Imperial College London

Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC)

Confirmed minutes of the meeting held on 16 February 2022 at 14:10 via MS Teams

Present

Professor Yun Xu (Director of the Graduate School) [Chair]
Professor Emma McCoy (Vice-Provost, Education and Student Experience)
Professor Laki Buluwela (Deputy Director of the Graduate School)
Ceire Wincott (FoNS Student Representative)
Tin Hang Un (FoE Student Representative)
David Ashton (Academic Registrar)
Dr Abbas Dehghan (School of Public Health)
Dr Saskia Goes (Earth Science and Engineering)
Professor Christopher Gourlay (Materials)
Dr Hamed Haddadi (Dyson School of Design Engineering)
Dr Jo Horsburgh (CLCC/CHERS)
Dr Angela Kedgley (Bioengineering)
Professor Cleo Kontoravdi (Chemical Engineering)
Laura Lane (Head of Strategy and Operations, Graduate School)
Dr Sally Leevers (Crick Doctoral Centre)
Professor Mike Lovett (NHLI)
Dr David Mann (Life Sciences)
Dr Enrique Martinez-Perez (Institute of Clinical Sciences and MRC LMS)
Robin Mowat (Centre for Academic English representative)
Professor Kevin Murphy (Brain Sciences; Immunology and Inflammation; Infectious Disease; Metabolism, Digestion and Reproduction)
Dr Salvador Navarro-Martinez (Mechanical Engineering)
Dr Matthew Santer (Aeronautics)
Professor Ben Sauer (Physics)
Professor Michael Seckl (Surgery and Cancer)
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)

Emma Rabin (Assistant Registrar, Partnerships, Monitoring and Review) [Secretary]

In Attendance
Scott Tucker (Deputy Director, Academic Quality and Standards)

Part 1 – Preliminary Items

1. Welcome and apologies for absence

1.1 The Chair welcomed Dr David Mann who has joined the committee as the new DPS in Life Sciences.

1.2 Apologies were received from:

Daniel Lo (ICU Deputy President (Education))
Professor Pier Luigi Dragotti (Electrical and Electronic Engineering)
Professor Carol Propper (Business)

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

2.1 The Committee approved the minutes of the previous meeting held on 3 November 2021 **[PRQC.2021.11].**

2.2 The Committee noted the action list. There were a number of actions related to the introduction of Turnitin for thesis submission which had been paused whilst the pilot was carried out. **[PRQC.2021.12]**

2.3 It was reported that the Chair had approved the withdrawal of the EngD in Nuclear Engineering (H8WPME) in Mechanical Engineering as Chair's action on behalf of the committee.

3. Matters arising

3.1 The query as to which committee should review the updated good practice guidance for in-person vivas had been discussed (point 3.1). It was agreed that this should come to PRQC.

3.2 The members were invited to consider if the College should continue to offer the option of remote vivas on a permanent basis following their introduction as a temporary measure during the pandemic. There was support for investigating this and the Chair suggested that a working group would be set up and make recommendations to PRQC as appropriate.

Action: Yun Xu / Laura Lane

Areas for the working group to consider were suggested as follows:
- survey students who have undertaken remote vivas to capture their experience of undertaking a remote viva consider the impact of the increased numbers of international examiners used in vivas

3.3 If PRQC members wished to join the working group, they were asked to contact Yun Xu or Laura Lane.

Part 2 – Matters for Consideration

4. Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2021

4.1 PRES 2021 College action plan [**PRQC.2021.13a/b**]

The meeting received a presentation on the PRES 2021 College action plan following the meetings of the PRES 2021 Task and Finish Group. Specific actions had been identified across all PRES categories. In some categories, the Task and Finish Group reported that actions taken in response to the 2019 PRES were still being embedded.

4.1.1 A PGR Community and Visibility working group will be set up by the Graduate School to consider ways of supporting PGR community development at a College level. This aligns with the work being undertaken by the ICU which will work with departments and faculties to identify opportunities to support community work at a local level.

4.1.2 It was reported that ICT will implement a new Unified Access Solution which should allow students and staff to access IT resources seamlessly and securely across all devices. Advice and Counselling are recruiting additional counselling posts and it was reported that the College had introduced a new role of Student Mental Health Intervention Officer who would be responsible for dealing with more serious cases. This post was in the process of being recruited.

4.1.3 The committee was asked its view on how departments could be supported in ensuring that supervisors undertook the mandatory supervisor training – particularly the requirement to undergo refresher training every six years. The following points or suggestions were raised in discussion:
- This could be included in the PRDP process to check that this has been done within the required period
- Highlight how undertaking the training may be beneficial for promotion prospects
- Ensure completion of the mandatory training appeared within the Power BI dashboard, alongside Imperial Essentials
- Make the supervisor's training record visible to students
- Include a description of what is covered in the mandatory supervisor training in the PGR handbook template
- Supervisors who do not engage with the training could be prohibited from supervising President's Scholarships or other prestigious awards
- Remind departments that they are required to submit evidence of compliance with the training requirements as part of the PGR Periodic Review documentation
- Care needs to be taken when discussing possible sanctions for not undertaking the training to not automatically equate this as 'bad' supervision. Genuine cases of poor supervisor performance would need to be managed via HR processes.

