Imperial College London

Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC)

Confirmed minutes of the meeting held on 25 October 2023 at 14:10 in room G.05, Royal School of Mines Building, South Kensington campus

Present

Professor Yun Xu (Director of the Graduate School) [Chair]
Professor Laki Buluwela (Deputy Director of the Graduate School)
Yi Yang (ICU Deputy President (Education))
Michaela Flegrova (PGR Academic & Welfare Officer (Natural Sciences))
David Ashton (Academic Registrar)
Dr Alexis Barr (Institute of Clinical Sciences)
Dr Chris Cantwell (Aeronautics)
Professor Pier Luigi Dragotti (Electrical and Electronic Engineering)
Dr Mazdak Ghajari (Dyson School of Dyson Engineering)
Professor Christopher Gourlay (Materials)
Dr Choon Hwai Yap (Bioengineering)
Laura Lane (Head of Strategy and Operations, Graduate School)
Professor Alex Michaelides (Business)
Professor Kevin Murphy (Brain Sciences; Immunology and Inflammation; Infectious Disease; Metabolism, Digestion and Reproduction)
Dr Salvador Navarro-Martinez (Mechanical Engineering)
Caroline Ransom (Crick Doctoral Centre)
Professor Ben Sauer (Physics)
Jennifer Simeon (Surgery and Cancer)
Dr Jeffrey Vernon (Faculty Senior Tutor (PGR) representative)
Professor Ahmer Wadee (Civil and Environmental Engineering)
Dr Rudiger Woscholski (Chemistry)
Emma Rabin (Assistant Registrar, Partnerships, Monitoring and Review) [Secretary]

In Attendance
Professor Alessandro Astolfi (item 4)
Dr Magdalena Jara (9.2)

Part 1 – Preliminary Items

1.   Welcome and apologies for absence

1.1   The Chair welcomed new members of the committee for 2023-24 as follows:

Professor Jennifer Quint (Deputy Director of the Graduate School)
Dr Chris Cantwell (Aeronautics)
Professor Alex Michaelides (Business)
Dr Alexis Barr (Institute of Clinical Sciences, co-DPS)

Camille Boutrolle - ICU President
Yi Yang - ICU Deputy President (Education)
Jordon Millward - Postgraduate Research Representation Chair
Nan Fletcher-Lloyd - Postgraduate Research Academic & Welfare Officer (Medicine)
Michaela Flegrova - Postgraduate Research Academic & Welfare Officer (Natural Sciences)

1.2   Apologies were received from:

Dr Dalal Alrajeh (Computing)
Dr Ryan Barnett (Mathematics)
Professor Charlotte Bevan (Surgery and Cancer)
Camille Boutrolle (ICU President)
Nan Fletcher-Lloyd (PGR Academic & Welfare Officer (Medicine))
Professor Saskia Goes (Earth Science and Engineering)
Professor Peter Haynes (Vice-Provost, Education and Student Experience)
Dr Jo Horsburgh (CLCC/CHERS)
Professor Cleo Kontoravdi (Chemical Engineering)
Dr Yiannis Kountouris (Centre for Environmental Policy)
Dr Sally Leevers (Crick Doctoral Centre)
Professor Mike Lovett (NHLI)
Dr David Mann (Life Sciences)
Robin Mowat (Centre for Academic English representative)
Professor Jennifer Quint (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 10 May 2023 **[PRQC.2023.01].**

2.2   The Committee noted the action list **[PRQC.2023.02]**.

Action 7.4 (May 2023) – it was confirmed that a budget had been identified to pay student representatives on Periodic Review panels and this action was complete.

2.3   The committee noted that Chair's Action **[PRQC.2023.03]** had been taken to approve the creation of an MPhil programme in Clinical Medicine Research (Clinical Sciences) to facilitate a student programme transfer.

3.   Matters arising

3.1   No matters were reported.

4.   Terms of Reference and Membership 2023-24 [PRQC.2023.04]

4.1   The Terms of Reference and Membership were approved subject to updating references in the document to the University Research and Enterprise Board and Postgraduate Development and Experience Committee.

Action: Secretary

Part 2 – Matters for Consideration

5.1   Computing PGR Periodic Review Report [PRQC.2023.05]

5.1.1   The meeting received the panel report from the Periodic Review of PGR provision in the Department of Computing held on 24 April 2023.

5.1.2   The panel chair – Professor Alessandro Astolfi – highlighted the following points from the report:
- The use of teaching scholarships which benefit both the student and the department by building in teaching opportunities in a structured way as part of the PhD.
- The generous travel / conference budget allocated to students.
- 'Pizza Friday' as a mechanism for encouraging students to attend campus on that day and engage with other students and staff.
- Notwithstanding Pizza Friday, general attendance on campus by students was poor. This was an issue pre-dating Covid and the department had been advised to convene a group to consider expectations on attendance.

