

Postgraduate Research Quality Committee

4 June 2013

Confirmed Minutes

Present

Professor Andrew George (Chairman)
Professor Ferri Aliabadi (Aeronautics)
Dr Tim Albrecht (Chemistry)
Dr Simon Archer (College Tutor)
Professor Erkkö Autio (Imperial College Business School)
Dr Bernadette Byrne (Chair of the Postgraduate Professional Development Committee)
Mr James Charlesworth [for Ms Natalie Kempston] (AWO Medicine)
Professor Chris Cheeseman (Civil and Environmental Engineering)
Professor Lesley Cohen (Physics)
Dr John Gibbons (Mathematics)
Dr Niki Gounaris (Department of Life Sciences)
Professor Marjo-Riitta Jarvelin (School of Public Health)
Professor Tony Magee (NHLI)
Dr Felicity Mellor [for Dr Jorge Diaz-Cintas] (School of Professional Development)
Mr Nicholas Ng (AWO Physical Sciences)
Ms Helen Pennington (AWO Life Sciences)
Dr Alessandra Russo (Computing)
Dr Simon Schultz (Bioengineering)
Professor Spencer Sherwin (Academic Lead, Joint PhD Programme with University of São Paulo)
Professor Morris Sloman (Dean of Engineering and Business School)
Mr Ross Webster (AWO Engineering)
Mr Nigel Wheatley (Academic Registrar)
Professor Denis Wright (Dean of Students)
Professor Xiao Yun Xu (Chemical Engineering)
Professor Robert Zimmerman (Earth Science and Engineering)

In Attendance

Ms Sally Baker (Senior Assistant Registrar)
Mr Duncan McNae (PhD student, Department of Aeronautics) – for item 4

1. Apologies for absence

Professor Donal Bradley (Pro Rector, Research)
Professor Simon Buckle (Pro Rector, International)
Professor Peter Cheung (Academic Lead, Hong Kong University/Imperial Doctoral Programme)
Ms Maryam Habibzay (GSA President)
Professor Andrew Holmes (Electrical and Electronic Engineering)
Professor Debra Humphis (Pro Rector, Education)
Mr Doug Hunt (ICU Deputy President (Education))
Professor Richard Kitney (Academic Lead, NTU/Imperial Doctoral Programme)
Professor Paul Langford (Academic Lead, A*STAR-Imperial Doctoral Programme)
Professor Peter Lindstedt [and alternate] (Mechanical Engineering)
Dr David McPhail (Deputy Chair)
Dr Kevin Murphy (Department of Medicine)
Professor Chris Scruby [and alternate] (Academic Lead, EngD in Non-Destructive Evaluation)
Professor Michael Seckl [and alternate] (Surgery and Cancer)
Professor Anne Soutar (MRC Clinical Sciences Centre)

2. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 February 2013 were approved.

PRQC/2012/32

3. Matters arising

3.1 Minute 4 - Discussion Paper on Special Cases – it was reported that the discrepancy in Section 1 of the paper (PRQC/2012/21) had been resolved and that the revised figures supported the statement that the College 4-year submission rate was consistently around 90%.

3.2 Minute 6 - Hard Bound Copies of Theses – it was reported that the Graduate School Director had been reassured that storage on the College servers would make an electronic thesis less susceptible to loss or damage caused by fire or flood than its hardcopy counterpart. Regular restore points would be built into the system to ensure validity of the electronic files, and theses would be saved by the library in a suitable archive file format to ensure they remained accessible and readable for the foreseeable future. This being the case, it was reported that proposed revisions to the College regulations for submission of theses, so that candidates would no longer be required to submit a hard bound copy of their final thesis, would be presented to the Senate, for implementation with effect from October 2013.

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

ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

4. Periodic Reviews of Research Degree Provision

4.1 Review of Research Degree Training in the Department of Aeronautics

4.1.1 The Committee considered the periodic review of research degree training in the Department of Aeronautics, including the reports of the assessors, the internal Chairman's completed Reviewer's Comments Form and the Department's response to the assessors' comments [tabled].

PRQC/2012/33

4.1.2 The review was presented by Professor Wright, the internal Chair for the review. Professor Ferri Aliabadi, the Head of Department and Director of Postgraduate Studies, together with Mr Duncan McNae, the student representative from the Department, attended to present their responses to the review.

