

UNIVERSITY OF YORK
YORK GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL

Policy and Programmes Sub-Committee

**Annual Programme Review (APR) 2015/16 Summary Report:
Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes and Students**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. This report provides a summary of issues identified from the 2015/2016 APR process that relate to postgraduate research (PGR) degree programmes and students. The report aims to identify where issues require action, and also note where issues have been, or are the process of being, resolved. This report only highlights issues that are common across a number of departments or require consideration or action at University level.

- 1.2. This report was approved by the PPSC at its meeting on 15 February 2017. This report will be circulated to Chairs of Boards of Studies and Graduate School Boards, and relevant support offices. Departments will receive a brief individual response to their APR report that references this report where appropriate.

2. ISSUES RAISED

- 2.1. The general tone of responses was positive. A number of departments provided helpful updates on how they had addressed issues flagged in last year's APR reports (e.g. Archaeology, Environment, Psychology). Where new or ongoing concerns were identified there was often evidence that the departments were already taking steps to resolve the issues. Good practice identified included Archaeology's 'breakfast club' for PGR students and annual progression days for students in several Departments.

Role of the YGRS

2.2 A number of departments (e.g. Environment, Language and Linguistic Science) commented positively on the role of the YGRS, although Biology felt the lines of communication between YGRS and Graduate School Boards could be improved. There was praise for the standardised student handbook template, and the YGRS conference fund.

ACTION: Ensure terms of reference, membership, minutes and dates of meetings of all YGRS committees are available online and notify Chairs of GSB (RSAT).

Recruitment of PhD students – funding, fees, and competition

2.3 Looking across all departments, the biggest concern was, perhaps, how to attract sufficient students, and the best students, to research degree programmes against a background of limited studentships (CMS, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics, English, History of Art, Language and Linguistic Sciences, Mathematics), high levels of competition for students (Biology, Economics, English, TYMS), international uncertainty (CMS), and increased international fees (Chemistry).

ACTION: This is a research excellence and funding issue. The University's budget to support research studentships is currently fully committed to the provision of match funding to support bids to research councils and other major funders. Chair to attend ADRR (Annual Departmental Research Review) panels in July to discuss specific issues.

Space

2.4 As last year, concerns about access to appropriate desk space for research students featured in a number of reports (CMS, Health Sciences, TYMS, Law, SPSW), although some departments noted improvements in their space situation (Education, Environment, Mathematics, Politics).

ACTION: To continue to work with Directors of ReCSS, HRC and Library to ensure the effective use of existing space (Chair). PGR space review being coordinated by Operations Manager, Stuart Jolley, during 2016-17 (a commitment from 2016) to take into account new desk space available since last review (Chair).

Research degree provision delivered through DTPs

2.5 Biology noted its desire to work with the YGRS and other departments to improve the management, finance and administration of cross-departmental and inter-university collaborations.

ACTION: To ensure the YGRS supports this aspect of all new collaborative proposals (Chair).

2.6 English and History of Art noted concerns about the allocation process for PhD studentships for the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities (WRoCAH), while Economics raised a similar concern about the ESRC White Rose Doctoral Training Partnership (WRDTP). Economics also flagged its disquiet about the academic impact of the introduction of the Faculty-wide MA in Social Research programme.

ACTION: Concerns about allocation to be relayed to relevant DTP managers (ASO). Concerns about the MA in Social Research to be referred to Associate PVC-T&L (ASO).

Actions to address issues identified in the 2016 PRES results

Integration into an active research community

2.7 An encouraging number of departments (including Archaeology, Education, Environment, Mathematics, Philosophy, Politics, Psychology, Sociology, SPSW) report on the action that has been taken to ensure that research students feel integrated into an active research community, for example, greater integration of students into research clusters, new student-led events and forums for the presentation of student work, more student involvement in departmental research seminars and events, and student 'buddy' systems.

Research skills and professional development

2.8 An encouraging number of departments (including Archaeology, CMS, Education, Electronics, Environment, Psychology, Sociology, SPSW) also noted action being taken to improve research students' access to skills training, professional development opportunities and careers advice, with initiatives often arising from student feedback.

ACTION: To develop a University approach to Training Needs Analysis and its monitoring for research students covering research skills, professional skills, and employability (a commitment from 2016) (YGRS Ops Group). To work with Careers to

guide the introduction of the York Award Gold which will be made available to research students (Chair).