5.1.3   Members discussed the topic of in-person attendance on campus as other departments were experiencing similar issues. The following points were noted in discussions:
- There was a distinction between non-attendance on campus and failing to engage with studies. In the latter case there was a policy for unsatisfactory engagement which can be used.
- There could be many reasons why students do not attend in person such as issues with their supervisor or wellbeing difficulties.
- It was hard to ask students to attend when supervisors were frequently not present either as per the work location framework.
- There was an attendance policy for PGR students but this was targeted at PRI, Split PhD and part-time students so this could be reviewed.
- There had been numerous discussions at QAEC in regard to implementing attendance policies but it had not been possible to achieve a consensus.
- Due to the above, decisions on expected attendance requirements were devolved to the departmental level.
- The ESA and LSR could be a useful opportunity to discuss attendance expectations or requirements as determined by the department.

5.2   Computing PGR Periodic Review departmental response [PRQC.2023.06]

5.2.1   As there was no representative attending from Computing, the Chair invited comments on the department's response to the Periodic Review report. It was noted that the purpose of the teaching scholarship had been clarified and data relating to destinations of participants had been provided.

5.2.2   The Deputy President (Education) reported that the union would have preferred if an alternative budget had been found to increase student support and GTA pay instead of using scholarship funds. The department would be asked to respond.

Action: Dalal Alrajeh

5.2.3   The Graduate School are planning to offer more social events this year and members were asked to publicise these events to students to encourage attendance.

5.3   Mechanical Engineering PGR Periodic Review 12-month update [PRQC.2023.07]

5.3.1   The following points were noted from the update:
- The department was monitoring numbers of students in supervisory groups.
- New LSR forms have been done but are on hold whilst the new extension process is being introduced by the College.
- Changing the timing of the Research Assessment Form has significantly boosted responses by students from 22% to 60% but responses from supervisors have decreased as the new timing is during the exam period.
- GTA training is now co-ordinated centrally and experienced GTAs are assisting with training.
- Work has started on creating supervision records but is paused whilst the department waits to see developments on My Imperial.

5.3.2   The meeting discussed how many students are considered a 'large' group. For Mechanical Engineering this has been set at six but larger groups would be permitted if there were also a sufficient number of post-docs to assist with support. Other departments said they limited the number of students a new academic could supervise but not for other staff.

6.   Generative AI and postgraduate research degrees [PRQC.2023.08]

6.1   It was reported that the College has already produced some guidance on the use of Generative AI and there was a College working group on the issue but these both focussed on teaching and learning rather than research. PRQC was asked to consider whether guidance or FAQs were needed in this area.

6.2   The following points were noted in discussion:
- The Library has updated its Plagiarism Awareness Course to cover this

topic.

- Students were receiving conflicting messages on Generative AI with some being encouraged to use it on taught programmes and others being banned.
- Its use could benefit students who had weaker English language skills but it may need to be acknowledged in a thesis.
- Whether incorporating Generative AI into assessed work is plagiarism or simply needs appropriate citation like any other source.

6.3   Members felt that as Generative AI is likely to become even more pervasive, the best approach may be to focus on students' demonstrating their ability to deeply evaluate and interpret multiple sources of information to synthesise new ideas. This may mean that verbal assessments become more important than written assessments contrary to current practice where written assessments tend to be weighted more heavily than verbal in assessment schemes.

6.4   It was agreed that the College Working Group would be asked to consider adding research degree issues to their scope of work. The Graduate School will look at devising training on Generative AI and ethical use in research degrees.

Action: Laura Lane

7.   Working group to review GTA rates of pay [PRQC.2023.09]

7.1   PRQC received the final report and recommendations from the Working Group to review GTA rates of pay. The recommendations covered harmonising pay rates across departments and contractual matters as well as support and recognition.

7.2   The following points were noted in discussions:
- The interim report had been seen by GTA coordinators, DPS, DUGs plus other departmental representatives.
- Departments had been invited to comment on the draft GTA activities and remuneration table through the Summer consultation.
- The harmonising of pay rates means that some students may now be paid less for the same activities although others will be paid more.
- UTAs should get the same pay rate as GTAs if they are doing the same activity.
- GTAs will receive holiday pay as part of the hourly rate but it is expected this will be paid out rather then taken as extra leave on top of their annual leave entitlement.

7.3   It was requested that the hourly rates in the paper be updated to include the holiday pay uplift to assist departments with accurate budgeting.

Action: Laura Lane

7.4   The Business School is maintaining a separate pay scale for its GTAs. This is due to its use of external teaching assistants who perform the same duties as the GTAs. The pay rates are designed to be competitive with other business schools in London.