4.1.3 The Committee noted that the reviewers had rated the Department "compliant" with seven of eleven precepts and part compliant with four of eleven precepts. The Committee noted from the Department's written response that action had been taken to ensure that the Department was fully compliant with all of the precepts and therefore agreed that the Department was "compliant" overall. The Committee congratulated the Department on its excellent review and noted that all points raised by the review panel had been satisfactorily addressed by the Department.

4.1.4 The review panel had been impressed by the excellent standard of research training offered by the Department. The panel observed that the Department had rigorous admissions standards and highlighted the care taken to recruit students of the highest calibre as an example of good practice. The panel noted the excellent 4-year submission rate (93% over the past 5 years), suggesting that formal and informal procedures for monitoring student progress were working well.

4.1.5 The review panel had observed that doctoral students were central to the activities of the Department, with academic staff caring greatly about recruiting excellent students and actively supervising them to completion. The panel found many examples of excellent supervision, including group meetings, journal clubs and presentations and commended the ethos of the department whereby staff outside the immediate supervision team take an interest in projects and are available for consultation. The panel highlighted the friendly collaborative culture in the Department as an example of good practice.

4.1.6 Students present at the review reported that the feedback was good and that staff were supportive and encouraging. The panel highlighted the clear commitment of the academic staff to achieve excellence in all aspects of doctoral supervision as an example of good practice.

4.1.7 The panel had concluded that the Department was part compliant with Precept 1 (procedures for interviewing prospective students) and the Department had subsequently confirmed that a new procedure had been implemented to ensure that the correct procedures were being uniformly followed.

4.1.8 The panel had concluded that the Department was part compliant with Precept 6 (composition of PG Committee). The Committee agreed that the arrangements as described met the objectives of the precept and were therefore satisfactory. The Committee was satisfied that the arrangements as described met the objectives of the precept and did not make a recommendation for change.

4.1.9 The panel had concluded that the Department was part compliant with Precepts 7 and 9 (selection of assessors) and the Department had subsequently agreed that this would become effective immediately.

4.1.10 The panel had recommended that the Department should consider increasing doctoral student representation on relevant committees and the Department had agreed that this would be discussed at the next staff-student committee.

4.1.11 The panel had recommended that the Department should promote greater student participation in internal and external surveys. The Department responded that students were reminded on a regular basis but that the number of surveys they were expected to complete was possibly excessive. The Department nevertheless agreed that this would be further addressed.

4.1.12 The panel had recommended that the Department should make their internal funding structure for conference attendance by doctoral students more transparent, and the Department had agreed that this would be addressed.

4.1.13 The panel had recommended that the Department should have a clear and transparent procedure to ensure that issues raised by students were resolved in a timely fashion, and that the staff-student committee should play a central role in this procedure with minutes defining actions and outcomes. In response, the Department maintained that clear and transparent procedures had been established, but that where issues were raised which were outside the control of the Department, response times could be delayed. The Committee reiterated that minutes of meetings where such discussions had taken place and been resolved or acted upon were an essential part of the feedback process and as such should be routinely recorded and made accessible to all students.

4.1.14 It was noted that the report would be presented to Senate with the recommendation that the Department of Aeronautics 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.

4.2 Review of Imperial-A*STAR Programme (collaborative research degree training not owned by a department)

4.2.1 The Committee considered the periodic review of collaborative research degree training provided via the Imperial-A*STAR Programme, including the reports of the assessors, the internal Chairman's completed Reviewer's Comments Form and the Academic Lead's response to the assessors' comments.

PRQC/2012/34

4.2.2 The Imperial-A*STAR Programme is a four year PhD where students split their time between an A*STAR research institute and Imperial. Students spend 50% of their time at each institution.

4.2.3 The review was presented by Professor Sloman, the internal Chair for the review. Apologies for absence were received from Professor Paul Langford, the Academic Lead, Ms Helen Challis, Head of International Programme Development, and the students present at the review. In the absence of representatives from the programme, Professor George had consulted beforehand with the Academic Lead, the Head of International Programme Development and with students present at the review to discuss the issues identified by the review panel. The Committee agreed that Professor George should present the feedback from these discussions where appropriate.

