

YORK GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL (YGRS) BOARD

Wednesday 26 April 2023, 14:00 - 16:00 via Zoom

Present: Kate Arnold (Chair), Wayne Campbell, Viviane Cao (GSA), Jonny Exon (GSA), Chelsea Grooby (GSA), Andrew Jackson, Juliet James, Steve King (SK), Alison Laird, Richard Ogden, Tom Richens (Secretary), Peter Smith, Sarah Thompson, Sethina Watson, Zhangteng (ZT)

Apologies for absence: Yvonne Birks, Andy Dougill, Ambrose Field, Jane Hill, Tracy Lightfoot, Melissa Nurcombe, Karen Rowlingson, Matthias Ruth,

In attendance: Gemma Wheeler (note-taker), Anna Bull (AB) and Vanita Sundaram (VS, for the update on the training for handling staff-student sexual harassment reports), Hannah Smallpage-Hurst (for the PGR Recruitment and Admissions report), Paul Armstrong and Gwion Sims (for the PGR Recruitment update)

M22-23/12: Minutes of the Last Meeting

The meeting of the meeting on 12 December 2022 (**YGRSB/22-23/01**) were **approved**. There were no matters arising that were not dealt with elsewhere on the agenda.

M22-23/13: Action Log

With respect to the action log (**YGRSB/22-23/02**) it was **noted** that:

- M21-22/17: progress has been made on the creation of 3.5-year PhDs for the near future, in line with some other Russell Group universities. JJ and HS-H will discuss this in future meetings with Leeds and Sheffield
- M22-23/07a: the Chair has a meeting with Hannah Smith to discuss this soon, as the remit is wider than the Careers Service. It was **noted** that this would be addressed in later items on the agenda. Nic Streatfeild and Claire Shanks from SLAW will be taking on this project. It was noted that TZ will address a matter related to funding for disabled PGRs in a later item.
- M22-23/07b: SW will give an update at the June YGRS meeting. It was **noted** that Arts and Humanities are able to support PGRs. **The action was therefore closed.**

M22-23/14: Chair's Report

Widening access - The Chair **reported** that six or seven training events had been run to support prospective UK PGRs from a BAME background at York and at the other four HEIs (Sheffield, Leeds, Sheffield Hallam and Bradford) within the YCEDE consortium, along with research internships for students of colour. There had also been training events for current PGRs and workshops with pilot departments in each of the 5 institutions, work led by Paul Wakeling, and a number of data-gathering surveys had been

launched. The initial response from Research England was very positive; this work is a combination of data gathering, applied research and key activities, which will also feed international initiatives. York has been successful in advertising and recruiting to a number of new roles associated with recruitment and selection (**YGRSB/22-23/11**). This will provide an evidence base for improved recruitment. Funding has been obtained for an external business analyst to scope out a new PGR funding database in order to draw together information about due diligence and the terms and conditions of each scholarship's funding; the analyst was to start work on 27 April. There has been triaging for the York application for a new Leverhulme Doctoral Training Centre.

Generative AI - The Chair **reported** that an initial policy on the impact of ChatGPT on PGR progression and assessment had been shared with Grad Chairs. This had received community feedback. SK, working with Stephen Gow, who has been leading a working group with UTC to address the issue of Generative AI in UG and PGT assessment, will provide feedback on a new policy draft to be shared with graduate chairs for feedback. This is a fast-moving area and an iterative process, with further consultation to be layered in this time.

Marking and assessment boycott - The Chair **reported** that guidance was being developed around how departments might manage this in terms of PGR progression. The boycott's potential challenges and impact are not currently clear, and some more unionised depts might be more affected than others. The withholding of pay in the context of PGR marking is to be considered by HR colleagues and the Industrial Action Contingency Group.

UKRI - The Chair **reported** that the UKRI would imminently release a revised minimum UK stipend and fee levels for 2023/24. The stipend was likely to rise by about 5.4% and fees by only 2.5%. YGRS is working with the Finance Team to look at financial modelling around UKRI match-funded PhDs.

3MT - The Chair **reported** that there had been a massive response to the 11 finalists for the Three-Minute Thesis (3MT) competition.

European Doctoral Summer School - The Chair noted that an online summer school will be held in tandem with Maastricht University and the University of Munster from Monday 19 to Monday 23 June 2023.

PRES - The Chair reported that the response rate for PRES was at 40% and promotion was still required. Board members were asked to encourage their departments to respond.

