



## YORK GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL BOARD

Friday 25 February 2021, 10:00-12:00

Zoom

### MINUTES

**Present:** Dr Kathryn Arnold (Chair), Ms Jennifer Gilmartin, Ms Susanna Broom (Secretary), Ms Cecelia Lowe, Dr Jeremy Goldberg, Dr Martin Cockett, Dr Kelly Redeker, Professor Richard Ogden, Ms Jane Baston, Dr Purnur Altay

**Apologies:** Professor Ambrose Field, Professor Brian Fulton, Darryl Butcher, Professor Matthias Ruth, Sarah Kirkup, Professor Sarah Thompson, Professor Stuart Bell, Professor Tracy Lightfoot, Dr Wayne Campbell, Professor Yvonne Birks, Dr Sally Hancock.

**Attending:** Ms Jessica Main (Minutes Secretary)

#### Category I Business

**M/20-21/12:** The minutes of the meeting of 17 December 2020 were **approved**.

**M/20-21/13:** The action log was reviewed. It was noted that:

- M19-20/09 Supervision compliance action plan to be deferred. SB confirmed SkillsForge digests to prompt milestone sign-offs are circulated to PGR supervisors fortnightly.
- M19-20/11 can now be closed.
- M19-20/22 will now be led on by JM.
- M19-20/07 SB to follow up with KC regarding Thesis Mentoring Scheme.
- M20-21/10 to be brought up at the future Graduate Chair Forum.
- M20-21/10 is ongoing.
- M20-21/11 Action for next year.

**M20-21/14:** Chair's oral report

The Chair reported that:

- PGR students continued to experience challenges arising from the pandemic, such as the interruption of access to resources and issues around financial support.

- The Writing Up+ support fund has been extended to the 31 May 2021. The Covid-19 scholarship fund has received between 70-80 applications, which was lower than expected.
- A variety of wellbeing support is in place, through sources such as the Academic Skills team; Mentoring and Buddying schemes; and the Thrive and Survive scheme.
- The Annual Progression process was suspended between March 2020 - December 2020, to allow for a light touch automatic progression during the pandemic. There has been additional support put in place around the standard Annual Progression to allow for PGRs to get appropriate feedback to support their studies.
- The Chair is leading the Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education (YCEDE). This is a funding application to the Office for Students and Research England, aimed at increasing widening participation for BAME students. Focus will be on:
  - Encouraging applications and help in the preparation.
  - Training, audit and coaching for selection procedures - reducing inequality in offer rates.
  - Address on-course doctoral experience.
  - Evaluate the above initiatives to provide an evidence base for interventions to share widely across the HE sector and beyond.

JB noted that it tended to be social experience that caused BAME students to withdraw from their studies, rather than their research. JB queried whether having a connection with BAME supervisors - who can empathise and be a role model - would make a difference. The Chair agreed that the right mentoring and networking was invaluable.

- In conjunction with CITY College, the University of York will be providing undergraduate, postgraduate, MBA and doctoral programmes which lead to University of York degrees. Through this collaboration, there will be opportunities for the following:
  - York - strengthening links with CITY - our strategic partner in Southern Europe.
  - Departments - provide new research opportunities; access to EU funding; additional high quality students.
  - CITY - bridge the 'gap' in research and innovation performance between the South East European (SEE) region and the rest of Europe; become the institution of choice for PGRs in the SEE region.

Key points from collaboration opportunity:

- York students registered for York degrees, but based at CITY
- Students will be subject to York policies and regulations
- Supervision split equally between York and CITY colleagues
- Admissions decisions will be made by York
- Subject areas currently limited to Computer Science, Language and Linguistic Science, Management and Psychology
- No limits on numbers - aim is for an annual intake of 10 students
- Student/staff visits

The Chair noted that the CITY College project was vast with further detail to clarify, and that a full overview will be provided to the Board at a later date.

- UKRI funding has been announced for UKRI PGRs, as has funding through Research England. The Chair will consult with the Board and GSA regarding the use of the financial support.

The Chair also noted thanks to CL for her work alongside KA and KC to implement extra Academic Skills Support for PGRs, and to Jamie Khoo for leading on Thrive and Survive over the last academic year.

