

The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Second Round Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews
Research Postgraduate Education
Self-Evaluation Document

Background information

The Graduate School was established in 1966. Its policy arm is the Graduate Council, and its Executive Committee takes up most management tasks. The administrative arm is the Graduate School Office. All students and programmes report on subject-specific academic matters to the Faculty, on general quality assurance and regulations to the Graduate School. 1
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1. Processes, activities, structures and resources to assure and enhance the quality of the student experience in the research environment

Assurance of programme quality

- 1.1 The University regards the education of RPg students as a collective responsibility. RPg students are not admitted by individual supervisors, but are enrolled in programmes approved by the Faculty Board, Graduate Council and Senate, and run by a Division. Programmes are initiated at the Department/Faculty level, on the basis of academic justifications, societal needs, and the mission and strengths of the University. Proposals are then scrutinized by the Graduate Council or its Executive Committee, and with its endorsement are presented to the Senate for approval. Adequacy of resources (e.g., staff), course offerings and requirements are considered. Recently introduced programmes include interdisciplinary programmes offered jointly by several departments. 3
- 1.2 Subsequent programme changes are submitted to the Faculty Boards for approval and then to the Graduate School for implementation.

Quota allocation and control

- 1.3 The RPg quota has been actively managed as an instrument for ensuring responsible administration and to direct places (with attendant resources) to Divisions that perform well. The divisional quotas are adjusted annually from the historical base, by considering a basket of performance indicators: completion and attrition rates, the quality of intake (e.g., first-degree honours), exit standards (thesis grades given by external examiners), and measures taken to address issues raised by the Graduate School. 4
- 1.4 The Graduate School holds back a central pool, which is released in several trenches for bidding by Divisions that have filled their quota in a timely fashion, and on the basis of the qualifications of the particular student to be admitted, as well as the statistics and quality of the students admitted in the past. These measures have shifted resources and improved intake quality. 5

Resources allocated by Faculty/Department/Division

- 1.5 Satisfactory progression depends on resources made available to the student. At CUHK, resources are allocated to Departments through one-line budgets based on the full load equivalent (FLE) taught; in this computation, RPg students are given an enhanced weight, to cover the cost of the research.

- 1.6 On the other hand, Divisions have to ensure that departmental resources and facilities are made available to RPg students. This is one of the elements scrutinized in quota allocation.

Other enhancement/support measures

- 1.7 To enrich student experience and to enable them to learn new techniques and benefit from different research environments, students are permitted, subject to application and approval, to do part of their research in another institution. The University has also entered into a joint RPg programme with a partner university to leverage on resources.
- 1.8 The series *Improving Postgraduate Learning*, first introduced in 1995, prepare students for postgraduate studies, impart skills that are not specific to particular subjects, and enrich the learning experience beyond the major department. Modules include, e.g., research ethics, thesis writing, library, internet and safety. Attendance is mandatory for intellectual property and safety (for those involved in laboratory work). **6**
- 1.9 The Graduate School provides guidelines and advice on research and thesis writing; these are available on the web. **7**
- 1.10 Other enhancement measures include: the Independent Learning Centre which offers services to individual students, library facilities like the provision of full-text dissertations on CUHK's campus network, a best thesis award, support for attending overseas conferences and academic visits, etc..

Feedback loop and continuous improvement

- 1.11 An annual exit survey is used to identify areas for improvement; recommendations are then made to Faculties and other supporting units. **8**
- 1.12 The Graduate Council reviews regularly policies on postgraduate studies. Recommendations and feedbacks on programme improvement, handling of students, etc., are conveyed to Graduate Divisions. On the other hand, the performance of divisions affect future quota allocation. This provides incentive for continuous improvement.

Problem areas

- 1.13 Inadequate coursework requirements (in part because of the previous three-year normative period for the PhD).
- 1.14 Student thesis work is sometimes weakly connected to the focus of faculty research.
- 1.15 There is wide diversity in the culture of RPg supervision.

2. Supervisory, monitoring and advising practices, and the maintenance of academic standards

Admission

- 2.1 The minimum admission standard is controlled not by individual departments but by the Graduate School, which vets and makes all admission offers. Cases that do not meet these minimum standards have to be individually approved by the Graduate Council. **9**
- 2.2 First-degree holders must first enrol in M.Phil. programmes before transferring to PhD programmes. Applications that do not meet the minimum entry requirements for the PhD programmes have to be considered at the Graduate Council.

Supervision and advising

- 2.3 The Graduate Council has laid down rules for the eligibility of supervisors and the upper limit on the number of students supervised, to ensure adequate supervision. **10**
- 2.4 If the supervisors will soon retire, resign, or complete their contracts at the University, a co-supervisor has to be assigned to ensure continuous supervision.
- 2.5 Supervisors have to be assigned soon after admission, so that students receive advice at an early stage. Clear rules are laid down to allow change of supervisors; the current supervisor cannot prevent a student from moving to a new supervisor.