In course of discussion it was **noted** that:

YCEDE: Online workshops had been set up which were aimed at current undergraduates along with 6 or 7 very well-attended online events going through the PhD application process and targeted at UK BAME applicants. York is advertising research internships to BAME candidates, and there is a mentoring programme for current PGRs, looking at working with staff and PGRs to understand challenges such as workload and a high dropout rate). **ACTION: the YCEDE Year One report is to be circulated with the YGRS Board.**

M22-23/15: YGRS PGR Recruitment and Admissions Project Report

The Committee received the report (**YGRSB/22-23/11**) from the YGRS Project Officer, Hannah Smallpage-Hurst.

It was **reported** that:

- Phase 1 of the PR&A project's main aim is to gather an evidence base. Its

objective is to introduce changes to policies and processes around recruitment and selection admissions at PGR level. A consultation phase will be needed next. A timeline for Phase 1 was presented to the Board.

- Research Culture funding has been secured via RIKE to help fund 2 part-time, fixed-term (6 months to the end of July) graduate roles in the department.
- YCEDE WS1 has been conducting outreach events to improve knowledge around PhD study, while YCEDE WS2 has launched a survey, external to York, across all 5 YCEDE universities. The two projects are working in tandem, which will be beneficial.
- As part of the wider work to maintain or increase PGR numbers at York, the 'Supporting Transition into PhD Project' (STIPP) will be appointing a new staff member on a 9-month, fixed-term contract.
- Current funding for a new PGR Marketing and Recruitment role is 6 months and the Board was informed that this work may not be possible should funding be lost. In terms of next steps, the aim is to have a high-level plan for streamlining and simplifying PGR admissions and recruitment policies and processes within and across faculties to present at the next Board meeting in June, along with scoping plans for PGR marketing and recruitment analysis for feedback from the Board.
- No changes to recruitment or marketing will be made until departments have had chance to feed back during the consultation period.

In course of discussion it was **noted** that:

- PGR recruitment and admissions hinges on turnaround time between offer receipt and acceptance. Applicants have reported a long waiting time for a response, and the Chair asked the Board for suggestions on how departments and faculties might be supported in shortening turnaround times, if this were considered an issue and on how consistency between departments could be ensured. The Registrar asked for feedback on this from academic colleagues.
- From an academic perspective, the Chair of the Graduate Admissions Panel commented that the heterogeneity of PGR applicants was a key factor; the admissions process is very different from UGT/PGT admissions as a result. Matching prospective students with individual supervisors, in addition to the new requirement for interviews, has improved quality control but has extended the length of the process, which reflects its thoroughness. This is a long-term commitment with different priorities from UGT/PGT recruitment and a higher element of risk for both student and supervisor.
- The importance of robust, consistent processes rather than time taken to process an application is crucial for all involved. The Chair **noted** that the administrative burden currently falls on the individual supervisor and asked if anything could be done centrally to help with the earlier stages of triage. The departmental-level individual responsible for screening candidates is crucial here.
- Some good PGT students want to apply for PGR but are concerned about funding; this affects international students more frequently, as more funding and loans are available to UK students. **ACTION: ask for MRAO to ensure that the York website better flags up funding opportunities, including those available to subgroups of applicants. Online workshops could also be run to support this with the International Office.**
- In A&H, applications involve a long conversation between students and potential supervisors; applications are either created by this process or submitted by the central applications system, which tends to be less

successful in ensuring a good match. The negotiation between academic fit and quality is crucial. Some students leave it quite late to apply, and applications need to be in the system by January each year to meet deadlines for funding.

- In Science, individual applications can tend to slip, while those submitted via funders are less affected. The letter of application for scholarships is a potential pinch point.

M22-23/16: PGR recruitment for 22/23 and 23/24 academic years

The Committee received the report (**YGRSB/22-23/10**) from External Relations on its PGR-focused work. Gwion Sims, the Head of International Recruitment, and Paul Armstrong, the Head of Student Recruitment and Marketing, attended the meeting to present the item.

