**Graduate School Review – College of Science and Engineering**

**5 May 2017, Kelvin Meeting Room**

**Number 11, The Square**

**Introduction to the Review**

A Review Panel met on 5 May 2017 with staff, listed in the tables below, from the Graduate School (GS) in the College of Science and Engineering (COSE) to discuss the written submission (Self-Evaluation Questionnaire [SEQ]) the GS made to the Review Panel.

Meetings were held separately with senior staff and Postgraduate Convenors, students and supervisory staff culminating in a wrap up meeting with senior staff. The Panel comprised one internal member, one external member, one Senate Assessor, one student member, a senior member of staff as Convenor and a Clerk from the Research Strategy and Innovation Office.

***Panel Members:***

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| Professor Miles Padgett | University of Glasgow | Chair |
| Professor Chris Phillips | Imperial College | External Panel Member |
| Professor Jo-Anne Murray | University of Glasgow | Internal Panel Member |
| Professor Karen Lury | University of Glasgow | Senate Assessor |
| Bob Rooney | University of Glasgow | Student Panel Member |
| Mary Beth Kneafsey | University of Glasgow | Clerk to Panel |

**Review Meeting Attendance:**

***Key Staff Meeting***

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| Name | School | Role |
| Professor Susan Waldron | Graduate School / School of Geographical and Earth Sciences | Dean of Graduate Studies |
| Ms. Heather Lambie | Graduate School | Graduate School Manager |
| Mrs. Pat Duncan | Graduate School | Head of Academic and Student Administration |
| Dr. Anthony Kelly | School of Engineering | PG Convenor |
| Dr. Stefan Hild | School of Physics and Astronomy | PG Convenor |

***Student Meeting***

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| **Name** | **School** |
| Helmi Kreinan | School of Chemistry |
| Sarah Griffin | School of Chemistry |
| Kirsty Annand | School of Physics and Astronomy |
| Danielle Morrison | School of Psychology |
| Charlie Gilles | School of Geographical and Earth Sciences |
| Blair Archibald | School of Computing Science |
| Maria Evangelopoulou | School of Computing Science |
| Justin Sperling | School of Engineering |
| Ashwini Venkatasubramaniam | School of Engineering |
| Angela Tabiri | School of Mathematics and Statistics |
| Samuel Evington | School of Mathematics and Statistics |
| Yoana Borisova | School of Mathematics and Statistics |
| Richard Middlemiss | School of Physics and Astronomy |

***Supervisor Meeting***

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| **Name** | **School** |
| Ross Forgan | School of Chemistry |
| Lee Cronin | School of Chemistry |
| Joelle Prunet | School of Chemistry |
| Christina Cobbold | School of Mathematics and Statistics |
| Donald McLaren | School of Physics and Astronomy |
| Aidan Robson | School of Physics and Astronomy |
| Martin Lages | School of Psychology |
| Nick Kamenos | School of Geographical and Earth Sciences |
| Craig MacDonald | School of Computing Science |
| Nikolajj Gadegaard | School of Engineering |
| Huabing Yin | School of Engineering |
| Scott Watson | School of Engineering |
| David Featherstone | School of Geographical and Earth Sciences |

***Final Review Meeting***

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| **Name** | **School** | **Role** |
| Professor Muffy Calder | College of Science and Engineering | Head of College |
| Professor Susan Waldron | Graduate School | Dean of Graduate Studies |
| Ms. Heather Lambie | Graduate School | Graduate School Manager |
| Mrs. Pat Duncan | Graduate School | Head of Academic and Student Administration |

**Summary of Discussions**

The Panel met prior to the Review meeting to discuss their impressions from the SEQ. A number of themes were agreed for discussion. In the various sessions, similar questions and topics were discussed with each group to get a range of perspectives.

One issue that was noted in the narrative rather than in the statistical information provided was that of timely submission rates and a particular School where these were markedly low. The Panel also wanted to look into how Annual Progress Review (APR) was functioning and the engagement of staff with supervisor training as it felt that these were important as well as related to issues with low timely submission rates. Further, the Panel wished to understand how staff and students viewed the Graduate School and how they saw its role.

***Submission Rates***

The overall submission rate for the College is, for the cohort starting in 2012, 74.8%. Some Schools have a high timely submission rate of over 90% but two Schools fall below the 70% threshold seen as the minimum acceptable by most external funders. For the same year, the School of Computing Science had a rate of 66.7% and the School of Engineering, a rate of 50%. The Panel noted that these were submission rates for the softbound theses within 4 years for full time students. While there were concerns that these low numbers meant that students were failing to complete at all, this was not the case. The issue is one of failing to submit on time. This is a matter already under investigation by the Graduate School and the Schools.

Several possible explanations were offered:

* senior staff are often the worst offenders in terms of promoting timely submission as they have not adapted to changes in culture;
* students are asked to do many more things during their PhD than in the past, such as training, public engagement and career development related activities and this can be a distraction;
* students are often quite productive near the end of their PhD in terms of papers and presenting their results and this can be a distraction;
* some delays are inevitable, such as chronic illness or issues with required equipment or large scale collaborations.

