

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

YORK GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL

Policies and Programmes Sub-Committee

Annual Programme Review (APR) 2018/19:  
Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes and Students

The following paper summarises themes and issues arising from the 2018/19 Annual Programme Review reports that relate to postgraduate research degree programmes. A number of actions have been identified in response to the issues raised.

This report and actions were approved at the meeting of the Policy and Programmes Sub-Committee (PPSC) on 13 February 2020.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 This paper summarises themes and issues identified from the 2018/2019 Annual Programme Review (APR) reports that relate to postgraduate research (PGR) degree programmes. 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, along with any actions carried over. The paper aims to identify where issues require action, and also note where issues have been, or are the process of being, resolved.
- 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. Issues for the attention of relevant services (e.g. Information Services, Research Student Administration (RSA), Marketing, Student Recruitment and Admissions (SRA)) will be referred on for information and/or response.

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

**Postgraduate Research Student Experience Survey**

- 2.1 The Postgraduate Research Student Experience Survey (PRES) was conducted in the 2018/2019 academic year. Departments were asked to reflect on their results and comment on them in their APR reports (in particular where results were particularly high or low compared to the institutional average). The commentary provided by some departments (e.g. Chemistry, Education, Electronics) is comprehensive, while other departments provide a more limited commentary (though in some cases this is due either to very positive results across the board, or results close to institutional averages).

*New action:*

- Meet with History and TYMS to discuss their PRES results (Dean).

**Student well-being and mental health**

- 2.2 As in previous years, student well-being and mental health is a frequent theme (Archaeology, Biology, Education, Electronic Engineering, English and Related Literature, Health Sciences, Music, Philosophy, Psychology), with a number of departments highlighting initiatives to improve well-being and reduce mental health issues, including: supervisor training and support, and peer support (Archaeology); an extended induction process, changes to TAP meetings and the introduction of a holiday log (Biology); plans to work with student representatives (Electronic Engineering), and a PhD festival which includes a

pastoral focus (English). Improving or re-thinking induction (particularly for students arriving during the academic year) features in a number of reports (Chemistry, Education, Electronic Engineering, Environment and Geography, Health Sciences, Music).

*Closed 2017/2018 APR actions:*

- The Dean raised the issue of support for disabled PGR students with the Academic Registrar
- Chemistry presented on their voluntary annual leave tracking system to the Gradmin Forum in May 2019.

*New actions:*

- Work with Jo Hardy (Student and Academic Services) to consider whether a short-version of the mental first aid course tailored for PGR supervisors might be developed and, if so, the timeline for this given the resource implications (Ops Group)
- Meet with Biology to discuss the welfare issues raised (Dean and RSA)
- Ask Electronic Engineering to supply the job description for their Research Student Counsellor to see if this good practice might be shared (Dean).

*Related activity:*

- Continuing support for the student-led 'how to survive your PhD (and enjoy it)' workshops (YGRS)
- Recent audit of well-being support across academic departments and support services to identify gaps and good practice. Will be reported to YGRS Operations Group in February (Dean).
- Promotion of the new national Wellbeing Thesis resource (RSA and GSA)
- Work of the PGR student Liaison Officer (RETT).

**Research culture, community and integration**

- 2.3 As in previous years, departmental efforts to enhance their PGR's experience of research culture, through initiatives to improve the PGR community and enhance PGR student integration, feature in a majority of reports. In some cases, new action has been prompted by PRES results indicating a need to focus on this area e.g. Archaeology, Computer Science, Education, Environment and Geography, Health Sciences, History of Art, Politics, TFTI.

*New action:*

- The highest scoring departments – in the relevant dimension in PRES - in each Faculty to be asked to contribute a very short case study on how they promote a positive research culture for distribution within each Faculty (ASO); to feed into a possible wider project on what constitutes good practice in research culture (RETT, RSPO, ASO).

