



Internal Review School of Postgraduate Studies

Peer Review Group Report October 2011

DOCUMENT CONTROL SHEET

Name of Unit	QEO Peer Review Group					
Project Title	Internal Review School of Postgraduate Studies					
Document Title	Peer Review Group Report					
Document No.						
This Document Comprises	DCS	TOC	Text	List of Tables	List of Figures	No. of Appendices
	X	X	X	0	0	3

Rev	Status	Author(s)	Reviewed By	Approved By	Office of Origin	Issue Date
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1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOOL OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) School of Postgraduate Studies (SPGS) was established in 2006 and is responsible for ensuring the delivery and quality of fourth level education at RCSI. The SPGS was established in response to the growth in postgraduate activity, including the Government's National Development Plan to double the output of PhDs by 2013.

1.2 OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOOL OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

The mission of the SPGS is "The pursuit of postgraduate excellence and the development of RCSI postgraduates as competent and inspiring leaders capable of making significant contributions in the health sciences".

The SPGS caters for a community currently comprising 253 postgraduate research students, 72 postdoctoral researchers and 102 supervisors. The SPGS oversees the following domains: higher degrees by research across a number of campuses in Ireland and abroad, postdoctoral and supervisor training, and elements of some taught Masters' programmes.

Since its inception, the SPGS has achieved notable successes; these are summarized in Section 1.1 of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR).

2 CONTEXT FOR REVIEW

RCSI is an independent health sciences Higher Education Institution headquartered in Ireland encompassing Schools of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Physiotherapy, Postgraduate Studies and Leadership with an international 'foot-print' in Ireland, Bahrain, Dubai, Jordan & Malaysia. RCSI is a Recognised College of the National University of Ireland and, in 2010, received independent degree-awarding powers by order of the Minister of Education and Skills of Ireland. The advent of degree-awarding powers has brought RCSI into a national Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement structure administered by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). In parallel with Institutional Reviews managed by NQAI on a four-year cycle, RCSI is required to conduct internal reviews of Schools and non-academic units on an on-going basis. Internal reviews of the School of Postgraduate Studies and the Examinations Office will take place during 2011.

2.1 MEMBERSHIP OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP (PRG)

Professor John Breen, Associate Professor, Department of Life Sciences, University of Limerick; Dean of University of Limerick Graduate School from 2007 to 2010; Chair of PRG;

Professor Pam Denicolo, Professor of Postgraduate and Professional Education, Director of the Graduate School, University of Reading; Vice Chair UK Council for Graduate Education;

Ms Kate Kelly, Chief Librarian, RCSI;

Professor John Waddington, Professor of Neuroscience, Molecular and Cellular Therapeutics, RCSI.

2.2 TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW GROUP

The PRG was asked to review the SPGS under the following headings:

- (a) Organisation and management of the School
 - The activities within the School and how these are organised.
 - Are appropriate and effective committee structures in place to support the School's activities?
 - Are the aims and objectives of the School clearly articulated with agreed strategic goals?
- (b) Staff and facilities
 - Staff and qualifications
 - Are academic and non-academic staff levels sufficient to execute the activities of the School?
 - Is there a satisfactory balance between the teaching and research activities of staff within the School?
 - Professional development and review: how are the professional needs of staff and the skill needs of the School identified?

(c) Quality assurance

- Plans for improving the quality of all activities of the School.
- Strategies for achieving the aims of the School.
- The School's proposals for measuring its success in achieving its aims, with special reference to improving the quality of teaching and learning and enhancing the quality of research.

(d) Teaching, learning and feedback from stakeholders

- Are mechanisms in place for evaluation and feedback effective?
- Is there evidence to suggest that the School has responded to feedback?
- Are students represented on committees within the School?

(e) Curriculum development and review.

- Are there systems in place by which the curricula of programmes are developed and reviewed on a periodic basis? If so, are these systems adequate?
- Is there evidence to suggest that curriculum content is benchmarked against recent developments in teaching and learning, and research?
- Is there evidence of stakeholder (internal and external) involvement in the curriculum development and review process?

2.4 CONDUCT OF THE REVIEW BY THE PRG

Prior to the Site Visit, members of the PRG were supplied with a Self-Assessment Report (SAR), together with Appendices, documenting a self-assessment by members of the SPGS conducted prior to April 2011.

