

Procedures for the Periodic Review of Departmental Research Degree Provision

Introduction

1. Imperial College London is responsible for the academic standards of awards made in its name and for providing high quality learning opportunities and learning experiences to students which enable them to achieve the academic standards of those awards.
2. The university's review process for departmental¹ research degree provision covers programmes leading to the awards of MPhil, MD(Res) and PhD². Where departments lead on Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) programmes offering EngD awards, these will also be included in the scope of a review.
3. The reviews aim to highlight examples of good practice across the university and identify areas for enhancement. Periodic reviews are overseen by the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC) and outcomes reported to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) and Senate.
4. The schedule for the university's periodic and precept reviews is set by QAEC. From time to time, review schedules need to be revised and departments may be reviewed out of turn in response to information that would suggest that an earlier review would be desirable.

The Precepts

5. The university has a set of [Research Degree Precepts](#) for research degree training (this incorporates specific precepts for collaborative provision).
6. The precepts have been agreed in consultation with departments and the Early Career Researcher Institute (ECRI). The precepts allow departments a degree of flexibility in implementing and reflecting on their own systems and research environments, but also ensure that there is consistency of standards across the university. Within this structured institutional framework, Imperial monitors whether departments are fulfilling their responsibilities by carrying out precept and periodic reviews of research degree programmes. These processes entail each department to demonstrate how they achieve compliance with the university's precepts.
7. The precepts draw together the university's research degree regulations and procedures with QAA guidance (specifically the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education core expectations for](#)

¹ Any reference to 'departmental' or 'department' may include institutes, centres or schools as appropriate.

² This procedure includes the review of collaborative research degree programmes which are owned by individual university departments.

[standards and quality](#) and advice and guidance on '[research degrees](#)' for all programmes and '[partnerships](#)' for programmes involving a collaborative partner.

The purpose of Periodic Review

8. Periodic reviews normally take place every six years. Periodic reviews focus on overarching themes linked to departmental, faculty and university strategies for learning, teaching and research and the pastoral support provided to students. They include students and external peers in the review process.
9. The purpose of the periodic review of departmental research degree provision is to ensure that:
 - a. Each department's strategy for the development of its research degree provision, including any collaborative research degree provision, supports the strategy for the development of research within the faculty and the university and promotes interdisciplinary collaboration between departments; Opportunity is taken to consider future goals for research degree training in the short, medium and long term;
 - b. Imperial maintains its academic standards and enhances the quality of research degree training that it provides for its students;
 - c. Review processes are transparent and research degree provision remains current and valid.
 - d. External reference points, for example the [National Framework for Higher Education Qualifications \(FHEQ\)](#), the [Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area \(EHEA\)](#) and other external references are being followed;
 - e. The success of the department is monitored via regular and systemic review of processes and consideration of feedback from students and other stakeholders, to identify and build on existing strengths and areas of good practice, and to ensure that areas for enhancement are identified and addressed;
 - f. A pastoral care network is in place for student welfare and that mechanisms exist to monitor and review this provision;
 - g. Students progress smoothly through each stage of their programme and that appropriate mechanisms are in place for monitoring and supporting student progress;
 - h. The ECRI professional skills development programme is effective in supporting research student development;
 - i. Research degree training is exposed to external scrutiny.

The Periodic Review process

10. The indicative timeline for a Periodic Review is as follows:

Timeframe	Action	Responsible Role(s)	Associated documents

Procedure

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4 – 8 months prior to review	Department informed that review is due	Quality Assurance and Enhancement Team (QA&E)	PGR Periodic Review guidance External Reviewer nomination form
	Department proposes review date	Department	
	Department nominates external reviewers	Department	
	External reviewers to be approved by Chair's Action	PRQC Chair	
	Organise review panel (External and internal reviewers and Chair)	QA&E team	
1 – 4 months prior to review	Milestone and award data sent to department	QA&E team	Milestones data Destinations data SED template
	Self-evaluation document (SED) compiled	Department	
	Recruit participants for student feedback session	Department	
0 – 4 weeks prior to review	Submit SED	Department	Departmental SED
	Check SED and forward to panel	QA&E team	
	Review SED and formulate areas of inquiry	Panel	
Review day(s)	Ensure staff and students are available to participate in sessions	Department	
0 – 8 weeks post review	Produce outcome report	QA&E team	Periodic Review Panel report
	Review and approve outcome report	Panel	
	Check outcome report for factual inaccuracies	Department	
2 months + from review	Receive Periodic Review outcome – either unconditional or conditional approval	Department	Periodic Review Panel report Department written response and action plan
	Respond to conditions and recommendations	Department	
	Outcome considered by PRQC	QA&E team	
	Outcome noted by QAEC	QA&E team	
	Outcome noted by Senate	QA&E team	

Periodic Review documentation

11. The QA&E team contacts departments in the summer to advise that a periodic review is due in the coming academic year, and to agree a visit date (normally between February and June) and request nominations for external reviewers. Any Registry-owned data will be supplied to departments no later than four weeks prior to the documentation submission date so that the department can incorporate this data into their submission.
12. The department Self-Evaluation Document (SED) provides details of the documentation that is required and who should take responsibility for each item. All documentation must be supplied to Registry four weeks prior to the review date.
13. If the department under review 'owns' a collaborative research degree programme(s), the Head of Department must consult the academic lead for the programme when preparing any documentation which relates specifically to the collaborative programmes.
14. The material is sent to the panel appointed for the review (see below) a minimum of two weeks prior to the review date. Panel members are free to request additional information or clarification.