**M20-21/15:** Oral report from the Graduate Student Association representatives

- PA confirmed that the GSA has put on events to support students feeling isolated over Christmas and upon arrival in January.
- GSA Spring elections will begin at the end of March, with results expected by the end of May. PA and JB to finish in post at the end of August 2021.
- GSA is in discussions regarding relocation of space on campus, to include a larger, more sociable space and designated child-friendly area for families.
- JB and PA regularly attend the PGR Contingency group meetings to report on issues important to the PGR community. The main issues include extensions, funding and hardship.
- The GSA has run a campaign called 'Funding for all' with a focus on making hardship funding more accessible to students.
- JB hosted termly Faculty Forums with Academic Reps (previously known as Course Reps) and the GSA is launching a consultation on the development of a new academic representation strategy to include staff and students.
- JB has been working on a variety of campaigns relating to PGR extensions, e-books and academic integrity.
- The Board lauded the extraordinary amount of peer support provided by the GSA and noted thanks for the extremely hard work undertaken throughout such a challenging period.

**YGRSB/20-21/16:** Chair's draft [vision and strategic plan](#) for YGRS

The Chair presented her vision for YGRS. Key areas included:

- How YGRS will provide support to nurture a positive, flexible and resilient mindset for PGRs students.
- The University's capacity for public good and how the research of PGRs has the potential for positive impact at local and global scales.
- How research and development will be critical to swift economic and social recovery from the impacts of COVID-19, plus other fundamental challenges to society and economy.
- How YGRS would work with colleagues to establish mutually beneficial interdisciplinary PGR programmes to address large scale issues, and develop future research collaborations.
- How YGRS can improve the attractiveness and sustainability of careers throughout the research and development workforce.
- Broaden models of graduate research and training to better prepare PGRs for a diversity of future professions. This would provide an opportunity for the University to be innovative in the design and ambition of its PGR programmes.
- Diversify the intake of students to be more representative of wider society (international, and students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds), moving towards a more balanced, open and transparent process for appointing PGRs. More mental health and wellbeing training and support for PGRs and supervisory teams.

The Chair acknowledged that the first phase of YGRS provided foundations of governance and policy around the management of progression, assessment and training of PGRs. The next phase of YGRS will focus on

ensuring the postgraduate research and education experience within York will serve as a model of innovation and best practice among higher education institutions.

The Chair shared her strategic plan with the Board, drawing particular attention to the YGRS vision:

- a) To foster an environment of curiosity, creativity and community
- b) To co-create a vibrant and inclusive research culture that values open communication and collaboration
- c) To empower the holistic development of individuals
- d) To improve the accountability and sustainability of support for postgraduate research

Comments were invited from the Board:

- KR commented that there should be a framework for appointing PGRs, to apply across all disciplines. JB agreed, with the recommendation that current PGRs and the GSA should be involved in the consultation process. The Board fully supported the need for consultation.
- PA raised concerns about supervisors taking on too many PGRs and being too stretched to provide appropriate time to individual students.
- RO noted that, to attract a more diverse population of PGRs, prospective students will want to see a diverse community of academic staff. In presenting the strategic plan to the community, it would be positive to acknowledge the work done already by departments in creating a more diverse community. KA acknowledged the need to celebrate these achievements.
- RO noted that the wording used in 2.1 (d) *Thematic strategies*, may potentially alienate Arts & Humanities (A&H) colleagues, in that A&H's academic staff expect an applicant to have an idea of their project upon application, not apply for a project already designed. RO recommended a change in the language to apply to all faculties.
- CL raised concerns that PGRs will come from varied backgrounds and that some students may be in need of support to aid transition to research from the beginning of their studies. KA noted that she is working with RETT to ensure that the majority of training will continue to be delivered online.
- JG noted the sentence "*It is important that we move to a more open, fair and transparent process for appointing PGRs*" may imply that the current process is not fair or transparent and recommended making a change.
- KA is working in conjunction with Kieran Trehan, to develop initiatives around racial equality.

