

Discussion of Queen Mary PRES results – 2008

The analysis of the PRES 2008 results indicates that in general students are satisfied with their experience of their research degree programme, but that there are several areas in which things could be improved. Many of these issues were also brought up in the national survey, and so are not unique to QM. Also, many of the same issues surfaced in last year's survey, but as it has been less than a year since the PRES 2007 report was produced it is not surprising that the same problems still exist. Recommendations of ways in which these might be tackled are discussed in the following section.

- Many students do not feel properly integrated into their department or the wider research community, and do not feel that the research environment is stimulating.
- There is a lack of support and guidance provided to some students involved in teaching. Some students received excellent support and this was an area about which opinions were more positive than last year, but it is important that all students receive the necessary guidance in order to provide high quality teaching and to get the most out of their experience.
- The area of career, personal and professional development is one for concern, with many students not being encouraged to think about career options or professional development. Only just over half of students believe there are adequate opportunities for them to develop transferable skills, and similarly low percentages of students have taken advantage of opportunities available to them through their Graduate School, ESD or external bodies.
- There is a problem with the level of information many students are receiving regarding expectations of them and their work, and requirements in terms of deadlines, upgrade procedures, thesis submission etc

Actions taken and recommendations for the future

A full report of results from the college was presented at a meeting of the Graduate Schools' Management Committee on 27/01/09. In addition, a separate report was written for each of the three graduate schools, and these reports were presented at each graduate schools' committee meetings in December 08/January 09.

Below is a summary of the recommendations that were made, based on the results of the survey, and a list of actions that will be, or have already been carried out in response.

Induction events

A successful induction event which is attended by all, or the majority of, incoming PhD students could help to address several of the issues highlighted by PRES. It could help to integrate students into their department, and other related departments, by giving them a chance to socialise with fellow students and staff. It would also be an opportunity for staff from ESD and the Careers service to highlight the courses, workshops and services that they provide, ensuring that all new students are aware of what is available to them in terms of personal and professional development. In addition it would ensure that students were fully aware of all facilities and resources available to them.

More co-ordination is required between the Graduate Schools, departments and central services to ensure that a successful PhD induction event, or events, can be provided. Whether this event is at a College, Graduate School or department level is a matter for discussion, but lack of communication has been a problem in the past resulting in some students having no access to induction events, and some being overloaded with information from different angles.

Actions:

Graduate schools have decided that they will hold their own induction events at the start of the Autumn term, rather than continuing to run a college-wide induction event which has not been well attended in the past. There will be input from central services (ESD, Careers service, Students' Union.....) into all the induction events.

Each Graduate School will prepare a plan of their induction event to be presented to the Graduate Schools' Management Committee meeting in May.

Research environment

- Some kind of induction/social event when students start their research degree programme would enable them to meet other students and academics, and help them feel part of the department immediately.

- Departments should make sure that all their students are aware of events such as seminars, journal-clubs, postgraduate society events. The wide range of opinions from students within single departments suggests that some students are more aware of these opportunities than others.
- Student-run events should be encouraged and enabled wherever possible. Ideas such as the “Take the Initiative” scheme, which provides funding for students to set up journal clubs, seminar series etc., can help with this and should be promoted. Initiatives such as the newly formed EECS Research Liaison Committee could also be a very positive way of encouraging students and young researchers to take more responsibility for their own research environment.

Actions:

Jo Cordy is currently looking into the success of projects funded by the Take the Initiative scheme last year, and will request funding from the graduate schools to run a similar scheme to fund student-led projects this year.

The School of Medicine & Dentistry are starting up Student Forums to co-ordinate student-led events in the Institutes.

EECS have set up a Research Liaison Committee. The aim of this committee is to be a forum for researchers and PhDs to feed back issues/concerns to the School and to act as a conduit for research related information. It will also aim to help develop a social network for researchers, via support of events etc.

Support for teaching

- Course-coordinators should ensure that PhD students who teach are aware of marking standards and any other relevant information, and that they have access to administrative support where necessary.
- ESD runs courses to help students who will be demonstrating in labs, and also offer a few one-off workshops on aspects of learning and teaching. Students should be made aware of both of these, if appropriate. If departments wish to offer their own courses/workshops to students about to undertake teaching/demonstrating, then ESD would be very happy to work with them to do this.

