



YORK GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday 06 Jan 2022, 15:00 - 17:00 via Zoom

Present: Kate Arnold (Chair, KA), Brian Fulton (BF), Andrew Jackson (AJ) Cecelia Lowe (CL), Wayne Campbell (WC), Ekansh Kapoor (EK), Susanna Broom (SB, Secretary), Peter Smith (PS), Kelly Redeker (KR), and Yvonne Birks (YB).

Apologies: Matthias Ruth, Tracy Lightfoot, Stuart Bell, Ambrose Field, and Viviane Cao

In attendance: Maria Adlam (Minute Secretary), Juliet James (presenting the YGRS governance paper), and Sam McElhinney (presenting the annual complaints report)

Category I Business

M21-22/01: Minutes of the meeting of 22 June 2021. Approved. There were no matters arising.

M21-22/02: Review of action log. It was noted that:

- M20-21/22 can now be closed.
- M20-21/23 is ongoing
- M20-21/24: Karen Payne provided an update on disabled students applying for extensions in the 2020/21 academic year. The data showed that disabled students did not apply for more extensions than non-disabled students. KA noted that this did not fit the pattern from previous years, however this could be due to a higher volume of extension requests overall in the year 2020/1. SB noted that any actions taken on the basis of this data should be aligned with the annual SCC report.
- M20-21/25a can now be closed
- M20-21/25b can now be closed

M21-22/03: Chair's oral report

- The PGR Contingency group has met to discuss YGRS' response to the ongoing situation with Covid-19. All University facilities are currently open and PGR activities are continuing as normal. Contingency plans are in place for action to be taken within teams if over 25% of staff are absent (for example, moving viva dates). Certain administrative processes relating to online vivas and, in some

cases, extension to submission requests, have been made more light-touch.

- All funding rounds of the Covid-19 Support Fund are now complete. Around 400 PGRs have been supported in the last year to the tune of ~£1 million.
- Industrial action is ongoing but minimal disruption to the PGR community is anticipated. KA attends the Industrial Action Contingency group, so will notify PGR-facing teams if anything changes.
- KA has been supporting departments with applications for blocks of PGR funding. These include: STFC, the ESRC Policing Centre, White Rose DTP and industry funding. One York-led doctoral training application has been put forward for Horizon EU funding.

M21-22/04: GSA oral report

- EK reported that the GSA will host 'welcome back' week activities for PGRs from 10 January, both online and in person.
- GSA is currently taking a neutral stance on the industrial action, however, this may change at the end of January after the GSA council meeting.
- GSA staff are still working remotely.
- PGRs have expressed concerns about a lack of clarity from the University regarding the ongoing Covid-19 measures. An open letter is being drafted to request that the continuation fee be paused for a longer period of time.
- KA responded: a reassurance e-mail has been circulated to PGRs to explain the Covid-19 situation and the flexibilities that are in place around online vivas and extensions to submission. There is no additional funding to scrap continuation fees; additional funding has been used to target those in the most need, as opposed to adopting a blanket approach. The continuation fee was suspended for 18 months while there was disruption. As facilities are now open and there is no longer major disruption on campus. There are no current plans to waive continuation fees but this will remain under review given that circumstances might change.

M21-22/05: YGRS Governance Paper (Juliet James)

- The governance changes aim to ensure effective oversight of the University's PGR activity and that decision-making is transparent, consistent and efficient, following an appropriate level of scrutiny by suitably qualified individuals who represent all key stakeholders.
- The proposed changes are:
 - to refocus the YGRS Board on vision and strategy
 - to revise and expand the AFSC remit
 - to set up a new PGR Support, Development and Community Committee which will essentially promote the Operations Group to having official status within the YGRS governance structure

