

Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC)

Confirmed minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2020 at 14:00 in
Royal School of Mines, Room G01, South Kensington Campus

Present

Professor Yun Xu (Director of the Graduate School) [Chair]
Professor Peter Allison (Deputy Director of the Graduate School)
Dr Ryan Barnett (Mathematics)
Dr Christos-Savvas Bouganis (Electrical and Electronic Engineering)
Ashley Brooks (ICU Deputy President (Education))
Professor Laki Buluwela (Deputy Director of the Graduate School)
Emma Couves (Student Representative)
Mohit Devgan (GSU President)
Raya El Laham (Student Representative)
Dr Antonio Filieri (Computing)
Dr Saskia Goes (Earth Science and Engineering)
Dr Hamed Haddadi (Design Engineering)
Milia Hasbani (Student Representative)
Hannah Jones (Student Representative)
Dr Angela Kedgley (Bioengineering)
Laura Lane (Head of Strategy and Operations, Graduate School)
Professor Tony Magee (Deputy Director of the Graduate School)
Dr Enrique Martinez-Perez (Institute of Clinical Sciences and MRC LMS)
Robin Mowat (Centre for Academic English representative)
Professor Kevin Murphy (Medicine)
Dr Salvador Navarro-Martinez (Mechanical Engineering)
Dr Bill Proud (Physics)
Professor Eduardo Saiz (Materials)
Dr Matthew Santer (Aeronautics)
Professor John Seddon (Faculty Senior Tutor (PGR) representative)
Professor Ahmer Wadee (Civil and Environmental Engineering)
Dr James Wilton-Ely (Chemistry)
Dr Jem Woods (Centre for Environmental Policy)
Scott Tucker (Deputy Director, Academic Quality and Standards) [Secretary]

In Attendance

Matt Sheahan, Scholarship Manager (Student Financial Support) [Item 6]

1. Welcome and apologies for absence

1.1 The Chair welcomed new members of the Committee, colleagues in place of existing members and non-members in attendance.

1.2 The following apologies for absence were received:

- David Ashton (Academic Registrar)
- Professor Simone Buitendijk (Vice-Provost, Education)
- Dr Abbas Dehghan (School of Public Health)
- Dr Kleoniki Gounaris (Life Sciences)
- Dr Jo Horsburgh (CLCC/CHERS)
- Professor Serafim Kalliadasis (Chemical Engineering)
- Dr Sally Leever (Crick Doctoral Centre)
- Professor Mike Lovett (NHLI)
- Professor Carrol Propper (Business)
- Professor Michael Seckl (Surgery and Cancer)

1.3 The Chair announced that Professor Tony Magee has retired and has been replaced by Professor Laki Buluwela, who has been appointed as Deputy Director of the Graduate School.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

2.1 The Committee approved the minutes of the previous meeting held on 23 October 2019 **[PRQC.2019.15a]**.

2.2 The Committee noted the action list and received updates on the following actions due for completion by February 2020 **[PRQC.2019.15b]**:

- (i) Proposed schedule for the review of postgraduate research regulations (February 2019, 5.1)

A report of the Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations Subcommittee was presented under Item 5.

2.3 No further updates were required on the remaining ongoing actions for May 2020 completion.

3. Matters arising

3.1 No matters arising.

4. PRQC terms of reference, constitution and membership [PRQC.2019.16]

4.1 The Committee noted the following revision to the membership:

- Professor Laki Buluwela for Professor Tony Magee

5. Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations [PRQC.2019.17]

- 5.1 The Committee considered a report from the Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations Working Group.
- 5.2 PRQC (20 February 2019) and QAEC (13 March 2019) agreed that a full review of the Postgraduate Research Regulations will be carried out over the 2019-2020 academic year. The review will cover the College's Regulations for the award of the MPhil and PhD, and other associated policies and procedures.

The review will seek to ensure the regulations remain fit for purpose and future-proofed. It was agreed that a sub-group of PRQC (the 'Postgraduate Research Regulations Working Group') would convene and submit recommendations to PRQC. The Working Group met on 13 December 2019 and 13 January 2020.