It was **reported** that:

With respect to international recruitment:

- The International Office supports PGR recruitment in a number of ways such as offer-making, applications, and transitioning to York and student life. It manages relationships with the official agent network, various government sponsor agencies, and international partner universities as well, and handles marketing (web pages, marketing campaigns). The priority around volume and income generation is different for PGR recruitment, and the University has made clear that UG and PGT student recruitment is a priority; increasing UGH growth and participation and also international growth and diversification.
- The lion's share of the team's attention and resources is therefore geared in that direction; External Relations has not necessarily had clarity on what areas each section of a given Faculty requires support on in terms of the changing climate around PGR recruitment, subject areas, and international source markets. There is less internal funding; the PGR International Students Scholarship scheme has now been transformed to another objective of widening participation for PGRH students. There is not a lot of point in going out to generate leads and applications if funding/supervision is limited for a given subject area. International students can find UK admissions very alienating and different from processes in their home countries.
- There has been a drop-off in PGRH and PGRO applicants since a peak in 2019 for various reasons. Expectations for student numbers for the next 5 years may be unrealistically high, and there may need to be a conversation about how we influence this. New Faculty structures are now in place, and a PGR Funding and Recruitment Committee has now been set up, along with the new Heads of Faculty Marketing and Recruitment and the funding for a short-term YGRS role; this provides a good context for work in this area. One key point for 2023 is that PGRO data has improved significantly since the report was produced, and admissions are now only 10% down.

With respect to home recruitment:

- Events such as the Russell Group roadshow with other universities have been beneficial in promoting research at York, and the relationship between the research proposal and discussions with departments and supervisors beyond that point, where Marketing steps back. The International team will talk to overseas candidates on visits to discuss processes.
- Research is a crucial part of the York brand. The pandemic has also affected PGRs as well as PGTs: there was a big spike in home applications and enrolments in 2020 and 2021, a similar pattern to that observed with PGROs.

In discussion it was **noted** that:

- The Chair remarked on the improved figures and asked for more detail. Numbers for PGRH are currently approximately 26% down in the Sciences (by 168) but are up in Arts and Humanities, while Social Sciences are steady. Acceptances are remarkably good by comparison: 13 more than this time last year in the Sciences - Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences are very similar (4 lower and 1 lower respectively). The caveat is that pending applications are not in the same volume as this time last year but are holding up well under the circumstances.
- Proportions of offers and accepts by Faculty were as below:

A&H: offers -18%; accepts -2%

Sci: offers -36%; accepts -29%

SocSci: offers -11%; accepts +9%

- In terms of whether these application trends were specific to York or a broader trend across institutions, it was noted that a conference took place a few weeks ago with presentations from the website Find a Masters/PhD; External Relations is planning to ask them to come to York to present their findings. The situation is extremely challenging for all institutions on the Home side.
- Another presentation from Prospect (Masters degrees) showed that the best PGT result among their clients was down -5% and the worst -45% on Home. Reasons for this include the aftermath of Brexit and the fact that the reputation of Brand UK has suffered from recent political upheaval; the cost-of-living crisis has also impacted upon the taught market. The confidence of students has also been damaged after lockdown's difficulties. We need to tap into how we can support students, but funding is crucial. The Chair remarked that this seems to be true across UK HE, but there is no clear benchmarking data for York. It was noted that HESA data for this is between 18 months and 2 years behind.
- The lack of scholarships at York was noted, along with the success of a hardship fund as a safety net in Biology. The Chair commented that this would need to be explored first with Faculty Deans.
- The possibility of using the US common application system was discussed; there has been some take-up in the UK, especially in historical university towns like St

Andrews. The Chair remarked that colleagues have reported Saudi applicants with secured funding whom they struggle to assess, and suggested that there could be a pilot of a departmental-level panel with all applicants submitting applications by a certain date to be matched with PGR supervisors. The

Associate Dean for Research in A&H criticised this option due to the possibility of poor matches being made centrally and highlighted funding issues after the cut in AHRC-funded scholarships. The importance of departments over faculties in student choices was also emphasised. The AD wondered whether a system of reminders, such as those used by SkillsForge, might assist academics along with some centralisation of the admissions process; the Chair commented that this could be useful for enquiries about issues such as visa requirements.

M22-23/17: PGR Annual Review Reports

The Committee **received** a report from the PGR Policies and Programmes Committee (**YGRSB/22-23/08**). Juliet James, the PGR Quality Support Officer, presented the item.

It was **reported** that:

- Departments are asked to reflect on their vision every year, with a number of prompts; next year's annual review will include PRES and the uptake of the "Becoming an effective research supervisor" tutorial.
- This year's was very light touch and focused on two points: the role PGRs played in the 2021 REF and a more general question about any burning issues to be presented to YGRS (see the table of notes and action at item 3.2 of the report). There was a lot of variety in the emphasis placed on PGRs role in the environment template. In terms of University-level actions, the need to celebrate and showcase the role PGRs play in REF was highlighted for action; improving the PGR experience with early-career forums was another point, along with getting a PURE profile for PGRs. It was also noted that the REF process needs to ensure that all departments are making the most of their PGRs. **ACTION: to showcase the role PGRs play in REF.**