Research student progression: policy and process

2.9 The implementation of the new policy on annual progression points for research students was identified as a priority for a significant number of departments (e.g. Archaeology, Computer Science, Economics, English, Environment, History of Art, Language and Linguistic Science, Physics, Sociology) this academic year. Concerns about the impact of the new policy on staff workload remained but there were also positive comments about the changes (e.g. Electronics, Health Sciences, Psychology).

ACTION: To undertake a light touch review of policy on annual progression points in Autumn 2017 to identify required policy and systems improvements (RSAT).

2.10 The introduction of Skills Forge for the recording of supervision and TAP meetings was noted by several departments but concern was expressed about the late introduction, and notification, of the changes (Archaeology, Biology, Chemistry, Education, Health Sciences, Physics).

ACTION: To report on SkillsForge usage to YGRS Board (Feb 2017) followed by a review of possible improvements (RSAT).

2.11 English requested more information and better training with respect to granting leave of absence to research students, and raised a concern about the perceived harshness of Special Cases Committee.

ACTION: To review the guidance and training on applying for leave of absence and programme extensions for research students (RSAT). To flag to Special Cases Committee the concerns raised by English (Chair).

2.12 Biology noted that tracking research students who had left could be problematic and that systems improvements would help.

ACTION: To bring to PPSC a recommendation that all PGR students should be required to obtain an ORCID registration (RSAT). To recommend to the Office of Philanthropic Partnerships and Alumni/Heidi Fraser-Krauss changes to the alumni.york.ac.uk email

service (including continuity of user name, ability to import contacts from the york.ac.uk address, and forwarding functionality) to improve uptake and use of the service amongst PGR students (Chair).

Supervision and staff capacity

2.13 Three departments (Archaeology, Computer Science, Mathematics) noted action that had been taken to address specific issues around supervision. Education and TYMS noted concerns about supervisory capacity, particularly the need for enough supervisors within particular research areas (Education) and with sufficient experience (TYMS). History of Art felt that research supervision should be classed as a combination of teaching, research and administration in terms of workload modelling, not just as research.

ACTION: Departments to be encouraged to align PGR recruitment with Research Strategy through the ADRR process (Chair and Associate Deans). Departments to note that with respect to research supervision the workload modelling reflects why the task is being undertaken.

Distance learning PhDs

2.14 Several departments (Archaeology, Computer Science, Education) flagged the introduction (or proposed introduction) of distance-learning PhDs.

ACTION: To undertake in 2017/2018 a light-touch review of distance-learning PhDs and in the meantime develop guidance for departments on good practice in supporting distance-learners (including a template for individual student agreements) (ASO).

Examination procedures

2.15 Economics was concerned that new guidance on the choice of external examiners, with the aim of avoiding actual or perceived conflicts of interest, could seriously limit the pool of potential examiners. Economics was also concerned that a new process for requesting an extension for an oral examination date was administratively burdensome and had a suggestion for an alternative approach.

ACTION: To remind Economics that the guidance to SCA members on external examiner appointments is to ensure not only that there is no bias, but also that there is no perception of bias (as might be generated by a collaborative relationship between the

supervisor and the external examiner on a topic related to the student's research). To reassure Economics that decisions about external examiner appointments are made by academic members of SCA and that if a Department can provide a convincing rationale for the appointment of a particular external examiner (e.g. in a very niche area of research) that SCA may be willing to consider an exception to a particular rule. (ASO). To review the process by which departments can request an extension for an oral examination date in the light of Economics' comments (RSAT).

Library

2.16 Education wanted clarification regarding access to the Library in a continuation period.

ACTION: Rules on Library access are clear - students have access throughout their continuation period - but this will be incorporated in the PoRD.

Postgraduates Who Teach (PGWT) [note – formally the responsibility of UTC]

2.17 A number of reports (e.g. Education, History of Art, Mathematics) commented on work being undertaken to improve training for PGWT. RETT (reporting as part of Academic Practice) raised concerns about the future of University-level training for PGWT.

ACTION: To request clarification regarding the future of University-level PGWT training (Chair of UTC). To remind UTC to review its guidance on PGWT (requested in 2015/2016 but not yet undertaken), drawing on good practice identified by RETT.