

Title: Thesis Committees in the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh

What was done:

A Thesis Committee (TC) is appointed for all new PhD students at the School soon after their arrival at the University. The TC consists of the supervisors, an independent Chair and an external advisor. The Chair is appointed by the School Postgraduate Studies Committee (SPGSC) and has responsibility for ensuring that meetings take place and reports are submitted in timely fashion. Ideally the Chair should be an experienced supervisor. The external advisor is nominated by the supervisors and is someone with relevant expertise in the area who can provide independent scientific insight. Ten weeks after starting, the student submits a two page report to the Postgraduate Secretary giving a brief project outline and plans for the first year. A TC meeting is then held- this is a light touch meeting which is designed to ensure that a project plan is in place and that the student knows where to go for help and support if necessary. Nine months after starting the student submits a formal report, of around 20 pages and a formal TC meeting takes place within eleven months of start date. At this meeting, the student gives a presentation and is questioned on project and future plans. If all is well, the student is confirmed as a PhD student and proceeds to second year.

Further TC meetings take place at the end of 2nd and 3rd year to make sure progress is being made and that the thesis plan is in place. Many TCs choose to meet more frequently, particularly if issues arise at the TC meetings.

All TC reports go to the Postgraduate Director and, if there are any concerns, go to the SPGSC. The SPGSC can request additional TC meetings or the Postgraduate Director may talk directly to student or supervisors.

Links to:

- [Approaches to training and support for doctoral candidates and supervisors](#)

Motivation and aims:

This structure allows the School to monitor progress of the PhD throughout and hopefully spot problems early on. The ten week TC meeting is particularly important as it makes sure there is a viable plan for the thesis. This meeting often becomes a discussion between committee members which is valuable for supervisors and students. The 11 month deadline gives time to consider problems and support students before the first year is completed and if necessary allows for extension of the probationary period to 15-18 months or to discontinue students who are not making adequate progress before the end of the first year.

Lessons learnt:

Thesis committees have been running in the School for over five years and over this time the School has found that the role of the SPGSC in appointing the Chair is particularly important as this ensures the appointment is made in a timely manner. Also, appointment by the SPGSC means that the Chair is independent and reports are submitted within a reasonable timeframe.

One major issue is getting the TC meetings to take place in a timely fashion before the end of first year. The challenge is that most of these are due over the summer.

It is still too early to assess whether this approach has had an impact on PhD completion rates but in the latest Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2013 85% of students rated the School highly for assessment and feedback.

Scalability and transferability:

There are around 150 PhD students in the School and 150 TCs is a considerable commitment. The

School would like to have assigned members of the SPGSC as TC Chairs but has decided that this would be too great a burden. Therefore, most staff act as Chairs at some point. The aim is to have staff chairing no more than 1 new TC each year (3-4 in total).

The School Postgraduate secretary sends out a reminder to all first year students before submission of ten week and nine month reports and monitors submission. Students who are late are sent reminders. This requires resources in terms of personnel. One difficulty which has been noted is that care has to be taken to keep track of students who do not start at the beginning of the academic year as these can be sometimes overlooked. Reports are also requested from students in second and third year and if these are not submitted – again this requires time and resources.

It seems likely that the TC structure could be adapted for use in another School or institution. Indeed, there are variations of this practice in other Schools at the University of Edinburgh. It would be necessary, however to be mindful of the resource and workload required.

Further information:

Location of practice: Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh

Author: Dr Bernadette Dutia , Postgraduate Director, Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies

Date: May 2013

Work package titles and themes:

- International dimensions to examination, supervision and the doctoral experience
- Design and development of a doctoral supplement to cover broader activities, training and experiences with a particular focus on employability & mobility
- Employer engagement, including employers not traditionally associated with the recruitment of doctoral graduates
- Approaches to training and support for doctoral candidates and supervisors
- Dissemination and promotion

Note for authors:

These case studies will be made publically available via the project website and may be included in future project publications and reports (printed and online).

Project website: www.doctoralexcellence.dk

Template adapted from JISC and SHEEC case studies, JT 14/2/13