- to set up two new stakeholder forums for PGRs with GSA and CDTs/DTPs
- to revise the membership and reporting lines of the ToR
- to set up a direct reporting line from YGRS to Senate (on hold pending the Senate governance review)
- Impact on YGRS Board:
 - More focused on ToR and tighter membership
 - Reduced duplicated/operational activity
 - Focus on vision/strategy/bigger picture
 - Oversight of and challenge to sub-committees
- CL noted that the 'Support, Development and Community Committee' is also being referred to as the 'PGR Experience Committee' and expressed a preference for maintaining the use of one consistent name.
- CL noted that Libraries, Archives and Learning Services did not feature on the Terms of Reference of the PGR Experience Committee. **ACTION: JJ to add LALS to the ToR**
- CL noted that the Terms of Reference for the Standing Committee on Assessment will need to change, if they are required to report to another Committee. **ACTION: (Juliet James)**
- JJ passed on comments from Tracy Lightfoot. It was noted that the PVC for Learning, Teaching and Students would no longer sit on PPSC but the link between PPSC and UTC would be retained by cross-membership
- TL expressed concern about adding a new sub-committee. JJ reiterated that there would be the same number of committees as the Operations Group would be disbanded.
- TL queried how the Annual Departmental Research Review will link to PPSC's Annual Review process. JJ confirmed this is on the radar to be resolved.
- YGRS Board agreed to:
 - Recommend to URC the proposed changes to YGRSB's ToR and membership
 - Approve the proposed changes to the ToR and membership of PPSC
 - Approve the ToR and membership of the AFSC, subject to the resolution of any points raised by that committee at its next meeting (delegated to the Chair of YGRSB and PVC-R)
 - Approve the establishment, ToR and membership of a new sub-committee of YGRSB: the PGR Support, Development and Community Committee, (to replace the YGRS Operations Group)
 - Endorse the establishment of new stakeholder forums: PGRs and CTDs/DTP
 - Note that the issue of a direct reporting line to Senate from YGRS is on hold
- KA noted that amendments to the proposals would be made in the light of the

Board's comments..

M21-22/06: Annual YGRS Paper (KA)

- Despite a challenging 2021, YGRS has seen success in a number of areas:
 - York is now part of the Discovery Medicine North DTP, funded by the MRC.
 - York has had 3 Minute Thesis finalists at a national level and won the Falling Walls competition.
 - Training and induction events have continued to take place online.
 - Expenditure on PGR stipends has been maintained (approximately £10m external and £5m internal funding).
 - The CITY College PhD programme has been established.
- UoY is leading the Yorkshire Consortium for Equity on Doctoral Education (YCEDE) project:
 - The YGRS PhD Scholarship scheme has been set up to target UK Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) applicants. The scholarships include Home rate tuition fees for three years, a UKRI-aligned stipend for 3.5 years, and an annual research training support grant budget of either £5k for a lab- or field-based programme or £2k for a non-lab based programme.
 - New staff to be employed at UoY under the YCEDE project are a G7 project manager, G6 PDRA and G4 administrator.
 - YCEDE will run activities to encourage applications from BAME candidates to PhD programmes, review and reform recruitment, selection and admissions processes and policies at partner institutions based on current best evidence, and run new activities to retain and support BAME PGRs at partner institutions.
 - The governance and management structure of YCEDE includes a diverse management team, external advisory board, scholars board and evaluation and dissemination panel.
- Areas to progress in 2022:
 - Offer different models of postgraduate research programmes to meet the evolving needs and aspirations of individuals at all career stages and external partners including funders.
 - Expand the range of PGR programmes that can be completed via remote research and distance learning, in order to increase research capacity globally.
- Challenges:

- Internal: completing the PGR scholarships database project so that the University can strategically manage partnerships with funders of international PGRs and track investment in relation to the University Strategy and the Change Programme.
 - Challenges with Horizon.
 - UKRI's 'New Deal for PGRs' consultation could fundamentally change the way that UKRI-funded PGRs are funded and their status within the University.
- YB queried how UKRI's New Deal for PGRs might affect the new proposed governance structure. If PGRs are under research contracts this will be a key issue for URC. KA noted that there will be some debate across the HE sector before any changes are made. **ACTION: KA to consider and take forward.**
 - PS noted that offering placements to PGRs during their programme will soon become integral to ESRC funding. This will require a University-level response rather than a faculty-level response. WC is in agreement that Student Careers and Systems will need to be involved. KA noted that a database is being developed to track York's relationships with external stakeholders. **ACTION: Members of Student Careers and Systems and the Knowledge Exchange Team, need to be brought together to discuss the co-ordination of placements for ESRC-funded students.**
 - WC emphasised the necessity of pulling together all involved parties, noting the Interim Director of Student Careers and Systems is Hannah Smith. WC welcomed a discussion involving all stakeholders.

