

Final Report of the World-Class Research Supervision Task and Finish Group for Research Culture and Community

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
 - Interruptions of Studies
 - Prospective Student Information
 - Research Culture
 - Student Supervision Partnerships
 - Student Financial Support
- 1.3 The task and finish group for Research Culture and Community met six times to develop the recommendations of the Working Party relating to research culture from a student perspective. 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, 5 fell within the remit of the task and finish group for Research Culture and Community. All recommendations have now been addressed and a response to each is set out below.

2.2 Recommendation One: To explore what constitutes a vibrant, multidisciplinary research community from a student perspective

2.2.1 The need for exploring research culture has arisen from a number of information resources. The first being PRES 2015 which has shown that research culture questions are rated the lowest by students in the sector, not just for the College. Only 57% of Imperial students state that they have opportunities to become involved with the wider research community. Exploring the free text comments of PRES further, students reported that there was little opportunity to network, that inter-departmental communication was poor, seminars were more like tick box exercises with no real interaction and that there was little exposure to other researchers. These issues were compounded for students based at campuses other than South Kensington. To explore this further, the Graduate School held two focus groups, one with existing PhD students and one with alumni.

2.2.2 Common themes emerging from the focus groups were: improving connections and opportunities to network both within departments and more widely across College; improved understanding of the work of other research groups; more opportunity to communicate science and meet people via College wide events; better engagement with alumni. Students and alumni also reported that they would also welcome a College wide searchable facility in which to find out about open research seminars taking place. Both groups discussed the importance of providing a dedicated space for postgraduates at a College level. Alumni also suggested that the College find better ways in which to celebrate student success.

2.2.3 In response to this feedback, the following actions have been taken by the Graduate School:

- A central College-wide Open Research Seminar Listings website has been developed. This facility can be used by students to learn what open research seminars are taking place across College and sign up to seminars as appropriate. The website can be accessed here: <http://www.imperial.ac.uk/study/pg/graduate-school/events/research-seminars/>
- A brand new PhD Summer Showcase has been launched and will take place on the 14 July. The showcase will include a College-wide poster symposium together with a Science as Art Competition. All are invited to view the exhibition which will open in the Queen's Tower Rooms from 12 noon that day (closed between 3-5pm for judging).
- To celebrate success, on a monthly basis, students who have been awarded their PhD are invited to attend a group photo shoot with the Graduate School. The photo and a congratulatory message is then posted on social media and featured in the Graduate School's newsletter.
- Provision of Transport for Silwood Park students to attend Graduate School events which take place at the South Kensington Campus has been established.
- A brand new online resource been developed to help PG student representatives, and any other interested parties, understand more about the College community and how the College works. The new online resource will be launched in time for the start of the 2017-18 session and will feature as part of the Graduate School's departmental induction talks and will appear prominently on the Graduate School's website.
- A brand new Graduate School blog has been launched with PhD students invited to contribute articles. The blog is available here: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/blog/icpostgrad/>
- The Graduate School has also launched "PhD Stories", short video clips of students who share their stories of success and how they have overcome challenges. The videos are published on the Graduate School's youtube channel here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCufhf8HjWkEu4eyplZokoWQ>

2.2.4 The task and finish group also reviewed the PRES questions relating to research culture and community. Should the Higher Education Academy, who are responsible for delivering the survey, provide institutions with an opportunity to consult on changes to the survey questions, the Group wish to propose the following amendments:

- To add an additional question which asks students to comment on the extent to which their department provides opportunity for network with other researchers
- To amend the words “research ambience” to “research environment”

2.2.5 More broadly, the task and finish group discussed student communities at hospital campuses and the new community which is developing at the White City Campus. It was agreed that the task and finish group would strongly urge the College to consider how to encourage and facilitate research exchange and connectivity across all its campuses. The Graduate School will be developing short videos which promote the facilities available to students at all campuses in order to encourage students to visit other campuses.

2.2.6 The task and finish group also discussed online community building. It was noted that the Graduate School has launched a webinar programme to connect students based at hospital campuses and Silwood to the central programme. It was noted that there is good engagement by students from the Faculty of Medicine. This new provision has also enabled students that are overseas to engage with the Graduate School community. Future developments are being led by the learning technologist within the Graduate school who is designing courses which will stimulate discussion and engagement between students online.

