating to student engagement at a national level. TSEP was housed and managed by the National Union of Students, with funding from HEFCE, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, GuildHE and the Association of Colleges.
See: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2014/news96466.html

19. Any Other Business

There was no other business raised for discussion.

20. Date of next meeting

The next meeting will be held on Friday 15 May 2015. The meeting will be held in Room G01, Royal School of Mines, South Kensington Campus, and will start at 10:00. The deadline for papers will be Friday 1 May 2015.

21. Reserved Business (not circulated to student members)
Special Cases Reports

The Committee received reports on special cases considered by the Director of the Graduate School and the special cases panel for doctoral programmes as follows:

(i) Special cases for admissions considered by the special cases panel for doctoral programmes, covering the period 6 November 2014 – 27 January 2015.

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(ii) Special cases for Examiners, considered by the Director of the Graduate School, covering the period 4 November 2014 - 3 February 2015.

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(iii) Special cases for late entry, considered by the Director and Deputy Director of the Graduate School, covering the period 4 November 2014 - 3 February 2015.

PRQC/2014/28