Report of the World-Class Research Supervision Task and Finish Group for PhD Milestones

1. Introduction and background

1.1 One of the strategic aims set out in the College’s Education and Student Strategy document, published in autumn 2013 and now incorporated within the Strategy 2015-20, is for the College to achieve international recognition for a distinctive education. The led to the Doctoral Proposition, a document developed and refined through extensive consultation, which outlines what postgraduate research students can expect of their education and wider student experience at Imperial. In response to the Doctoral Proposition the Working Party for World-Class Research Supervision, which reported to the Vice Provost’s Advisory Group for Education (VPAGE) and the Vice Provost’s Advisory Group for Research (VPAGR) was established by the Graduate School to develop this part of the proposition.

1.2 During 2014-15, the Working Party for World Class Research Supervision carried out a number of activities and there was substantial consultation across College and with other HEIs. As a result, the Working Party for World Class Supervision made 40 recommendations which have now been approved by the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC) and endorsed by VPAGR, VPAGE and the Provost’s Board. Seven World-Class Research Supervision Task and Finish Groups have been established to develop the recommendations, these are:

- PhD Milestones
- Doctoral Students Wellbeing
- Interruptions of Studies
- Prospective Student Information
- Research Culture
- Student Supervision Partnerships
- Student Financial Support

1.3 The task and finish group for PhD Milestones met three times to develop the recommendations of the Working Party relating to PhD assessment and to consider progress made by the Graduate School to address the recommendations around professional skills development. The task and finish group has now concluded its business.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Of the 40 recommendations made by the Working Party for World-Class Research Supervision, 16 fell within the remit of the task and finish group for PhD milestones. All recommendations have now been addressed and a response to each is set out below.

Recommendation 1: The College requirement to complete a Research Plan Confirmation should be removed

The purpose of removing the Research Plan Confirmation (RPS) from the examination regulations is to reduce the administrative burden and provide more time for students and staff to work together to build a thriving and vibrant research culture. Departments are reminded that they are free to keep local arrangements for an RPC in place if they wish, but there is no formal requirement to report the outcome of this to College. The amendment to the examination regulations was approved at the May meeting of the PRQC and at the June meeting of the Senate.
Recommendation 2: The Early Stage Assessment at 9 months should be kept

In terms of the timing of the ESA, the Working Party noted that the timing at 9 months was appropriate and allowed students sufficient time in which to re-attempt the assessment before 12 months. It also ensured that the College could retain funding for the student should the student leave at 12 months. The task and finish group noted this recommendation and did not make any further changes although it was agreed that the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC) would be asked to clarify what exactly is required of the student at the 9 month stage. For example, should the written work be submitted at 9 months, or should the assessment itself take place at 9 months in which case the written work would need to be submitted prior to 9 months. Clarity is needed. The same applies to the LSR.

Recommendation 3: To review the ESA so that there is greater use of conversion to MPhil and honourable exit where appropriate

Given the current structure of the College’s PhD regulations which normally require students to register directly for a PhD, transfer to MPhil will inevitably feel like a failure to some. However, some students choose to change their registration to MPhil because they no longer wish to pursue the award of PhD. The task and finish group considered how best to support students through this process and revised Section C of the ESA and LSR forms to facilitate greater discussion between students and supervisors about research progress and the outcome of assessment.

The task and finish group noted that not all students will have sufficient data for the award of MPhil at the ESA stage and most will not have enough data even by 12 months after which point, funding will cease. With that in mind, the task and finish group agreed that Departments should make this clear to students at the start of the PhD. For those students who leave with an MPhil, the task and finish group suggest that departments find opportunities to celebrate the achievement, perhaps by using short profiles which promote honourable exit. The task and finish group also agreed that Directors of Postgraduate Studies should be supportive of supervisors whose students exit via MPhil. Students who leave with no award should be supported through the process and their achievements celebrated.

Recommendation 4: ESA to be reviewed so that there is improved discussion between students and supervisors with respect to research progress and professional skills development.

The ESA form and guidance has been revised to facilitate improved discussion between supervisors and their students. There is now a requirement for students and/or departments to append a record of professional skills courses, other technical training and any other development activities undertaken by a student to the ESA form prior to the milestone assessment. The task and finish group also agreed that this information should be updated and appended to the LSR form. Section C of the ESA and LSR forms have been amended to contain specific questions relating to the professional development of students and to encourage supervisors to use the milestones as an opportunity to provide students with formal feedback. Both the supervisor and the student are required to sign this section of the form.

Recommendation 5: Extend the time in which students have to complete Graduate School professional skills courses from four by ESA to two by ESA and two by LSR.

The Graduate School’s Postgraduate Professional Development Committee (PPDC) has now approved a change to the Professional Skills Statement of Policy, requiring students to complete
two courses by the ESA and a further two by the LSR. The amended policy statement was approved by the PRQC on 10 May 2016 and the June meeting of Senate. The change will take effect for the 2016-17 session.

**Recommendation 6: The Late Stage Review should remain in place.**

The task and finish group noted that the Working Party agreed that the timing of the LSR was appropriate and that the LSR should remain in place. It did not make any further changes.

**Recommendation 7: The Completing Research Status should remain in place.**

The task and finish group noted that the Working Party agreed that the Completing Research Status was appropriate and should remain in place. It did not make any further changes.

**Recommendation 8: To encourage greater engagement from supervisors with respect to milestones.**

As previously stated, both the ESA and LSR forms and guidance have been revised to facilitate improved discussion between supervisors and their students. Following the outcome of the ESA or LSR assessment, supervisors are invited to discuss the outcome of the assessment, plans for research progress and to have a discussion about professional development with their students. This should be seen as an opportunity to provide students with formal feedback and the wording on the forms has been adjusted to reflect this.