This document constitutes the Report of the PRG. A list of abbreviations is in Appendix 1. The PRG visited RCSI from 18 - 20 May 2011. During the Site Visit interviews were conducted with various Stakeholders; the schedule of meetings is in Appendix 2. In addition, small amounts of information, not included in the SAR, were requested and supplied to the PRG. At the conclusion of the Site Visit, the Chair read a preliminary summary of principal findings of the PRG (Appendix 3). This Report is based on analysis of the SAR, a joint presentation by the Head of School and Postgraduate Programmes Manager in which they highlighted attainments in quality measures in accordance with national guidelines, the interviews during the Site Visit, and communications between the members of the PRG following the Site Visit.

3 ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE UNIT

The PRG should consider:

- The activities within the School and how these are organised.
- Are there appropriate and effective committee structures in place to support the School's activities?
- Are the aims and objectives of the School clearly articulated, with agreed strategic goals?

3.1 OBSERVATIONS BY THE PRG

The PRG appreciates the detail and transparency in the SAR and its Appendices. The PRG was impressed by the level of engagement with the Review process during the Site Visit, both by members of the SPGS and the Stakeholders who were interviewed.

Activities of the School include:

Overseeing higher degrees by research (PhD, MD, MCh, MSc) across a number of campuses in Ireland and overseas, training of postdoctoral fellows and supervisors, and taught Masters' programmes.

For Postgraduate Research Students (PGRs), the "overseeing" activities include everything from initial recruitment, through registration and monitoring of progress, to the examination processes and graduation.

The activities of the School also include overseeing and contributing to modules delivered to PGRs.

The SPGS is also conducting a review of taught Masters programmes for Postgraduate Taught Students (PGTs), which are mostly run by academic departments. This situation is commented on further in Section 9.

The PRG noted that there has been very considerable expansion in PGR activity since the inception of the School in 2006. The PRG also noted that all Stakeholders interviewed spoke very highly of the activities of the School, and of their reliance on them though some drew attention to the constraints of resources available to the School.

The PRG noted that the role of the SPGS in PGT was less clear. The PRG noted that much of PGT activity is carried out in academic departments, apparently with much individual autonomy and little central RCSI control.

The PRG noted that RCSI appears to have several major institutional problems which impact adversely on the delivery of a high quality postgraduate education and on the ability of SPGS to achieve its full potential. These include historically derived, unlinked procedures and functions which often work against each other rather than in concert. These procedures and functions were suitable for particular undergraduate activities but are inappropriate for the complexity of postgraduate activity following a major expansion in this area over the past decade. We noted lack of co-ordination and very variable ownership of fundamental processes such as admissions, registration, student records, fees and support services (e.g. library and IT). There is no forum which addresses postgraduate requirements for IT systems and associated processes. These fractured systems lead to duplication of

information, missing information, contradictory information and inaccessible or lost information in relation to students and their key activities and entitlements.

Members of the SPGS also co-ordinate the annual RCSI Transition Year Mini-Med School, during which about 150 pupils from approximately 80 schools spend one week in RCSI/Beaumont Hospital.

The rationale for the reporting structure for staff within the School is unclear. At the time of the site visit, the PRG noted that the Postgraduate School Secretary reports to the Associate Director for Academic Affairs, or nominee, and not to the Postgraduate Programmes Manager, while the HRB PhD Scholars' Administrator, located in the same office as the Postgraduate School Administrator, reports to the PhD Programme Director, or nominee.

3.2 COMMENDATIONS

The SPGS is a team of committed, enthusiastic and talented individuals who engage in a wide and complex variety of activities to the benefit of RCSI and the wider community.

Everyone we interviewed spoke most highly of the service provided by the SPGS, despite the lack of resources and limited number of personnel.

They also acknowledged the major positive impact and added value that the SPGS has contributed since its inception. These contributions include, *inter alia*, training, the multi-facets of PGR examinations, supervisor support and pastoral support of students and postdocs. This makes the SPGS an integral part of the educational mission of RCSI.

In the relatively short time that it has been existence, the SPGS has imposed order and introduced quality control into what were previously nebulous and disparate activities. This is most evident in the areas of PGR, and to a lesser extent for PGT and Postdoctoral researchers.

3.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The SPGS has made sensible, short-term proposals, in response to reviews, in the SAR, However, a strategic long-term plan needs to be developed should the PRG recommendations be acted on.

Recommendation 3.1: The SPGS should develop a strategic long-term plan. [Strategic]

Systems need to be introduced to give unity to fundamental processes such as admissions, registration, student records, fees and support services (e.g. library and IT), such that all such information is contained ideally within a single RCSI database. These challenges need be addressed by RCSI Senior Management Team. The SPGS needs to ensure that the RCSI database meets the reporting requirements for the HEA (see section 12, IUQB, 2009. *Good Practice in the organisation of PhD programmes in Irish higher Education*. Second Edition. Dublin. Irish Universities Quality Board).

