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Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC)

Confirmed minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2024 at 14:10 on MS Teams

Present

Professor Yun Xu (Director of the Graduate School) [Chair]
Yi Yang (ICU Deputy President (Education))
Michaela Flegrova (ICU PGR Academic & Welfare Officer (Natural Sciences))
Nan Fletcher-Lloyd (ICU PGR Academic & Welfare Officer (Medicine))
Jordon Millward (ICU PGR Representation Chair)
Dr Dalal Alrajeh (Computing)
David Ashton (Academic Registrar)
Dr Ryan Barnett (Mathematics)
Dr Alexis Barr (Institute of Clinical Sciences)
Professor Charlotte Bevan (Surgery and Cancer)
Professor Laki Buluwela (Deputy Director of the Graduate School)
Dr Chris Cantwell (Aeronautics)
Professor Jennifer Collier (Earth Science and Engineering)
Dr Abbas Dehghan (School of Public Health)
Professor Christopher Gourlay (Materials)
Nicola Hann (Business School)
Professor Cleo Kontoravdi (Chemical Engineering)
Dr Sarah Martin (Crick Doctoral Centre)
Robin Mowat (Centre for Academic English representative)
Dr Salvador Navarro-Martinez (Mechanical Engineering)
Professor Jennifer Quint (Deputy Director of the Graduate School)
Professor Ben Sauer (Physics)
Dr Jeffrey Vernon (Faculty Senior Tutor (PGR) representative)
Professor Ahmer Wadee (Civil and Environmental Engineering)
Dr Rudiger Woscholski (Chemistry)
Dr Choon Hwai Yap (Bioengineering)
Emma Rabin (Assistant Registrar, Partnerships, Monitoring and Review) [Secretary]

In Attendance

Dr Mara Arts (Deputy Director of Student Administration (Operations))
Professor Bernadette Byrne (Associate Dean (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) for FoNS) – item 7
Professor Alan Spivey (AI Working Group Chair) – item 6

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Scott Tucker (Deputy Director, Quality Assurance and Enhancement)
Dr Victoria Crossley (Senior Teaching Fellow - Research Impact and Cornerstone) – item 8 and 9
Kirstie Ward (Assistant Registrar, Regulations) – item 4.4

Part 1 – Preliminary Items

1.   Welcome and apologies for absence

1.1   Apologies were received from:

Camille Boutrolle (ICU President)
Professor Pier Luigi Dragotti (Electrical and Electronic Engineering)
Professor Saskia Goes (Earth Science and Engineering)
Professor Peter Haynes (Vice-Provost, Education and Student Experience)
Dr Jo Horsburgh (CLCC/CHERS)
Laura Lane (Head of Strategy and Operations, Graduate School)
Dr Sally Leevers (Crick Doctoral Centre)
Dr David Mann (Life Sciences)
Professor Alex Michaelides (Business)
Professor Kevin Murphy (Brain Sciences; Immunology and Inflammation; Infectious Disease; Metabolism, Digestion and Reproduction)

1.2   The Chair welcomed Dr Sarah Martin to the meeting. Dr Martin is Head of Student Programmes at the Francis Crick Institute and will be replacing Dr Sally Leevers as the Crick representative.

2.   Minutes of the previous meeting

2.1   The Committee approved the minutes of the previous meeting held on 14 February 2024 **[PRQC.2023.29].**

2.2   The Committee noted the action list **[PRQC.2023.30]**.

Action 6.3 (February 2024) – it was agreed the updated document should be circulated for information.

Action: Secretary

The remaining actions from the February meeting had been completed or were on the agenda. The status of all actions on the list would be reviewed and updated as necessary for the next academic year.

Action: Secretary

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2.3 The committee noted that Chair's Action **[PRQC.2023.31]** had been taken to suspend a programme linked to the Safe and Trusted AI CDT which had not been successful in its renewal bid to UKRI.

3. Matters arising

3.1 No matters were reported.

Part 2 – Matters for Consideration

4. Academic regulations and policies

4.1 **MPhil/PhD academic regulations 2024/25 [PRQC.2023.32]**

4.1.1 The meeting received a paper detailing proposed updates to the academic regulations for MPhil/PhD programmes for the 2024/25 academic year. It was reported that any updates required following discussion of item 5 on the agenda would be included prior to the paper being submitted to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC).

4.1.2 The following updates were approved:
   (i) Include text to specify that concurrent registration on two programmes was not permitted. It was confirmed that overlapping registration between a student finishing a masters and starting a PhD could be dealt with via suspensions of regulations.
   (ii) Specifying deadlines for MPhil students to have met compulsory training requirements and clarifying MPhil students do not have progression milestones.

