

Report of the World-Class Research Supervision Task and Finish Group for Prospective Student Information

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
- Interruption of Studies
- Prospective Student Information
- Research Culture and Community
- Student Supervision Partnerships
- Student Financial Support

2. Recommendations

2.1 The Task and Finish Group for Prospective Student Information has now concluded its business. There were six recommendations which fell within the remit of the group. These have now been addressed and a summary of the work of the group follows.

Recommendation one: Departments are reminded of both the standard and higher level English language entry requirements for PhD students.

Recommendation two: Departments are encouraged to consider applying the higher level English language entry requirement for PhD students.

Effective communication is an important part of developing a successful student-supervisor partnership. The College's minimum level English language requirements are in place to ensure that non-native speakers have the necessary level of proficiency to be able to start a PhD programme in English in STEM subjects and communicate effectively. Encouraging the use of the higher level should give students a stronger starting point in terms of their general language proficiency, although it ultimately remains the decision of the department.

The Task and Finish Group developed a communication to departments reminding them of the standard and higher level English language requirements and asking them to consider applying

the higher level. Departmental responses to this will be collated and submitted to the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee's (PRQC) autumn meeting.

Recommendation three: The Graduate School continues to work with the Centre for Academic English to explore how best to embed English language within the PhD of non-native speakers.

Further work is needed to embed English language within the PhD as some students still find it a challenge to reach the required level of academic literacy to complete their thesis independently. The Graduate School and the Centre for Academic English (CfAE) now meet termly to discuss how best to continue to embed English language within the PhD. As a result of this, a brand new writing retreat has been developed in partnership by the Graduate School and the CfAE. The two-day writing retreat is available to PhD students who are planning to submit their thesis within six months. The writing retreat provides plenary sessions, talks on effective texts, sentences, language, use of data, critique and self-management. There are 1-2-1s available from retreat tutors and time for students to write. Although the retreat is aimed at non-native speakers, students whose first language is English also attended. Student feedback on the pilot writing retreat was excellent and the Graduate School will continue to offer this as part of its provision.

Recommendation four: Departments should be encouraged to consider introducing higher entry requirements for their PhD programmes.

Encouraging the use of a higher level entry requirement should give students a stronger starting point, although once again it remains the decision of the academic department as to whether to apply higher entry levels and what they comprise. The Task and Finish Group has developed a communication to departments reminding them of the minimum academic entry requirements and asking them to consider applying the higher level. Departmental responses to this will be collated and submitted to the PRQC's autumn meeting.

Recommendation five: Departments and supervisors should be encouraged to review their websites noting that websites are a key source of information to prospective students. In particular, doctoral students wish to learn about how research groups function, key roles within in each group and the number of students in each group. It is important to note that students as consumers are protected by regulations stipulated by the Competition & Markets Authority.

Prospective students use websites to gather information to inform decisions about where to apply. Further, students as consumers are now protected by regulations stipulated by the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA). It is therefore important for departments, research groups and the College to ensure that websites are current and up to date. The College has a number of groups which are currently reviewing what the College is required to provide at the application stage, offer stage and acceptance stage and what information should be presented on websites. Being mindful of this work and to avoid duplication of effort and information, the Task and Finish Group agreed that it was not best placed to take forward this recommendation. However, the Task and Finish group has developed a set of questions which prospective students may wish to ask at interview which will allow them to explore the structure and nature of research groups (see below).

The Task and Finish Group also explored what other Russell Group institutions currently provide applicants with respect to PhD programmes. It was noted that UCL, KCL, Oxford, Cambridge, Newcastle and Manchester all have a standard template providing high level information about their PhD programmes. The Task and Finish Group also noted that the College does not currently have a centralised place in which prospective students can search for a PhD programme or one single place which provides key information about individual PhD programmes. Instead, prospective students must search individual departmental websites, and central websites to gather information. The Task and Finish Group therefore agreed that it would be beneficial to open up discussions about this. To facilitate this, the Task and Finish Group has developed a template proforma for PhD programmes which provides high level information about research programmes available at College. Departments will be asked to provide feedback on this over the summer period which will be considered at the autumn PRQC.

Recommendation six: A list of suggested questions for prospective students to ask at interview is developed.

The Task and Finish Group has developed a set of questions which prospective students may wish to ask at interview. The list will be sent to prospective students and applicants via the regular communications sent by the College's Communications Division. Departments will be invited to provide feedback on this document over the summer period which will be considered at the autumn PRQC.

Finally, the Task and Finish Group reviewed the letters and correspondence prospective students and offer holders receive from College. It found that although departments send a welcome letter to new students, the College does not. Quite often, the first communication students are sent by College is a fee invoice. Given the College is currently clarifying what information should be provided to prospective students, offer holders and new students, the Task and Finish Group agreed that it would not make any recommendations in this area but would review the position in a year's time. Instead, the Graduate School would continue to send a welcome e-newsletter to new students at the start of term and would link to the new starters' website from their website in order to capture students who start outside the usual start of term.