Recommendation 3.2: RCSI Senior Management Team should address the issue of including all postgraduate information within a database system, which should satisfy internal requirements as well as the reporting requirements for the HEA and other statutory bodies. [Strategic]

Recommendation 3.3: A forum needs to be established which will identify and implement postgraduate requirements for IT systems and associated processes across RCSI.

The terms of reference and reporting mechanisms of the School of Postgraduate Studies' Committee are unclear. This committee appeared to be uncertain about the balance and dynamics of power between the School, the Research Committee and the other Schools, and did not demonstrate signs of strategic direction beyond the immediate future. This needs to be addressed by RCSI Senior Management Team.

Recommendation 3.4: Clear terms of reference should be agreed for the School of Postgraduate Studies' Committee. See also Recommendation 5.4. [Strategic]

The reporting structure within the SPGS should be altered so that both the Postgraduate School Secretary, and the HRB PhD Scholars' Administrator should report to the Postgraduate Programmes Manager. There should be strategic succession planning for the imminent retirement of the Head of School.

Recommendation 3.5: The reporting structure within the SPGS should be altered. [Rectifiable with current resources]

The SPGS needs to review the PGR recruitment system to ensure that entrants meet a common standard required by RCSI, as part of Postgraduate Academic Regulations (see Recommendation 5.1), and also takes into account the views of supervisors following their interviews of potential applicants. At entry, and at regular intervals throughout their research programme, the skills needs of individual PGRs should be assessed. RCSI should have appropriate resources, available and accessible to entrants if their background requires it. This could be provided in an online system, to ensure that applicants' individual needs are acknowledged. It is particularly important that resources are accessible, and not merely in existence, and that students recruited are of a quality that can flourish in RCSI. Please read, also, related recommendations in Section 5.3.

Recommendation 3.6: The SPGS should review PGR recruitment with regard to standard at entry, and take into account the views of supervisors following their interviews of potential applicants. [Strategic]

Recommendation 3.7: The training needs of PGRs should be assessed at entry and at regular intervals throughout their research programmes. These skills needs should be matched to short courses and modules, some of which may need to be developed. As far as possible, taught elements which are available to PGRs on Structured Programmes should be made available to all PGRs. The necessary resources to provide this PGR training should be provided. [Strategic]

Co-ordination of the annual Mini-Med School should reside outside the SPGS, although the experience of members of the SPGS should be retained as far as possible.

Recommendation 3.8: Co-ordination of the annual Mini-Med School should reside outside the SPGS. [Strategic]

4 STAFF AND FACILITIES

The PRG should consider:

- Staff and Qualifications
- Are academic and non-academic staff levels sufficient to execute effectively the activities of the unit?
- Is there a satisfactory balance between the teaching and research activities of staff within the unit?
- Professional Development and Review; how are the professional needs of staff and the skill needs of the unit identified?

4.1 OBSERVATIONS BY THE PRG

The SPGS consists of four members of staff, one of whom, the Head of School, is part-time in this role. The organisation and reporting structures of the SPGS, within RCSI, are outlined in Section 2 of the SAR. One member of staff, whose post is research grant funded, deals with one specific Structured PhD programme. Currently, there are 253 postgraduate research (PGR) students, 102 supervisors and 72 postdoctoral fellows. The SPGS Committee, which includes Student representation, oversees the activities of the School.

In Section 3.3, we referred to procedures and functions which the PRG considered inappropriate for the complexity of postgraduate activity following the major expansion of this activity. If the recommendation of the PRG is acted upon, the centralisation of fundamental processes such as admissions, registration, student records, fees and support services (e.g. library and IT) has resource implications for RCSI.

The PRG notes that the professional needs of the School staff are being identified through the annual Professional Development Review (PDR) process and through regular progress meetings with the Postgraduate Programmes Manager. Some of these are provided “as needed” or “when appropriate opportunities arise”.

The PRG notes that there is no career structure for any of the staff within the SPGS.

The current office accommodation for the staff of the SPGS is dispersed throughout the main RCSI building. This makes it difficult to recognise the SPGS as a cohesive unit and is detrimental to efficient working practices.

4.2 COMMENDATION

The SPGS is a team of committed, enthusiastic and talented individuals who engage in a wide and complex variety of activities to the benefit of RCSI and the wider community but are in imminent danger of being overextended as a result of their own success. This conclusion was reinforced by each stakeholder group which we consulted.

4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

For the current level of activity the number of staff in the SPGS is inadequate to sustain the quality of the services provided and should be increased. This should include incorporating externally funded posts into the core posts of RCSI.