   In regard to (ii) it was noted that the majority of MPhil students will have transferred from a PhD programme following review at a progression milestone. The group discussed whether direct entry MPhil students should be subject to a progression assessment. It was agreed to review the number of students on this route and consider if it should be recommended that an assessment is required.
   Action: Scott Tucker

   (iii) Include requirement that students who fail to complete enrolment within 21 days of the start of the academic session will be withdrawn from their programme. Students will only need to re-enrol once per academic year in September and receive several reminders pre and post this deadline.
   (iv) Specify that any transfer students should complete a minimum of twelve months of active research (full-time study) or 24 months for part-time study. For special cases, a suspension of regulations can be considered.

   In regard to (iv) it was agreed that discussion was needed as to whether a student could complete the 12 months and then submit their thesis for examination directly afterwards.

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Action: Scott Tucker

(v)   Clarify that student-led transfers from PhD to MPhil are permissible with the agreement of the department.

(vi)   Delegate approval of departmental LSR requirements to the DPS with the appropriate faculty committee having oversight via an annual audit.

(vii)   Remove requirement that supervisor must certify student's declaration regarding joint work given there is no mechanism for supervisors to do this.

(viii)   Include a brief section to describe the purpose and requirements of the progress review and clarify that students who enter Writing Up status early will be exempt from undertaking the progress review. It was unclear if My Imperial will allow students to enter for the exam if they have been exempted from the progress review so the operational function will need to be checked.

Action: Scott Tucker

4.1.3   The meeting discussed whether the use of sanctions should be considered for students who were due progression assessments but had not engaged with staff to undertake these nor made requests for extensions via the approved processes. It was agreed this should be discussed further at a future meeting.

4.2   **Research degree precepts 2024/25 [PRQC.2023.33]**

4.2.1   PRQC considered the following updates to the Research Degree Precepts for 2024/25:

(i)   Precept 1 to facilitate gender balance in interview panels and/or opportunities to meet other students as part of the interview process.

(ii)   Precept 10 to align with research degree supervision policy that all students must have access to a Senior Tutor (PGR) who is an academic member of staff.

4.2.2   PRQC approved the amendments to the precepts.

4.3   **Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership [PRQC.2023.34]**

4.3.1   A number of changes had been recommended to the mutual expectations document to reflect changes in policy or feedback from students, particularly from the ICU Academic and Welfare Officers for Medicine.

4.3.2   The ICU Deputy President (Education) had undertaken a survey with research students which had led to recommended changes to point 12 which covers meeting frequency between students and supervisors.

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4.3.3   The following amendments has been proposed:

(i)   Reflect new requirements for students and supervisor to re-visit mutual expectations document including at ESA and LSR.

(ii)   Incorporate the Imperial Values work.

(iii)   Include recommendations from the ICU Deputy President (Education) survey.

(iv)   Clarify expectations for publishing and training.

(v)   Strengthen expectations in regard to support for students pursuing non-academic career pathways.

4.3.4   It was agreed that the text for point 7 should be further updated on the student side to reflect that students should be expected to submit drafts for feedback in a timely manner as per any agreed deadlines.

4.3.5   PRQC approved the updates to the document.

4.4   **Unsatisfactory engagement policy and procedure [PRQC.2023.35]**

4.4.1   It was reported that the Regulations Policy and Review Committee (RPRC) had agreed to undertake a review of the unsatisfactory engagement policy and procedure in 2024/25. As part of this review, the views of PRQC were being sought on the process that applies to research students.

4.4.2   Currently the process for research students has additional stages to the one which applies to taught students. The same roles are involved at different stages which is not compliant with the good practice framework issued by the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

4.4.3   The meeting discussed the paper and the following points were noted in discussion:

- The supervisor has to support the student as well as make decisions on whether they should continue which could undermine the future relationship.
- There may be a need for an objective participant or evaluation earlier in the process to ensure the initial action plan is appropriate.
- Whether mediation should be included as a stage.
- How the process would work if the supervisor(s) held responsibility for PGR matters or headed the department.
- The timeline for the process could run to 6 months including the appeal stages. For international students they may lose permission to be in the country whilst an appeal against withdrawal is considered.
- If there are mental health concerns, there are other policies that should be followed.

4.4.4   It was agreed that further discussion was required to ensure the process was appropriate and timely. Members were asked to send comments to the Assistant Registrar (Academic Standards). A revised paper would return to PRQC with the aim of having the process and guidance agreed by December.

Action: Kirstie Ward

4.5. Thesis Deadline Extension Requests guidance and form [PRQC.2023.36]

4.5.1. PRQC considered a proposed update to the guidance and form as follows:
- (i) if an extension is requested for wellbeing or mental health reasons that, where relevant, a plan is in place to support the student during the extension.