In discussion it was **noted** that:

- It was important to ensure that papers co-authored by PGRs needed to be flagged as such in REF. The challenge of collecting PGR data, especially given that their postal addresses might have changed, was noted. The Chair commented that new guidance should be made available over summer. **ACTION: to ensure that PIP identifies PGR status of co-authors.**
- Going forward for the next REF, provision of guidance for good practice needed to be made for departments. Retaining all information in PIP for future reference is the best policy for this. **ACTION: ensure that PIP gets this information and incorporates it into the planning for the next REF.**

M22-23/18: Update for PGR start dates for 23/24 onwards

This discussion was postponed until the end of the meeting. The Chair **noted** that there will be a mismatch between the PGT and PGR start of term; most PGRs will start on 1 October 2023 rather than 18 September 2023, the PGT start date. The two start dates will align in 2024/24, but a piece of work remains to be done to ensure alignment in

admissions and funding processes.

M22-23/19: Update on the training on handling staff-student sexual harassment reports

The Committee received the report (**YGRSB/22-23/06**). Anna Bull and Vanita Sundaram (Department of Education and 1752 Group) presented the item.

It was **noted** that:

- An overview of the two projects led by AB and VS has been sent around; they are funded by Research England and by funds directly allocated by universities. AB is running a pilot project until the end of August 2023 focusing on sexual harassment experienced by PGRs.
- There are 3 strands to AB's project. The first is training for the HR department and other staff who handle reports of staff-student sexual misconduct; women PGRs are more likely to experience this than any other category of student, and 10% report such incidents. Most cases will go unreported. The second is working across 3 Departments and Schools (the School of Physics, Engineering and Technology; the Department of Chemistry; and the School for Business and Society) to run a pilot training session for staff looking at professional boundaries and signposting sexual harassment. AB and VS will gather some light-touch feedback data and write up a report later in July to share within YGRS.
- AB **noted** that current University processes for reporting staff-student sexual harassment were not working as they should, and a working group is currently overhauling this. AB asked the Board's permission to inform any concerned departments that work was taking place to improve this. The Registrar suggested that AB take this to the Sexual Violence Steering Group; AB clarified that this has been done, but the working group under the Steering Group was still looking into this and that this project is looking for clarity of messaging rather than action by the YGRS Board.
- VS's project involves research and evidence-gathering as a primary component and focuses specifically on racially minoritised PGR students. The impetus for this is that there is an underrepresentation of Black and racially minoritised students in general and especially at PGR level. This project is longer and will run until July 2025 until funding from Research England ends; it will cover experiences of bullying and harassment experienced by racially minoritised PGRs and its links with their engagement with CPD and their career aspirations and aims to speak to at least 10
- The Board received this report warmly and undertook to provide a willingness to listen to updates, to provide feedback and to give a commitment to considering recommendations and outcomes in terms of any future changes to policies and processes, in collaboration with any other parts of the University that own different parts of the relevant

processes. It was **noted** that this work should not overlap with that of the Sexual Violence Steering Group; AB clarified that VS is a member of this group while AB and KA are on the working group, so this will not be an issue.

M 22-23/20: Proposal for PGRs who declare a disability and the continuation fee

The Committee received the report (**YGRSB/22-23/12**) from Zhangteng, the GSA Vice President for Academic matters.

It was **noted** that:

- Despite excellent support for PGRs, some students were struggling. PGRs who finished their theses within 3 months could claim back their continuation fees, but this was challenging for able-bodied students and even more so for disabled PGRs. Removing this requirement would ease cost-of-living issues and improve PGRH and PGRO mental health.

In discussion it was **noted** that:

- There could be an equity issue; the waiving of the continuation fee could perhaps be considered as part of an individual PGR's SSP, rather than as a one-size-fits-all policy, given the variety of experience among disabled students. Neurodivergent students in particular were identified as potential beneficiaries of such a recommendation.
- This issue was more suited to the Planning Committee than to the YGRS Board.
- ZT was commended by the Board for his hard work and tenacity in looking into this issue. Since the paper was submitted, the Disability Team had discussed this with the GSA and advised exploration of this issue in terms of equality legislation and potential discrimination. **ACTION: ZT to discuss this issue with Claire Shanks (Head of Open Door and Disability) and Stephen Gow (SCA Secretary).**

M22-23/21: Date of the Next Meeting

[Secretary's Note] The date of the next meeting is currently scheduled as: **Monday 10th July 2023, 11:00 to 13:00** via Zoom.