Recommendation 4.1: For the current level of activity within the SPGS, the number of staff should be increased. Externally funded posts should be incorporated as core RCSI posts. [Limited Resources]

We envisage potential expansion of postgraduate activity and this would only be viable through a combination of re-focussing of the range of activities of the SPGS and a further increase in staff numbers.

Recommendation 4.2: Staffing levels and the range of activities of the SPGS need to be re-considered if there is any further expansion of postgraduate activity within the SPGS. [Limited Resources]

The SPGS should be co-located in a cohesive unit with adequate office space and facilities.

Recommendation 4.3: The SPGS should be co-located in a cohesive unit with adequate office space and facilities. [Rectifiable with current resources]

There should be a clearly defined career structure and staff development for members of the SPGS.

Recommendation 4.4: There should be a clearly defined career structure for staff within the SPGS, to reflect their abilities, efforts and aspirations. Once a clear Strategy and Policy is developed for the SPGS, requirements for the professional development of the members of the School, including skills, should be more evident. [Rectifiable with current resources]

5 QUALITY ASSURANCE

The PRG should consider:

- The plans for improving the quality of all activities of the School.
- The strategies for achieving these aims.
- The School's proposals for measuring its success in achieving its aims, with special reference to improving the quality of teaching and learning and enhancing the quality of research.

5.1 OBSERVATIONS BY THE PRG

The PRG welcomes the commitment to quality improvement as described in the SAR pages 13 and 41.

The PRG notes that the SPGS has produced a number of guidelines for various PGR activities. The PRG noted the existence of guidelines entitled "Recruiting a Higher Degree by Research Student", "Procedure to Register for a Higher Degree by Research", "Guidelines for PhD Annual Report", "Definition of PhD", "Appointment of Examiners for Higher Degrees by Research", "Guidelines for Examiners of PhD Candidates at RCSI", "Guidelines for Independent Chairs of PhD Viva", "Guidelines for Oral Presentation in a PhD Viva", and "Right of Appeal of the PhD Thesis Examination Process". Similar guidelines are available for MD, MCh and MSc where appropriate. The SPGS also has a suite of forms appropriate for the different stages in the research degree process.

While monitoring of annual progression by PGRs is being fully implemented for those on Structured PhD programmes, the PRG was not convinced that this situation prevailed amongst all PGRs on non-Structured PhDs.

Additionally, the great bulk of documentation and discussion centred around PhD students; though MD students are an important, even critical, component in a balanced postgraduate portfolio, they appeared somewhat peripheral in the the activities of the School.

5.2 COMMENDATIONS

The PRG commends the examination structures in place for all candidates for higher degrees by research, including the mechanisms for appointing external examiners and the inclusion of independent chairs for PhD examinations. It is evident from a number of sources that these processes are fully accepted and implemented widely for all candidates.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendation should be borne in mind when implementing Recommendation 3.6.

Recommendation 5.1: The PRG recommends that checking of the validity of international qualifications of prospective students needs some further attention, e.g. possibly involving the use of NARIC (www.naric.org.uk). [Limited Resources] / [Rectifiable with current resources]

While the PRG commends the SPGS for its range of useful Guidelines, these need to be re-structured and formalised as Postgraduate Academic Regulations which are fully recognised by RCSI academic structures. In their present format, they are just guidelines and it is not possible to impose sanctions if they are not applied. However, the PRG expects that the present series of Guidelines will form the basis of the proposed Postgraduate Academic Regulations. Furthermore, many examples of PGR Regulations are available both nationally and internationally as exemplars. The existing series of Guidelines can be retained as guidelines which give working instructions for the implementation of the Regulations. All regulations, guidelines, and activities should give the same standing to MD as to PhD students.

Recommendation 5.2: RCSI Postgraduate Academic Regulations, fully recognised by RCSI academic structures, are required urgently. [Rectifiable with current resources]

There needs to be an institutional policy on supervisors, supervision and a register of supervisors needs to be established (see IUQB, 2009. *Good Practice in the organisation of PhD programmes in Irish Higher Education*. Dublin. Irish Universities Quality Board).

Recommendation 5.3: RCSI needs an institutional policy on supervisors and supervisory issues. A register of RCSI supervisors needs to be established. [Strategic] and [Rectifiable with current resources]

RCSI management needs formal terms of reference for the SPGS Committee and the Programme Validation and Assessment Committee (PVAC) and their relationships with SPGS. These terms of reference should include regular quality assurance checks and national and international benchmarking.