Progression and monitoring

- 2.6 The Graduate Council has introduced a framework on research postgraduate programmes. Unit-bearing "research" courses monitor student progress; unsatisfactory grades trigger attention at the Division level, and at the Graduate Council if deemed necessary by the Division Head concerned. **11**
- 2.7 At the beginning of each academic year, supervisors together with students agree on and record expected milestones; at the end of each year these are reviewed and returned to the Graduate School. Cases with unsatisfactory performance are put up to the Graduate Council for attention and action, e.g., advice, warning, and in some cases discontinuation. **12**
- 2.8 Leave is carefully monitored. Leave beyond 21 days has to be approved by the Graduate School. Subject to evidence that the student will be supervised during that period and upon approval by the Dean of Graduate School, "in residence" leave may be granted for sojourns at another institution to use facilities, to perform experiments, or to attend short courses.

Exit standard

- 2.9 The exit standards are controlled by a thesis committee, comprising the supervisor, the division head or his representative, 1–2 other internal examiner(s) from within or outside the division, plus at least one external examiner. The external examiner is approved by the Senate and the University Council. (Exceptional urgent appointment is made by the Vice-Chancellor.) External examiners not of an appropriate academic rank (SL or Associate Professor) have to be justified to the Graduate Council – not on the basis that the nominee is suitable, but on the basis that, because of the subject matter, no known academic of the specified seniority can be found.
- 2.10 The examiners submit separate assessment reports on the thesis. Where there is one or more failure grades, or if the grades are significantly discrepant (even though they may all be passing grades), the case is considered at the Graduate Council with input from the Division. A final recommendation is reached if necessary upon the advice of an independent panel from that subject discipline. Cases with a C grade given by the external examiners are presented to the Graduate Council for attention as well. These procedures are intended to uphold standards on the one hand, and to ensure that a single examiner cannot fail a student for reasons that may be subjective. **13**

Feedback loop and continuous improvement

- 2.11 The Graduate School monitors on a statistical or sampling basis various indicators, both as a formal instrument for quota allocations, and also to get a feel for the state of an increasingly large and diversified sector. A statistical summary of entry standards is compiled and is used as an indicator that affects quota allocation. The distribution of grades awarded by external examiners is also monitored from time to time. The Dean of Graduate School reads a sample of theses together with the examiners' reports, and the impressions are recorded. **14**
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- 2.12 Completion and attrition rates are compiled annually and affect the distribution of student quota for the following year. All these measures serve as effective incentives for improvement. **16**

Problem areas

- 2.13 In some Divisions, the tradition of individual supervision is still strong.
- 2.14 The student numbers of some Divisions are too small to allow effective peer learning.
- 2.15 Some supervisors may regard students more as research assistants.

3. Processes, activities, structures and resources to support the career development of research students

Generic skills

- 3.1 Many modules in the *Improving Postgraduate Learning* series target generic skills for students. The list of modules provided is in Appendix 7. (cf. Para. 1.8.) **7**
- 3.2 The Independent Learning Centre offers language enhancement programmes to help students polish their language skills.
- 3.3 An induction session for new postgraduate students target their teaching skills in their role as part-time teaching assistants. **17**
- 3.4 All students are required to pass the University's IT proficiency test before graduation, irrespective of their major.

Services by the Office of Student Affairs (OSA)

- 3.5 OSA offers guidance programmes: career planning and development workshops, talks on interviewing and presentation skills.
- 3.6 OSA posts on-line job listings and links students to recruiters by arranging on-campus interviews and submitting students' applications to recruiters. One-to-one career counselling service is also provided to students where needed.

Technology transfer activities

- 3.7 Technology transfer often leads to career opportunities with the licensees.

4. Major areas for future attention

- 4.1 Good practices are not yet uniform. A survey on best practices across Divisions has been conducted and will form the basis of policy changes to be encouraged or mandated. **18**
- 4.2 Further effort is needed to develop a more uniform pattern of course requirements for programmes to follow.
- 4.3 Course evaluation for taught classes should be required, in parallel with undergraduate courses.
- 4.4 Need to gradually improve the culture of RPg supervision: to bring student research closer to faculty research, and yet to allow students sufficient independence to grow, and not operate as research assistants.

List of Appendices

- 1 Terms of reference of the Graduate Council and membership of the Graduate Council and its Executive Committee
- 2 Summary of matters considered at the Graduate Council Executive Committee
- 3 List of recently introduced RPg programmes
- 4 Quota management (sample taken from adjustment of 2001-02 quota)
- 5 Communication to Divisions on bidding for central pool places
- 6 Induction Programme – Improving Postgraduate Learning 2000-01
- 7 Guidelines on thesis writing
- 8 Summary of the exit survey on RPg students
- 9 Extracts from the General Regulations on minimum entrance standard
- 10 Extracts on guidelines for appointment of supervisors
- 11 Framework on research postgraduate programmes
- 12 Sample progression form
- 13 Sample cases with significant discrepancy in grades
- 14 Distribution of grades by external examiners
- 15 Sample of notes kept by Dean of Graduate School in reading selected theses
- 16 Completion and attrition rates of RPg students
- 17 Orientation for new Teaching Assistants 2001-02
- 18 List of best practices in monitoring and assuring quality of research education