2.3 **Recommendation two: To adjust central cohort building funding to reflect the findings of the above, publicising this fund and the programme more widely**

and

Recommendation three: To review and strengthen guidelines on cohort building

2.3.1 The group noted that the Graduate School’s cohort building programme and funding to support cohort building activities was not widely publicised by departments and consequently under-utilized. Following this discussion, the following actions have been taken:

- The cohort building fund and criteria has been reviewed and re-branded as the Research Community Fund. Funds are available for student-led cohort building activities only
- The cohort building website has been reviewed and can be accessed here: <http://www.imperial.ac.uk/study/pg/graduate-school/cohort-building/>
- In order to promote the programme and research community fund more widely, the Graduate School will lead a workshop on cohort building as part of the ICU PG Rep training and development programme
- The Graduate School is hosting a cohort building re-launch event on the 24th May. It will feature short talks from students who have previously benefitted from the fund and will end with a networking session
- The Graduate School has submitted a proposal to Planning Round to increase the budget for the Research Community Fund from £20K to £30K

2.4 Recommendation four: To explore how best to ensure that postgraduate students have physical space in which to meet other students and have greater interaction with other research groups

2.4.1 The task and finish group noted that several institutions are now heavily investing in capital projects which facilitate research student communities by providing physical spaces, rooms and even buildings to support research students and thereby raising the profile and visibility of postgraduate students at institutions and increasing a sense of community and belonging. To explore this further, the Graduate School visited a number of institutions in the UK which have invested in dedicated space for the postgraduate community and an Imperial PhD student focus group was also held.

2.4.2 The Graduate School has visited the universities of Loughborough, Kent and Warwick, all of which have dedicated space for postgraduate students. Additionally, a number of members of the Russell Group reported that they have dedicated postgraduate space, including London based institutions.

2.4.3 The Task and Finish Group agreed that space was extremely important for postgraduate students, particularly with the loss of the Holland club. The Group also remarked that the space in the SCR was not conducive to quieter conversations or space in which to meet with research groups. It was also agreed that dedicated space for postgraduates was extremely important for Imperial because it is based in London, with lots of students commuting, and does not have the campus feel of other institutions. The Task and Finish Group agreed that should the College invest in space for postgraduates, it would visibly show the value of the postgraduate community to the College. It would also help to encourage students to leave their labs and meet other students.

2.4.4 As a result of this work the following action has been taken:

- A business case for the development of a postgraduate hub has been developed. The business case sets out the case for space with the student voice featuring prominently.
- The business case has been submitted to the Vice Provost (Education) and a meeting has been established between the Graduate School, the ICU, GSU and the Associate Provost (Space) in which to discuss this further.

2.5 Recommendation five: To review exit surveys/correspondence from College

2.5.1 The task and finish group was reminded that part of its role was to review exit surveys and the College's correspondence with alumni in order to ensure that communities of students can continue to thrive after they have been awarded and left College. The task and finish group listened to a presentation from the Alumni Relations Manager, setting out current provision delivered by Advancement and were provided with a copy of the information sheet which staff are invited to give to new students. The presentation included information on current the alumni population, strategic aims of the Advancement Division, current ways in which connections are made and special events such as the Alumni Weekend. In particular, the #ourimperial was highlighted as a way in which connections are promoted on social media.

2.5.2 The task and finish group remarked on the significant developments in provision which had been made by Advancement since the original findings of the Working Party for World Class Research Supervision in 2014-15. It was agreed that a recommendation around strengthening correspondence and exit surveys was no longer required.

- 2.5.3 However, the task and finish group did agree that the Graduate School and Alumni Relations Office should continue to work together to promote ways in which alumni can contribute towards Graduate School provision. The following actions have been taken:
- The provision of a Graduate School statement on how alumni can engage with the professional skills programme and networking events abroad such as the Global Fellows programmes has been developed and will be sent to Graduands as part of the invitation to attend Graduation.
 - Opportunity for Alumni to attend the Global Fellows Programme networking events will be established. For 2017, Alumni based in Munich have been invited to attend the Graduate School's Global Fellows Programme which is taking place at Technical University Munich.
 - The use of the #ourimperial by Graduate School staff to celebrate and share information with the alumni population.
 - The provision of links to the website which feature PhD Stories and the Graduate School's blog have been shared with Advancement
 - Alumni will be invited to attend the Graduate School's PhD Summer Showcase
3. The task and finish group for research culture and community wishes to thank students and staff for their contribution towards the work of this group. **It recommends that Departments continue to seek ways in which to celebrate student success at a departmental level and encourage and promote opportunities for students to engage with the wider College community.**
4. Finally, the task and finish group agreed to strongly emphasise that PhD students make a fundamental contribution towards the College's REF submission and this should also be recognised by Departments. The Graduate School is currently exploring ways in which the College's Symplectic Software can be modified to generate departmental reports which show the numbers of students who have contributed towards the publication of papers.