# UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

**COLLEGE OF LIFE SCIENCES AND MEDICINE GRADUATE SCHOOOL**

**INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW**

**SUMMARY**

The summary is extracted from the full report on the Internal Teaching Review of the Graduate School of the College of Life Sciences and Medicine, following the ITR Panel’s visit on 1 and 2 May 2008. It includes the Panel’s overall impressions, of the provision, a record of the Panel’s commendations and recommendations and a list of the programmes which were recommended for revalidated.

**1. Overall Impressions**

The Panel **commended** the Graduate School for its strong commitment to the ITR process. It noted that the Graduate School had been able to identify areas where there was commonality amongst the Academic Schools and where more work has to be done. Furthermore, the Panel was pleased to endorse the wider areas for development as identified in the Action Plan.

The Panel noted that a great deal had been achieved within the administrative support that it provided to the Academic Schools, and the Panel **commended** the cohesion of the administrative staff. Both administrative and academic staff interviewed by the Panel were positive about the Graduate School and appreciated the consistency it brought to administration.

In order to set out a clear strategic vision of the Graduate School’s function in the future, and to foster clearly shared objectives amongst its Academic Schools, the Panel **recommended** that the Graduate School develop its own mission statement. In this context, the Graduate School may wish collectively to review the meaning of and rationale for commonality, which was given such prominence in the Aims of Provision section of the Self-Evaluation Document.

The Panel noted that the Graduate School recognised much more work needed to be done in order to bring greater consistency to the taught postgraduate provision. To this effect, plans for course-sharing and rationalising programmes into groups and families were **commended** by the Panel. That being said, the Panel noted that there were impediments to developments in this area: primarily that not all programmes were modularised and credit point totals were variable. The Panel **recommended** that the latter be standardised, and modularisation be pushed forward as a matter of priority, where appropriate.

The Panel **recommended** that the Graduate School ensure communication is progressed with the Heads of School in regard to greater engagement of academic staff in taught postgraduate teaching and supervision of Masters projects. As several programmes are dependant on just a few individuals, work will have to be done towards succession planning.

The Panel **recommended** that the Graduate School investigate the perception that lack of staff time was impeding quality enhancement and speedily address it appropriately.

The Panel **commended** the support and impetus that the Graduate School gave to Academic Schools for the development of new programmes.

The Panel **commended** the support service the Graduate School had developed for taught postgraduate students, particularly with respect to enhanced induction sessions, formative assessment, and the measured introduction of e-learning. The Panel recognised that the Graduate School were strongly committed to enhancing the support it provides to students, particularly evidenced by plans to hold orientation sessions to help students acclimatise to living and studying in Aberdeen.

The Panel **commended** the consistency of the research student provision that the Graduate School had implemented, and was particularly impressed with the comprehensiveness of the training programme developed for research students.

The Panel recognised that the 9-month assessment, together with the requirement to submit an assessment at the end of second year and a thesis plan towards the end of the third, gave a **commendable** basis for research student monitoring and support. However, the Panel noted problems with supervisor completion of research student 6-month assessment forms and **recommended** the system be reviewed, with forms perhaps being further simplified to enhance supervisor completion rates. It was also **recommended** that the Graduate School ensure that the existence of a 9-month assessment and a 6-monthly assessment do not lead to unnecessary duplication of effort amongst supervisors and students.

The Panel noted that the induction and training of supervisors, teaching staff, and technical support staff in general required greater consistency across all Academic Schools, whilst the training of postgraduate research student demonstrators was limited. The Panel **recommended** that a more focused, systematic approach be adopted to staff development and training. Nevertheless, the practice of pairing up a new supervisor with a more experienced one was **commended** for the support that it gave to new supervisors.

The Panel noted that the Graduate School was keenly aware and makes effective use of both the academic and non-academic infrastructure of the University, particularly via its interaction with ASPIRE, and the Student Learning Service. The Panel was encouraged by how open the Graduate School is to further discussions with these later two groups, in order to further develop the support it gives to its students.

**2. Commendable Features**

(Note: numbers in brackets e.g. [3.3] refer to the relevant paragraph of the Panel’s full report.)

With regard to the Graduate School of the College of Life Sciences and Medicine’s provision, the Panel commended the following aspects:

***Graduate School Organisation***

2.1 the progress the Graduate School had made in achieving commonality in respect to administration of the postgraduate programmes. [4.1]

***Course and Programme Design, Accessibility and Approval***

2.2 the strategic vision that the Graduate School Postgraduate Taught Working Group gave for the development of new taught postgraduate programmes, thereby providing impetus and support for the Academic Schools to set up new programmes. [5.1]

2.3 the PGT Working Group’sattempts to coordinate taught postgraduate programmes across the Graduate School (measures for uniformity of course design, application of the Common Assessment Scale, and student support had been instituted). [5.2]

2.4 plans to rationalise programmes into groups and families. Such a development would encourage the spread of best practice, and also enhance the interdisciplinary experience of students, thereby broadening their learning. [5.3]

