UNIVERSITY OF YORK

York Graduate School Board
POLICY AND PROGRAMMES SUB-COMMITTEE

Meeting held on Tuesday 6 October 2015, 14.00 - 15.00 in H/G19 Heslington Hall

MINUTES

Present: Tom Stoneham (TS), John Robinson, Nigel Dandy, Juliet James, Alun Kirby (AK), Beatrice Szczepk Reed, Marjan Van Der Woude, Rasha Ibrahim, Peter Gorbert and Mike Bentley.

In attendance: Helen Poyer (HP)

15-16/1 Welcome and apologies for absence

TS welcome the Committee and noted apologies from the Academic Registrar and the Faculty Representative from the Arts and Humanities.

CATEGORY I BUSINESS

15-16/2 To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 15 June 2015

The minutes from the last meeting were approved with an action for HP to check why the recommendation by the Committee to change the wording in 12.9 of the Policy for Research Degrees was not done.

Action: HP

15-16/3 Matters arising from the minutes:

15-16/3.1 To approve the amended Terms of Reference

The amended Terms of Reference were approved with the following changes:

● Replace ‘In association with’ to ‘On behalf of’ in the first line of the first paragraph
● Replace ‘students’ with ‘programmes’ in the second line of the first paragraph
● Include a reference to the reporting line to the YGRS Board.

Action: HP to amend the ToR

15-16/4 To receive an oral report from the Chair

TS gave an overview of the agenda items and suggested that for agenda item 10, the Committee also discuss whether straightforward new programme approvals could be approved by Chair’s Action in future. There was also a tabled paper ‘ArchSci2020’ to be noted under AOB.

15-16/5 To receive an oral report from the GSA representative/s
The GSA Manager and Student Welfare Officer reported that there were no urgent concerns they wished to bring to the Committee’s attention however there was an issue with some PGR students in Electronics who were being charged ‘lab fees’ even though their particular research does not require any use of such equipment. TS confirmed he was aware of the issue and would be discussing it further with the Head of Department in Electronics. Environment and Archaeology have had similar issues and Environment has now introduced a different PGR degree route to accommodate those who do not use laboratory space which allows them to charge a lower fee. TS asserted this was a straightforward solution to the issue and such a proposal from the Electronics department could be brought to a future PPC meeting should they wish to address the issue.

Action: TS to contact Electronics HoD

The GSA representatives also asked the Chair what sort of issues he would expect them to bring to PPC. TS asserted there was no fixed criteria and that the Committee wished to have a standing item for the GSA on the agenda so that any issues relating to PGR programmes and the experiences of could be brought to the fore. TS asked that if the GSA wished to add a specific agenda item and / or paper to the Committee then they should contact HP in advance.

15-16/6 To discuss and clarify the process of updating the Policy for Research Degrees and, if applicable, Regulation 2 for 2016/17 (Oral report - Head of RSAT)

AK informed to the Committee that the updating of the PoRD for 2015-16 had been managed by ASO whilst the YGRS was bedding in however future updating and revision would now fall under the remit of the Research Student Administration Team (RSAT). This would include responsibility for the updating of all PGR related forms and webpages in consultation, where appropriate, with other relevant stakeholders throughout the University. RSAT would also ensure any recommended revisions to the PoRD that may affect Regulation 2 of the University’s Ordinances and Regulations were forwarded on.

AK proposed the following timeline to ensure all revisions are timely and enable submission to Senate for approval in June:

- RSAT begins revisions in Autumn and early Spring term
- Potential changes to the PoRD to be submitted to PPC for consideration at the February meeting
- Any required amendments following the meeting will be carried out
- Revised draft of the PoRD re-submitted to PPC for consideration to the April meeting
- Final revision, if required, following the meeting will be carried out
- Final draft of the PoRD to be submitted to YGRS Board at the May meeting
- Approved PoRD, and Briefing Note defining changes, to be submitted to Senate in June

The Committee approved the timeline.
To approve a proposal to replace current PGR progression policy

TS gave a brief overview of the reasons for the decision to change the PGR progression policy:

1. The current term ‘Confirmation of Enrolment’ suggests we are not confident of our admissions decisions so it is more appropriate to enrol or accept a student onto a programme at the beginning of their studies and to then monitor the progress of the student thereafter. This would bring PGR programmes more in line with the UG and PGT experience.

2. A recent QAA report at the University of Southampton, which has a similar ‘upgrade’ process as the current one at York, found that it led to a great variance of timings for the ‘Confirmation of Enrolment’ event. The QAA did not feel this was good practice and recommended that Southampton ensure a more consistent approach to the timing of the ‘upgrade’ panel is adopted.

3. The same QAA report also recommended that the student’s supervisor should not form part of the upgrade panel - this is a practice also currently carried out at York.

The proposed PGR policy aims to provide a more consistent and objective approach to monitoring PGR progression while still offering flexibility in the timing and submission of work requirements for both the student and department.

The Committee had the following comments:

- would there be a specific University criteria for the submission of work for each progression point?

