

Final Internal Audit Report on the Doctoral Supervision Process

Summary

The attached paper provides an overview of the Final Internal Audit Report on the Doctoral Supervision Process. The report has been considered by the City Graduate School Committee.

Senate is asked to receive the report.

One action required.

Recommended Action

Senate is asked to **receive** the report.

Publication: Open



CITY UNIVERSITY
LONDON

FINAL INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT 2017/18 DOCTORAL SUPERVISION PROCESS AUDIT

Opinion and Recommendation Classification

A **Substantial** level of assurance can be given to the adequacy and effectiveness of the system of internal control over the Doctoral Supervision Process at the time of our audit and limited to the scope. Substantial assurance is defined as, "While there is a basically sound system of internal control, there are weaknesses, which put some of the client's objectives at risk. There is evidence that the level of non-compliance with some of the control processes may put some of the client's objectives at risk".

As a result of our audit, the following recommendations have been raised.

Recommendation Type	Number
Priority One	-
Priority Two	3
Priority Three	-

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The City Graduate School, established in August 2012, provides a focus for the University's research degrees provision. The Graduate School works in close partnership with the academic Schools and Professional Services of the University in order to meet the diverse needs of our research student body and aims to:
 - strengthen the research student community;
 - support the personal, professional and academic development of research degree students; and
 - promote the enhancement of the overall research student experience.
- 1.2. The management and development of University research degree policy and provision is supported by Student and Academic Services through the Graduate School Committee, the Senior Tutor for Research Forum, and through the liaison of Student and Academic Services with Schools, Departments, validated institutions and other University services.
- 1.3. Section 9 of the University's Quality Manual sets out the arrangements for, and the principles that underlie, the quality assurance and enhancement of research degree provision regarding the admission, progress and assessment of the University's research degree students.
- 1.4. Under the Framework of Delegated Authority, Schools are responsible for the approval of the admission, monitoring and progress review, examination and award of individual research students, and in approving any changes in registration status during any period of candidature, the record management of research students and in securing research student feedback in accordance with the requirements of the University.
- 1.5. Since October 2011, the institutional-wide Research and Progress (RaP) system, provided by Manchester University, has been used to record, monitor and report on doctoral supervision and research student progress across the University. RaP aims to:
 - ensure research students are meeting with their supervisors regularly;
 - enable research students to manage their own personal and professional development;
 - ensure consistency of practice across the University;
 - enhance the University's research student community;
 - ensure compliance with relevant policy; and
 - improve research degree qualification rates.
- 1.6. The Student and Academic Services operational plan has provision to replace the RaP system by September 2019, though the specification and business case for the replacement has not yet been developed. It is, however, envisaged that the replacement system will be more flexible than RaP:
 - to take into account different arrangements that apply to different types of research degrees;
 - to make it more user-friendly for Students and Supervisors that will give School access to better analytical data; and
 - to have better connectivity to the students record system – SITS.

AUDIT SCOPE AND APPROACH

- 2.1 The audit approach was to develop an assessment of risks and management controls operating within each area of the scope.
- 2.2 The Audit included the following areas:
 - The admission and registration of doctoral students;
 - Their progress and review of doctoral students; and
 - Their assessment and award.

2.3 Key risks identified in the Terms of Reference were:

- Doctoral students are accepted who do not have the academic ability to undertake a doctorate;
- Research supervisors are not supervising their students effectively; and
- Doctoral students fail to complete their studies.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