***Teaching, Learning and Assessment***

2.5 the piloting of formative assessment amongst some taught postgraduate programmes. [6.2]

2.6 the facility for study days in certain taught postgraduate programmes, where external course contributors are brought in to discuss teaching matters with permanent staff. [6.5]

2.7 the measured use of e-learning across the Graduate School. [6.6]

2.8 the practice of programmes within Biological Sciences to block students’ access to Web CT if they were not attending classes. [6.9]

2.9 the development of standard CAS descriptors and assessment marking sheets as an attempt to bring greater consistency to taught postgraduate programmes. [6.13]

2.10 the element of experiential learning facilitated by a number of programmes, such as role-playing in the MSc in Drug Development. [6.17]

***Course and Programme Monitoring and Review***

2.11 plans for the Graduate School to review all External Examiner reports, currently done solely by Academic Schools, to ensure consistency of the course/programme review procedure and to detect any systemic problems at the earliest opportunity. [7.2]

2.12 the use of the Industrial Liaison Group and the New Products Advisory Group in order to seek employer feedback on programmes. [7.3]

2.13 the use of focus groups in Biological Sciences during 2006/07 to ‘assess specific [taught postgraduate] programme issues and to further develop strengths’. [7.5]

***Training and Supervision of Research Students***

2.14 the implementation of supervisory teams, as opposed to individual supervisors, for research students (although, it was noted that this is not consistent throughout the Graduate School). [9.3]

2.15 the comprehensiveness of research skills training offered to research students and the consistency that had been achieved across the Graduate School. [9.4]

2.16 the allocation of a £1000 budget to each student for training purposes. [9.7]

2.17 the development of on-line facilities aimed at improving the completion rates of 6-monthly research student assessment forms and the development of guidelines for the completion of these forms by supervisors, along with a two-week deadline. [9.10]

2.18 the provision of 9-month assessments as a reliable indicator of student progress. [9.13]

2.19 the requirement to submit a report in the style of a publication at the end of second year, and a plan for completion of the writing-up of the thesis in third year. [9.13]

2.20 the responsible approach to industrially-funded PhDs, particularly the willingness to not accept them if the content and approach required for the proposed topic is not suitable for a PhD. [9.16]

***Staff Training and Educational Development***

2.21 ensuring that a new PhD supervisor is always paired up with a more experienced one. [12.2]

2.22 peer reviews, such as those that took place in Health Science MSc projects, as mechanisms for project supervisors to get feedback on the quality of projects and thus their supervision. [12.3]

***Student Involvement in Quality Process***

2.23 the large proportion of student representatives within the Graduate School as a real sign that the School was committed to quality assurance. [13.1]

***Student Support, Retention and Progression***

2.24 following comments submitted by the University’s Senior Disability Adviser stating that the Graduate School has a good history of responding to the requirements of disabled students, the Graduate School’s disability provisions. [15.1]

2.25 the system of advisers for research postgraduates that was in place across the Graduate School: a system that could be used by the two other Graduate Schools within the University of Aberdeen. [15.2]

2.26 plans to introduce student support induction sessions for all taught postgraduates from the start of the 2008/09 academic year. [15.3]

2.27 plans to pilot an orientation session for taught postgraduate students to help acclimatise them to both the University and the wider community of Aberdeen. [15.4]

2.28 the Graduate School’s website as a well-designed, comprehensive resource, particularly with the information it provided to students about skills training courses. [15.8]

***Recruitment, Access and Widening Participation***

2.29 the Graduate School’s adherence to the University’s 21-day deadline for processing admissions applications. [16.1]

2.30 the Graduate School’s ability to respond to market demands when developing new postgraduate programmes and the commitment to promoting current programmes abroad. [16.2]

2.31 new ERASMUS agreements that had resulted from recruitment trips to Europe. [16.3]

***Quality Enhancement and Good Practice***

2.32 the strong links the Graduate School have with local research institutions and the opportunity this provided for students to work in research-intensive environments. [19.1]

**3. Recommendations**

(Note: numbers in brackets e.g. [3.3] refer to the relevant paragraph of the Panel’s full report.)

The Panel invites the Graduate School of the College of Life Sciences and Medicine to consider the recommendations in this section and asks that the Head of the Graduate School and the Head of College, consulting with colleagues as appropriate, provide an agreed response to each.

