

# Imperial College London

## Graduate School Postgraduate Research Quality Committee

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14 February 2013

### Confirmed Minutes

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#### Present

Professor Andrew George (Chairman)  
Dr David McPhail (Deputy Chair)  
Professor Ferri Aliabadi (Aeronautics)  
Professor Erkkö Autio (Imperial College Business School)  
Professor Chris Cheeseman (Civil and Environmental Engineering)  
Dr Jorge Diaz-Cintas (School of Professional Development)  
Professor Lesley Cohen (Physics)  
Dr Tim Ebbels [for Professor Michael Seckl] (Surgery and Cancer)  
Dr John Gibbons (Mathematics)  
Dr Niki Gounaris (Department of Life Sciences)  
Professor Andrew Holmes (Electrical and Electronic Engineering)  
Professor Debra Humphis (Pro Rector, Education)  
Professor Peter Lindstedt (Mechanical Engineering)  
Dr Kevin Murphy (Department of Medicine)  
Dr Alessandra Russo (Computing)  
Dr Simon Schultz (Bioengineering)  
Professor Morris Sloman (Dean of Engineering and Business School)  
Professor Robert Zimmerman (Earth Science and Engineering)  
Mr Nigel Wheatley (Academic Registrar)  
Professor Xiao Yun Xu (Chemical Engineering)

#### In Attendance

Ms Sally Baker (Senior Assistant Registrar)

#### 1. Apologies for absence

Dr Tim Albrecht (Chemistry)  
Dr Simon Archer (College Tutor)  
Dr Bernadette Byrne (Chair of the Postgraduate Professional Development Committee)  
Professor Simon Buckle (Pro Rector International)  
Ms Maryam Habibzay (GSA President)  
Mr Doug Hunt (ICU Deputy President (Education))  
Professor Marjo-Riitta Jarvelin (School of Public Health)  
Professor Tony Magee [and alternate] (NHLI)  
Dr Mike Tennant [and alternate] (Centre for Environmental Policy)  
Professor Denis Wright (Dean of Students)

#### 2. Minutes of the last meeting

Subject to a correction to the Department name, Civil and Environmental Engineering, the minutes of the meeting held on 26 October 2012 were approved.

PRQC/2012/20

#### 3. Matters arising

**3.1** Minute 14 - Revisions to Procedure for Appointment of Examiners for Research Degrees: it was reported that, having considered the revised procedure for the appointment of examiners for research degrees at the December meeting, the Senate had requested a change to the reference

to CASLAT/PG Certificate in paragraph 4 to make clear that staff should ideally have completed CASLAT, the PG Certificate or equivalent training provided by the College as there was now no longer a requirement for staff to undertake a formal qualification.

**3.2** There were no other matters arising not appearing elsewhere on the agenda.

### **ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION**

#### **4. Discussion Paper on Special Cases**

**4.1** Members were reminded that a small working group had been convened to look into the relatively high number of special cases involving late submissions of theses, the reasons underlying the requests and the sanctions available to the special cases panel.

**4.2** The Committee had considered (Minute 12 - 26 October 2012) a paper from the working party and, after discussion, had agreed that the paper should be further refined for final consideration by the Committee.

**4.3** The Committee considered a revised paper, presented by Dr David McPhail.

**PRQC/2012/21**

**4.4** It was reported that, subsequent to the last meeting, some further investigation had taken place into those areas where the highest instances of special cases for late submission had been attributed to an individual supervisor. Significant amongst the reasons in these cases were slow academic progression by the students and work commitments of students moving into full-time employment before having submitted a thesis. The Committee agreed that both of these issues could be addressed by reviewing admissions processes and encouraging students to write-up before moving into full-time employment.

**4.5** It was reported that one other significant reason was due to the loss of staff and the Committee agreed that this situation could be addressed by improved staff succession planning and the appointment of a second supervisor in all cases.

**4.6** It was clarified that the late cases reported against the Department of Mechanical Engineering were in respect of EngD students for whom a 5-year submission deadline was the norm, but who had historically been recorded as late submissions after a 4-year period. The Committee was reassured that a special case for late submission in respect of EngD students was only required if a thesis had not been submitted within 60 months and that, since this requirement had only been in place since Summer 2011, the data presented in this paper did not fully reflect this.

**4.7** In further discussion, members of the Committee highlighted an apparent discrepancy in Section 1 of the paper which stated (first paragraph) that about 200 cases involving late submissions of theses are made per year (out of a total of up to 900 PhD thesis submitted annually) and (second paragraph) that the College has a very 4-year good submission rate, consistently around 90%. The Committee asked that these figures should be clarified, and agreed that the paper was otherwise very constructive.