Recommendation 5.4: Formal terms of reference are needed for the SPGS Committee and PVAC Committee. See also Recommendation 3.4. [Strategic]

6 TEACHING, LEARNING AND FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

The PRG should consider:

- Are the mechanisms in place for evaluation and feedback effective?
- Is there evidence to suggest that the unit has responded to feedback?
- Are students represented on committees within the unit?

6.1 OBSERVATIONS BY THE PRG

The unit has developed a clear working relationship with all stakeholder groups and is being praised by all.

The PRG notes that this opinion is supported by the responses to feedback in the SAR.

The SPGS works through the PGSU but clearly operates an open-door policy for all students. There is student representation on the SPGS Committee.

6.2 COMMENDATION

The universal opinion of all stakeholder groups interviewed was that the SPGS staff delivers an excellent service.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 6.1: The PRG recommends full implementation of the improvements identified in the SAR. [Strategic] / [Limited Resources] / [Rectifiable with current resources]

7 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW

The PRG should consider:

- Are there systems in place by which the curricula of programmes are developed and reviewed on a periodic basis? Are these systems adequate?
- Is there evidence to suggest that curriculum content is benchmarked against recent developments in teaching and learning, and research?
- Is there evidence of stakeholder (internal and external) involvement in the curriculum development and review process?

7.1 OBSERVATIONS BY THE PRG

For PGRs the relevant Structured programmes are developed by the Course Teams. Generic modules and short courses should be made available to PGRs who are not on structured programmes.

The SPGS is involved in design and delivery of modules and short courses such as those included in IUA (2008). (IUA, 2008. *Irish Universities' PhD Graduates' Skills*. Dublin. Irish Universities Association).

7.2 COMMENDATIONS

The SPGS is delivering a series of modules and short courses consistent with those mentioned above (IUA, 2008).

7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The PRG has made recommendations on the need for terms of reference for the SPGS Committee and the Programme Validation and Assessment Committee (PVAC) and their relationships with the SPGS in Recommendations 3.4 and 5.4.

See Recommendations 3.4 and 5.4.

8 THE EXPERIENCE OF RESEARCH POSTGRADUATES (PGR)

8.1 OBSERVATIONS BY THE PRG

Completion times for PhD students are in line with national and international norms, but the completion times of MD students were not as good, often due to competing work commitments.

Modules and short courses are being provided to develop PhD graduates' skills. These were developed mainly for the Structured PhD programmes and need to be offered to all PGRs.

The School has some provisions in place for the pastoral care and support of students who encounter difficulties. Difficulties can include, very rarely, the breakdown of relations between student and supervisor.

8.2 COMMENDATIONS

The PRG believes that PGRs gain an excellent experience. This is supported by the very supportive comments of the PGRs, and of the supervisors, who were interviewed during the site visit.

The SPGS provides a service to PGRs from recruitment through to their graduation, and as alumni. This service is acknowledged and appreciated by both students and supervisors.

8.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

All PhD students, not just those on specific structured programmes, should be able to avail of modules and short courses in line with the recommendations of the Irish Universities' PhD Graduates' Skills (IUA, 2008. *Irish Universities' PhD Graduates' Skills*. Dublin. Irish Universities Association.). All activities should be available to MD as well as PhD students, where appropriate.

See Recommendation 3.6 and 5.1.

In our meeting with PGR representatives, two issues were raised: healthcare and access to scientific journals. We also understand that, while undergraduates at RCSI have access to laptops and the cost is built into their fee structure, this does not apply to postgraduates.

Recommendation 8.1: the SPGS should consider the issues of healthcare, access to scientific journals and laptops by PGRs and make recommendations to RCSI. [Limited Resources]

The new Postgraduate Academic Regulations (Recommendation 5.1) should include provision for dealing with the breakdown of relations between student and supervisor. In this situation the rights, including intellectual property rights, of the student, supervisor(s) and RCSI need to be clear and protected. There should be a transparent policy on how to deal with these situations, including a policy on whether certain academic staff should be allowed to act as supervisors.

Recommendation 8.2: The new Postgraduate Academic Regulations (Recommendation 5.2) should include a transparent policy for dealing with problems that occasionally arise in student / supervisor(s) relations and supervisory arrangements. [Rectifiable with current resources]

9 THE EXPERIENCE OF TAUGHT POSTGRADUATES (PGT)

9.1 OBSERVATIONS BY THE PRG

Compared to its role in research postgraduate activity, the role of the SPGS in taught postgraduate activity seems less clear. Within RCSI, much taught postgraduate activity seems to take place within clearly defined units, sometimes with little or no connection to the SPGS or the main RCSI campus. The role of the SPGS seems to be confined to those taught programmes not delivered by these clearly defined units.