The Panel recommended to the Graduate School:

***Aims of Provision***

3.1 that the Graduate School develop its own mission statement, accompanied by high-level strategic aims, which tie-in with the University’s own, and which express the School’s clear commitment to quality enhancement through specific, practicable measures. [2.1]

***Staffing***

3.2 that the Graduate School pursue, with added impetus, the issue of the difficulty in engaging staff to teach on postgraduate programmes and supervise taught postgraduate projects through negotiations with the Heads of School., School. [3.3]

3.3 that more cross-School programmes be developed in order to increase the potential pool of staff available for teaching on any particular programme. [3.4]

***Graduate School Organisation***

3.4 that, following the suggestion by taught postgraduate students that additional secretarial support would be helpful due to the high volume of queries secretarial staff were dealing with, the adequacy of secretarial support for its taught postgraduate programmes be reviewed. [4.2]

***Course and Programme Design, Accessibility and Approval***

3.5 that all programmes offered by the Graduate School be, as far as practicable, modularised and that the credit points for courses be standardised, in order to enhance course-sharing and the effectiveness of rationalising programmes into groups or families. [5.4]

3.6 that the outcomes of the college-wide New Product Advisory Group be acted upon as soon as possible. [5.6]

3.7 that the English language requirements for acceptance on to programmes be monitored. [5.7]

***Teaching, Learning and Assessment***

3.8 that formative assessment be rolled out progressively to all taught postgraduate programmes. [6.2]

3.9 that the Graduate School investigate the feasibility of implementing a standard procedure for submitting draft versions of essays for feedback. [6.3]

3.10 that steps be taken to ensure all tutors meet the normal standard of promptness with which marked assignments are returned, and develop standard guidelines for staff on providing feedback to students. Students’ expectations in this area may also need to be managed to a greater extent. [6.4]

3.11 that study days with external course contributors present be rolled out across the whole of the Graduate School, in order to facilitate better coordination of content coverage and to inform comprehensively the external experts of the standard of teaching and student learning outcomes expected. [6.5]

3.12 that, with regard to distance-learning, the Graduate School keep aware of the need to balance intentions with capabilities, as distance-learning is a resource-intensive provision (the Panel were unsure of the Graduate School’s intentions in this area). [6.7]

3.13 that all programmes in the Graduate School which use Web CT consider making similar provisions to those within Biological Sciences, where students’ access to Web CT is blocked if they were not attending classes. [6.9]

3.14 that the provision of handbooks be reviewed and a standard format and set of guidelines for each programme to follow be developed. [6.11]

3.15 that the learning outcomes given in a small number of the programme handbooks be revised as they were inappropriate for Masters-level students. [6.12]

3.16 that a system of standard CAS descriptors be made mandatory rather than simply ‘encouraged’. [6.13]

3.17 that the CAS descriptors be reviewed as the percentage bands were too narrow and limiting, and did not adequately match up to CAS. [6.14]

3.18 that the content of the standard assessment forms be reconsidered and the forms made mandatory across the Graduate School. [6.15]

3.19 that, due to undergraduate students and postgraduate students being taught together, different learning outcomes and assessment criteria or the MSc in Forestry be made clear to the markers of the assignments and that the students are also made explicitly aware of the criteria. [6.16]

3.20 that more use be made of experiential learning, where appropriate, throughout the Graduate School, as it was a commendable aspect of some current postgraduate programmes. [6.17]

3.21 that the timing of taught postgraduate projects be reviewed to assess whether more time can be given between the taught and research elements of the programmes, and whether potential projects can be released earlier. [6.18]

3.22 that, following the recognition of the need to increase the range of MSc projects available in some programmes, it liaise with the Heads of School to try and engage new supervisors for MSc projects. [6.19]

3.23 that the funding of MSc projects be reviewed, following concerns that the funding received by project supervisors for laboratory projects was not always adequate to fund the work the student was required to undertake. [6.20]

3.24 that a formal mechanism be considered to limit the number of students that any staff member can supervise simultaneously, and that more staff members be involved in supervision. [6.21]

3.25 that the issue of taught postgraduate students doing laboratory work alongside undergraduates be explored and, if appropriate, these students be provided more Masters-level laboratory work. [6.22]

3.26 that the statistics courses for taught postgraduates be reviewed and, where appropriate, greater consistency be achieved throughout the Graduate School. [6.23]

3.27 that there be a specific member of staff in each of the Academic Schools who students can contact to receive informal, one-to-one guidance on statistics. [6.23]

3.28 that the timing of skills training embedded within programmes be reviewed, as taught postgraduate students stated that some skills training would have been more beneficial if it was earlier on in the academic year.

## Course and Programme Monitoring and Review

3.29 that a formal measure be introduced to monitor student uptake of programmes and flag up those that are consistently under-recruiting. [7.4]

3.30 that, citing the example of taught postgraduate programmes within Biological Sciences during 2006/07, other programmes give consideration to the use of focus groups to ‘assess specific programme issues and to further develop strengths’ this as one means of gathering student views. [7.5]

### Training and Supervision of Research Students

3.31 that the use of supervisory teams for supervising research students be made consistent throughout the Graduate School. [9.3]

3.32 that measures to engage the full commitment of supervisors with skills training for research students continue to be pursued vigorously. [9.6]

3.33 that the provision of a £1000 budget for each research student for training purposes be explicitly communicated to students and supervisors. [9.7]