4.5.2. PRQC approved the amendment.

5. Use of Generative AI for Research Degrees [PRQC.2023.37]

5.1 The meeting reviewed the recommendations from the AI Working Group related to the use of generative AI in research degrees and the impact on assessment. It was noted that developments in this area happened extremely quickly and new tools were frequently released.

5.2 The recommendations covered a number of areas including training for students and amendments to current regulations and policies to ensure students are clear how they should cite / reference their use of generative AI where this is permitted.

5.3 The following points were noted in discussion:
- Training for students is being developed by Edtech and ICT. This will be iterative to ensure that it supports students appropriately as well as addresses emerging developments in the field.
- Students also need to understand the implications of uploading their own or someone else's materials into a Large Language Model (LLM) – training on data ethics is being created by the Graduate School.
- A viva is the most effective mechanism to assess if generative AI has been used appropriately or if it is suspected it has been used but not declared.
- Some programs / tools are already incorporating generative AI so it may be hard for students to limit their usage to the boundaries set by the university. The Library is collating best practice in this area.
- Should the university have a list of 'approved' tools or would this be too difficult to manage given the number of new LLMs emerging.
- There needs to be an implementation plan for the new training to be offered and guidance issued which should include a way of monitoring whether these are effective.

5.4 It was agreed the AI Working Group would review the points raised by PRQC and make revisions where appropriate and then re-submit the recommendations to a future PRQC. However, it was felt that the proposed changes to the ESA, LSR and examination processes to require students to declare their use of generative AI tools should be accelerated for approval by QAEC.

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Action: Alan Spivey / Scott Tucker

6.   Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion data [PRQC.2023.38]

6.1   PRQC received a form used by the Department of Life Sciences to capture EDI data from applicants. This data is used by the department to identify under-represented groups applying for PhDs and then capture whether interventions with targeted groups are resulting in increased applications.

6.2   The form has been in use for three years. Applicants are requested to complete it and return it alongside their CV and other documents when applying for an advertised PhD. It is not part of the university application form which is completed separately later on in the process. The information provided is used to provide contextual factors for assessing an application.

6.3   The following points were noted in discussion:
- The form requires students to provide personal information which may not be relevant to the specific EDI issue a department is trying to address.
- The data cannot be anonymised since it is provided with the CV.
- Information is being captured and held from people who may not then be offered a place at Imperial.
- Whether there are specific representation numbers the university is aiming to achieve.
- Departments will have different EDI issues/needs.
- The form is only appropriate for home students.

6.4   The group supported the purpose of the form but it was felt the situation in relation to the capturing and retention of this sensitive data should be clarified with the Data Protection Officer (DPO).

Action: Bernadette Byrne

6.5   Once the data protection guidance was available, departments could be encouraged to use this form with adaptations to focus on the specific EDI areas they wish to target. There is a university PG WP working group and it would be good to ensure that this work links in with any activities they are undertaking.

7.   UKRI Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training 2024 [PRQC.2023.39]

7.1   It was reported that UKRI had updated its statement of expectations for doctoral training which had been previously published in 2016. The document mapped the updated expectations against current practice at Imperial and indicated where enhancements were required.

7.2   Members were invited to send any comments on the mapping to the Graduate School.

8.   Supervisor CPD Framework [PRQC.2023.40]

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8.1 The group noted the proposed updates to the supervisor CPD framework as follows:

(i) Departments may now choose whether to run a bespoke 'Focus on Best practice in Supervision' workshop or allow staff to attend one of the optional peer-based workshops offered via Cornerstone.

(ii) Strengthen wording to clarify that departments must have systems in place to check supervisors are undertaking CPD as required by the framework and precepts.

8.2 PRQC approved the amendments to the framework.

8.3 It was requested that the schedule for the 'Focus on best practice in supervision' workshops for the upcoming year be circulated to the group.

Action: Victoria Crossley

Part 3 – Matters for Information

9.   PRQC subcommittees

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

(i) Unconfirmed minutes of the Crick Research Degrees Committee held on 16 November 2023 **[PRQC.2023.41]**

(ii) Unconfirmed minutes of the CDT-DTP Governance Committee held on 21 February 2024 **[PRQC.2023.42]**

10.   Dates of future meetings

10.1 Dates for next year will be proposed once the meeting dates for QAEC and Senate are set.

11.   Any Other Business

10.1 Members were asked to encourage students to complete the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) which was currently open and would close on 10 June.

10.2 The Chair thanked members for their contributions to PRQC over the past year. As the Chair's term as Director of the Graduate School was ending, this was the last PRQC meeting she would be chairing. The name of the new chair would be advised in due course. The Chair was thanked for her work leading the committee.