For logistical reasons, the PRG did not meet any current taught postgraduate students (PGTs) during the site visit. However we did discuss this PGT activity with a few previous PGT students and with relevant teaching and administrative staff.

The PRG was surprised to note that registering of RCSI PGTs on the main student records' system (Quercus) follows a distributed process (i.e. across several departments), with no apparent single owner. This can lead to a disconnection in the provision of essential services and access to various RCSI facilities, e.g. library access.

The PRG was surprised to note that there appears to be independent subunits managing some PGT programmes for recruitment, registration, payment of fees, teaching, examination and graduation.

9.2 COMMENDATIONS

There has been great expansion in taught postgraduate activity. Many of the services to PGTs are delivered by the SPGS as well as support service staff.

9.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Management of RCSI needs to develop a policy on the overall management of PGT programmes delivered by RCSI. At a minimum, all PGTs should be registered in a central database and should be able to access all relevant RCSI facilities. The PRG observes that some form of Central Admissions Office for all students, undergraduate and postgraduate, would be the norm. However, we recognise that this suggestion has funding and other institutional implications. The PRG does not suggest that all PGT activity should be within the remit of the SPGS, but we recommend that RCSI needs to make strategic decisions on this issue.

Recommendation 9.1: RCSI management needs to develop a policy on the overall management of PGT programmes delivered by RCSI. [Strategic]

10 RESEARCH ACTIVITY

10.1 OBSERVATIONS BY THE PRG

The SPSG Head of School is a member of the Research Executive/Research Committee.

The PGR noted that the SPGS coordinated two successful applications by RCSI for funding for Structured PhD programmes and helped with others.

10.2 COMMENDATIONS

The coordination of applications for national funding involves both intra- and inter-institutional organisation and the successful outcomes have provided funding for greatly increased research activity.

Research supervisors repeatedly praised the members of the SPGS and considered the School to be responsive and efficient.

10.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic planning is required at management level to clarify the relationship of the SPGS with the Research Institute, which is reviewing its governance and strategy under a newly appointed Director of Research.

Recommendation 10.1: The relationship of the SPGS with the Research Institute needs to be clarified. [Strategic]

11 EXTERNAL RELATIONS

11.1 OBSERVATIONS BY THE PRG

The School oversees higher degrees across a number of campuses in Ireland and abroad. RCSI has obtained significant research funding for Structured PhD programmes and these are run in collaboration with a number of other Irish universities. In addition to research involvement, this activity also includes the administrative functions and knowledge and understanding of the postgraduate regulations operating on a number of campuses.

Since its inception, members of the SPGS have attended meetings relevant to updating and upskilling, e.g. those of the Irish Universities' Association, the Royal Irish Academy and the UK Council for Graduate Education and the Canadian Association of Graduate Schools. Some of the meetings attended included training seminars.

11.2 COMMENDATIONS

The involvement of RCSI in Structured PhD programmes (list in Appendix 4 of the SAR) is impressive and involves collaboration with a number of Irish universities.

The PRG notes that members of the SPGS have made presentations, e.g. at a meeting in Vienna of the Organisation for PhD Education in Biomedicine and Health Sciences in the European System (ORPHEUS) and at the National Academy for Integration of Teaching, Learning and Research (NAIRTL) in Dublin.

11.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Members of SPGS should continue to attend regularly at meetings relevant to updating and upskilling. To make best added value of this activity, the SPGS should perform a "mini-SWOT" analysis to identify the needs of the School and plan attendances at these meetings strategically.

Recommendation 11.1: Members of SPGS should continue to attend regularly at meetings relevant to updating and upskilling in PGR and PGT issues. [Rectifiable with current resources]

12 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This is a summary list of the recommendations made by the PRG. Each recommendation below should be read in conjunction with the additional explanatory text in the Recommendations sub-section of Sections 3 to 11 of this report.

The instructions for writing the Report also asked that “any deficiencies identified should be categorised as follows:

1. Strategic, i.e. involving RCSI policies, regulations or practices, or dependent on the college/faculty or other schools/units, where appropriate
2. Due to limited resources
3. Caused by poor management, policies or operations within the department, and rectifiable with current resources.” Our interpretation of the latter category includes situations where the resources are available across RCSI.