7.5 A concern was expressed that although there had been two rounds of consultations with departments the impact of the recommendations (particularly the pay rates) may not have been picked up by UG/PGT teaching teams who would be employing GTAs. The meeting was reminded that the recommendations needed to be submitted to the November QAEC meeting in order to permit departments to make budget requests in the planning round. It was agreed that the paper would be recommended to QAEC but the report would also be circulated to departments to make any final comments that will be fed into the QAEC discussions.

Action: Laura Lane

7.6 The committee acknowledged the importance of ensuring the new guidance and aligned pay rates were implemented to ensure fairness and consistency for GTAs across College.

8. Academic regulations, policies, and procedures

8.1 Updates to Research Degree Precepts 2023-24 [PRQC.2023.10]

8.1.1 Changes to Precept 1 had been proposed as to reflect a recommendation from the Computing PGR Periodic Review panel. It was recommended that the precept include reference to best practice in recruitment, in particular in supporting EDI initiatives, so text had been proposed to address this. This change was approved.

8.1.2 The second change in Precept 1 was to remove the implied reliance on the DPS as the second independent interviewer. Members felt that relying on a single role was not realistic given the number of selection interviews taking place. It was agreed that the text would be amended to reflect that a number of roles could perform this function operating as a pool to meet departmental needs.

Action: Secretary

8.1.3 It was noted that although the Precept says 'All prospective students must be interviewed…' there were occasionally cases where an interview had not been carried out for self-funding students. It was agreed to add some text to reinforce that this requirement applies in all cases regardless of funding source.

Action: Secretary

8.2 Updates to ESA and LSR forms for 2023-24 [PRQC.2023.11]

8.2.1 The meeting considered a recommendation to amend the ESA and LSR forms to reflect that the Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership should be a live document throughout the student's studies and re-visited after its initial introduction at the start of the degree.

8.2.2 PRQC approved the amendments.

8.3 Update to Modality of Vivas policy [2023.12]

8.3.1 The meeting considered an amendment to the Policy on Modality of Research Degree Final Thesis Vivas to reflect that a desire to limit carbon emissions could be a reason to opt for a remote or hybrid viva.

8.3.2 The meeting approved the amendment.

9. Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2023

9.1 **PRES 2023 summary analysis and terms of reference and membership for PRES 2023 task and finish group [PRQC.2023.13a/b]**

9.1.1 It was reported that Imperial was above the global benchmarks in several categories but was lower for supervision and progression – this was also the case in PRES 2021. Some groups are particularly dissatisfied compared to the overall cohort: disabled students, BAME students and female students. The task and finish group will focus on these areas/groups.

9.1.2 From the free text comments, it was thesis submission that was causing most concerns to students in the progression category rather than the ESA or LSR. It may be that students do not feel concerned about this aspect initially but struggle with this during the Writing Up period when they are likely to be away from campus.

9.2 **Final report of the PGR Community and Visibility Working Group [PRQC.2023.14]**

9.2.1 This group had been set up following the PRES 2021 survey which indicated dissatisfaction with the research community on offer. The group had analysed data from the ICU's PGR Experience Study and the Graduate School's data on community-building work.

9.2.2 Key points were noted as follows:
- Around 50% of respondents to the ICU PGR Experience Study did not feel part of the PGR community.
- The number of students attending face-to-face activities in the Graduate School has remained low and not returned to pre-COVID levels.
- Students are not applying for the funding available to support activities.

9.2.3 The group had identified recommendations for both the ICU and the Graduate School focussing on practical activities to engage students which are in the process of being delivered:
- More events will be put on by the Graduate School to connect students across the College.
- The ICU is identifying the needs and experiences of PGR students to address these separately from the UG and PGT cohorts.
- The Graduate School and the ICU will aim to work more collaboratively on PGR activities, including strengthening the

connections between the Graduate School and PGR reps.

- ICU will be providing more robust representatives' training to support reps in their roles.
- The Graduate School will put together guidance and suggestions for departments on community building.

Part 3 – Matters for Information

10.   List of Partner Research Institutions, Split PhDs, and Imperial Recognised Locations [PRQC.2023.15]

10.1   The meeting noted the updated list.

11.   PRQC subcommittees

11.1   The Committee noted minutes of the subcommittees / reports from collaborative committees as follows:

(i)   Confirmed minutes of the CDT-DTP Governance Committee held on 24 March 2023 **[PRQC.2023.16]**

(ii)   Unconfirmed minutes of the CDT-DTP Governance Committee held on 24 May 2023 **[PRQC.2023.17]**

(iii)   Confirmed minutes of the Crick Research Degrees Committee held on 2 March 2023 **[PRQC.2023.18]**

12.   Dates of future meetings

12.1   Wednesday 14 February 2024, 14:10-16:30
Wednesday 8 May 2024, 14:10-16:30

13.   Any Other Business

13.1   Members were reminded the DPS lunch meeting would be taking place in November (via Teams) and they were encouraged to attend**.**