4.1.4 The meeting discussed how to communicate the PRES 2021 action plan to students to make them aware of the work being undertaken. A number of

communication routes were already in place but, in addition to these, it was agreed that the action plan would be emailed to departments with a request to circulate it directly to students.

Action: Laura Lane

4.1.5 A description of the Cornerstone training for supervisors would be added to the PGR handbook template.

Action: Laura Lane / Scott Tucker

4.2 Implementing new support for student-supervisor partnerships [PRQC.2021.14]

4.2.1 Under the Responsibilities section of the PRES 2021 College action plan, it is proposed to implement a six-month confidential reporting framework and a proposal to pilot a Project Rescue Framework (PReF).

4.2.2 The six-month confidential reporting framework is based on a system currently running in CEP where students are required to fill in a confidential form focused on supervision every six months. The results are sent to the PGR administrator. If a concern is raised, the student is asked whether they are happy for this to be seen by the DPS and also if they are happy for it to be discussed with the supervisor or not. The PGR administrator will also direct students to support outside of the department if required.

4.2.3 Several other departments operate similar systems, but not all, and it was felt that a consistent process should operate. The Graduate School could develop a template to be used if departments wished to introduce the system. The following points were raised in discussion:
- students would need confidence in the system as a lack of trust and concerns the supervisor will know they have complained will decrease engagement
- it can be light touch if there are no issues to report
- it may be better to have an online process which is separate from the specific department
- it may be less important to have a common template than to ensure that all departments have a framework in place that allows this reporting

4.2.4 It was agreed that the possibility of a central online version on My Imperial should be raised but this will need to be considered by the Student Administration Lifecycle Board.

Action: Laura Lane

4.2.5 The Project Rescue Framework (PReF) is being set up as a pilot in the Faculty of Medicine. This will be used when there has been a breakdown in the student and supervisor relationship and support is needed to improve the situation. It will not cover all cases – bullying and harassment should be handled through existing procedures.

4.2.6 The process will be managed via a dedicated website. In addition to hosting

guidance and support information, there will be a decision-making tool to assist students to understand their options for addressing the situation, one of which is to initiate the PReF.

4.2.7   The faculty will appoint academics to form the PReF panel – one from each department and a College Consul. The panel will review the student's case and will decide whether to intervene with the supervisor with the intent of restoring the situation under a 'no blame' ethos. An action plan will be developed for the student and supervisor. If there is no progress or improvement after a certain period, the panel will look at how this can be escalated without harming the student's position.

4.2.8   It is envisaged that the website and tool will be developed over the rest of the academic year with the pilot launching in October 2022 running for the full year. It was agreed that the Graduate School would report the outcome of the pilot to the PRQC in 2023.

Action: Laura Lane

4.3   Focus on Best Practice in Supervision workshop schedule

4.3.1   PRQC approved the workshop schedule as detailed in appendix 1 of the PRES 2021 College action plan.

4.3.2   This schedule is based upon the time since departments last held the workshop. Results from PRES 2021 have been reviewed to suggest areas where the workshops could be tailored to address lower scores and negative comments.

4.4   Faculty of Medicine PRES 2021 action plan [PRQC.2021.15]

4.4.1   The meeting received the PRES 2021 action plan from the Faculty of Medicine. Although the research focus of the faculty covers three areas, the majority of research is concentrated in Clinical Medicine. The faculty covers eight departments. Four of these departments were created in 2019 and this is the first occasion where they have participated in PRES.

4.4.2   PRES results were discussed at the faculty's Doctoral Degrees forum. Each department developed its action plan which was then placed on a shared drive for communal access. This allowed identification of common issues and triggered briefing and discussions with student representatives.

4.4.3   The following points were noted in producing the faculty action plan:
- Medicine scored lower than the College average in 'Opportunities' and 'Responsibilities' in particular
- For Opportunities, the lower scores were recorded in the newer departments. It was felt that this was because there are fewer opportunities for teaching in these areas as yet.
- Against the sector, Medicine scored lower than average in 'Supervision', 'Progress', 'Responsibilities' and Opportunities'

4.4.4 The following actions were highlighted from those proposed in the plan:
- Further sharing of best practice between high- and low-scoring departments at the Doctoral Degrees Forum
- Departments are ensuring that information about GTA training and opportunities are more visible.
- Departments have access to the Dean's Internship Fund which provides support for PhD students to engage with external teaching and outreach opportunities.
- Departmental well-being plans were on hold during COVID-19 as these relied on buddy systems. These are now being re-started and the faculty is exploring different ways to provide structured support.

4.5 Imperial College Business School PRES action plan [PRQC.2021.16]

4.5.1 The meeting received the PRES 2021 action plan from Imperial College Business School. It was noted that ICBS had a small PhD cohort distributed across departments. It was important to ensure that small groups of students had the opportunities to participate in cross-cutting developmental and community-building activities.

5. Cornerstone

Members were encouraged to review the new 'Fundamentals of Supervising PhD Students' mandatory course which was available via Blackboard and send feedback to the Graduate School team by 23 February. The new programme will have a 'soft launch' in March with the main rollout planned for April once the content management freeze on the website has ended.