4.2.4 The Committee noted that the reviewers had rated the Programme “compliant” in each of the precepts and “compliant” overall and congratulated the Academic Lead on the excellent review and noted that all minor points raised by the review panel had already been satisfactorily addressed by the Academic Lead.

4.2.5 The review panel had been impressed by the very high quality of the students on the programme, some of whom were publishing papers in collaboration with both Imperial and A*Star supervisors. The panel found that staff and students were enthusiastic about the interdisciplinary research being undertaken in the programme.

4.2.6 The panel commended in particular the excellent support for the programme from the International Relations Office Team who monitor the students, organise social events and effectively act as mentors.

4.2.7 The panel had found that the varied start dates of the students had meant that they did not necessarily fit into the normal schedule for other students within College departments and had recommended that there should be a standard start date to allow easier integration with normal departmental PhD intake.

4.2.8 On behalf of the Academic Lead, Professor George explained that most of the students do a year with A*STAR prior to starting their PhD and start at different times, so the PhD start date would need to align with that. This view was endorsed by the students present at the review who felt that a standard start date would be difficult to implement since the start and end dates of the pre-requisite attachment were not standardised. Nevertheless, the Academic Lead agreed that an October start date would be strongly recommended but stressed the need to retain the flexibility for students to start at other times should personal circumstances or departmental arrangements require.

4.2.9 The panel had recommended that the students should be strongly encouraged to do the first year at Imperial in order that they become familiar with Imperial practices, procedures and support at an early stage.

4.2.10 On behalf of the Academic Lead, Professor George explained that this was dependent on the nature of the project and had to remain science led. If the programme were to introduce a requirement for a first year in Imperial then project design would be harder and student numbers, already low, may decline. The students present at the review agreed with the concept of encouraging students to do the first year at Imperial on the basis that they could integrate into the Imperial culture earlier and easier, and take advantage of the Graduate School RSD courses earlier. In summary, the Academic Lead agreed that students would be encouraged to do the first year at Imperial, but that ultimately the science should dictate when the student spends their time at Imperial and in Singapore.

4.2.11 The panel had observed that not all current supervisors were aware of the financial arrangements for visits to A*STAR research institutes and recommended that the supervisor briefing packs should be sent to all current supervisors. The Academic Lead confirmed that this had been arranged.

4.2.12 The panel had noted that only 50% of students had reached their progression timelines on time and had recommended that the International Relations Office Team should remind departments of due dates for assessments. The Academic Lead confirmed that this would be arranged and that students would additionally be reminded during the International students' induction.

4.2.13 The panel had suggested that the arrangements for funding for student and supervisor travel could be more flexible. The students present at the review had agreed. Professor George confirmed that the Academic Lead would be willing to discuss the matter further with A*STAR partners.

4.2.14 In general discussion, it was confirmed that all Imperial departments were eligible to participate in the A*STAR programme and the Committee agreed that the programme should be publicised more widely to attract more potential supervisors.

4.2.15 It was noted that the report would be presented to Senate with the recommendation that the Academic Lead 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.

5. English Language Support Unit (ELSU) Report 2012-2013

The Committee received the annual report from the ELSU, presented by Mr John Hughes, Director of the ELSU.

PRQC/2012/35

Mr Hughes presented an overview of the ELSU provision for postgraduate students and reported on the demand for teaching and testing of students.

Mr Hughes highlighted four key concerns for discussion.

5.1 Mr Hughes indicated that there were issues associated with the consistency of the information on the English requirement and how it was implemented in practice. He reported that information in handbooks and that given out to students varied between departments, and that some departments treated the purpose and results of the tests differently to others. The Committee agreed that it was important to ensure that departments and students had the same understanding of the process and the rationale, and that the wording used in handbooks should be standardised and be consistent with guidance issued by the Registry and the Graduate School.

5.2 Mr Hughes highlighted that the timing of the English test in relation to the ESA continued to be a problem. Mr Hughes asked the Committee to consider whether the ELSU report on the English test result at ESA could be effectively separated from the ESA requirements so that it became a parallel but separately recorded element. Mr Hughes explained that this would allow more flexibility with the tests and the possibility of recommending that individual students should not take the English test until later if that fitted their language progress better. In discussion, the Committee were sympathetic to the idea of the parallel but separate English test, but felt that the test was needed at that stage in order to inform the decision to allow the student to progress beyond 12 months.