3.1 Areas of Good Practice Identified

- **Admittance to research degree** – Only students who meet the academic and English language entry requirements, and for whom suitable expertise was available within the School to supervise the proposed research, are admitted onto research degrees.
- **Allocation and suitability of supervisors** – In our audit sample of students undertaking a research degree, but with the exception of the DPsych students, all had at least two supervisors, one of whom was a current member of academic staff, ensuring formal accountability. The main supervisors have previous experience of supervising research students to completion and are engaged in research in a relevant discipline. Changes in supervision arrangements were approved by the School Boards of Studies and were in accordance with the University's policy for the approval of research supervisors.
- **Ongoing supervision of research students** – Students and their supervisors enter into a written Learning Agreement that sets out their commitment for a research studies supervision relationship. Formal supervision meetings occur throughout the year and the student's progress is assessed initially after six months and then annually on the anniversary of the student's registration. A student is required to have made satisfactory progress in their research in order to progress to their next year.
- **Examiners** – The appointment of examiners for research degrees are approved by the School Board of Studies. Examiners who are appointed, meet the academic appointment criteria and have previous experience of examining research students, or are current professors or readers at a university. Two examiners are appointed for each viva, including one external examiner, neither of whom are members of the students' supervisory teams. External examiners do not have significant contact with the students during their course of research and their work does not form a significant part of the students' theses to avoid any bias and unfairness.
- **Viva Voce examinations** – A Chair, normally the Senior Tutor for Research or a nominated deputy, is appointed for each viva voce examination in order to ensure that the assessment of the research students is rigorous, fair, reliable and consistent. At the conclusion of the examination, the Chair completes a checklist to confirm the fairness of the assessment and to reflect on any good and bad practice noted.

3.2 Key Issues Identified

- **Application of Policies** – Our audit identified several instances in our sample of students where the policies and guidance in Section 9 of the Quality Manual concerned with seeking the approval of School Boards of Studies to the admission of students to the degree programmes or for transferring to writing-up were not being followed, and other instances where the guidance did not adequately reflect variations in practice that different types of degrees require, or which were required for Tier 4 students. We have recommended that the policies and guidance be reviewed to take into account the different approaches being undertaken and which can be universally adopted without detriment to quality and standards.
- **Research and Progress (RaP)** – The RaP system, designed to be used across the University to record monitor and report on doctoral supervision and student progression is not being used fully as intended. In our audit sample there were instances of the system not being used at all and other instances of all the required records not being created. There are recognised shortcomings in the system, and a plan to replace it is in its very early stages. We have recommended that in developing a specification and business case for the replacement system, user views and requirements are taken fully into account so that the new system is more fully accepted and used.

- **Learning Agreements** – These agreements are a statement of commitment for a research studies supervision relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee, which both the student and supervisor should sign. We identified that there were a number of student/supervisor relationships for which a Learning Agreement was not in place and that the template for the agreement did not allow sufficient flexibility to describe the expected relationship where the supervision requirements of a degree programme differed from the normal pattern required for a standard PhD. We have recommended that the Agreement should be a form on RaP (and its successor system) that can be signed electronically and amended where necessary to reflect different supervision approaches where these vary from the normal pattern due to the type of research degree. In all cases, supervision arrangements must continue to meet the requirements for the particular research degree as set out in the Senate framework.