M21-22/07: Annual report on Complaints (Sam McElhinney)

- In 2020/21, 40 formal complaints were received by UoY, of which four were submitted by PGRs. This is fewer than in 2019/20 and the same as in 2018/9.
- PGRs are more likely to complain than UGs (this is a nationwide trend).
- There has been an increase in complaints related to disability and mental health support.
- The report includes breakdowns of numbers by department.
- York Online courses generate a high number of complaints compared to other courses.
- A recommendation from the report was a separation between the TAP panel and Review of Supervision form.
- A further recommendation was for supervisions to be recorded accurately. If the University cannot prove that supervisions took place, the OIAHE assumes they did not take place.
- The report noted that there is currently nothing in the Policy on Research Degrees requiring supervisors to manage the pastoral support of their supervisees. This was highlighted in a complaint by a disabled student whose requirements in her Student Support Plan were not being addressed by her supervisor.

- KR queried how complaints can be recorded effectively outside of a scheduled meeting. He noted that the TAP meeting is an easy access point, and PGRs already have recourse to record complaints at any other time. SM responded: plans are being made for PGRs to regularly receive invitations to record feedback on their supervision, as UG students do for their modules.
- KA noted that there is a requirement for a greater separation between the supervisor and the process for raising issues, for PGRs who want to address concerns.
- EK queried whether there is confidentiality for PGRs who complain. SM replied that this is difficult; confidentiality is maintained as far as possible, however issues cannot be fixed within departments if supervisors are not aware of the issues. If there was an issue around a supervisor/PGR relationship, a new supervisor could be assigned as per the Policy on Research Degrees.
- YB encouraged caution in making wider changes to the review of supervision on the basis of such small numbers. A separate system from a review of supervision at the end of a TAP may give the erroneous impression to the supervisor that things are being escalated more seriously.

M21-22/08: Annual supervision compliance report (SB)

- Compliance has fallen in 2021 across all areas (supervision, TAPs, and annual review of progress)
- In December 2019 a plan was developed to start interventions with departments to improve compliance. The plan has been on hold for the past two years due to the increased workload caused by the pandemic, but given the falling compliance rates this needs reviewing.
- Two new approaches are proposed to address the issue: 1) to add compliance rates to the annual PGR programme review report, so that it becomes an integral part of the programme review for reflection by departments, and 2) that YGRS undertakes targeted work with departments where compliance rates are lower than average.
- YB noted that she accepts the outcome of the report but queried whether an alternative to SkillsForge can be considered, as certain complexities around the system and processes are contributing to the issues. SB confirmed that there is no viable alternative on the market and SkillsForge will remain in place, however she appreciates that there are issues with the processes and confirmed that there are conversations ongoing with the SkillsForge Technical team to make improvements.
- Both proposal were approved. **ACTION: (Juliet to add compliance rates to PGR programme review report, YGRS to take on targeted work with departments)**

M21-22/09: Annual PGR outcomes report (SB)

- 2020/21 saw a decrease in awards, which is likely due to the increase in extensions to submission on the grounds of Covid-19.
- Female, Overseas, BAME, disabled students are overrepresented in the Revise and Resubmit data and the overall level remains the same as in previous years.
- 95% of PGRs go on to receive their intended award, even after a Revise and Resubmit outcome.
- Rates of successful progression were marginally higher than in previous years, which is likely due to the automatic progression process that was in place due to Covid-19.
- Withdrawal rates were similar to previous years. Whereas female, overseas, disabled and BAME PGRs are overrepresented for the other outcomes reported, the opposite pattern is found for withdrawals.
- SB noted that this data will inform work undertaken by KA to review and reform recruitment policy.

M21-22/10: Biannual PRES report (KA)

- The report was written by Andrea Boam from the Academic Quality Office
- The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) ran from 5 March to 17 May 2021.
- York had a lower response rate than usual (30% as opposed to 40%; 647 responses).
- PGRs were positive about the efforts of the Library, IT Support and Internal Communication, particularly during the pandemic period.
- York was the highest in the Russell Group in several areas, such as supervision and resources.
- Areas for reflection are research culture and professional development.
- The PRES report will come to the Board in future years before going to Senate.
- WC queried whether efforts to address areas for improvement can be summarised in future years. KA confirmed that this information will be gathered via the departmental Programme review forms. A summary will be brought to YGRS Board and any specific issues will be brought to the relevant sub-committee.
- EK queried whether qualitative responses from PGRs are included in the PRES. KA confirmed that there is qualitative feedback in the PRES that has been analysed by YGRS and some have prompted action.
- WC observed it was heartening to see that York's satisfaction with supervision is higher than the Russell group average. He noted that the number of complaints on the basis of supervision in the Complaints report was low.
- PS queried the idea that PGR wellbeing is the responsibility of supervisors and asked whether pastoral support could be provided at a faculty level.

Category II Business

No other business.

Date of next meeting : Monday 21 February 2022