3.34 that, following on from the University-wide evaluation of English language needs, the Graduate School liaise with the Student Learning Service to deliver an appropriate package of writing skills training for its students, building upon the successful basis already in place. [9.8]

* 1. that statistics courses be reviewed to ensure PhD students, who have differing needs to Masters students, be accommodated. [9.9]
  2. that consideration be given as to whether 6-monthly assessment forms should be revised further to make them simpler and less time consuming to complete (perhaps simple tick boxes could be used). [9.11]
  3. it be ensured that the existence of 9-month and 6-monthly assessments do not lead to unnecessary duplication of effort amongst supervisors and students. [9.11]
  4. that flexibility be introduced to the system of 6-monthly assessment, in order to allow for students who started at different times of the year. [9.12]
  5. that the Graduate School review whether the two monitoring systems sufficiently reflect the different time scales on which three-year and four-year research students operate, and that supervisors and students are reminded of the different monitoring procedures periodically. [9.14]

3.40 that procedures for ensuring CASE students and other students funded by external partners are not over-assessed be brought more forcefully to the attention of supervisors. [9.15]

***Personal Development and Employability***

3.41 that the plans to form an Industrial Liaison Group to deal specifically with postgraduate provisions, with employers and industrial representatives actively involved, be taken forward. [10.1]

3.42 that the value of PDP be promoted more vigorously to supervisors. [10.4]

#### Staff Training and Educational Development

3.43 that the Graduate School advocate a more systematic and consistent approach to the induction process for new teaching staff, especially Teaching Fellows. [12.1]

3.44 that a more thorough and systematic training and development programme be implemented for new PhD supervisors that will include explanations of the cultural differences underlying the British University system and overseas institutions. [12.2]

3.45 that a formal training procedure for teaching staff and MSc project supervisors be put in place, standardised, and regularly updated so that project supervisors are clear about what is expected of them. [12.3]

3.46 that peer reviews, such as those that took place in Health Science MSc projects, enabling project supervisors to get feedback on the quality of projects and thus their supervision, be rolled out to all programmes within the Graduate School. [12.3]

3.47 that internal examiners be given training to ensure that they understand viva procedures and expectations of them as internal examiners, or that they be supported by a non-examining chair in their first PhD examination. [12.4]

3.48 that a thorough training programme for postgraduate research student demonstrators be implemented as soon as possible across the Graduate School to educate demonstrators in teaching students. [12.5]

3.49 that postgraduate research student demonstrators be provided with the appropriate staff development opportunities. [12.5]

3.50 that Technical Support staff be provided with the relevant support and training courses required to perform responsibilities delegated to them by Principal Investigators, such as teaching students about safety in the laboratory. [12.6]

3.51 that the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching and Learning be made mandatory for all new teaching staff (it was recognised that this did not fall under the Graduate School’s jurisdiction). [12.7]

## Public Information/Management Information

3.52 that data on submission rates be collated, in order to determine whether there is a link between lack of completion of 6-monthly research student assessment forms and PhD submission rates. [14.2]

***Student Support, Retention and Progression***

3.53 that meetings between all research students and their advisers (distinct from supervisors) take place at the start of the academic year. [15.2]

3.54 that writing skills form a central aspect of any future support programmes for both taught and research postgraduates. [15.7]

***Impediments to Quality Enhancement***

3.55 that the Graduate School liaise with the Heads of School to address this concern raised in the Self-Evaluation document that the main impediment to quality enhancement was lack of staff time, the Panel felt that discussions with a sample of the staff gave grounds for this view. [20.1]

**4. Conclusion**

The Panel considered the Graduate School for the College of Life Sciences and Medicine to have made good progress towards engendering commonality amongst the Academic Schools, primarily in an administrative capacity. The Panel acknowledged the difficulties the Graduate School had in effecting a smooth transition from pre-Graduate School practices to the new structure, but recognises that those involved remained committed to doing so.

The Panel noted that full commonality has not yet been achieved, but that measures such as grouping programmes and courses into families and promoting interdisciplinary learning will help advance progress in this area, as will some of the recommendations outlined in this report. Primarily the Graduate School needs to develop its own mission statement to provide a rationale for these initiatives and a strong basis for future direction. This will help the Academic Schools work to the same agenda and further identify with the Graduate School, which is perhaps lacking in some places.

The Panel had sympathy for the Graduate School’s concern about the suitability of the current self-evaluation forms. The Panel considered that the SED may need to be revised to take into account the different focus when conducting a review of postgraduate provision.

Graduate Schools contribute significantly to the University’s approach to quality assurance and enhancement in teaching and learning in the postgraduate domain. As such, it was deemed appropriate that a Graduate School should be subject to review, in order to ensure that it has the required processes to assure and enhance quality of provision. However, as this was the first ITR of a Graduate School to be conducted at the University, the Panel discussed the relative advantages of reviewing postgraduate provision, via the ITR process, at School and Graduate School level.