- Some departments encourage students to take the Certificate in Learning & Teaching (CILT) run by ESD, but students often find they can't enrol because the course is full. One possible way of overcoming this would be to develop a course specifically designed for PhD students with teaching responsibilities. This could run along similar lines to module 1 of CILT and could include input both from ESD and departments. This is obviously not something that could be set up immediately, but it is something that could be discussed.

Actions:

Departments are now more aware of the need to provide PhD students who have teaching responsibilities with proper support and training.

Jo Cordy will put together a proposal for a new course designed specifically for PhD students who teach.

In Humanities & Social Sciences departments such as English & Drama, who already provide good support to teaching assistants, are sharing their experience and practices with other departments.

Career, Personal and Professional Development

Although there are many opportunities within the Graduate Schools, in ESD and outside the college for students to develop their personal and professional skills, and to think about their careers, many students are either unaware of these opportunities or do not take advantage of them.

- Supervisors should discuss career, personal and professional development with their students, and encourage them to attend courses and workshops where appropriate. Currently very few students use any form of Personal Development Plan (PDP) to help them with their development, and it would be very useful if supervisors could encourage students to do this, either using the on-line resources or a different format if that is preferable.
- An induction event could be an opportunity to introduce the concept of career, personal and professional development to new PhD students, and to make them aware of courses run by ESD, events within departments and the Graduate School, and opportunities offered by the Careers Service.

- A new feedback form will be introduced in ESD in the next couple of months, to collect more information from students about their views on the courses they attend. This form will ask students for their department, so it will be possible to look at the feedback from each graduate school. This will allow us to provide courses that are more useful to students, and to identify areas in which training might be better provided at graduate school level.
- A new careers advisor dedicated to research students and staff started in December. She will be working mainly within SEGS. ESD will work with her and with other careers advisers to organise appropriate careers events and workshops for students.

Actions:

Dr Tracy Bussoli started in the Careers Service in December as the Careers Adviser for Researchers in Science & Engineering. She will work mainly with S&E researchers, but will also run workshops in ESD that will be open to all PhD students.

Jo Cordy is starting to plan the programme of workshops for PhD students in 2009-10. She will look carefully at feedback from this year to ensure that a suitable range of workshops is run.

Guidance on standards and expectations

- Supervisors need to be aware of current rules, regulations and guidelines so that they can pass the correct information on to their students. In addition, supervisors should provide students with more guidance and feedback on the standard of work that is required.
- An induction event would be a good opportunity for students to be informed about university regulations and guidelines.

Actions:

Supervisors will receive training at least once every five years, which will ensure they remain up to date with regulations and are able to provide the correct information to their students.

The School of Medicine & Dentistry have introduced a PhD students' diary which contains useful information about requirements, regulations, etc.

Graduate School-specific issues

While there were a lot of similarities between the results obtained from the three graduate schools, there were also some issues that were specific to one or two of the schools. These will be mentioned briefly here, but much more detail, including recommendations for dealing with issues of concern, can be found in the reports for each individual graduate school.

Within HSS one of the main areas of concern was the lack of appropriate facilities available for students. There was a strong feeling amongst students that they did not have adequate access to library and computing facilities, and often did not have a suitable working space. This same area was a strength for both SEGS and SMD, with a large proportion of students satisfied with the facilities available to them.

Actions:

Some investment has been made to renovate the library, which will include more study space dedicated to PG students.

HSS departments have been informed that they may bid for more funding from the college to improve their own library facilities.

In SEGS and SMD many students felt that they were not receiving an adequate level of supervision, and although supervisors were generally thought to have the skills and knowledge required, students were much less positive about their supervisors' willingness to understand their problems and to provide useful feedback. This was not so much of a problem in HSS, where over 70% of students were satisfied or very satisfied with the supervision they were receiving.

Actions:

Supervisor "refresher training" is being enforced, meaning that any member of academic staff who has not undergone training in the last five years will not be able to supervise PhD students. All new PhD supervisors already have to undergo training before they are allowed to supervise. This training will involve sharing best practice of supervision methods as well as updating supervisors on current rules and procedures.

One particular area of concern in SEGS is that students are much less confident, on average, about being able to complete their PhD on schedule, than students elsewhere in the university or in other universities. This problem does not seem to be restricted to QM, as the national survey also found that science and engineering students were generally less confident in their ability to complete on time than students in the arts, humanities or medical sciences.

Actions:

Supervisors are being made aware of the need to discuss completion schedules and plans for writing the thesis with their students.