

Postgraduate Research Quality Committee

4 March 2016

Confirmed Minutes

Present

Professor Sue Gibson (Chair and Director of the Graduate School)
Dr Tim Albrecht (Chemistry)
Professor Andrew Amis (Mechanical Engineering)
Dr Simon Archer (College Tutor)
Dr Anil Bharath (Bioengineering)
Dr Paul Bruce (Aeronautics) [representing Professor Ferri Aliabadi]
Professor David Dye (Materials)
Professor Amparo Galindo (Chemical Engineering)
Professor Andrew Holmes (Electrical and Electronic Engineering)
Professor Henrik Jensen (Mathematics)
Professor Stefan Maier (Physics)
Dr Felicity Mellor (School of Professional Development)
Dr Kevin Murphy (Medicine)
Dr Alessandra Russo (Computing)
Mr Chun-Yin San (ICU Deputy President, Education)
Dr Mark Ungless (MRC Clinical Sciences Centre)
Professor Tommaso Valletti (Business School)
Professor Ahmer Wadee (Civil and Environmental Engineering)

In Attendance

Mr Richard Monk (Assistant Registrar, Senate and Academic Review)

1. Welcome

The Committee welcomed new members.

2. Apologies for absence

Professor Ferri Aliabadi (Aeronautics)
Professor Peter Allison (Earth Science and Engineering)
Dr Marco Aurisicchio (Design Engineering)
Mr James Balloch (Acting Academic Registrar)
Dr Niki Gounaris (Life Sciences)
Professor Marjo-Riitta Jarvelin (School of Public Health)
Dr Sally Leever (Crick Doctoral Centre)
Professor Peter Lindstedt (College Consul)
Professor Tony Magee (Graduate School Deputy Director and NHLI)
Professor Michael Seckl (Surgery and Cancer)
Dr Mike Tennant (Centre for Environmental Policy)
Professor Denis Wright (Director of Student Support)

3. Terms of Reference and Membership

The Committee noted minor revisions to the terms of reference and membership of the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee for 2015-16 resulting from the recent changes to the College's academic governance structure and some staffing changes.

PRQC/2015/17

4. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2015 were approved.

PRQC/2015/18

5. Matters arising

- 5.1 The Committee received and noted an action list detailing matters arising from the previous meeting and containing updates on progress in completing the required action.

PRQC/2015/19

- 5.2 Minute 5.3.4 – Submission Data (Business School) – It was noted that the issues identified by the Business School with the submission rate data presented to the previous meeting were still to be resolved. The matter was being further investigated by staff within the Registry who would advise the Business School of the outcome of those investigations as soon as possible.

Post meeting note: The Business School was subsequently advised that its submission rate, as presented at the November 2015 meeting, had been inaccurate. Further investigations had identified that the thesis submission dates of four students had been set up incorrectly in OSS, which had resulted in those students being excluded from the Business School's overall submission rate, despite having submitted on-time. The records had been corrected by the Registry and resulted in the Business School's submission rate improving from 50% to 67% (10 of 15 students submitting on-time).

- 5.3 Minute 5.3.6 – Research Degree Submission Data – It was reported that further discussions would take place regarding the future presentation and format of research degree submission data prior to its annual submission to the May 2016 meeting of the Committee.

- 5.4 The Committee agreed that the remaining matters arising were either ongoing and due for report at a subsequent meeting or that appropriate action had been taken since the last meeting.

ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

6. Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2015

6.1 PRES 2015: The Research Student Journey

- 6.1.1 The Committee considered a paper from the Higher Education Academy, 'PRES 2015: The Research Student Journey'.

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- 6.1.2 The Committee's discussions focused in particular on research culture, which the report identified as the lowest scoring area of the PRES across participating institutions. It was also noted that this was the lowest scoring area within the College's results. In discussion Committee members expressed the view that certain aspects of the survey on research culture were potentially confusing for students, in particular the question on 'research ambience' was highlighted. The Committee felt that the concept of research ambience was potentially difficult for students to understand and also to quantify, which was borne out by Departmental scores and also scores across the sector. It was further noted that the Graduate School intended to undertake some further work in this area with the aim of identifying what students understood by research culture and what it meant from their perspective. The importance of defining research culture from the student's perspective was highlighted.

6.2 PRES 2015: Imperial College Union (ICU) Response

- 6.2.1 The Committee received and considered the ICU response to the PRES 2015.

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- 6.2.2 It was noted that in 2013 the ICU had published its first policy document focusing on issues concerning Postgraduate Research students in response to the PRES 2013. The 2015 PRES response set out the ICU's latest policy recommendations on key issues affecting the experience of doctoral researchers at the College and would form the basis of the ICU's Postgraduate Research agenda for the next two academic years.
- 6.2.3 The ICU Deputy President (Education) outlined the key matters arising from the ICU response which included: providing safety nets to world-class research supervision; building a safe and professional work environment; growing our students and fostering vibrant communities.
- 6.2.4 The Committee engaged in a wide-ranging discussion focusing on various aspects of the ICU response. This included discussion of the effectiveness of the student representation network for PhD students and the ability of representatives to attend relevant committee meetings, particularly in multi-site Departments. The Committee noted that the ICU was conducting further work in this area and had set up a formal working group for this purpose, looking at the representative network and the quality of service provided to students.
- 6.2.5 The Committee further discussed various matters linked to complaints and appeals, focusing in particular on mental health and stress. Committee members and the ICU considered this to be an area of increasing importance. The ICU had run a major campaign on mental wellbeing during the previous academic year. Increased vigilance to identify students who may be experiencing mental health or stress related issues and raising awareness of the support mechanisms available to offer assistance to students were considered to be priority areas for all Departments.