The Convenor agreed to bring to the ASC(Pg) for discussion not only the above issues raised in the SED but also reflections on the experience of the first ITR conducted for a Graduate School

The Panel would like to thank all members of staff within the Graduate School for the College of Life Sciences and Medicine for the work that has gone into producing the ITR documentation and for their commitment to the review process.  The Panel would also like to thank all students and staff whom it met during the visit.

# UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

**COLLEGE OF LIFE SCIENCES AND MEDICINE GRADUATE SCHOOOL**

**INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW**

**Response from the Graduate School Director and the Head of College**

The Graduate School would like to take this opportunity to thank the panel members, the convenor Dr D. Hay and the external members Dr J. Bradshaw (University of Edinburgh), Prof J. Harris (Cranfield University), Dr S. McGregor (University of Glasgow) and Dr D. Pearson (Nottingham City Hospital NHS Trust) for undertaking this detailed review. We would also like to thank those members of the College academic, technical and administrative staff and students, who took part in the ITR and met with the panel. We would also like to thank those members of staff in the University support units who contributed comments to the SED.

The Graduate School found the Internal Teaching Review a useful and informative process. In particular, it highlighted areas in which we have made significant progress towards providing a unified and cohesive unit with responsibility for postgraduate teaching and research training within the College. It allowed us to clearly recognise examples of good practice and gave added impetus to the promotion and adoption of these across the College. It has also focussed our attention on areas were there is still work to be done. There is an urgent need for wider participation in postgraduate teaching both taught and research by the College academic community in order to sustain a high standard and to broaden our provision. The outcome of the ITR will be communicated to College academic staff through presentations by the Director of the Graduate School and Head of College at School staff meetings in the next few months and this will provide an opportunity to promote involvement in postgraduate teaching and supervision. In the wider University context as responsibility shifts from central administration to Graduate Schools the ITR has reaffirmed our view that the Student Record Database in its current form is not adequate and that the University should commit to providing a system that is fit for the purpose of recording all aspects of postgraduate study and one that incorporates an online provision for recording formal supervisory meetings, research training, progress monitoring and assessments.

We echo the Panel’s concern about the suitability of the Self Evaluation Document for review of postgraduate provision. We recommend that ASC(Pg) revise the SED and supporting documentation/reports to reflect the differences between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and the unique challenge that cross-school provision entails. This will become increasingly important as the Internal Teaching Review process is rolled out to other Graduate Schools.

There is an action plan arising from our response to the ITR panel’s report, the implementation of which will be determined at the Graduate School team meetings in November and December 2008.

***2. Aims of Provision***

2.1 The Graduate School agrees with the panel’s recommendation that it develop its own mission statement and strategic aims and that it uses this opportunity to be bold and aspirational in its vision.

***3. Staffing***

3.3 The College of Life Sciences & Medicine recognises the importance of postgraduate students and their contributions to our ambition for excellence in teaching and research. The Graduate School, supported by the Head of College, will continue to take an active role in increasing the visibility of the Graduate School and publicising opportunities for staff to engage in postgraduate teaching. Through the Heads of Schools we will propose measures to encourage more universal engagement in supervising MSc project students and in contributions to the development and teaching of MSc programmes. Our dialogue with Heads of School will include an annual report with details of postgraduate numbers (taught and research) and participation of staff in postgraduate teaching including project supervision.

3.4 Several of the existing programmes within the College are either cross-School (Human Nutrition and Metabolism, School of Medical Sciences and the Rowett Institute; Medical Molecular Microbiology and Clinical Pharmacology, both Schools of Medicine & Dentistry and Medical Sciences) or cross-College (International Health Management, School of Medicine & Dentistry, CLSM and Business School, CASS). Three new programmes launched in the 2008/09 academic year add to this portfolio: the Masters in Social Cognitive Neuroscience and Patient Safety are cross-School programmes involving the Schools of Psychology and Medicine & Dentistry and the MSc in Systems Biology is a cross-College programme with the College of Physical Sciences. We will continue to seek opportunities to develop new programmes that make use of expertise across the College regardless of the School (eg MSc in Public Health Nutrition which is currently under development). At the same time we acknowledge that the provision of wider courses and integrated aspects are most likely to develop at the School level.

***4. Graduate School Organisation***

4.2 We will review the level of secretarial support particularly for Postgraduate Taught programmes in consultation with the Head of College. Several changes in the secretarial provision are being or will be made. These include: (i) the appointment of replacement secretarial staff which offers an opportunity to review and streamline administrative procedures; (ii) re-organisation of the College offices and relocation of Graduate School secretarial staff to a purpose designed room with a hatch. This offers the capacity to designate specific opening hours dedicated to postgraduate student enquiries. Occupancy of the new offices is planned for October 2008 and information and opening hours will be sent to all students at that time.

***5. Course and Programme Design, Accessibility and Approval***

5.4 Recognising the increased flexibility and benefits afforded by modularisation of courses, in the coming academic year we will modularise all programmes and standardise credit points for courses as far as is practicable.

