

**UNIVERSITY OF YORK**  
**YORK GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL**

**Policies and Programmes Sub-Committee**

**Annual Programme Review (APR) 2017/18:  
Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes and Students**

The following paper summarises themes and issues arising from the 2017/18 Annual Programme Review (APR) reports that relate to postgraduate research degree programmes. A number of actions have been identified in response to the issues raised.

The draft report was discussed at the meeting of the Policy and Programmes Sub-Committee on 8 February 2019 in order to agree the final report and the approved actions.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1. This paper summarises themes and issues identified from the 2017/2018 Annual Programme Review (APR) reports that relate to postgraduate research (PGR) degree programmes. The paper aims to identify where issues require action, and also note where issues have been, or are the process of being, resolved. A number of actions are ongoing or have been postponed from the last academic year.
- 1.2. This paper highlights themes and issues that are common across a number of departments or require consideration or action at University level. A final version of this paper (incorporating any comments from the Committee) will be circulated to Chairs of Boards of Studies and Graduate School Boards.
- 1.3. Departments will also receive a brief individual response to their APR report that references this paper where appropriate but also addresses departmental themes and issues that are not covered here. Where departmental issues are considered to be of particular concern (e.g. the long-awaited review of supervision within Computer Science, and the poor progression and examination results in the York Law School), the Dean will contact the department concerned for a discussion. Issues for the attention of relevant services (e.g. Information Services, Research Student Administration (RSA), Marketing, Student Recruitment and Admissions) will be referred on for information and/or response.
- 1.4. Overall, the tone of the APR reports is broadly positive. Many of the themes and issues raised are common to previous years and this is noted where relevant. PPSC is reminded that the Postgraduate Research Student Experience Survey (PRES) was not conducted in the 2017/2018 academic year, although three departments (CMS, Economics, Psychology) comment on their 2017 PRES results, and a number of departments comment on actions taken in response to the 2017 PRES results.

**2. UNIVERSITY-WIDE THEMES AND ISSUES**

**Reporting duplication**

2.1 In 2016/2017, the PGR APR questions were revised to avoid duplication with the Annual Departmental Research Review (ADDR) process. Once again, a number of departments (Archaeology, Biology, CMS, Economics, Environment, Language and Linguistic Science, Politics Sociology, SPSW) raise issues around PGR recruitment, funding and DTP/CDTs that should instead be raised via the ADDR process.

### **Progression policy**

2.2 Many departments (CMS, Chemistry, Economics, Education, Electronic Engineering, History of Art, Language and Linguistic Science, Psychology, TFTV) report that the second year of the implementation of the new PGR student progression policy had gone smoothly (some after having made changes to their progression procedures in the light of their experience of year one of the implementation), with some positive feedback on the impact of the policy (e.g. the role of the second attempt at meeting the progression criteria in bringing under-performing students up to standard at an early stage). A small number of departments (CMS, English, Health Sciences) are considering making changes to their progression procedures for the third year of the implementation. Mathematics mentions a briefing session for students on the progression requirements, and monitoring more generally, which is an example of good practice.

2.3 Three departments (Archaeology, History of Art and – as noted in the PPSC meeting – Biology) raise concerns that the progression policy has led to increased pressure on students. In the case of Archaeology, this may be linked to issues around SkillsForge (see below). A number of departments raise concerns about staff workload (Education, Health Sciences, History of Art) and one department (Physics) feels that elements of the progression form are redundant.

#### *Update to existing actions:*

*In the light of the broadly positive feedback from departments and the figures on progression compliance complied by RSA, PPSC has decided that a review of the policy on PGR student progression is not currently needed. RSA will continue to identify any required policy and systems improvements.*

*RSA will, once again, remind departments that they can make changes to those aspects of PGR student progression that fall under departmental control but that approval for any changes must be sought from PPSC (NB these will normally be dealt with by Chair's action for speed and convenience).*

#### *New action:*

***The Dean, with RSA and ASO, will meet with Archaeology, History of Art and Biology to discuss their concerns about the impact of the progression policy on their students.***

### **SkillsForge**

2.4 Feedback on SkillsForge (and associated systems) continues to be mixed. Some departments provide positive feedback on the embedding and acceptance of SkillsForge (Archaeology, Chemistry, English, SPSW) but several departments (Archaeology, Biology, Computer Science, Education, English, Mathematics, Music, Philosophy, Physics) comment that SkillsForge is creating stress for students and/or additional work for staff and students (e.g. Biology's concern about the difficulties of editing and signing forms). Archaeology and Computer Science raise major concerns about automated emails sent to students when a progression deadline was missed: these were felt to be unhelpful and poorly worded and, although the issue had been raised with RSA, in the case of Archaeology at least, it appeared not to have been fully resolved. Some departments comment positively on the SkillsForge

support received from RSA (Archaeology, Chemistry) but there is a sense that the support available is insufficient (Biology, Chemistry).