6.3 **PRES 2015: Departmental Responses**

- 6.3.1 The Committee considered Departmental responses to the PRES 2015 results from the Departments of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Mathematics and Surgery and Cancer.

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- 6.3.2 Committee members were reminded that at the 15 May 2015 meeting it had been agreed that the survey results and action plan should be discussed at Staff Student Committees (SSC) and should be signed off by at least one of the student representatives and the SSC Chair as confirmation that this step had taken place.

- 6.3.3 It was noted that the following Departmental responses and action plans were outstanding and it was agreed that these would be requested from the Departments concerned as soon as possible for presentation to the May 2016 meeting:

- Aeronautics
- Materials
- Mechanical Engineering

ACTION: Registry Surveys Team

- 6.3.4 In discussion a number of Departmental Representatives commented that participation rates had been lower than anticipated. It was noted that postgraduate research students had been asked to participate in the World-Class Research Supervision survey two weeks before the PRES and that this may potentially have led to survey fatigue and therefore affected participation in the PRES. The Committee determined that it would be beneficial to avoid scheduling major surveys in such close proximity in the future.
- 6.3.5 Having reviewed the action plans the Committee was content that each Department had fully addressed the PRES results and had adequately responded to its students.

7. Late Submission of Theses

7.1 Data on cases of late submission in 2014-15

7.1.1 The Committee received a paper on cases of late submission in 2014-15. The Committee was invited to consider the analysis of factors affecting the timely submission of theses in 2014-15.

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7.1.2 The Committee engaged in a wide-ranging discussion focusing on various aspects affecting timely submission of theses. The Committee noted from the report that the Department of Surgery and Cancer had submitted the highest number of late case requests, as had been the case in 2013-14. The Committee was informed that the Department recruited a number of trainee surgeons to study for a PhD who often found it difficult to find sufficient time to write up once they returned to clinical work. Students in this category usually had 3 years funding and would then return to clinical work, after which it would be difficult for the Department to encourage and support them to complete on-time.

7.1.3 The Committee also discussed whether there were instances where students should more appropriately be registered as part-time rather than full-time, thereby extending the period for completion. The Committee further discussed whether some cases for late submission could more appropriately be dealt with as interruptions of study. It was noted that wider use of interruptions of study had been discussed by the Working Party on World Class Research Supervision, which had concluded that this would be a preferable course of action in appropriate circumstances to requests for late submission. The Committee was informed that the Graduate School was due to undertake some further work in relation to interruption of studies in the near future.

7.1.4 The Committee also discussed whether the Early Stage Assessment was sufficiently rigorous in identifying students who were likely to experience difficulties later on, or be at risk of not submitting on time. Members noted the importance of the ESA as a mechanism to make sometimes difficult decisions regarding student progression, particularly where this resulted in a student being required to transfer to MPhil or to withdraw from the College. It was further noted that the ESA was also important as a means to encourage students to improve where necessary and provide guidance as to how they might achieve this.

8. Admissions

8.1 2015-16 Admissions Cycle Report

8.1.1 The Committee received and considered a report on research degree application and enrolment numbers for 2015-16 compared with figures for the previous two years.

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8.1.2 The Committee was asked to note that as the College was still recruiting into the 2015/16 cycle the applications, offers, offer accepts and enrolments would continue to increase until the end of September 2016. For that reason the numbers shown for 2015-16 would appear lower when compared with the previous two cycles as those cycles were complete.

8.1.3 The Committee was also asked to note that the statistics excluded students who had enrolled on a PGR programme after progressing through the 1+3 route. This was because those students did not have an admissions record for PGR. Similarly, staff research applicants were excluded from the statistics as they were created as an enrolment but did not have an admissions line. If those students were included, enrolment numbers would appear to be higher than applications received.

8.2 2014-15 Admissions – End of Cycle Report

- 8.2.1 The Committee received and considered an end of cycle report on research degree application and enrolment numbers for 2014-15 compared with the previous two years.

PRQC/2015/25

9. Postgraduate Professional Development Committee

- 9.1 The Committee received and noted the confirmed minutes of the Postgraduate Professional Development Committee meeting held on 25 November 2015.

PRQC/2015/26

ITEMS FOR REPORT

10. Chair's Action

- 10.1 It was noted that no action had been taken by the Chair on behalf of the Committee since the previous meeting in November 2015.

11. Graduate School Annual Report 2014-15

- 11.1 The Committee received and noted the Graduate School Annual Report for 2014-15.

PRQC/2015/27

12. Senate

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

13. Quality Assurance & Enhancement Committee

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

14. Any Other Business

There was no other business raised for discussion.

15. Date of next meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 10 May 2016. The meeting will start at 10:00. The deadline for papers is Tuesday 26 April 2016.

16. Reserved Business (not circulated to student members)

16.1 Special Cases Reports

The Committee received reports on special cases as follows:

- (i) Special cases for admissions considered by the special cases panel for doctoral programmes

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- (ii) Special cases for Examiners, considered by the Director of the Graduate School

PRQC/2015/29

- (iii) Special cases for late entry, considered by the Director and Deputy Director of the Graduate School

PRQC/2015/30