5.1 Approval of amendments to the College's precepts for research degrees [PRQC.2021.17]

5.1.1 PRQC approved the amendments to the Research Degree Precepts to reflect the introduction of the Cornerstone programme and the changes to supervisor training requirements.

5.2 Approval of amendments to the College's CPD framework for supervisors [PRQC.2021.18]

5.2.1 PRQC approved the amendments to the CPD framework for supervisors to reflect the introduction of the Cornerstone programme.

6. Revised Writing Up Procedure [PRQC.2021.19]

6.1 Following the revisions to the PhD/MPhil academic regulations, the procedure for transferring to Writing Up status had been amended. It was planned for the revised procedure to take affect from 1 April 2022.

6.2 The key differences in the procedure were outlined as follows:
- There would be a single Writing Up status (the Completing Research Status and Writing Up Away from College status would be withdrawn)
- Students would be fully enrolled during Writing Up
- No fee would be charged for Writing Up
- The Writing Up allowance for full-time and part-time students had been clarified
- The requirements for entering Writing Up status early had also been clarified

6.3 It was agreed that it would be helpful to seek further guidance on the following points raised by members:
- Are students fully insured when they enter Writing Up status including using labs (on a limited basis)?
- If the outcome of the viva is 'not pass, major amendments required', and the student is required to use laboratory facilities, what will the student status be? If the student stays in Writing Up, are they insured to use the labs as required to make the amendments?
- If the student is approved to enter Writing Up status early (i.e. at 24 months), is the student eligible for a tuition fee refund if they have already paid for the third year?

These issues would be raised with the appropriate teams in Registry and Finance and reported back to PRQC.

Action: Scott Tucker

7. Special cases annual report - non-standard examiner nominations & thesis extensions [PRQC.2021.20]

7.1 The meeting received a paper analysing the number of Special Cases requests in 2020-21 in relation to non-standard examiner nominations and thesis extensions.

7.2 The meeting agreed the recommendation in point 2.5 to review the current approach for nominations and ensure that any requirements for additional examiners or DPS briefings based on limited (or lack of) nominee experience be set out clearly in the College's appointment criteria for research degree examiners.

7.3 It was felt that there were additional issues relating to the appointment of examiners as follows:
- Lack of ability on My Imperial to review the examiners in detail or see the supervisory team
- No option to feedback to supervisor on examiner selection unless they are being rejected
- Lack of clarity over the compulsory information required from examiners e.g. how many examples of previous experience to include

7.4 The meeting discussed how to support staff new to examining to build up the experience needed given the current panel requirements. It was agreed that

these points would be raised with Assessment Records and to request an update to a future meeting.

Action: Secretary / Eleri Canning

7.5   The meeting discussed the recommendations relating to management of thesis extension requests. As expected, the number of requests had increased sharply in 2020-21 due to COVID-19 and the largest reason for the requests is 'personal difficulties'.

7.6   The meeting noted the recommendation which proposed further work to be done to reduce the number of additional extension requests needed and the initial period granted is sufficient to cover the full time needed. Members noted that students who have personal difficulties or mental health issues frequently cannot or are not in the right state of mind to judge the impact of this on deadlines or complete forms in a timely manner. In such cases, flexibility is needed rather than sanctions.

7.7   It was agreed that it would be useful if the thesis extension request process could be built into My Imperial alongside the other milestones. However, given the pressure on development resources it was unclear when this could be accomplished.

7.8   The PGR Regulations Working Group will be re-convened to consider regulations for other types of research degrees (e.g. EngD). It could also look at these issues and propose some principles for such situations.

Action: Scott Tucker

8.   Department of Mathematics centres for doctoral training – request to amend regulations [PRQC.2021.21]

8.1   The meeting considered a request from the Department of Mathematics to amend regulations for current students registered on the London School of Number Theory and Geometry Theory and the Financial Computing and Analytics CDTs in the department.

8.2   These amendments were required to ensure that the milestone deadlines at Imperial aligned with the structures of the CDT and EPSRC. The meeting approved the request.

8.3   The meeting discussed whether other CDTs may be affected by similar issues. If members felt it necessary, this could be discussed with the CDT-DTP Governance Committee to investigate. No concerns were raised.

Part 3 – Matters for Information

9.   PRQC subcommittees

9.1   The Committee noted minutes of the subcommittees / reports from collaborative

committees as follows:

(i)   Minutes of the Postgraduate Professional Development Committee held on 24 November 2021 **[PRQC.2021.22]**

(ii)   Minutes of the CDT-DTP Governance Committee held on 17 November 2021 **[PRQC.2021.23]**

(iii)   Minutes of the Crick Research Degrees Committee held on 17 June 2021 **[PRQC.2021.24]**

10.   Dates of future meetings

10.1   The next meeting will be held as follows:

Tuesday 10 May 2022: 14.10 – 16.30

10.2   Following a poll of members, it was agreed that the May meeting would be held on Teams. The format of meetings for next year would be discussed further.

11.   Any Other Business

11.1   None reported.