Periodic Review Panel

15. The Periodic Review panel will normally be comprised of the following members:
 - i. Chair: someone of standing within the university who has knowledge of quality assurance processes, such as a College Consul. They must be from a different faculty to the department under review.
 - ii. Internal Reviewer: normally a Director of Postgraduate Studies (DPGS). They must be from a different department to the one under review.
 - iii. Two External Reviewers: must have knowledge and experience of postgraduate research provision. They may be academic staff from similar departments with other higher education institutions, experts from industry or business, or educationalists. External Reviewers cannot be affiliated with the university. The Head of Department will be asked to complete an External Reviewer Nomination Form with details of two possible External Reviewers. The Chair of the PRQC will consider all proposals and ensure that nominees meet the agreed set of university criteria.
 - iv. Student Representative: the Student Representative will normally be a current research degree student from a different department to the one under review.
 - v. Review Officer: the QA&E team will appoint a Review Officer to oversee the administrative aspects of the periodic review, support the panel and draft the periodic review report.

Periodic Review Visit

16. Standard practice has been for reviews to take place in person over the course of one day. Recent developments have meant that an alternative virtual review is also permissible. This will follow a similar agenda but will be split into two sessions rather than a single day.

Procedure

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17. For an in-person review, arrangements are made for the panel to visit the department for discussions with groups of staff and student representatives (this will include staff and student representatives from collaborative programmes where applicable) and the opportunity is provided for the reviewers to see appropriate departmental facilities. Departments should ensure that a cross section of students are invited to attend.
18. For a virtual review, a series of online meetings will be set up with different groups of staff and student representatives (this will include staff and student representatives from collaborative programmes where applicable). There is no requirement for a departmental visit for this type of review but the department may offer a virtual tour of specific facilities if it is in a position to do so.
19. An [example agenda](#) for both types of review can be found on the website.
20. Whether the review is undertaken in person or virtually, the following areas may be addressed by the panel:
 - a. The extent to which the departmental strategy for the development of its research provision reflects and supports the faculty and university strategies for research degree training;
 - b. The suitability of the research environment and access to equipment and resources required;
 - c. Compliance with the university's Research Degree Precepts, including collaborative precepts where appropriate;
 - d. The suitability of the mechanisms in place to manage any collaborative research degree programmes within the department;
 - e. The suitability of the discipline specific research skills training and professional skills development and the assessment of training needs throughout the study period;
 - f. The mechanisms in place for monitoring student progression and on the effectiveness of the Early Stage Assessment (ESA) and Late Stage Reviews (LSR);
 - g. The pastoral care of students, academic support and overall student experience, including, where applicable, those students on collaborative programmes (studying for PhDs or EngDs);
 - h. The opportunities given to students to engage with the department and to provide feedback on their experience as a research student, how student feedback is used to enhance provision., and how students are informed of actions taken as a result of their feedback;
 - i. How the department promotes student interaction with their peers and facilitates the existence of a research community;
 - j. Career development opportunities and how well the department prepares its students for employment;
 - k. The supervisory arrangements for students in the department and the effectiveness of the supervisors' roles and responsibilities;
 - l. The training, guidance and support provided for internal and external supervisors and the management of their workloads to ensure they carry out their supervisory roles effectively;

- m. The continuing professional development opportunities available to supervisors.

At its final meeting the panel will also:

- n. Identify any areas of commendation and/or commendable achievements
- o. Identify instances of good practice for wider dissemination across the College
- p. Identify recommendations for enhancement
- q. Identify any areas where urgent action is required

Periodic Review panel report

- 21. Following the periodic review, the Review Officer will produce a report which will summarise areas identified as good practice for further dissemination as well set out a number of recommendation for enhancement.
- 22. The draft report will be sent to the Chair for approval, followed by the other members of the panel for information. Following any necessary revisions, the final unconfirmed report will be sent to the Head of Department for information and with an invitation to correct any errors in matters of fact or accuracy. Once any factual errors have been corrected the final confirmed report will be sent by the Review Officer to the department and to the panel and the Director of the Early Career Researcher Institute or nominee for information.

Consideration of the Periodic Review report

- 23. The Head of Department, (in consultation with the International Relations Office and academic lead where appropriate), will be asked to provide a written response and action plan to the Panel's recommendations. The department's response should be submitted to the Review Officer.
- 24. The department's action plan will be shared with the panel members for further comment, and the Chair of the periodic review panel will be asked to confirm that each of the panel's recommendations has been satisfactorily addressed, or indicate where there are any issues still outstanding.
- 25. The confirmed periodic review report and departmental response/action plan will be submitted to PRQC. The chair of the periodic review panel will present the report to PRQC and the DPGS of the department under review should be in attendance. The other members of the periodic review panel and other representatives of the department will not normally be required to attend.
- 26. The judgement of PRQC is reported to QAEC for endorsement and to Senate for noting.
- 27. Departments will be required to provide a report, outlining action taken to address any recommendations highlighted by the periodic review panel, to PRQC mid-cycle, normally as part of the precept review, unless the findings of the periodic review indicate that earlier follow-up is required.
- 28. The outcome of any periodic review of a collaborative research degree programme will inform the quinquennial strategic review of the partnership.

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