**Progression policy**

- 2.4 Whilst the University's progression policy still features in a notable number of this year's reports (CMS, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics and Related Studies, Education, Electronic Engineering, Environment and Geography, History of Art, Language and Linguistic Science, Law, Psychology, TYMS, TFTI), it does so less prominently than in the past two years, reflecting a move to business as normal. A number of departments have taken, or are taking, steps to improve the information or training that they provide for their students (e.g. CMS, Chemistry, Computer Science, Environment and Geography, TYMS) and/or staff (Psychology, TYMS). TYMS flags difficulties with both the practicalities of managing the progression process and academic buy-in for the policy.

*Closed 2017/2018 APR action:*

- The Dean and RSA/ASO met with Archaeology, History of Art and Biology to discuss their concerns about the impact of the progression policy on their students. The conversations were positive and the issues resolved.

*New action:*

- Meet with TYMS to discuss its progression issues (Dean/RSA).

### **SkillsForge**

- 2.5 Comments on SkillsForge (and associated systems) are greatly reduced (Biology, CMS, English and Related Literature), with only one negative comment (Biology), in this year's reports which suggests that the system is bedding-in and issues are gradually being resolved.

#### *Closed 2017/2018 APR actions:*

- RSA revised the wording of the automated emails for missed deadlines, and automated e-mails chasing overdue progression deadlines are now delayed by seven days
- The transfer of first line support for SkillsForge from SkillsForge to Student Systems continues to be monitored but appears to be working successfully.

#### *New action:*

- Follow up Biology's issues with SkillsForge (Student Systems).

### **The PGR student voice and oversight of PGR matters**

- 2.6 A number of reports note efforts to improve the student voice (Biology, Education, TYMS, Physics) and/or improve the oversight PGR programmes and students (Computer Science, TYMS, Politics, SPSW).

#### *New actions:*

- Produce guidance on good practice in the oversight of PGR programme and students (Dean)
- Produce guidance on ways of enhancing the PGR student voice (Dean and GSA)
- Trial an annual meeting of GSB Chairs (or equivalent) for each Faculty, with the Dean and GSA, to discuss key issues (Dean).

### **Space for PGR students**

- 2.7 Concerns about a lack of space for PGR students (either generally or within the department's main building) continue to feature in a number of reports (Health Sciences, History, Language and Linguistic Science, Mathematics, Music, Politics, Sociology, TFTI), but in some cases with the proviso that the issue is being managed at present (CMS, CWS, Electronic Engineering, Environment and Geography). There are some positive comments about space (Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics and Related Studies, Philosophy, Psychology), including the resolution, or future resolution of space issues (Education, Law). Noted that appropriate space – that enables PGR students and staff to build communities - can be an important factor in terms of establishing a positive research culture.

#### *Closed 2017/2018 APR action:*

- The timetabling review was put on hold pending the results of the Savings and Efficiencies Project but the Dean continues to discuss space management for PGRs (Dean).

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

- 2.8 As in previous years, a majority of departments highlight their achievements and/or plans in relation to research training, professional development and employability. In some cases, new action has been prompted by PRES results indicating a need to focus on this area. One department (Biology) highlights poor support for PGRs from Careers.

#### *Closed 2017/2018 APR actions:*

- A Training Needs Analysis tool (covering research skills, professional skills, and employability) is now available in SkillsForge
- There is now a dedicated PG advisor in Careers (Janice Simpson)
- Careers has been working with RETT to provide better signposting and packaging of support for PGR students, including new PGR webpages.

#### *2017/2018 APR actions carried over:*

- Work with SkillsForge to identify the easiest way to enable the capture in SkillsForge of 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 (RETT and SkillsForge)

- Continue to lobby the Research Strategy and Policy Office for PGR students to have a profile on PURE, with a suggestion that this might be added to the PURE development list for January 2021 (Dean).

*New actions:*

- Refer Chemistry's request for the central provision of scientific writing training for PGR students to the Writing and Language Skills Centre (ASO)
- Refer Biology's concerns about student and supervisor access to, and comprehensibility of, project budget reports (for student training and consumables) to Natalie Armstrong (Dean).