Based on these categories, the PRG has appended these three terms to the recommendations throughout the text: **[Strategic]**, **[Limited Resources]** and **[Rectifiable with current resources]**

Recommendation 3.1: The SPGS should develop a strategic long-term plan. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 3.2: RCSI Senior Management Team should address the issue of including all postgraduate information within a database system, which should satisfy internal requirements as well as the reporting requirements for the HEA and other statutory bodies. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 3.3: A forum needs to be established which will identify and implement postgraduate requirements for IT systems and associated processes across RCSI. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 3.4: Clear terms of reference should be agreed for the School of Postgraduate Studies’ Committee. See also Recommendation 5.4. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 3.5: The reporting structure within the SPGS should be altered. **[Rectifiable with current resources]**

Recommendation 3.6: The SPGS should review PGR recruitment with regard to standard at entry, and take into account the views of supervisors following their interviews of potential applicants. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 3.7: The training needs of PGRs should be assessed at entry and at regular intervals throughout their research programmes. These skills needs should be matched to short courses and modules, some of which may need to be developed. As far as possible, taught elements which are available to PGRs on Structured Programmes should be made available to all PGRs. The necessary resources to provide this PGR training should be provided. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 3.8: Co-ordination of the annual Mini-Med School should reside outside the SPGS. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 4.1: For the current level of activity within the SPGS, the number of staff should be increased. Externally funded posts should be incorporated as core RCSI posts. **[Limited Resources]**

Recommendation 4.2: Staffing levels and the range of activities of the SPGS need to be re-considered if there is any further expansion of postgraduate activity within the SPGS. **[Limited Resources]**

Recommendation 4.3: The SPGS should be co-located in a cohesive unit with adequate office space and facilities. **[Rectifiable with current resources]**

Recommendation 4.4: There should be a clearly defined career structure for staff within the SPGS, to reflect their abilities, efforts and aspirations. Once a clear Strategy and Policy is developed for the SPGS, requirements for the professional development of the members of the School, including skills, should be more evident. **[Rectifiable with current resources]**

Recommendation 5.1: The PRG recommends that checking of the validity of international qualifications of prospective students needs some further attention, e.g. possibly involving the use of NARIC (www.naric.org.uk). **[Limited Resources] / [Rectifiable with current resources]**

Recommendation 5.2: RCSI Postgraduate Academic Regulations, fully recognised by RCSI academic structures, are required urgently. **[Rectifiable with current resources]**

Recommendation 5.3: RCSI needs an institutional policy on supervisors and supervisory issues. A register of RCSI supervisors needs to be established. **[Strategic]** and **[Rectifiable with current resources]**

Recommendation 5.4: Formal terms of reference are needed for the PG Committee (PGC) and Programme Validation and Assessment Committee (PVAC). See also Recommendation 3.4. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 6.1: The PRG recommends full implementation of the improvements identified in the SAR. **[Strategic], [Limited Resources], [Rectifiable with current resources]**

Recommendation 8.1: the SPGS should consider the issues of healthcare, access to scientific journals and laptops by PGRs and make recommendations to RCSI. **[Limited Resources]**

Recommendation 8.2: The new Postgraduate Academic Regulations (Recommendation 5.2) should include a transparent policy for dealing with problems that occasionally arise in student / supervisor(s) relations and supervisory arrangements. **[Rectifiable with current resources]**

Recommendation 9.1: RCSI management needs to develop a policy on the overall management of PGT programmes delivered by RCSI. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 10.1: The relationship of the SPGS with the Research Institute needs to be clarified. **[Strategic]**

Recommendation 11.1: Members of SPGS should continue to attend regularly at meetings relevant to updating and upskilling in PGR and PGT issues. **[Rectifiable with current resources]**

APPENDIX 1. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HRB	Health Research Board
IT	Information Technology
IUQB	Irish Universities' Quality Board
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
PDR	Professional Development Review
PGR	Postgraduate Research Student
PGT	Postgraduate Taught Student
PRG	Peer Review Group
PVAC	Programme Validation and Assessment Committee
QA/QI	Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement
RCSI	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
SAR	Self Assessment Report
SPGS	School of Postgraduate Studies

APPENDIX 2. SPGS: SCHEDULE FOR SITE VISIT BY PRG 19 - 20 MAY 2011

Evening prior to site visit: Wednesday 18th May 2011

Time	Meeting
17.30 – 18.00	Peer Review Group (PRG) meeting with the Dean
18.00 - 19.30	Private planning meeting for members of the PRG
19.30	Dinner

