Report of the World-Class Research Supervision Task and Finish Group for Interruption of Studies

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. This 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
- Interruption of Studies
- Prospective Student Information
- Research Culture and Community
- Student Supervision Partnerships
- Student Financial Support

2. Recommendations

2.1 The task and finish group for interruption of studies has now concluded its business. There were two recommendations which fell within the remit of the group. These have both been addressed and a summary of the work of the group follows.

Recommendation 1: To address concerns surrounding general practice relating to interruption of studies, including funding at departmental, Faculty and College level and explore how these might be addressed.

Recommendation 2: To develop good practice guidelines

2.2 An interruption of studies will effectively “stop the clock” on a PhD student’s period of registration, extending the original date of submission by the period of time indicated in the interruption. It will not be recorded as a Late Submission. For students who hold a Tier 4 visa, an interruption will trigger a report from the College to UKVI which will result in a visa curtailment (with the exception of an interruption to become a Sabbatical Officer) and the student must leave the UK.

2.3 The task and finish group considered the existing guidelines for research students wishing to take interruptions and agreed that they should be revised and a new form developed to provide clarity of process, improved information about categories of interruptions and when these should be
2.4 As part of its review of the categories for interrupting, the task and finish group noted that a period of time away from College to undertake activities which do not directly contribute towards the degree registration should be recorded as an interruption of studies using the category Alternative Research/Internships. This led the task and finish group to consider the existing guidelines for study leave which is defined as being period of time away from College (minimum of two weeks) to undertake research which counts towards the degree registration. Ordinarily, this is either fieldwork or a placement, but also covers split-PhDs. To avoid confusion with interruptions, the task and finish group re-named study leave to be external study leave and revised and clarified the existing guidelines.

2.5 The task and finish group also considered the College’s data for late submissions 2014-15 and noted that no formal guidelines for Late Submission existed. The group therefore agreed to develop a new set of guidelines to clarify the process and implications to be considered.

2.6 Finally, as part of its consideration of funding issues surrounding interruptions of studies, the task and finish group noted variations in the level of financial support provided to students. The task and finish group for interruptions of studies has developed a discussion paper which will feed into the work of the task and finish group for student financial support which will be exploring the development of shared parental leave for students and will take a holistic review of financial support available to students.