### **Supervision**

2.9 Supervision is mentioned in a number of reports but mainly only to reflect on positive PRES results in this area. Additionally, the CWS report raises issues around the loading on staff (considered during its periodic review) and sharing income when students are supervised across departments, and the Computer Science report recognises a need to improve communication on supervision responsibilities.

*Closed 2017/2018 APR action:*

- Resources on good practice in PGR student supervision are now available on a wiki site for departments to access.

*New action:*

- Add the recommended income split for cross-departmental co-supervision, to reflect the additional contribution made by the administrative lead department, to the PoRD (ASO).

*Related activity:*

- The new online supervisor training (Becoming an Effective Supervisor Training - BEST) will soft-launch later in the Spring Term (RETT)
- A supervisor shared practice forum will take place later this year, aligned to the support to be provided to supervisors nominated for the UKCGE Research Supervision Recognition Programme (RETT).

### **Distance learning PGR provision**

2.10 Commentary on existing distance learning programmes is lacking but a number of departments signal plans to develop new distance learning provision (English and Related Literature, Health Sciences, Music, Sociology). For Health Sciences, a key concern is that the fee for distance learning PhD programmes will serve as a barrier for those in low and middle income countries.

*Closed 2017/2018 APR action:*

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

*Carried over 2017/2018 APR action:*

- The light touch review of distance learning PhD programmes (ASO).

*Related activity:*

- Revision of the framework for distance learning PhD programmes in the light of PPSC approval of changes to the attendance and induction requirements (ASO).

### **Collaborative PGR provision**

2.11 Archaeology once again flags the challenges associated with collaborative PhD provision.

*Carried over 2017/2018 APR action:*

- The planned light-touch review of joint and double PhD provision has been replaced by the development of a joint and double PhD wiki which aims to reflect lessons learnt from the reflections of students, supervisors and others and help set clearer expectations for staff and students.

#### **New PGR provision**

- 2.12 In addition to the plans for new distance learning PhD programmes (as above), a number of departments mention the introduction (Chemistry, Environment and Geography) or consideration (Psychology) of 4-year PhD programmes and work on new integrated PhD programmes (Economics and Related Studies, English and Related Literature, Health Sciences) and a new cross-departmental programme (Biology).

#### **Policy suggestions**

- 2.13 There are a small number of suggestions for changes to PPSC policy or guidance.

*2017/2018 APR action carried over:*

- Further development of guidance on PhDs based on academic papers (RSA/ASO).

*New action:*

- English and Related Literature to bring a proposal to PPSC with respect to: (i) whether part-time PhD students should have a two-year continuation period, and (ii) whether there should be a six-month PhD correction period as an addition to the three-month correction, and refer and submit outcomes (ERL).

#### **Funding and recruitment issues**

- 2.14 Funding and recruitment issues do not fall within the remit of APR or PPSC, nonetheless they are identified here for possible referral to the appropriate offices or committees.

*New actions:*

- Develop guidance on the China Scholarship Council visiting scholars programme (Dean and Global Engagement)
- Clarify whether students in social science departments/centres should be able to apply to the Humanities Research Centre Postgraduate Collaborative Project Grant for humanities projects (Dean to refer to HRC Steering Group)
- Develop a coordinated University approach to the recruitment of Marie-Curie fellows requiring PhD registration to ensure they meet the University's standard PGR entry requirements (PPSC to refer to SRA and HR).

#### **GTA issues**

- 2.15 GTA support and training feature in a number of reports, with departmental initiatives including wider teaching opportunities (Biology), improved employment practices and representation (Chemistry), improved recruitment of, and communication with, GTAs (Language and Linguistic Science), and improved induction and training (Music).

*New action:*

- Refer good practice to the GTA Coordinators Group (ASO).

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

- 3.1 Faculty-specific issues and themes were hard to discern and therefore none have been highlighted.