**Action: David McPhail**

**4.8** The Committee was asked for some clarification as to the procedure that should be followed where students do not undertake their Early Stage Assessment (ESA) or Late Stage Review (LSR) at the appropriate times. In discussion, the following principles emerged:

(i) That the ESA and LSR are policed at departmental level and that the Director of Postgraduate Studies has discretion in dealing with the outcome.

(ii) That it was important that the ESA and LSR deadlines were adhered to as this was considered to be a key measure in keeping to final submission deadlines, allowing any difficulties to be identified sufficiently in advance to allow time to put corrective measures in place and ensure timely and successful completion.

(iii) That every effort should be made to ensure that the ESA and LSR deadlines were not allowed to slip.

Members were reminded that transfer to MPhil was one of the possible outcomes at both the ESA and the LSR milestones, and several departments reported that they encouraged the view that, if

the requirements of the ESA and/or LSR were not met by the deadline then the student should expect to have their registration transferred and to submit for an MPhil. Members were reminded that the registration was easily reversed on successful completion of the requirement, but that this sanction had been found to be very effective. The Committee agreed that any mitigating circumstances should be considered in all cases.

## **5. Discussion Paper on the Research Degree Viva**

The Committee considered a paper from the discussion group convened to consider the concept of appointing an independent, non-examining chair for the final viva examination.

**PRQC/2012/22**

**5.1** Members were reminded that the Committee had asked a small number of members to consider the concept of appointing an independent, non-examining chair for the final viva examination and, in addition, to explore the option of conducting a public viva.

**5.2** The issues considered by the group, together with their recommendations, were presented to the Committee.

**5.3** In discussion of the appointment of an independent chair, the Committee was unanimous in its agreement that there was no evidence to suggest that the College's current procedures for the appointment of examiners were not robust and that there were no compelling reasons to introduce the requirement for an independent non-examining chair.

**5.4** The Committee was also of the opinion that the rare and exceptional circumstances when an independent observer, or a person other than the supervisor, should be permitted to attend the viva examination were properly covered in the procedures.

**5.5** It was reported that the Graduate School DVD "Passing Your Viva" was now available on-line. It was suggested that the DVD be recommended to junior staff to supplement their preparation for the role of internal examiner.

**5.6** In considering the option of conducting a public viva, the Committee heard that the discussion group had been divided on the issue and that it had been clear that the option would work better and be welcomed in some departments more than others.

**5.7** The Committee agreed that it was important that students should have the opportunity to present their work in public. Members believed that most students would experience this during their studies, if not at an external conference, then routinely at departmental level, and did not feel that it was necessary to add this requirement to the Research Degree Precepts.

**5.8** The Committee agreed that the addition of a public presentation as part of the viva examination was likely to put additional pressure on the candidate and on the examiners, as well as being logistically very difficult to organise. The Committee did not feel that this was something to be considered any further at present.

## **6. Hard Bound Copies of Theses**

The Committee received a paper discussing the long term need for a hard bound copy of the thesis.

**PRQC/2012/23**

**6.1** Members were reminded that successful candidates for the PhD, MPhil, MD(Res) and EngD awards were currently required to deposit both an electronic and hard bound copy of their thesis in the College Library.

**6.2** Given that all theses were made available on Spiral, members were asked to consider whether there was still a need for the hard bound copy.

**6.3** It was reported that discussions were underway with the Library and with ICT to determine if the current electronic storage system was secure (to hackers or to flood and fire), and to ensure that any theses were stored in a format that would allow their retrieval after PDF files had been superseded.

**6.4** The Committee raised no objection to removing the requirement for a student to submit a hard bound copy of the final thesis, providing that satisfactory assurances were provided by the Library and ICT (6.3 above). The Committee agreed, subject to the necessary reassurances

being provided, that Chair's action could be taken to approve the recommendation to go forward to the Senate for approval.

**6.5** It was further reported that the possibility of an electronic submission system for the thesis was to be investigated with ICT. The system would nevertheless allow for the examiners to receive a soft bound copy of the thesis, and for a supervisor to ask a student for a copy of the thesis.

## **7. Writing Up Status**

The Committee was asked to consider some possible changes to the College's writing up period.

**[no paper 24]**

**7.1** Members were reminded that research students were currently permitted to write up their thesis in College for a period of six months immediately following the end of their registration and all experimental work. To do this, a registration fee of £100 was payable and they were then allowed access to all College facilities, other than laboratories, for the six month period.