- 5.3 The Committee discussed the recommendation that 'College milestone deadlines are presented as a fixed date (e.g. 24 months from the date of the initial degree registration), not a range (e.g. 18-24 months from the date of the initial degree registration)'. The Committee, with strong support from student representatives, agreed to 'hard' deadlines for College milestones and that departments should manage ESA and LSR submission timelines locally to ensure that students are supported to meet College requirements. For example, departments may require students to submit an LSR report at 18 months in order to meet the College's 24 month deadline for assessment.
- 5.4 The Committee did not support a College milestone at 3 months, which was consistent with the recommendation from the College's World Class Supervision Task and Finish Group in 2018. The Committee agreed that departments could make local arrangements where students could be formatively assessed after 3 months but this would not prevent progression.
- 5.5 The Committee discussed the timing of the current ESA, which must be held by 9 months. There were mixed views among members; some felt that 9 months was too early at which to withdraw a student following failure at ESA (which in practice would take place at 11 months after re-assessment), however others felt this was an appropriate time and ensured that students who are not suited to continue study at PhD level could be appropriately supported and consulted on their options. A 9 month ESA deadline also supports supervisors in managing the supervisory duties. The Committee agreed that members' views of the timing of the ESA deadline varied with subject specialism and the department requirements of the ESA.
- 5.6 The Committee briefly returned to an issue previously raised at PRQC relating to the workload of supervisors at the 9 month ESA. ESA often clashes with supervisors' taught programme commitments and delaying the ESA deadline to 10 months might alleviate some pressures at this point in the academic year. This was subject to further confirmation that there are unlikely to be significant UKRI

funding issues should a student be required to withdraw after 12 months.

- 5.7 The Committee agreed that, for consistency and fairness, the ESA deadline for CDT programmes should be set 9 months after the start of the research element. As the length of the taught elements within CDTs vary across programmes, often designed and delivered collaboratively with other institutions, ESA deadlines should be flexible.
- 5.8 The Committee briefly discussed the recommendations around the Writing Up period. It was clarified that students writing up must be 'enrolled'. Students not enrolled cannot be sponsored under Tier 4. The Committee felt that further information is required on fees, funding and insurance before an informed decision could be made as to how the College manages the Writing Up period.
- 5.9 The Committee discussed the available viva voce examination outcomes and the recommendation that a 'Pass' should allow a student one month to submit typographical amendments. The Committee felt that any typographical updates must be reviewed rather than can be reviewed by one of the examiners or nominee. In addition, the Committee felt that further clarify should be provided as to how the correction of typographical errors relates to the resubmission of a thesis following amendments. For example, if a student is given 18 months to submit amendments, without the need for a viva, is the student permitted a further month to complete typographical errors?
- 5.10 It was agreed that the Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations Working Group will meet further to discuss PRQC comments and recommendations. PRQC members and colleagues across the wider College will be included in any updated draft regulations documents.
- 5.11 A draft set of Postgraduate Research Degree regulations will be presented at the next PRQC, to be held on 13 May 2020.

6. Bursaries and Stipends [PRQC.2019.18]

- 6.1 The Committee received a report on issues relating to bursary and stipend payments, presented by the Student Representative (Emma Couves). Discussion was supported by the Scholarship Manager, Student Financial Support (Matt Sheahan).
- 6.2 It was reported that a number of PhD students on 1+3 CDT programmes were unable to enrol for their second year (the first year of research) in time to ensure that the payment of bursaries or stipends were received in a timely manner to support the costs of year two. In addition, some students who successfully completed standalone masters programmes also experienced difficulties in registering for PhDs commencing in October in time to receive bursaries or stipends. The College has put an interim measure in place which allows students access to financial support, however, this is not deemed a long-term solution.

- 6.3 One issue to address is programme structure. The thesis/major project hand in date for the first year of 1+3 CDT programme is usually around mid-September. Internal and external moderation processes are then normally completed by mid-October. Following confirmation of marks by the Board of Examiners, students can enrol for the second year of the programme (which in systems terms is 'year 1' of a PhD programme). Bursaries and stipends are not paid until enrolment is confirmed. Without moving the hand-in date for the thesis/major project forward, thus reducing the length of year 1, the Committee felt that it was not possible for year 1 marks to be confirmed before commencement of year 2. As a result, the possibility of concurrent enrolment was discussed, where enrolment in year 2 would be conditional on successful completion of year 1.

Another issue is programme set-up. In systems terms, students have to enrol onto a standalone masters programme and then a separate PhD programme. Although the majority of new CDT programmes have been designed using the 'integrated model', 1+3 CDTs will continue to be delivered. As a result, the Committee discussed whether the set-up of these programmes on the record system could be revised in line with the integrated model. This would not affect the structure of the programme or delivery.