Day 1 Thursday 19th May 2011

Time	Meeting
09.30 – 10.30	Convening of PRG
10.30 – 11.00	PRG meeting with Head, SPGS and Postgraduate Programmes Manager
11.00 – 11.15	PRG meeting with Deputy CEO, RCSI
11.15 – 11.45	PRG short meeting. Tea / coffee
11.45 – 13.05	PRG meeting with all SPGS staff
13.05 – 13.35	Video conference to Bahrain – representatives to include members of MUB School of Postgraduate Studies & Research Board
13.35 – 14.50	Lunch with student representatives and PRG
14.50 – 15.35	PRG meeting with Research Postgraduates
15.35 – 16.00	Visit to core facilities of the unit
16.00 – 16.15	Tea/coffee
16.15 – 17.00	PRG meeting with Research Supervisors
17.00 – 17.45	PRG meeting with Postdoctoral Research Fellows
17.45 – 18.00	PRG meeting with Head, SPGS and Postgraduate Programmes Manager
18.00 – 18.30	Private meeting PRG

Day 2 Friday 20th May 2011

Time	Meeting
08.30 – 09.00	PRG meeting with Head, SPGS and Postgraduate Programmes Manager
09.00 – 09.45	PRG meeting with SPGS Staff
09.45 – 10.30	PRG meeting with Internal Thesis Examiners & Independent Chairs of PhD vivas
10.30 – 11.15	PRG meeting with School of Postgraduate Studies Committee
10.30 – 10.45	Tea / coffee
11.15 – 12.00	PRG meeting with Administration Department representatives
12.00 – 12.45	PRG meeting with Postgraduate Course Coordinators
12.45 – 15.30	Working private lunch for members of PRG to include preparation of first draft of final report
15.30 – 16.00	PRG meeting with Head, SPGS and Postgraduate Programmes Manager
16.00 – 16.45	Exit presentation summarising the principal findings of the PRG to all SPGS staff
16.45	End review

APPENDIX 3. EXIT PRESENTATION BY THE PRG

Summary of principal findings of the PRG

The PRG appreciates the detail and transparency in the SAR. We confirm that the details in the SAR are a fair reflection of the current situation in the School of Postgraduate Studies (SPGS). There are some minor details which we may comment on in the full report, but these are not material to the fundamental purpose of this exercise.

The SPGS is a team of committed, enthusiastic and talented individuals who engage in a wide and complex variety of activities to the benefit of RCSI and the wider community but are in imminent danger of being overextended as a result of their own success. The evidence drawn from and reinforced by each group which we consulted consolidated this conclusion.

In the relatively short time that it has been existence, the SPGS has imposed order and introduced quality control into what were previously nebulous and disparate activities, most evident in the areas of research postgraduates (PGR), and to a lesser extent for taught postgraduates (PGT) and Postdoctoral researchers.

Everyone spoke most highly of the service provided by the SPGS despite the lack of resources and limited number of personnel. They also acknowledged the major positive impact and added value that the SPGS has contributed since its inception. These contributions include, *inter alia*, training, the multi-facets of PGR examinations, supervisor support and pastoral support of students and postdocs. This makes the SPGS an integral part of the educational mission of RCSI.

RCSI appears to have several major institutional problems which impact adversely on the delivery of a high quality postgraduate education and on the ability of SPGS to achieve its full potential. These include historically derived, unlinked procedures and functions which often work against each other rather than in concert. These procedures and functions were suitable for particular undergraduate activities but are inappropriate for the complexity of postgraduate activity following a major expansion in this area over the past decade. We note lack of co-ordination and very variable ownership of fundamental processes such as admissions, registration, student records, fees, support services (e.g. library and IT). These fractured systems lead to duplication of information, missing information, contradictory information, inaccessible or lost information in relation to students and their key activities and entitlements. It should be the responsibility of RCSI Senior Management Team to address these challenges.

The terms of reference and reporting mechanisms of the School of Post Graduate Studies' Committee are unclear. This committee appeared to be uncertain about the balance and dynamics of power between the School, the Research Committee, and the other Schools, and did not demonstrate signs of strategic direction beyond the immediate future. There are many useful documents and codes of practice, but these are dispersed rather than readily available in a logical sequence some, at least, need to be developed into Postgraduate Regulations (which incorporate appropriate flexibility). There is evidence of a lack of security and career structure for existing SPGS staff, including a succession plan. This requires urgent redress.

The SPGS should be co-located in a cohesive unit with adequate office space and facilities. For the current level of activity the number of staff is inadequate to sustain the quality of the services provided and should be increased. This should include incorporating externally funded posts into RCSI. We envisage potential expansion of postgraduate activity and this would only be viable through a combination of re-focussing of the range of activities and a further increase in staff numbers.

The SPGS have made sensible short-term proposals in the SAR, in response to reviews. However, a strategic long-term plan needs to be developed should the PRG recommendations be acted on.