*Update to existing actions:*

*First line support for SkillsForge is transferring from SkillsForge to Student Systems (Student Services) within the University. This change will help to release resource in SkillsForge in order to focus on technical development and management. It will also allow Student Systems and RSA to analyse requests and identify patterns, better enabling them to prioritise development and fixes in dialogue with SkillsForge. The Dean will be monitoring this transfer of responsibility, and its impact, closely and alternative suppliers will be considered if the situation with SkillsForge does not improve.*

*New action:*

***RSA is in the process of revising the wording of the automated emails for missed deadlines and these should be in use shortly. Automated e-mails chasing overdue progression deadlines will also be delayed by seven days.***

#### **Space for PGR students**

2.5 Some departments report positively on the space available (CWS) or space improvements (Mathematics, Philosophy), others note the need to look at the use of space by PGRs within their department (Computer Science, Sociology) or raise ongoing desk space concerns (CMS, Environment, Health Sciences, Law, Politics, Sociology), though the latter category is smaller in number than in previous years. Where desk space within a department is lacking, in addition to the impact on the recruitment and the research community, issues of data security are raised (Health Sciences)

*Update to existing action:*

*A further timetabling review is on hold pending the results of the Savings and Efficiencies Project.*

#### **Research training and professional development**

2.6 Many departments highlight their achievements and/or plans in relation to research training (Chemistry, Computer Sciences, English, History of Art, Language and Linguistic Science, Law, TYMS, Mathematics, Physics, Psychology, Sociology, SPSW) and professional development/employability (CMS, Economics, Education, English, History of Art, Mathematics, Psychology, Sociology) including training for GTAs (Computer Science, Education, Environment, Physics), part-time students (TYMS) and international students (Chemistry, Music). Departments noting significant enhancements to their training provision include English (separating PGR training from PGT), Physics (plans for a Chemistry-style cohort based training package for non-DTP students), TYMS (a new suite of training courses) and Sociology (a more systematic/comprehensive in-house training offer).

*Update to existing action:*

*RETT have been working with SkillsForge to design a Training Needs Analysis (covering research skills, professional skills, and employability) which maps onto the PGR journey. It is hoped that this might be available for launch later in the Spring Term.*

*New actions:*

***RETT is working with Careers to provide better signposting and packaging of support for PGR students.***

***The Dean will continue to raise the issue of the lack of dedicated PGR resource in Careers with the new Academic Registrar.***

***RETT to work with SkillsForge to identify how the system can be used to capture all training undertaken by students, i.e. including that provided departmentally and externally, in***

*order that a student may produce a full transcript of the training that they have undertaken as a PGR student.*

2.7 Biology raises the issue of whether PGR students should be encouraged/required to have a presence on PURE in order to raise their professional profile.

**New action:**

***Biology's feedback to be passed to the Research Strategy and Policy Office. NB The RSPO has previously noted that it is desirable for PGR students have a profile on PURE but it is a low priority compared to REF.***

### **Research community**

2.8 As last year, there is a strong theme of community, both in term of facilitating a distinctive, active and inclusive PGR community within departments (Archaeology, Biology, CMS, CWS, Education, English, Environment, History of Art, Language and Linguistic Science, TYMS, Music, Philosophy, Politics, Sociology, TFTV) and ensuring that PGR students are fully integrated into the research life of their departments (Archaeology, CMS, Computer Science, Education, English, Environment, Language and Linguistic Science, Law, Mathematics, Philosophy, Politics, Sociology, SPSW, TFTV). Many positive community-building initiatives are mentioned, including a wide range of PGR student-led events, events which bring staff together with students, and cohort-building activities (e.g. Biology has introduced dedicated meetings with its Masters by Research students). A considerable number of departments highlight the value of an annual postgraduate research conference, some of which are linked to the new progression process (e.g. CMS, CWS, TYMS, TFTV). One department (CWS) has launched a postgraduate journal and another (History of Art) hopes to do likewise. Physics suggested that more might be done at University level (e.g. in terms of space provision and training opportunities) to enhance the experience of non-DTP PhD students.