**Recommendation 9: Encourage Departments to review their milestone criteria and guidelines especially with respect to the LSR.**

1,400 students completed the world class research supervision student survey in 2014-15. As part of the survey, students were asked to comment on the LSR milestone and provide feedback on this. Some students reported that they had found the LSR milestone criteria and guidelines to be unclear. Therefore, departments are asked to review the LSR milestone criteria ahead of the next academic session.

**Recommendation 10: Ensure Departments agree milestone assessment criteria and guidelines for inter-departmental students.**

The task and finish group discussed the importance of ensuring that interdepartmental students are clear about which department’s milestone assessment criteria they are subject to right from the start of their PhD. The task and finish group agreed that departments must ensure that students know that they are subject to their home department’s regulations and milestones. As a minimum, this information should be found in PG Handbooks. Further, where students have supervisors in different departments, or Faculties, it is vitally important that there is regular communication between the supervisors to ensure that information being passed to students is clear and correct and that there are no conflicting expectations.

**Recommendation 11: That the Graduate School continues to develop new and more challenging professional skills courses that embed development within the research environment.**

The Graduate School is currently expanding its provision to include more advanced level professional skills workshops. Workshops will be divided into three levels, each more challenging
than the previous. It is hoped that this will enable students and their supervisors to make informed decisions about the most appropriate course to take. The Graduate School is also exploring ways in which to embed learning within the research environment. For example, the Graduate School is exploring links with industry for the delivery of professional skills workshops on-site at employers of Imperial Graduates. Finally, the Graduate School is working with professional accrediting bodies to develop a pathway of professional skills development which will contribute towards membership of professional bodies.

**Recommendation 12:** That students have complete choice of the professional skills programme by removing the underpinning, consolidating completing and enriching stages.

Previously, the Graduate School’s professional skills development courses were divided into underpinning (0-9 months), consolidating (9-18 months), completing (18 months +) and enriching (anytime) stages. Doctoral students were required to choose professional skills courses appropriate for the stage of their PhD. As of 2015-16, the Graduate School’s PPDC removed this restriction, and students are now free to choose from across the entire range of courses. Again, it is hoped that this will enable students to choose professional skills courses most suited to their developmental needs.

**Recommendation 13:** That the Graduate School continues to develop more interactive and immersive courses with a range of delivery modes.

The Graduate School continues to develop its portfolio of online courses. Currently, the Graduate School has online courses in *Plagiarism Awareness, Sources and Types of Business Funding*, and *Maths and Stats Online Catch-up*. A new online course in *Copyright* is currently being piloted and the Graduate School is working with Imperial Innovations to develop a new online course in *Intellectual Property*. A brand new webinar series, comprising three individual webinars, has been developed entitled: *Success in Academia: Building Your Research Profile and Vision, Success in Academia: Understanding the UK Higher Education Landscape and Policy and Success in Academia: Making an Impact*. Other webinars currently in development are: *Ask the Doctor: Your Chance to Chat to a Doctoral Graduate at Work* and *Doctoral Student Wellbeing*.

**Recommendation 14:** That the Graduate School develops a programme of coaching and individual / small group provision for students who require it, embedding, where appropriate, resilience development.

The Graduate School’s doctoral student coaching programme has now launched. The programme supports the development of effective working relationships and doctoral student self-development. The coaching programme complements existing support and welfare services offered by College but operates independently from academic departments supporting those students, who for whatever reason are not able to discuss particular issues with departmental staff. The Graduate School already provides small group / individual support for students who require it and is now keeping a log of such interactions. Finally, the Graduate School is embedding resilience training into its courses, *Time Management* and *Becoming and Effective Researcher*.

**Recommendation 15:** That Departments consider making taught course programme timetables across College visible to PhD students.

The task and finish group has established that all staff and students are able to request read only access to taught course timetables and view these via the College’s timetabling software.
Following discussion at the ESA or LSR, or even at other points during the PhD, the supervisor and student may determine that technical or other training might be helpful to the student. Should there be an appropriate course delivered elsewhere in College, the task and finish group agreed that the supervisor should contact the department delivering the course to see if capacity would permit an additional attendee. Reference to this is included in the revised ESA and LSR guidance.

**Recommendation 16: The Graduate School explores ways in which to keep supervisors informed of their students’ professional skills development.**

Previously, the Graduate School used to provide supervisors with a copy of their students’ enrolment onto Graduate School courses. Whilst some welcomed this information others did not. On occasion, students have made requests to the Graduate School that their supervisor(s) is not informed of professional skills courses being undertaken for fear of repercussion.

In order to address this and to ensure supervisors are engaged with the professional development of their students, it is now a requirement for a record of completed professional skills development courses to be appended to the ESA and LSR forms and to ensure supervisors are informed of courses being undertaken by their students.

3. **Final comments and other action points**

3.1 As a result of the work of the task and finish group, the Registry’s Student Records team will now provide PG administrators and departments with a report setting out details of when viva examinations have taken place and the dates that theses have been submitted. Additionally, the Student Records team will provide training to departmental staff who wish to use the College’s ICA Dashboard to find these dates themselves.

3.2 It was also reported to the task and finish group that a number of departments have recently appointed academic mentors to be independent assessors of milestone assessments. Whilst this is perfectly fine, departments are reminded that it is not good practice to appoint members of staff who provide pastoral care to students as independent assessors of those same students due to potential conflicts of interest. The role of mentor will be explored further by the student supervisor partnership task and finish group.

3.3 Finally, the task and finish group recommend that new supervisors receive training on the ESA and LSR, if they do not do so already.