It was noted that there was no specific sanction involved in failing to complete on time other than perhaps an extended unfunded period. Two other Colleges in the University were represented on the Panel and they reported that since tightening their approaches and not allowing students to continue beyond their maximum period without documented good cause has resulted in much higher submission rates and a clear perception that the deadline is firm. The external Panel member also noted that the submission rate in his institution was very high and that students who ran out of time were moved into a special status to indicate this and that there were financial implications for the student and the supervisor. The Graduate School appreciates that this approach works but acknowledges that a sudden change would be difficult, if not unfair, and that for current students a failure to submit at the end of 4 years is often the result of problems that have already happened. The Dean has, however, taken the approach of personally contacting supervisors for a discussion when she receives an extension request to explore the reasons and be clear about the limitations.

Workload issues were mentioned in this context and that supervisors are generally supporting more students than in the past, alongside other duties which have also grown in scale or scope. The Panel pointed out that students who fail to finish cost both time and money and that if supervisors could be motivated or supported to improve submission rates, that this would ease some workload issues. It was also noted that, while it may take time to fix this issue, fixing it should be a priority.

Students were queried on their perceptions about when they were required to submit. They do have a sense that not submitting on time was somehow a failure but they didn’t know what the consequences of this were. One of the main drivers for students is that their funding runs out after 3 or 3.5 years and they are keen to submit before this happens. For international students on Tier 4 visas, submitting before requiring a visa extension is a driver for earlier submission. Students generally felt that supervisors didn’t particularly encourage them to finish or hold out a firm deadline to them but that this would be useful. Students also observed that there is a lack of parity in that some students are given work or funding might be found locally for them or that thesis pending fees might be waived or paid by the supervisor in some cases.

Staff felt that there were ‘cultural issues’ in some areas that related to low submission rates. While staff in place now are keen to address these issues, there are views and habits that have not been so easy to change. Staff also note there are no visible consequences for non-submission for either staff or students and that students know that they can ask for extensions. The challenges inherent in various funder regulations were also discussed; some funders provide funding for 3 years, some for 3.5 and some for 4 years. It can be difficult to interpret what, if any, part of this is a writing-up period. An unfunded writing up period was acknowledged as a challenge for timely submission as students often seek employment when they run out of funding which impacts on their ability to submit. Supervisors felt that better communication would be useful and clear messages about expectations and consequences would be beneficial.

***Annual Progress Review***

The Graduate School, the students and the supervisors all felt that Annual Progress Review (APR) was a process that was taken seriously. Progress interviews are conducted by a Panel with an independent convenor. The second supervisor may be present but the primary supervisor is not included. The primary supervisor provides comments to the panel on the progress of the student as part of the submission to the panel. The Graduate School feels that this enables the student to have an honest and independent assessment of their work as well as providing some experience of presenting their work to independent reviewers. The APR Panel then makes a recommendation as to whether the student should progress or be required to complete an improvement plan. Students requiring improvement are supported in the process of meeting the milestones in their plan. It was noted that few students require remedial action and very few fail to ultimately progress to the next year.

The external panel member queried the lack of participation by the supervisor in the meeting, as this is not common practice across the sector. It was noted that MVLS has a similar system where the supervisor does not participate although in that case the student sees the same independent panel throughout their programme rather than a different panel each year.

Students found the APR process useful, if bureaucratic, and appreciated the opportunity to discuss their work. However, they note that there are inconsistencies across the Schools and subjects / divisions in terms of how students are informed of or prepared for APR, what is required to be submitted for the process and whether the process is approached negatively or positively by the panel convenors. Staff generally found APR to be useful to keep students on track but commented that where students were weaker it could be difficult to diagnose issues effectively and plan for improvement in this context. They felt that recent changes to processes driven by the Graduate School were positive.

***Supervisor Training***

The Panel noted that, from the figures provided, attendance at supervisor training was low. Perceiving a lack of interest and attendance at the generic supervisor training which centres on policy and information dissemination, the Graduate School has tried to enhance provision by putting on a number of lunchtime workshops on topics suggested by the PG Convenors. However, take up has been low. The Dean has attended School meetings to provide some of the information provided to supervisors in the generic training course directly to staff in an effort to engage them. She also noted that a number of the agenda with which staff are currently required to engage also entail training, such as participation in Athena Swan activities. While the training numbers are low, she feels strongly that supervisor training should be focused on development and should provide more than a generic offering.

While the University Code of Practice states that supervisors must attend a training course every five years in order to continue supervising students, in practice this is difficult to manage and ensure that students aren’t left without support. The Dean suggested that an objective in the annual Performance and Development Review process might assist with highlighting that this activity is important by requiring that it is formally. It might also be useful to have senior staff, such as the VP (Research), visibly engage in training as an example to other staff of how the institution values this sort of development.