5.6We will continue to contribute to the College New Product Advisory Group and will act on any recommendations arising from that group within an appropriate timeframe.

5.7 We currently adhere to the University regulations with respect to English language requirements when accepting students to our programmes. Changing the entry requirements would necessitate a University-wide discussion and the Graduate School would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

***6. Teaching, Learning and Assessment***

6.2 The feasibility and mechanism for progressively introducing formative assessment to all postgraduate taught programmes will be considered by the PGT Working Group.

6.3 The feasibility of implementing a standard procedure for submitting draft versions of essays for feedback will be explored by the PGT working group.

6.4 It is unacceptable that some staff take overly long to mark and return assignments to students, although staff are advised of the deadline for return of work. The Graduate School brings such cases to the attention of the relevant Head of School who has line management responsibility for the staff member and ask that immediate action be taken. We will review the current practice for return of assignments to students for all programmes and ensure that students are made aware of the timeframe and that it is appropriate.

6.5 The provision of study days for external contributors on PGT programmes, while desirable, may not in practice be feasible. We will identify the programmes for which the contribution of external teaching staff is significant and work with the programme coordinators to develop a mechanism for briefing and information dissemination to those individuals.

6.7 The Graduate School is aware of the resource demands of developing distance-learning modules. Any further development in this area would only be undertaken if there was a clear business plan and an identified market.

6.9 The PGT Working Group will consider the recommendation of the panel with respect to student access to Web CT. In addition, changes to Visa regulations to be introduced by the Government in 2009 will place additional requirements on the Graduate School and Postgraduate Programme Coordinators to monitor attendance.

6.14 A Graduate School handbook containing generic information for PGT students has been developed and introduced across all programmes. Standardisation of Programme Handbooks is under development with a view to implementation across all programmes in 2009/10.

6.12 Learning outcomes of all programmes will be reviewed and revised if required to ensure that they are appropriate to Masters-level students.

6.13 The Graduate School’s approach is to seek agreement on the adoption of common practices across all schools on such matter as handbooks, feedback sheets and CAS descriptors. Our discussions on standard CAS descriptors are on-going and we expect to reach common agreement through discussion.

6.11 CAS descriptors percentage bands will be reviewed by the PGT working Group.

6.15 See 6.13 above.

6.16 Learning outcomes and assessment criteria for the MSc in Forestry will be reviewed to ensure that they reflect the difference between undergraduate and postgraduate students.

6.17 The PGT Working Group will consult with Programmes to identify areas were more use of experiential learning could be made. The introduction of the PGT PDP will contribute to and augment the benefits of such learning.

6.18 This will be reviewed for the PGT programmes where the time between the taught and research elements is too short at present.

6.19 The Graduate School recognises the urgent need and desirability of increasing the number of staff offering research projects to MSc students. Broad participation of staff is necessary if we are to sustain the quality of the programmes and avoid, in some cases, overburdening a small number of staff with the supervision of a large number of MSc student projects. We will propose a number of measures to Heads of Schools to try to achieve broader involvement, in addition to our recent decision to increase funding for such projects (see below).

6.20 Funding for MSc projects was reviewed prior to the start of the current academic year (2008/09) and a proposal to increase funding for both laboratory and non-laboratory based projects was approved and will be implemented with immediate effect.

6.21 This will be considered in consultation with Heads of Schools along with the measures outlined above to increase staff engagement with PGT programmes.

6.22 Refurbishment of laboratory space in the Polwarth Building on the Foresterhill campus will begin in early 2009 to provide a teaching laboratory that will be available, among other things, for MSc practical work. It is our intention that this will provide an opportunity to separate undergraduate and postgraduate laboratory-based course work. How this will be achieved will be considered by the relevant programme coordinators.

6.23 The Graduate School does not directly provide statistics training for PGT students. This is provided at the programme or school level as part of the programme curriculum. However, we will ask Programme Coordinators to review their current statistics provision where appropriate and in particular to consider the timing of courses and feedback to students.

6.23 With over 200 PGT students it is not feasible to provide one-to-one guidance on statistics for every student. Where statistics forms an integral part of the MSc project there is an expectation that supervisors would provide this guidance.

6.24 We will raise the issue of the timing of skills training with our PGT focus groups and review and revise in response to feedback.

## 7. Course and Programme Monitoring and Review

7.4 We disagree with the panel’s statement that the procedure for monitoring student uptake of programmes is insufficient. The numbers of applications to College programmes and their progress through to offer and acceptance are monitored on a monthly basis at least; this is increased to weekly or daily as we approach the start to the new academic year. Estimating actual numbers on each programme prior to registration is extremely difficult as most students are holding offers from several institutions and notoriously only make a final decision close to the registration date. As new visa regulations come into place in the next year it may be possible to more accurately predict International student numbers. Experience suggests that recruitment in one year is not always an accurate predictor of subsequent years, e.g. the MSc in Medical Genetics which was suffering from declining numbers over successive years has seen a substantial increase in the current academic year. The Graduate School will continue to monitor trends in uptake into individual programmes and seek to mitigate the effects of under-recruitment to specific programmes.