*[KR gave his apologies to leave the meeting at this point.]*

Discussions concluded with the following outcomes:

- **The Board was in agreement** with the general direction of the vision and strategic plan, following a period of consultation with PGRs, staff and (potentially) external partners.
- **The Board was in agreement** for the Chair to develop the measures around increasing diversity of PGRs, in order to take a paper to UEB and/or Senate within the next several months.
- **Action: The Chair will bring a paper to the Board regarding changes to models of PhDs and forms of assessment following further consultation.**

- **Action: The Chair will provide an updated version of the vision and strategic plan by email, after consultation.**
- **Action: The Chair will investigate concerns regarding supervisors taking on high numbers of PGRs and being unable to provide adequate time to each.**

#### **YGRSB/20-21/17: Annual report on GSA Advice Service PGR Casework**

- PA provided a summary statement, and indicated that, due to the GSA's heavy workload, they were unable to produce a full report at this time.
- PA reported that the GSA Advice Service continues to provide free and independent support to PGT and PGR students, covering areas such as (but not limited to) appeals, complaints and exceptional circumstances. Due to the pandemic, appointments have taken place virtually.
- During December-January, there has been a reduction in staff, with two advisers continuing to provide support. Recruitment for new staff is underway.
- PA noted that while the amount of GSA Advice Service cases had increased over the last academic year, the number of PGR cases had stayed relatively similar to previous years.
- JGo expressed appreciation for the work done by the GSA. JGo inquired about the rise in cases relating to academic misconduct. PA confirmed that the increase was in relation to PGT students rather than PGRs.
- CL commented that some of the case data might be classified as 'multiple' cases, for example - one case of academic misconduct 'event' with several individuals involved, would be treated as separate cases for each individual student.
- The Chair concluded that it would be useful to see the PGR breakdown only, to check for ongoing issues. PA confirmed happy to report back. *[Secretary's note: there is already an action on the GSA to provide a breakdown via YGRS Operations Group]*

#### **YGRSB/20-21/18: PGR element of SCC annual report to Senate**

- MC noted that the baseline numbers of extensions and leave of absence requests has decreased throughout 2018/9 and 2019/0 academic years. In comparison, the pandemic precipitated an increase in extensions from 172 cases (during 2018/9) to 303 cases (during 2019/0) - 177 of which were C-19-related. Leave of absence requests increased from 201 cases (during 2018/9) to 292 cases (during 2019/0) - of which 119 were C-19-related.
- All requests are made through and considered by RSA and (R)SCC, of which a majority are processed through RSA on delegated authority. MC noted that the numbers of cases provided on the report were a true reflection of the desires of PGR students, whereas the PGT numbers represented only the cases that had been brought to the attention of the SCC.
- The Chair commented that there appeared to be a large cohort of students who - owing to the influx of extension and leave of absence requests - would take much longer than would be expected, to complete their programme. It was briefly considered that there would potentially be repercussions and subsequently, the number of appeals may grow in time. SB noted that RSCC might expect to see more appeals related to Formal Progression.
- MC noted that, out of approximately 325 resolved appeals last academic year, 14 were from PGR s. Of the 14 appeals that were resolved, MC stated that the majority were from overseas students and provided a breakdown -

- 10 were from overseas students
  - 2 were from EU students
  - 2 were from Home students
  - 12 cases were submitted by female students, 2 by male students.
- JGi queried why the number of appeals submitted by PGR students was small. MC commented that the structure of Formal Progression differs between PGT and PGR level, with a vast number of assessment points available to PGTs in comparison to the annual Formal Progression for PGRs. SB noted that most appeals tend to be at the end of study, rather than during the programme.
  - A discussion ensued in relation to whether culture had any impact on the amount of PGR appeals. CL commented that it was considered 'normal' to appeal a grade in some cultures, but unusual for Home students. CL felt it important to clarify and ensure international students understand the UK approach to academia. MC agreed that the majority of appeals came from overseas students; this is also the case for extensions.
  - The Chair noted that support for international candidates and those from a non-traditional background required improvement, as flagged in the YGRS strategic plan. The discussion provided useful evidence to include in an implementation plan.

**No other business was raised.**

#### Category II Business

#### **YGRSB/20-21/19: Annual PGR Admissions Report**

- The Board had nothing to query from the Annual PGR Admissions Report.