

UNIVERSITY OF ABEREEN
POSTGRADUATE COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF MEETING 24 MARCH 2016

Present: Prof J Masthoff (Convenor), Prof B Connolly, Dr M Ehrenschtner, Dr P Fernandes, Dr H Hutchison, Dr D Maccallum, Dr A Mckinnon, Prof W Naphy, Dr J Oliver, Prof L Phillips, with Ms C Croydon, Mr R Findlay (Clerk), Dr L Leiper, Mr M Roberts, and Mrs K Slesser in attendance.

Apologies: Prof R Evans-Jones, Mr L Fuller, Prof M Jaspar, Prof B MacGregor, Prof P McGeorge, Prof C Montagna.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES OF MEETING ON 7 DECEMBER 2015

Copy filed as PGC/240316/014

- 18.1 Prof Connolly requested that minute 12.4 be amended to indicate that some funding bodies will not support 4 years of funding.
ACTION: CLERK
- 18.2 The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting of 7 December 2015, on the proviso that the above change be made.

MATTERS ARISING

Minute 15.5

- 19.1 The Clerk confirmed that Dr Foley had provided links to a couple of websites that could provide guidance to supervisors if they have concerns about a student's mental health. The Committee requested that these websites be forwarded to the Graduate Schools for distribution to supervisors.
ACTION: CLERK

UPDATE FROM MENTAL HEALTH WORKING GROUP

- 19.2 The Committee noted that there would be a change in administration for the Mental Health Working Group following Dr Foley's departure. The Committee requested an update on the group's activities at the next Committee meeting.
ACTION: CLERK

UPDATE FROM CENTRE FOR ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 20.1 The Committee noted that Dr Mary-Alice Clancy would be leaving the Centre for Academic Development and wished to record their thanks for all the work she had done towards research student skills development.
- 20.2 The Committee noted that numbers of students who had completed the online ethics training had been low. The Committee noted that the College of Life Sciences and Medicine had booked computer rooms specifically for students to complete the training and that completion of it would be made a requirement of progression into the second year of study. In the future, ethics training would be made a part of research student induction. The College of Physical Sciences confirmed that they would seek to do the same.
- 20.3 The Committee noted that Dr Perkins would be in contact with Schools to request involvement in the Making the Most of Masters programme. The Committee expressed concerns that it would be too late to advertise project for summer 2016. The Committee recommended that December would allow more time to put projects in place. Concern was also expressed that there had been no funding available for students to undertake placements.

- 20.4 The Committee noted the establishment of the Enterprise Project, which sought to place researchers – both staff and student – with businesses for a period of 2 – 3 weeks, unpaid. The Committee noted that this might help business to gain a greater appreciation of what a researcher does. The Committee felt that there might be potential to expand the Scheme for certain students through the BBSRC Professional Internship programme. This programme allowed BBSRC DTP funded students to undertake a 3 month funded work placement.
- 20.5 Dr Leiper confirmed that CAD had been planning research skill training for the next academic year, and that Committee members should feed back to her any particular workshops they would like to see as part of the provision.

UPDATE FROM SCHOOLS ON PGR FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

- 21.1 The Committee noted the funding arrangements that Schools had advertised to potential PhD students.
- 21.2 CLSM members of the Committee expressed concern over whether the Elphinstone Scholarship was to be regarded as a cost for Schools and indicated that their schools were not keen to pursue these whilst this remained unclear. CASS and COPS members of the committee felt that this had been clearly confirmed in communications by the VP Research. The Committee requested that confirmation be sought.

ACTION: CLERK

UPDATE FROM SCHOOLS ON PGT PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT/REVISION

- 22.1 The Committee noted the new programmes that Schools intended to run in the next academic year.
- 22.2 The Committee noted concerns in CLSM over the lack of resource to expand taught postgraduate provision. The Committee noted that some Schools had not developed new programmes that would require additional resource whilst budgetary issues persisted. The Committee also noted that other Colleges saw the expansion of the taught postgraduate committee as a way to increase income.