7.5Greater use of focus groups will be made to solicit student views on programmes and to identify areas for development or improvement.

### 9. Training and Supervision of Research Students

9.3 The Graduate School recommends the general use of supervisory teams throughout the College but recognises that the case for sole supervision should not be dismissed and that there might be cases where this is the preferred model. Taking on board the panel’s recommendation we feel that there is an opportunity to debate this issue and propose a policy that could be consistently applied across the College.

9.6 We will continue to promote skills training for research students with supervisors at every opportunity through supervisor training workshops and at school staff meetings.

9.7 This £1000 budget is allocated to each student for training purposes either through the funding body or by the Graduate School where the studentship does not provide for this. In the latter case the allocation was previously made at the request of the supervisor. In order to avoid confusion this is now done automatically. All students and supervisors are made aware of the budget provision.

9.8 The Graduate School is already in discussion with the Student Learning Service (SLS) as to how best to deliver an appropriate writing skills training package to students. A protocol for a University-wide assessment of writing skills on entry was developed between the three Graduate Schools, the SLS and the Language Centre and piloted on a small number of new research students in the College of Physical Sciences. The results of this pilot are currently being evaluated. In addition, this Graduate School developed and ran pilot ‘Academic Writing Skills Writing’ workshops for first year PhD students during the last academic session. These were very well received and are being made available to all first year students this year. It should be recognised that the supervisor must take a central role in the development of a student’s writing skills to support any package identified by the Graduate School.

9.9 Postgraduate research students currently receive statistics training that is different and distinct from that provided for masters students. 3-Day courses in basic statistics are delivered twice a year through the ASPIRE programme and the Graduate School offers further training in the form of 2-day and 5-day courses in intermediate statistics. PhD students also have access to individual advice sessions with a statistician which they can access through the recommendation of their supervisor.

9.11The current 6-monthly assessment form is the result of a revision within the last two years and was approved by ASC(PG). Nevertheless, we recognise that particular sections of the form are still not optimally designed and this contributes to a number of incomplete forms being returned. We will undertake a further revision of the form in order to address this. It is the strong view of the Graduate School that the University should move to an online electronic processing system for the completion of the 6-monthly assessment. In an effort to move this forward we commissioned the College DIT Relationship Manager Allison Povall to undertake a ‘High Level Functional Requirement’ assessment for development of such a package. This has been presented to the Heads of the Graduate Schools of the other two Colleges with a view to seeking agreement to develop this for University-wide implementation. These discussions are in progress at the present time.

9.11 The 6-monthly monitoring form and 9-month assessment serve different purposes, differ fundamentally in their form and are completed and evaluated differently. The former consists of a progress monitoring form that it completed by the supervisor and student and could be undertaken in the course of a normal supervisory meeting. The latter involves a series of tasks completed by the students (short talk, written report and viva examination) that are then assessed by academics other than the supervisor and form the basis for a recommendation to progress into the second year of the PhD. As such there is no overlap between the assessments, and they are indeed generally separated in time, and therefore do not duplicate effort for either the supervisor or student.

9.12 At present it is our policy to release the 6-monthly monitoring forms in October and April for all students regardless of their start date. This was a recent decision and was made for several reasons: (i) we anticipated that the regular appearance of the monitoring forms at two pre-determined times would increase supervisors’ awareness of the 6-monthly monitoring requirement and thus increase completion rates; (ii) the biannual release of forms would allow secretarial staff and school postgraduate coordinators to monitor and track the return of completed forms; (iii) it would allow postgraduate coordinators to more effectively identify and follow-up on students making unsatisfactory progress. We note that with this approach recent completion rates within the College have improved significantly and we will continue to monitor this. Furthermore, producing individual forms for ‘non-October start’ students requires considerable additional work by secretarial staff to track these students as at present there is no easily accessible automatic system to generate and send out the forms. In addition there have problems in the past with inaccuracies on the student record database which has made identifying these students difficult and time consuming. As in our response to 9.11 above, the development of an electronic/online form would circumvent these problems and difficulties and would allow flexibility in issuing the forms while maintaining our ability to effectively monitor compliance and completion.

9.14 There is a single monitoring system for all students regardless of their funding period (ie the 6-monthly monitoring form). There are, however, two streams for assessment. The 3-year funding model for PhD students is gradually being replaced by 3.5-year or 4-year studentships from Research Councils and other funding bodies. In recognition of this the Graduate School has proposed that all College-funded studentships move to a 3.5-year funding model and this proposal is currently being considered by the College executive. The move away from the 3-year programme will necessitate a review of the current assessment procedures to better reflect the timescale of the extended PhD programmes. In this review we will consider how best to accommodate different time scales where they exist.

9.15 We will remind supervisors and students that where the external funding body has a requirement for assessment and monitoring these can be submitted in place of the normal Graduate School requirements where appropriate.