**7.2** It was reported that some dissatisfaction had been expressed by students and staff who felt that six months was too restrictive. In addition, there had been occasional complaints from sponsors of overseas students who had been asked to pay extra fees for a fourth year which they had not expected. The Committee was asked to consider whether changes were necessary to the College regulations to address these concerns.

**7.3** Members were informed of arrangements at other institutions such as UCL and King's College as follows:

(i) At UCL, all research students who have completed their approved period of registration can apply to transfer to Completing Research Status (CRS) status while they write up their thesis. CRS is permitted for a maximum period of one calendar year (full-time) or two calendar years (part-time). A student must be in a position to submit his or her theses within 12 months (for full-time students) and 24 months (for part-time students) before being permitted to take up CRS status. Students with CRS status have continued access to UCL facilities and are not required to pay fees for this period. Where a student does not submit a thesis by the end of the CRS period, their registration as a student is ended and they must apply for permission to submit a thesis. In addition, they are liable for a late submission fee (currently between £525 and £2,100 depending on the number of months late).

(ii) At King's College, students who have completed their normal registration period, but have not yet submitted a thesis, can apply to move to 'writing-up' status. This is a registration status that acknowledges that the thesis is nearly finished and places the students on a low fee which maintains registration, and provides library support, plus (minimal) academic support. The Department must be sufficiently convinced that submission within the next 12-15 months (up to 27 months for part-time students) is likely. A student will only be permitted to be registered as writing up for the maximum of one year.

**7.4** Members discussed the implications of extending the writing up period at Imperial and the following points were made:

(i) Members were keen to ensure that the writing-up period should be used for the intended purpose of writing-up and were concerned in case an extended writing-up period would be wrongly used to extend the experimental/research work, thus further delaying the thesis submission. There was also concern to ensure that students were not put under pressure to use the writing-up time to generate more data/papers when they in fact have enough for the thesis.

(ii) It was noted that many supervisors did nevertheless allow students to continue to come into the lab when they were on writing-up status. Members were unsure whether students were insured to do experimental work during writing-up status.

(iii) It was noted that the position was complex in that the length of the PhD study could be 36 – 48 months, dependent on funding, and so any policy to extend the length of the writing-up period would have to be equitable in all cases.

**7.5** After further discussion it was agreed that:

(i) There was no support for the UCL model of introducing fines for late submission, although members suggested that it would be useful to have some feedback from UCL in due course as to whether the policy had been successful in encouraging timely submission of the thesis.

(ii) Clarification would be sought as to whether students were insured to do experimental work during writing-up status.

**Action: SJB**

(iii) Directors of Postgraduate Studies should be reminded of the current policy and clarification issued if necessary.

(iv) The Committee agreed that the principle of introducing a twelve month writing-up period should be further explored.

(v) The Committee agreed that there should be a formal monitoring point at 36 months, or before going into writing-up status, to ensure that students have a realistic plan for submitting the thesis on time and that any mitigating factors are identified at an early stage.

## **8. Enrolment Numbers**

The Committee received a report showing postgraduate enrolment numbers for 2012/2013 compared with figures for the previous two years.

**PRQC/2012/25**

**8.1** The Committee noted that the overall number of enrolled students and the number of full-time enrolled students had increased year on year over this three year period. The number of full-time postgraduates had increased by 9.5% between 2010/2011 to 2012/2013, giving no indication that an increase in fees had adversely affected recruitment to date.

**8.2** The Committee noted that the overall ratio between male and female postgraduate students had remained relatively static over the three year period, at roughly 60% male and 40% female. However, there were more female students taking MRes courses than male students in each of the three years.

**8.3** The Committee noted that the overall number of students classified as overseas had risen very slightly over the period. However, the number of overseas students taking postgraduate taught courses had increased significantly over the last year by 16.8%. The Committee suggested that it would be useful to show the break down between Home and EU students.

## **9. Postgraduate Professional Development Committee: update**

The Committee received the minutes of the Professional Skills Development Committee held on 6 November 2012.

**PRQC/2012/26**

**9.1** It was reported that the "Maths & Stats Online Catch-Up" course had recently been launched and was available to all postgraduate students.

**9.2** It was reported that there was work on-going to develop a course on plagiarism and on research integrity.

## **ITEMS FOR REPORT**

### **10. Spiral**

**10.1** Members were reminded that, since 2012, all theses (unless embargoed) had been uploaded onto Spiral but had only been available to Imperial students and staff (unless requested otherwise). However, it had been agreed that, after one year, all theses loaded onto Spiral would, as a default, be made openly accessible to external users.

**10.2** Members were asked to remind staff and students that, with effect from 1 March 2013, all theses submitted to the Library will be openly available on Spiral, unless an embargo is requested.