PROPOSAL FOR AUTOMATIC WRITING UP PERIOD FOR PHD STUDENTS

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- 23.1 The Committee noted the proposal for PhD students to be permitted 48 months within which to submit their thesis, whether it be as a result of a 48 months funded PhD or a 36 month PhD plus an automatic year of writing up.
- 23.2 The Committee noted that the proposal outlined the increased expense faced and stress endured by Tier 4 students who would have to apply for a visa extension should they require a year of writing up following their completion of supervised study. An automatic year of writing up for students on a 36 month PhD would prevent this.
- 23.3 The Committee were in disagreement over the proposal. Some members felt that submission should take place after a student's funded period, expressing the view that if a student needed more time then the PhD project had not been designed well enough. They felt that a writing up year should not be granted automatically – and that this was in line with Research Council expectations. Others highlighted the stress the current situation poses on international students, and felt that it was not always possible to determine for certainty from the outset how long a PhD project might take to complete (which may be easier to do in lab-based research than in other types of research and easier for home than international students were the assessment of existing skills was more difficult). Whilst acknowledging the importance of completion rates, they also noted that writing-up periods were currently used extensively and almost awarded automatically, and that the proposal would give students a better indication of the duration of the PhD in line with Research Council expectations that students are well-informed about durations from the start. Some members expressed the view that writing up

time should not be permitted at all, and that any extensions beyond a student's original end date should be permitted as supervised fee-paying study only.

- 23.4 Two amendments were discussed: (1) changing the proposal to 42 months, meaning an automatic writing up period of maximally 6 months, and (2) allowing Schools to decide on an automatic writing up period themselves.
- 23.5 The Committee was unable to reach an agreement on the amendments, with some members against any form of automatic writing up period, and some members against writing up periods in general.

REPORT FROM WORKING GROUP ON A FRAMEWORK OF EXPECTATIONS FOR RESEARCH STUDENTS AND SUPERVISORS

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- 24.1 The Committee discussed the report from the working group looking at developing a framework of expectations for research students and supervisors.
- 24.2 The working group confirmed that it was felt a framework of expectations would be informed by the structures in place to deliver them; thus, it was felt that the issue should be discussed when the future structure of Graduate Schools and Colleges was confirmed. It was noted that the Codes of Practice for Research Students would need to be rewritten in the light of such changes, so it would be appropriate to take the issue of a framework of expectations as part of that discussion. Some other members of the committee expressed disappointment with the lack of progress and noted that in their view the expectations for research students and supervisors would be mainly independent of the structures.

REPORT FROM WORKING GROUP ON A FRAMEWORK OF EXPECTATIONS FOR TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMME COORDINATORS

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- 25.1 The Committee discussed the report from the working group looking at developing a framework of expectations for taught postgraduate programme coordinators.
- 25.2 The group confirmed that it felt it necessary to keep the framework generic, with room for Heads of School to decide how it could be expanded to meet the needs of specific disciplines. The group had looked at a number of approaches from Schools and Colleges and had recommended the adaption of a set of responsibilities developed by the School of Law.
- 25.3 Concerns were expressed over the responsibilities for leading programme recruitment, sustainability of the programme, and participating in School Marketing Committees. It was felt that programme coordinators may have some degree of involvement in recruitment but would not necessarily be leading, and that sustainability placed a lot responsibility on coordinators for budgetary matters.
- 25.4 The Convenor requested that the Committee provide feedback on the recommendation to the Clerk within two weeks who would then circulate an updated version for the approval of the University Committee on Teaching and Learning.

ACTION: CLERK

TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE FEEDBACK

- 26.1 The Committee discussed the adding of assessment hand-in dates and feedback dates to the course catalogue, and the monitoring of timely return of feedback to students.
- 26.2 The Committee agreed that they would not be in favour of assessment dates being added to course catalogues due to how far in advance that would need to be done. The Committee agreed that it would be more feasible to provide assessment dates and the timeframe for feedback in programme handbooks, which students would receive once they register.

26.3 The Committee note that one of the issues was knowing when students had received feedback. The Committee agreed that if all feedback was provided through MyAberdeen, then it would be easier to track. It was agreed that the Committees views should be feedback to UCTL.

ACTION: CLERK