Students were asked what they would like the Graduate School to do more of – and their response was that they would like to see supervisors have more training on things like providing constructive feedback, managing expectations, communication skills and promoting wellbeing and work life balance. Supervisors were asked what training they might like and their replies suggested that much of what they would find useful is already on offer. They specifically mentioned desiring training around creating communities and cohorts, improved communication, effective management and supporting students to improve time management or wellbeing. Staff however are still reluctant to engage and some noted that they would prefer to have no training at all, at least in this context. Some felt that increased development opportunities that allowed staff to share experiences and build support rather than ‘training courses’ might be beneficial. They also noted that they didn’t feel that their development was valued and taking courses that don’t relate to the kind of measurement that universities apply to staff didn’t seem useful or supportive.

***Role of the Graduate School***

The Graduate School serves 7 Schools and one joint Research Institute shared with another College. This is a large and diverse population for a small team to serve. There are currently over 775 full or part time students and another 215 students who are thesis pending. The Graduate School has a wide range of responsibilities, both administrative and strategic, including pastoral support for students, operational and financial management, recruitment and marketing, community building, supporting and developing the Strategic Advisory Board, participating in strategic thinking and planning within the College, industry engagement and funder engagement. This also includes working with other Graduate Schools on shared activities, such as linking with industry partners and developing proposals for CDTs or training.

While the Dean and Graduate School Manager are very visible to their community and very highly regarded by both staff and students for their helpfulness and responsiveness, the Panel questioned whether the burden of pastoral support was too concentrated on these key staff members and why it wasn’t shared more with the Schools. There was a concern that this interfered in their ability to undertake other activities. PG Convenors and student representatives should take on some of this activity but it seemed that the Convenor role varied by School and that student representatives were not always very visible to students.

The GS noted in their SEQ that they are stretched in terms of workload and that with more staff, more could be achieved. The Panel felt that some support from elsewhere, such as improved access to data from the Planning and Business Intelligence team, might free up time for the Graduate School Manager. The Graduate School felt strongly that additional resource would help them to maintain their visibility and active support for their community while still being able to move forward with their strategic aims.

Students, broadly, see the Graduate School as support for non-academic matters or problems and a resource for training courses and mobility or funding opportunities. They acknowledge that they have a sense that the Graduate School probably does much more than they know about. Feedback about the overall training programme was quite positive and they feel the courses are worthwhile and that the credit requirements aren’t too onerous. Staff shared these views and generally felt that the contributions of the Graduate School to the training programme and to the overall community of students were valuable.

**Commendations and Recommendations**

***Commendations***

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| **No.** |  |
| **1.** | The Panel would like to commend the Graduate School for their efforts to develop enhanced development opportunities for supervisors. |
| **2.** | When asked about what the Graduate School meant for them, students were clear that the Dean and Graduate School Manager ‘were’ the Graduate School in their eyes. The Panel commends the highly supportive and responsive approach that they have taken to managing the operations of the Graduate School. |
| **3.** | The Graduate School works very hard to ensure a high quality training programme is in place for researchers as well as community building events and activities. Students and staff value this support and coordination highly and the Panel commends this. |

***Recommendations***

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| **No.** |  |
| **1.** | Low 4-year submission rates are a key issue requiring resolution by the Graduate School and the Academic Schools. Additional investigation into the reasons for this should be undertaken and difference between the schools understood. While it is acknowledged that resolving this will take time, the Graduate School needs to perform more regular monitoringof the administration of progression processes in the Schools, impose firm consequences for late submission and provide clear, accessible messages to students and staff about these consequences. |
| **2.** | Annual Progress Review processes should be kept under review in order to encourage and maintain consistency. While staff and students felt that the process was supportive and broadly achieved its desired ends, there were inconsistencies and some divergent practices noted. |
| **3.** | The Graduate School should reflect on how more pastoral support can be provided within the schools and its availability more effectively communicated to students to lessen the burden on Graduate School staff. |
| **4.** | The level of administrative support for the Graduate School should be reviewed by the College to ensure that it is sufficient to support the delivery of the goals of the Graduate School. |
| **5.** | Engagement of staff with existing supervisor training should be improved. The Graduate School should continue to develop and promote the programme of workshops / seminars that they have recently instituted. Senior staff members should be strongly encouraged to visibly support training and development efforts, by attendance at the courses themselves and setting targets for the attendance of others. |
| **6.** | Consideration should be given to how supervisor development could be included in Performance and Development Review processes. |

**Conclusion**

The overall impression made by the Graduate School in this Review was very positive. While the Panel was at times challenging, there was a strong sense that the Graduate School had an awareness of the issues facing them and had already begun to address these. There were clearly longer term issues that they were working to resolve but it was possible to see the positive impact of the Graduate School across the Schools and in the experience of the students. The GS should be proud of its achievements and the Panel would like to thank them for their participation in the Review process.