5.3 Mr Hughes highlighted the need for better, direct liaison with DPSs and PG administrators both for the practical management of the language requirement and quality control of the content and processes. Members were reminded that a previous initiative to establish a small consultation group with faculty representatives had failed and it was reported that the ELSU now hoped that such a group could be established in future, probably with wider representation, in a different way.

5.4 The Committee noted that Mr Hughes would be retiring as Director of the ELSU in September. The Committee thanked Mr Hughes for his immense contribution to supporting the student experience over many years, and wished him well in his retirement.

6. Postgraduate Research Programme Handbooks

Members were reminded that QAEC had asked the Graduate School to provide guidance on items to be provided in Research Student Handbooks. It was noted that a list of contents would be prepared for initial consideration by QAEC and that the Graduate School would add generic text where appropriate.

[no paper 36]

7. Discussion Paper on Writing Up Status

The Committee received, for discussion, a paper proposing changes to the writing up status.

PRQC/2012/37

7.1 Members were reminded that the Committee had previously agreed that the principle of introducing a twelve month writing-up period should be further explored and had 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.

7.2 In discussion, the following key points from the proposal were highlighted:

- i) The writing up period should be extended from 6 months to 12 months;

- ii) The writing up period should be renamed as “completing research period” (CRP);
- iii) Students should be required to have completed 36 months registration before moving into the CRP;
- iv) The CRP fee should be increased to £200;
- v) The CRP period should terminate at 48 months from the student’s registration date, regardless of when the CRP started;
- vi) Before the student can move into the CRP a formal monitoring point should be introduced at 36 months when the student must demonstrate that they can complete their thesis within the CRP;
- vii) Mitigating circumstances likely to affect completion of the thesis must be flagged up at 36 months;
- viii) Students would be permitted access to College facilities throughout the CRP;
- ix) A late submission fee would be imposed for students who submit after 48 months;
- x) Cases for late submission would only be considered where mitigating circumstances have occurred during the CRP (unless they had been previously flagged up at the 36 month milestone).

7.3 In further discussion, the Committee noted that although the proposal was focussing on students with 36 month registration periods, the intention would be to adjust the timelines to accommodate students with different registration periods and that they would be required to follow the same principles.

7.4 The Committee discussed at some length the principle of introducing a late submission fee where students seek to submit a thesis after 48 months, and did not reach a conclusion on this issue.

7.5 The Committee was supportive of the proposal of introducing a twelve month writing-up period.

Post Meeting Note

It was agreed that the paper should be revised in light of the discussions and any subsequent feedback from departments and presented for formal agreement at the next meeting of the Committee.

8. Joint and Collaborative PhD Degree Programmes Committees

The Committee received minutes from joint research degree programme committee meetings as follows:

- 8.1** A*STAR-Imperial Doctoral Programme – 20 November 2012 [Unconfirmed] **PRQC/2012/38**
- 8.2** Malaysia-Imperial Doctoral Programme – 5 February 2010 **PRQC/2012/39**
- 8.3** NTU/Imperial Doctoral Programme – 6 December 2012 [Unconfirmed] **PRQC/2012/40**
- 8.4** NUS/Imperial Doctoral Programme – 27 April 2012 [Unconfirmed] **PRQC/2012/41**
- 8.5** Hong Kong University/Imperial Doctoral Programme – 28 November 2012 **PRQC/2012/42**
- 8.6** Imperial-University of São Paulo Joint Degree - meeting of the Imperial Sub-Committee of the Imperial-USP Joint Degree Committee - 24 January 2013 **PRQC/2012/43**
- 8.7** EngD in Nuclear Engineering – 22 October 2012 **PRQC/2012/44**
- 8.8** EngD in Non-Destructive Evaluation – 10 September 2012 **PRQC/2012/45**
- 8.9** EngD in Water Engineering – 19 February 2013 [Not for circulation]
- 8.10** MRC-Asthma UK Centre in Allergic Mechanisms of Asthma 4-year training programme - pending
- 8.11** The London Pain Consortium 4-year PhD programme – pending

In general discussion, the Committee noted that the frequency and nature of the meetings

appeared to be very variable. It was noted that the QAEC had established a working party to look at how the College manages its collaborative provision in the light of Chapter B10 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education: *Managing higher education provision with others* (December 2012). It was recommended that the working party should develop a template for minutes of joint research degree programme committee meetings.