Detailed Recommendations

4.1	Application of Research Degree Policies
Rationale	
<p>The Policies for, and expected practices to be followed in relation to, research degrees are set out in Section 9 of the Quality Manual. For this audit, we selected a sample of 20 current students across all Schools to confirm, or otherwise, that the following Policies and practices were being applied as expected:</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Admission for a research degree;• Annual Progress Review;• Approval of Doctoral Degree Supervisors; and• Application for change in supervision arrangements.	
<p>We selected a further sample of 10 students who had transferred to writing-up to review the application of the Transfer to writing-up policy and an additional sample of 9 students who had completed their viva voce examinations during 2017/18 to review the application of the policies for:</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appointment of Examiners for research degrees;• Appointment of Chairs for viva voce examinations; and• Viva voce or oral examinations.	
<p>With the exception of the three policies concerned with examinations, where we found full compliance with the policies and expected practices in our selected sample, we found several instances in our other samples where the policies and practices were not being followed or applied as described and expected.</p>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">i. Applications for admission for a research degree were not being submitted for approval by the Boards of Studies in Cass nor for students undertaking the DPpsych programme in SASS. In CLS, though the names of their applicants are reported to the Board of Studies, completed RDF1 forms, which is a recommendation to the Board of Studies from the Senior Tutor for Research for the approval of each applicant is not provided to the Board. The RDF1 form provides information that shows the registration category of the student, their proposed supervisors and that they have at least the minimum qualifications and English language proficiency required for the programme.ii. Similarly, applications for transfer to writing-up are not submitted to the Boards of Studies in Cass and SASSiii. The method of supervision of DPpsych students differs from that of other students following a four year PhD. DPpsych students, typically, are only having one supervisor appointed which occurs at the conclusion of their first year. They do not undergo a six month review nor an Annual Progress Review in Year One, having instead to pass two modules in Research Design and Analysis. Their progression is subject to formal assessment each year with external examiners present. They do not enter into a Learning Agreement with their supervisor.iv. Students who are undertaking a part-time Executive PhD jointly with another University are only required to have three formal supervision meetings a year as opposed to six meetings that are set out in the Learning Agreement between the student and the supervisor. This applies to one Cass programme which is currently in termination, and arrangements for supervision were approved via the programme approval process, and documented in the Memorandum of Agreement for the partnership.v. Once in writing-up, students should not receive further supervision, with the supervisor's role being to review draft copies of the thesis that are to be submitted, as a whole. Tier 4 visa students, however, are required to continue to meet in person during writing-up as these provided the evidence to show the continued presence on engagement of the student in compliance with UKVI requirements.	
<p>When policies and practices do not provide for variations from a standard approach to undertaking research degrees to reflect the approved structure of different types of research degree, there is a risk that actual practices followed by Schools to enable a variation to the standard approach to be</p>	

applied, may not be sufficiently robust to progress students to a successful outcome to their research programme.

In addition, when there is systemic non-compliance with policy, such as obtaining approvals of Boards of Studies at various stages in the research progression, which does not result in a diminution of the standards and quality of students being admitted to the research degree programmes, and of their progression towards achieving their doctorate award, there is a risk that the policies are creating unnecessary additional workloads for students, supervisors, research degree administrators and Boards of Studies.

Recommendation	Priority
<p>The Policies and practices for research degrees set out in Section 9 of the Quality Manual, should be reviewed and revised, where necessary, to take into account:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • different approaches to approval and supervision of students whose research programmes do not follow a standard 4 year PhD approach; and • different approaches adopted by Schools to submitting to Boards of Schools, applications and other requests requiring their approval, to determine if such practices can be universally adopted without detriment to the quality and standard of acceptance of candidates and the final outcomes of the research degrees. <p>If policies and practices are unchanged, the Senior Tutors for Research, in those Schools which have adopted different practices, should be reminded of the need to seek the approval of their Boards of Studies in accordance with the Quality Manual policies.</p>	<p>Two</p>

Management Response

Graduate School Committee approved a policy review schedule in November 2017 to deliver a systematic review, redrafting and re approval of all university policies governing research degree provision over the course of the next three academic years, recognising that a number of policies no longer satisfy increasingly varied modes of programme delivery. As part of this process, Schools will be consulted and asked to identify where policies are out of line with established practice, in order that this can be incorporated in to revised policy, where appropriate, before final approval by Senate.

Policies governing research degrees must strike a balance between being sufficiently prescriptive and being applicable to the entirety of the University's research degree provision. The preferred approach is to have a standard policy/procedure that satisfies the majority of research degree programmes, and then have approved derogations for particular programmes where deviations are appropriate.

It is recognised that the role of Boards of Studies has an agenda understandably dominated by taught provision – most schools have a Research Degrees/Research Programmes [sub-]Committee, but often with a different secretariat to the Board of Studies.

Proposed responses are therefore to:

- *Continue with the agreed policy review schedule*
- *Draft new derogations and regulations to current policy, with priority for the DPsych and Executive PhD programmes*
- *Carry out workshops and training with Secretaries of School Boards of Studies and Research Degrees Committees to clarify responsibilities and flow of approval documents relating to research degrees.*

Target Date	September 2019, September 2020	Responsibility	Assistant Registrar (Research Degrees)
--------------------	--------------------------------	-----------------------	--

4.2 Research and Progress (RaP)

Rationale

The Research and Progress (RaP) online system is designed to be used to record, monitor and report on doctoral supervision and research student progress across the University. Students are introduced to the system at their Research Student Induction Day. The benefits of the system are seen as:

- as it is an online system, students and supervisors can log in to it at any time from any location;
- it provides transparency regarding progression between the students, their supervisory teams and the Boards of Studies;
- it enable all key milestones to be tracked;
- it reduces administration time through online completion of forms; and
- it facilitates compliance with University and sector-wide regulations and policies including UKVI Tier 4 requirements.