- 6.4 The Committee agreed that the issues relating to 1+3 CDT programmes needed further consideration by a number of areas across Registry (e.g. Student Records, Assessment Records, Student Financial Support, Quality Assurance) as well as Departments regarding programme structure, design and operations.

Action: Secretary

7. Pastoral Care

- 7.1 The Committee received a report on the Postgraduate Pastoral Support Review within the Faculty of Natural Sciences.
- 7.2 The Faculty Senior Tutor (PGR) representative reported that the Faculty of Natural Sciences' education team conducted a review of the pastoral support services available to postgraduates in the Faculty. It was reported that the approach to the review was two-fold. Firstly, a top-down approach was adopted, liaising with Heads of Department and those identified with responsibilities for postgraduate support in the departments to establish where and how pastoral support is carried out. Secondly, a bottom-up approach was conducted; students were asked to complete a survey to understand their perspective of the services they have access to. It was highlighted that the aim of the review was to understand how pastoral support is carried out at a department level and set recommendations for how these services may be improved from a student perspective. The intention was not to impose a uniform approach across all Departments, but to ensure that there is consistency in the types and levels of support available.
- 7.3 The report set out recommendations, covering the following common areas for

improvement, from a student perspective: defining pastoral support; awareness of support; central and in-department services; frequency of correspondence; building a relationship; academic vs pastoral support staff; training for staff; and availability of female staff.

- 7.4 Departments were encouraged to review their own pastoral support, considering the general recommendations in the report. The Faculty Senior Tutor (PGR) representative encouraged other Departments to contact him if any additional guidance was sought for future postgraduate pastoral support reviews.

8. Late Case Requests

- 8.1 It was reported that a revised process for the consideration of thesis extension requests was approved by Chair's Action. The new process will allow for more efficient processing whilst maintaining proportionate oversight.

- 8.2 The Assessment Records Team will process thesis extension requests that fall within the following criteria, without referring to the Graduate School for consideration:

- Requests for thesis extensions of no longer than 12 months to the original deadline
- Thesis extensions requested on grounds of ill health, family or work commitments (including financial difficulties)

This is subject to confirmation of support and approval by both the supervisor and Director of Postgraduate Studies (or nominee) for the candidate's home department.

- 8.3 The following will continue to be referred to two members of the Graduate School (consisting of either the Director or Deputy Director(s) of the Graduate School) for consideration:

- Cases submitted for any other reason (including supervision problems/unforeseen delays with the research, or confusion over College procedures)
- Requests for extensions of longer than 12 months, alongside the required independent statement by a third party/expert in the research field indicating the continued relevance and novelty of the candidate's work
- Any subsequent requests following a previously approved extension (including those that fall within 12 months of the initial deadline), to ensure the extension period requested is considered sufficient and achievable

Response to cases referred to the Graduate School should be received by Assessment Records within one week; if no response is received, the request will be forwarded to a third reviewer (either the Director or Deputy Director(s) of the Graduate School. The Head of Strategy and Operations will be copied in to all requests.

- 8.4 As per current practice, Assessment Records will not require any additional supporting documentation (e.g. medical evidence) alongside a thesis extension request at this stage; although this is something that may be revisited when reviewing College policy and guidance on this.
- 8.5 For information, Assessment Records currently refer the following cases to the Graduate School for consideration and approval:
- Requests for examiner attendance at viva via Skype/video-conference
 - Non-standard examiner appointments (for nominees that don't fully meet the criteria for appointment outlined in the Procedure for Appointment of Examiners for Research Degrees (MPhil, PhD, MD(Res), EngD).
- 8.6 The Committee fully supported the revised process for the consideration of thesis extension requests and noted that this will be reviewed in line with any changes to the postgraduate research degree regulations.

9. PRQC subcommittees

- 9.1 The Committee noted minutes of the Postgraduate Professional Development Committee held on 3 July 2019 [**PRQC.2019.20**]
- 9.2 The Committee noted minutes of the CDT DTP Governance Committee held on 6 February 2019 [**PRQC.2019.21**]

10. Date of next meeting

- 10.1 The next meeting will be held on Wednesday 13 May at 14:00 – 16:30 in Room G01, Royal School of Mines, South Kensington campus.

11. Special cases reports

- 11.1 The Committee noted the following reports on special cases considered by the special cases panel for doctoral programmes:

(i) Non-Standard Examiner Approvals - February 2020 [**PRQC.2019.22**]

(ii) Late Case Thesis Approvals - February 2020 [**PRQC.2019.23**]