***10. Personal Development and Employability***

10.1 We will consider the formation of a Postgraduate Industrial Liaison Group but recognise that there may be some overlap with Schools’ Industrial/Employer Liaison Groups.

10.4 As with skills training we will continue to promote the value of the postgraduate research student PDP to supervisors. We recognise that there is either resistance or indifference among supervisors to the PDP and we are exploring ways of challenging this and increasing supervisor engagement. We have also advocated the introduction of a PDP for Postgraduate Taught students and are participating in a pilot for an online PGT PDP being proposed and developed by the Careers Service.

#### 12. Staff Training and Educational Development

12.1 Most staff involved in postgraduate teaching also contribute to undergraduate teaching within the School and therefore it is sensible and the best use of staff time to ensure that the induction process for new staff is not restricted. The College of Life Sciences & Medicine provides three Staff Development Teaching Workshops each academic year, the purpose of which is to discuss teaching and learning issues and share best practice between established and new members of staff. Topics covered include lecturing to large and small classes, small group/tutorial teaching, setting exam questions, the CAS system etc.  The Graduate School will liaise with the organisers of the College teaching workshops to ensure that staff are appropriately briefed in the specific requirements of level 5 teaching. We will also put into place measures to identify new staff requiring such induction through liaison with Programme Coordinators.

12.2 The Graduate School provides New Supervisor Workshops that cover the policies and regulations governing postgraduate research degrees, monitoring and assessment, PDP and skills training and the supervisor-student relationship. Attendance on these workshops is strongly encouraged by the Graduate School and we will continue to vigorously promote them to staff directly and through Heads of Schools. The need to make staff aware of the cultural differences underlying the British University system and overseas institutions is an important and University-wide issue. Recently the Centre for Learning & Teaching held an event at which international staff representing the six most numerous sets of overseas students presented something on the educational/cultural backgrounds of such students and the challenges that they face in coping with our educational methods and demands. This was open to all staff across the University. A second event is planned which will focus on Postgraduate Taught courses and the Graduate School is helping to identify PGT course coordinators to attend this event. We will investigate how some elements from these events could be incorporated into PhD supervisor training workshops.

12.3 The PGT Working group will consider how training/briefing of and feedback to MSc project supervisors could be most effectively delivered. In particular, the group will consider how to make explicit the expectations for supervision of MSc students and how these differ from the supervision of both undergraduate and PhD research projects.

12.4 We are in discussions with Dr Darren Comber, Educational Development Advisor of the Centre for Learning & Teaching concerning the organisation and content of a training course covering the procedures and expectations of PhD examiners, both internal and external.

12.5 All new PhD students who are undertaking teaching are required to attend the ‘Small Group Teaching’ workshop as part of their induction. It has been noted that some students are recruited as demonstrators before they have attended this workshop and we will make renewed efforts to ensure that this does not happen. It is expected that demonstrators will receive additional training specific to the course they are teaching on by the course organiser. We will provide course organisers with clearer guidance on what training demonstrators should receive. Postgraduate research students have the opportunity to develop and enhance their teaching skills through attendance on courses run by the Student Learning Services in the Centre for Learning & Teaching specifically designed for this purpose. The Graduate School will regularly remind students of these opportunities and encourage them to attend the appropriate workshops.

12.6 The Graduate School recognises and highly values the contribution that Technical Staff make to the day-to-day support, supervision and training of postgraduate students (both taught and research). We will organise a focus group with technical staff from across the College to canvass opinion as to what support and training is required and will act on the feedback from that focus group.

12.7 A requirement for all new teaching staff to undertake a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching and Learning falls outwith the jurisdiction of the Graduate School and the College of Life Sciences and Medicine. However, we recognise the value of such a certificate and are fully supportive of staff who undertake this on a voluntary basis.

## 14. Public Information/Management Information

14.2 The Graduate School will produce an annual report for each Postgraduate Research student to track the completion or non-completion of assessments such as the annual progress assessment and the 6-monthly forms as well as details of thesis submission and viva. These reports will be reviewed by the Graduate School and the Heads of Schools.

***15. Student Support, Retention and Progression***

15.2 Postgraduate students are allocated an advisor at the start of their PhD programme once their registration has been completed and are informed at Induction that they should meet their advisor as soon as possible.

15.7 The Graduate School currently includes writing skills in support programmes for taught and research students. We will review this provision to ensure delivery of appropriate training.

***20. Impediments to Quality Enhancement***

20.1 We will raise this issue in discussions with the Heads of Schools. However, as a Graduate School we recognise that quality in research fundamentally underpins our ability to deliver high quality postgraduate teaching. Our goal is to include all of our research active staff in postgraduate education, both at the masters and PhD levels. Wider engagement by staff will impact on Quality Enhancement, for example by freeing programme coordinators to explore opportunities to enhance the learning experience of students with respect to assessment and feedback.