9. Crick PhD Programme

The Committee received details of the "Crick PhD Progression Pathway" agreed by the Crick HEI Postgraduate Working Group.

PRQC/2012/46

Members were reminded that the Crick is a partnership between the Medical Research Council, Cancer Research UK and the Wellcome Trust, and Imperial, UCL and King's College London.

It was reported that the HEI sub-group and Crick staff had worked together over the last year to develop a set of key principles for delivery of the Crick PhD programme which would align with the regulations from the three HEIs involved and to ensure all students on the programme would receive a very similar student experience.

It was noted that the first PhD students were expected to start in September 2014.

10. Postgraduate Professional Development Committee: update

The Committee received the minutes of the Professional Skills Development Committee held on 4 February 2013 and the unconfirmed minutes of the meeting held on 24 April 2013.

PRQC/2012/47

10.1 It was reported that an on-line plagiarism course was being developed for Master's and research students and that it would become compulsory for students to complete the course as part of the Early Stage Assessment.

10.2 It was reported that training was being developed with respect to copyright issues and online publication of theses.

11. Application Statistics - Postgraduate Application Numbers for 2013-14 entry

11.1 The Committee considered a report of the postgraduate research (including MRes) application numbers for entry in 2013 (at 17 May 2013) compared with the same period for the previous 2 years.

PRQC/2012/48

11.2 The Committee considered a report of the current status of postgraduate research applications made for 2013 entry (at 17 May 2013).

PRQC/2012/49

Some members of the Committee commented that some of the data was incorrect. Subsequent to the meeting it was confirmed that work was on-going to standardise admissions reports presented to College Committees.

12. Submission data

The Committee considered a report of submission rates for students due to submit for an MPhil or PhD during the period 1 February 2011 to 31 January 2012.

PRQC/2012/50

Some members of the Committee were concerned that the data was incorrect and it was agreed that departments should be asked to check the data and that the report would be re-submitted to the next meeting.

In discussion, members were reminded that late cases approved for submission would nevertheless be recorded as submitting late, and would not be recorded as being within time.

13. Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2013 results

The Committee considered a report on the College participation rates and an overview of the results.

PRQC/2012/51

It was noted that departments would be asked to make a response to their PRES results and that these would be considered by the Committee in due course.

ITEMS FOR REPORT

14. Access to research degree theses and applying for embargos to theses

Members were asked to note that information about storage of theses and how to apply for an embargo to a research degree thesis had been posted at the following link

[https://workspace.imperial.ac.uk/registry/Public/Current%20Students/Applying%20for%20Restrictionv2%20\(2\).pdf](https://workspace.imperial.ac.uk/registry/Public/Current%20Students/Applying%20for%20Restrictionv2%20(2).pdf)

15. Senate:

Members noted that the latest executive summaries from Senate were available [here](#)

16. Quality Assurance & Enhancement Committee:

Members noted that the latest executive summaries from the QAEC meetings were available [here](#)

17. Any Other Business

17.1 The Committee noted that Mr Nigel Wheatley was retiring from the post of Academic Registrar in September. The Committee expressed their thanks to Mr Wheatley for his contribution to the work of the Postgraduate Quality Committees over many years and wished him well in his retirement.

17.2 The Committee expressed their thanks to the outgoing student representatives for their valuable contributions to the PRQC over the course of the academic year.

18. Dates of meetings in 2013-2014

Friday 25 October 2013
Monday 3 February 2014
Friday 30 May 2014

All meetings will start at 10.00am and will take place in the Council Room, 170 Queen's Gate, South Kensington Campus.

19. Reserved Business (not circulated to student members)

19.1 Special Cases Reports

The Committee received reports on special cases considered by the Director of the Graduate School (Paper 54) and by the special cases panel for doctoral programmes.

Special Cases for Admissions - PRQC/2012/52
Special Cases during Registration - PRQC/2012/53
Special Cases for Examiners - PRQC/2012/54
Special Cases for Late Entry - PRQC/2012/55