**10.3** It was noted that the Academic Registrar was producing a paper to remind users how to apply for an embargo.

**10.4** It was confirmed that theses which currently exist only in hard copy could be added to

Spiral upon application by the student and the principal supervisor.

#### **11. Applying for restrictions**

Members received, for dissemination, guidance on applying for a restriction to the availability of theses.

**PRQC/2012/27**

#### **12. PhD in Insect Biotechnology – Collaborative Programme**

It was reported that Chair's action had been taken to agree Imperial's withdrawal from the PhD in Insect Biotechnology collaborative programme with immediate effect. The decision had been taken on the basis that there were no Imperial PhD students registered on the programme, and that the majority of academic staff previously associated with the programme were no longer in post.

#### **13. MRC-Asthma UK Centre in Allergic Mechanisms of Asthma 4-year training programme**

It was reported that the arrangements for the programme had been modified and that students spend the first year doing a Master's programme in an appropriate discipline (rather than the MSc Immunology specifically) based at either Kings College London or Imperial College London before starting their three year PhD project.

#### **14. Requirements applicable to Theses submitted for the Degrees of MPhil, PhD & MD (Res)**

It was reported that Chair's action had taken to remove the requirement for students to provide an extra loose copy of the abstract when submitting their thesis, on this basis that this requirement had become redundant.

#### **15. RCUK money for gold open access: update from the Library**

It was reported that the College would receive one-off funding from RCUK to aid implementation of its policy on Open Access. The Library would administer this fund on behalf of the College. It was noted that Professor Maggie Dallman was leading an Open Access Policy Group for the College and that Ms Ruth Harrison (Library Team Leader - Education & Research Support) was working on the fund management with the Research Office in particular.

#### **16. Senate:**

Members noted that the latest executive summaries from Senate were available at:  
R:\10.Committees\Graduate School\GS PRQC\2012-13\Senate Executive Summaries 2012-13

#### **17. Quality Assurance Advisory Committee:**

Members noted that the latest the latest executive summaries from the QAAC meetings were available at:

R:\10.Committees\Graduate School\GS PRQC\2012-13\QAAC Executive Summaries 2012-13

It was reported that the Committee had recently been renamed and was now known as the as Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC).

#### **18. Joint and Collaborative PhD Degree Programmes Committees**

Members noted that minutes from the Joint and Collaborative Research Degree Programme Committee meetings would be presented to the next meeting of the PRQC.

#### **19. Any Other Business**

**19.1** It was agreed that the International Student Recruitment Team should be invited to give a presentation of the Imperial College Student Barometer, Autumn Wave 2012, at the next meeting.

**19.2** It was reported that the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) would be launched on 5 March 2013 and run until 16 May. It was noted also that it was likely that the National Student Survey (NSS) would be extended to taught postgraduate students, although this was not expected to happen imminently.

**19.3** Members received (tabled) a document which outlined briefly which universities use the terms 'graduate' and/or 'postgraduate' in their student recruitment marketing. For UK universities this involved looking at printed prospectuses (where available) and websites; for overseas institutions just websites. This chart was based on the Times Higher Global Rankings 2012, and includes more or less all of the top 100.

**19.3.1** It was noted that not many UK universities have adopted the term 'graduate', but those that had were the highest ranked and the most globally minded.

**19.3.2** It was noted that, beyond the UK, all US universities used the term 'graduate', and virtually none used the term 'postgraduate', and that that most EU universities (outside the UK) did not use either term.

**19.3.3** The Committee was asked for an opinion on which term they felt to be most appropriate for use in the marketing of postgraduate education at Imperial. After some discussion there was no clear preference for one or the other.

**19.4** It was reported that, from 1 March 2013, postgraduate students living outside the Imperial College Health Centre's registration area would no longer be able to use the Health Centre or any of its services. All postgraduate students not eligible to register at the Health Centre under the NHS should therefore be advised to register with GPs local to their accommodation and so ensure access all their health care needs from them.

## **20. Date of next meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Friday 19 April 2013, in the Ballroom, 58 Princes Gate, South Kensington Campus. The meeting will start at 14:00. The deadline for papers is Friday 5 April 2013.

## **21. Reserved Business** (not circulated to student members)

### **21.1 Special Cases Reports**

The Committee received reports on special cases considered by the Director of the Graduate School (Paper 30) and by the special cases panel for doctoral programmes.

**Special Cases for Admissions - PRQC/2012/28**  
**Special Cases during Registration - PRQC/2012/29**  
**Special Cases for Examiners - PRQC/2012/30**  
**Special Cases for Late Entry - PRQC/2012/31**