Our review of the RaP records of our sample of 20 current students showed that:

- the system was not being used by three students;
- not all the forms that should have been completed had been completed for four students
- some of the forms that had been prepared for seven students had not been fully signed off as agreed

We asked if alternative Word or pdf versions were available of the six month and annual progress review forms for the three students who had not used the RaP system and for the other students whose forms had not been completed or fully signed off. These forms could not be provided.

Criticisms levelled against the system which have contributed to its non-use include:

- it is time consuming to use and not user friendly;
- it is not accessible to external supervisors; and
- it increases the administrative burden of the Research Degree Administrators by generating emails to them whenever a form is completed, including forms which require no further administrative action.

These shortcomings have been recognised and a plan to replace the system, from September 2019, has been included in the Student and Academic Services operational plan, though, at this stage, the specification and business case for the replacement has not yet been developed although some user feedback on requirements for a new system has been obtained.

The risks associated with not using an institutional wide system for recording and monitoring progression include:

- a lack of transparency on students' progress and completion of milestones so that students who are struggling with their studies cannot be identified in advance, which, in turn, could then affect completion rates if they do not succeed, causing potential reputational damage to the University;
- records may not be safely retained and are not easily accessible by students and supervisors at any time;
- there is a level of inconsistency if different methods of recording information are used;
- the frequency of meetings between the supervisor and the student cannot be monitored, leading to a risk that students are not sufficiently supported;
- as the system uses traffic light indicators that show red milestones as being incomplete, students could appear to be not progressing in their studies when in fact it could be simply because they have not completed their actions on RaP;
- if six months and annual progress reviews are not properly carried out, students may struggle with their research, may not put in as much effort into doing well and so could

fail to successfully obtain their degree. This affects University completion rates and potentially causes reputational damage;

- if supervision meetings do not occur or forms are not completed:
 - any welfare issues affecting a student may not be picked up at an early stage;
 - evidence needed to show “on time” completion rates to support Research Council funding may not be available so that the University may be ineligible to apply for Research Council money; and
 - evidence needed to show compliance with Tier 4 requirements, where applicable, may not be available; and
- information taken from the RaP system to compile key performance indicators will be inaccurate.

Recommendation		Priority	
<p>When developing the specification and business case for the system to replace RaP, the views and requirements of the Schools should be sought and fully taken into account so that the replacement system is more universally accepted and used.</p> <p>In the meantime, Senior Tutors of Research should be reminded of the benefits of using the RaP system and encouraged to ensure that supervisors and students make full use of it.</p>		<p>Two</p>	
Management Response			
<p><i>It is recognised that use of Research and Progress (RaP) is inconsistent across the University, with a number of academics opting and permitted historically to retain paper records rather than a mass migration to RaP.</i></p> <p><i>User feedback on RaP and requirements for a replacement system was collected during 2016/17. A replacement of Research and Progress will be scoped, tendered and implemented for September 2019, with further input sought from users and administrators in Autumn Term 2018/19. Best practice in the use of RaP will also be raised as an item for discussion at the Senior Tutors for Research Forum</i></p>			
Target Date	September 2019	Responsibility	Assistant Registrar (Research Degrees)

4.3	Learning Agreements
------------	----------------------------

Rationale

The Learning Agreement is a statement of commitment for a research studies supervision relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. A template for the agreement is available as a Form in Section 9 of the Quality Manual and links to it are contained in:

- the guidance on the Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Supervisor, where both the student and supervisor are guided to consider the agreement; and
- the Introduction to Research Degree Framework form, on RaP, where the student is asked to tick a box to confirm that they have read the document.