### **Student well-being and mental health**

2.9 As last year, student well-being and mental health is a frequent theme (Archaeology, Biology, Chemistry, Music, Physics), with a number of departments highlighting attempts to improve well-being and reduce mental health issues (Biology, Chemistry, TYMS), including within particular demographic groups (Chemistry). Chemistry's various well-being initiatives have previously been shared at a Gradmins meeting but a new development is the introduction of a voluntary annual leave tracking system to encourage conversations about work-life balance. Biology raises concerns that a lack of support for disabled PGR students may impact upon their well-being

*Update to existing action:*

***YGRS has added PGR student well-being and mental health to its key objectives and work undertaken in this area has included support for the student-led 'how to survive your PhD (and enjoy it)' workshops.***

**New actions:**

***The Dean to raise the issue of support for disabled PGR students with the new Academic Registrar.***

***Chemistry to be asked to present on their voluntary annual leave tracking system at a future meeting of the Gradmins Forum.***

### **Supervision**

2.10 Supervision is mentioned by a number of departments (CWS, Economics, Environment, TYMS, Philosophy, Physics, Sociology, TFTV), with CWS raising issues of workload recognition

when staff supervise students from outside their own department. Four departments mention initiatives to improve supervision: Environment has introduced (well-attended) supervision training sessions for staff and students to discuss expectations around supervision and communication, in TYMS a supervision masterclass was run in association with RETT, Physics is planning a staff forum on supervision and PGR support, and TFTV is reviewing supervisor protocols for their expanded Masters by Research provision.

**New actions:**

***Dean to make resources on good practice in PGR student supervision available online for all departments to access.***

**New forms of PGR provision**

2.11 Commentary on existing distance learning PGR programmes is rather limited. No major issues are flagged, although History of Arts notes the need to improve the electronic interface with distance learners and Archaeology comments on its desire to integrate distance learners with other PGR students. Two departments raise the possibility of introducing new distance learning programmes (Health Sciences, Music).

*Update to existing action:*

*The planned light-touch review of distance learning PhD provision will take place in 2019/20 as noted at the last PPSC meeting (M18-19/04 refers).*

**New action:**

***Dean to speak to the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences regarding the FLTG's non-approval of new distance-learning PhD programmes in Education.***

2.12 Archaeology, in the light of the completion of its first joint PhD students, comments on the importance of agreeing the details of practical arrangements, e.g. in relation to communications and examination processes, as early as possible in a collaborative PhD programme. Health Sciences flags that it is in the process of establishing a double PhD with the University of Maastricht.

*Update to the existing action:*

*The planned light-touch review of joint and double PhD provision is now underway, with support from Aarhus University.*

2.13 Two departments (Law, and, for the second year running, Economics) mention the possibility of introducing an integrated PhD programme (in the case of Economics in response to concerns about the training offered as part of the ESRC DTP, see below).

***PhDs by published papers***

2.14 The University's rules already permit Boards of Studies to allow their students to submit a thesis based on academic papers (rather than a more traditional monograph). Archaeology has suggested that supervisors and examiners would benefit from more advice and guidance on this approach to a thesis.

***New action:***

***RSA/ASO to look at improving the guidance on PhDs based on academic papers.***

### **3 FACULTY-SPECIFIC ISSUES AND THEMES**

***Arts and Humanities***

***White Rose College of Arts and Humanities (WRoCAH)***

3.1 Archaeology and English raise concerns about their disappointing performance in the WRoCAH DTP, and English about how WRoCAH DTP2 will operate. Concerns about performance in, and operation of, WRoCAH are issues for the ADDR reporting process rather than APR but the detailed comments on WRoCAH will be forwarded to the Director of WRoCAH for information and action where appropriate. Encouragingly, Archaeology has identified a series of actions to improve its WRoCAH success rate, including writing workshops in advance of the application deadline, improved communications with prospective students and one-to-one sessions with new staff. Support for WRoCAH departments has also been provided by the HRC. Success in WRoCAH requires a shift in culture, with departments taking the initiative, and providing ongoing engagement, with prospective WRoCAH students.

***Social Sciences***

**ESRC DTP**

3.2 A small number of departments raise concerns about the training provided by the MA in Social Research for ESRC-funded students (Economics, Language and Linguistic Science, and Psychology in the Science Faculty). This is an issue for the ADDR reporting process rather than APR but the detailed comments will be forwarded to the Director of the ESRC DTP for information and action where appropriate.

***Sciences***

**Equality of opportunity**

3.3 Two departments (Chemistry, Physics) comment on efforts to improve equality of opportunity in the area of gender.

---