TS confirmed that there would be a University template for inclusion in departmental PGR handbooks as to the progression procedure overall however it would be up to the department as to what they felt was appropriate evidence for assessing progress. Departments would be asked to submit their guidance on what evidence they will require of students prior to the implementation of the new progression policy. TS informed the Committee however that departments must provide guidance on a programme specific basis and not tailored to individual students and / or research groups.

- How will departments implement the new progression policy?

TS responded that departments can structure it as fits them best, bearing in mind subject discipline and workload. It could be mapped on to the existing TAP process or departments may wish to set up a dedicated programme panel where such decisions are made. TS will assist departments with any set up advice that may be needed.

- Why does the Chair of the progression panel need to be a Professor or a Reader?

TS agreed this was not a relevant requirement, the main requirement was that the Chair is an experienced supervisor capable of assessing research progress in their discipline. It was agreed to amend this requirement.
Some smaller departments may not have enough suitably experienced staff available who have knowledge in the subject area, what will they do?

TS clarified that a departmental progression panel does not need to contain an expert on the student’s research topic. Along with the submission of evidence from the student, the student’s supervisor will also submit a detailed report on whether the student meets the criteria to the panel for consideration. The panel should have the relevant supervisory experience to be able to make a judgement on the student’s progression by the material submitted to it.

The 2 week window may be too tight, can this be extended?

The Committee discussed the issue and agreed that a four week window was more appropriate. This will be amended in the new policy. Departments will need to think carefully about submission of work deadlines for students. It was suggested that there might be a standard date for submission of evidence even if the meeting of the panel varied within the four week window.

Progression points

The Committee agreed that there did not seem a need for three formal progression points for a three year PhD programme and suggested the following:

- A standard three year PhD programme would have two formal progression points at the end of Year 1 and Year 2.
- A TAP meeting at the end of Year 3 should take place for those students going into a Continuation Year. Departments should be clear about setting expectations for the Continuation Year.

The Committee also noted the following:

- The new progression policy will be addressed in supervisor training and RDT will be asked to be responsive to requests from departments for such training throughout the year.
- The proposed online supervisory forms via Skills Forge will ensure that supervisors are aware of the requirement for the end of Year 3 TAP and all formal progression requirements as outlined in the new policy.
- RSAT will also be able to monitor that the relevant meetings are taking place via the proposed Skills Forge online supervisory form.
- RSAT will experience a higher workload following the move from one formal progression point to two. TS agreed to discuss this further with RSAT outside of the meeting.

The Committee approved the policy with the aforementioned amendments. TS informed the Committee that the revised policy would go out to departments and the implementation will begin. Departments will be offered every assistance with the implementation.

Action: TS / AK to inform depts.
15-16/8  To approve a proposal to append Confirmation of Registration policy

TS gave an overview of the background to the proposal, namely that departments had not been aware that the Confirmation of Registration deadline is a hard deadline and missing this timeframe means the student has essentially failed. Any requests made by a department to extend the Confirmation deadline can only be made in the final three months prior to the Confirmation deadline and will go to Research SCC for consideration. The proposal was welcomed by the Committee and it was approved. RSAT will take the new policy to a Graduate Administrators Forum in the early Spring term. TS confirmed that the new progression policy will apply to students starting in 2016-17 and will run in parallel with the ‘old’ policy.

Action: AK to raise at Graduate Administrators Forum

15-16/9  To approve a proposal for a PhD by Distance Learning in Computer Science

TS thanked the Faculty Representatives for the Sciences and Social Sciences and confirmed that their comments would be forwarded to the department. The Committee considered that it was a good proposal and that it should be approved. Care needed to be taken to ensure the quality of support for distance learning students was comparable to on site students and the GSA would monitor this. TS confirmed there would be a requirement for a dedicated Programme Lead and that distance learning students would be offered a tailored institutional induction in the Welcome Week.

Action: AK / HP to forward comments and outcome to CS

15-16/10  To approve a proposal for MA by Research in Social Policy and Social Work

The Committee approved the proposal and furthermore agreed that such straightforward programme proposals could, in future, be considered and approved by Chair’s Action. TS requested that SPSW clarify that research ethics issues are not limited to research involving human subjects.

Action: AK / HP to forward comments and outcome to SPSW

15-16/11  AOB

The Academic Support Office (ASO) submitted a tabled paper for the Committee to note that a proposal for a joint PhD programme had been approved in the Department of Archaeology and there was now an urgent need to put in motion the mechanism for running such a programme. The structure supporting the Aarhus programme would be a useful starting point. RSAT had raised the concern that the student cohort would essentially be members of staff on a full time salary. The University’s regulations state that full time PhD students must not work more than 20 hours a week and therefore it was agreed that the YGRS Board could perhaps grant exceptional approval for the ArchSci2020 cohort. A full programme proposal would be submitted by ASO at a future PPC meeting. TS commented that an extraordinary meeting may be required for consideration of the proposal in March 2016 so it could be approved in time for the May 2016 meeting of Senate.

Action: HP to set up a May date for PPC
15-16/12 Date of next meeting: 26 November 2015, 11.00 - 12.00, H/G15 (Heslington Hall)