In neither place is the student or supervisor asked to complete and sign the agreement.

We asked the first supervisors of the students in our sample of current students to provide us with a copy of the agreement they had entered into with the student as copies are not held on RaP. Of the 20 students in our sample, we received copies of the agreement for only three of them. For the others:

- one did not require a learning Agreement as he was undertaking his degree by prior publication;
- two agreements could not be found after the programme transferred from SASS to SHS;
- one DPsych student was in her first year and had not at that stage been allocated a supervisor;
- no agreements had been entered into with four students; and
- nine replies to our request had not been received.

The Learning Agreement document is a standard template that has the provision only to write in the names of the student and supervisor(s) and, in Clause 12, the number of days/weeks within which feedback can be expected when written work is submitted. All other clauses are standard wordings. Though these could be amended if needed, as the agreement is a Word document, there is no guidance on amending the Agreement if the supervision approach envisaged in the agreement is applied differently for certain degrees, such as the DPsych.

In particular, we noted different arrangements occurring for the number of supervisor meetings occurring each year (Clause 2) where for some part-time Executive PhD awards only three meetings occur each year as opposed to the six stated in the template.

There is a risk that, if a Learning Agreement is not entered into between the student and the supervisor, students are not fully aware of the commitment needed to complete the programmes or inadequate supervision of the student occurs. In both cases, this could lead to students not successfully completing their degrees.

In addition, the failure to maintain adequate supervision records as set out in the agreement, could expose the University to the risk of not fulfilling its responsibilities to provide adequate supervision and support which could lead to complaints and litigation under consumer protection legislation.

Recommendation	Priority
-----------------------	-----------------

The Learning Agreement should be a form on RaP (or its successor system) that can be electronically signed by both the student and the supervisor. Those parts of the agreement which will differ according to the variations in the supervision arrangements for different doctoral degrees should be free text fields on the form which can be filled in when the agreement is considered and discussed by the student and the supervisor.

Two

<p>The guidance on the Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Supervisor in Section 9 of the Quality Manual, should be amended to clarify that the Learning Agreement needs to be "considered and completed" by both the student and the supervisor.</p>			
<p>Management Response</p>			
<p><i>On Research and Progress (RaP), the Introduction to the Research Degree Framework Form, completed within one month of enrolment, does ask students to confirm that they have seen the supervisor/supervisee learning agreement. However, it does not ask students or supervisors to upload the agreement, and therefore relies on students/supervisors returning a copy to the School office, or retaining locally.</i></p> <p><i>We therefore support the recommendation, and a new form will be created on RaP (and any replacement system) to allow the Learning Agreement to be completed in the system or to be uploaded to the system for other members of staff (e.g. Senior Tutors for Research) to access.</i></p>			
<p>Target Date</p>	<p>December 2018</p>	<p>Responsibility</p>	<p><i>Assistant Registrar (Research Degrees)</i></p>

Appendix 1 – Assurance Definitions and Priority Levels

In order to assist management in using our reports:

a) We categorise our **opinions** according to our assessment of the controls in place and the level of compliance with these controls.

Full Assurance	There is a sound system of control designed to achieve the system objectives and the controls are being consistently applied.
Substantial Assurance	While there is a basically sound system, there are weaknesses which put some of the system objectives at risk, and/or there is evidence that the level of non-compliance with some of the controls may put some of the system objectives at risk.
Limited Assurance	Weaknesses in the system of controls are such as to put the system objectives at risk, and/or the level of non-compliance puts the system objectives at risk.
No Assurance	Control is generally weak, leaving the system open to significant error or abuse, and/or significant non-compliance with basic controls leaves the system open to error or abuse.

b) We categorise our **recommendations** according to their level of priority.

Priority 1	Critical business risk not being adequately addressed; weaknesses in key business control; substantial non-conformance with regulations and accepted standards.
Priority 2	Important business issues to be addressed; improvement area; inadequate risk identification or reduction; non-conformance with regulations.
Priority 3	Minor non-conformances with the business management system; other business issues to be addressed, good working practices.