RESEARCH DEGREES STUDENT SURVEY 2013 – REPORT

This report summarises key findings from the 2013 research degrees student survey.

Overall

2. **About the survey:** LSHTM's biennial School-wide research degrees student survey was carried out between March and May 2013, as part of a wider national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) exercise. This generally followed the same format as the 2010-11 PRES survey, consisting of: a set of 'national' questions; further LSHTM-specific questions agreed by RDC; and various 'about you' questions to allow further analysis. However, a number of changes to the 'national' questions were introduced this year in order to improve the wording of questions and address certain ambiguities that had crept in, to align the questionnaire more specifically with the Researcher Development Framework and to remove a range of questions that had little added value. The survey remained web-based, and students were sent initial and personalised reminder emails with a link to it.

3. **Response achieved:** The survey launched on 05 March 2013, with data collection closing on 16 May. N=234 research degree students responded from a total population of 401, a response rate of 58% – better than the 41.8% achieved nationally, from 122 UK HEIs; and considerably up from the 37% response rate achieved when the School last ran PRES. As in recent years, UK Home students are over-represented, whilst European Union and Overseas students are both under-represented. At Faculty level, PHP students are slightly under-represented. By mode of study, part-time students are under-represented and Staff PhD students are slightly over-represented.

4. **Overall results:** 86% of respondents said they would recommend the School to a friend and just 5% would not (the remainder were neutral) – a good result, with those who would recommend the School slightly up from 82% in 2010-11, and more in line with the 85% seen in 2008-09. However, these results are still lower than the 90%+ typically achieved in MSc student surveys. 80% said they were satisfied with the experience of their research degree programme and 10% were dissatisfied (the remaining 10% were neutral). An equivalent question had not been asked in previous survey; although students were asked to rate their overall experience in how it met expectations and 61% said their overall experience had exceeded their expectations, while 14% reported that the overall experience had not met their expectations. 74% agreed and 7% disagreed that an LSHTM research degree represents good value for money, an improvement on the 64% agreed and 10% disagreed from the previous survey; this can be seen as encouraging given the well-established importance and sensitivity of fee-related matters.

5. **Student comments:** Approx. 22,100 words of written feedback, from 132 students, were given in open-ended questions. This has increased considerably from previous years due to the inclusion of free-text questions at the end of each section of the national questions. Comments have been anonymised and will be passed on for further consideration by the Dean of Studies, Faculty Research Degrees Directors, Assistant Registrars and DrPH Course Director. The two most frequently mentioned topics continue to remain (i) supervision and supervisors (including the supervision and training of supervisors), and (ii) staff/student interaction or isolation. Other themes included *to be added after review by FRDDs etc.*

Key areas of results

6. **Supervision and academic support:** The survey returned good ratings for supervision, which were generally in line with previous years, although questions asked had changed. Results continue to make clear that supervisors are seen as key to successful study and completion of a research degree programme. 86% of respondents agreed they had regular contact with their supervisor/s appropriate for their needs and 10% disagreed. This compares well to 79% who were satisfied that their supervisors were available when they needed them in the previous survey. 86% of respondents agreed that their supervisor had the skills and subject knowledge to support their research and 10% disagreed, very similar to the 84% agreed and 8% disagreed in

the previous survey. 84% agreed and 9% disagreed that their supervisor/s provided feedback that helped direct them in the research activities and 72% agreed that their supervisor/s helped them to identify their training and development needs as a researcher, with 16% disagreeing. No directly comparable questions were asked in the previous survey but questions asking students if they agreed they had received good guidance in their literature search from their supervisors and if they had been given good guidance in topic selection and refinement by supervisors saw 64% respondents agreeing (12% disagreeing) and 74% agreeing (13% disagreeing) respectively. Supervision continued to be frequently mentioned in student comments, including outside the free-text question specifically asking about this, with comments demonstrating the variability of this experience. Meanwhile, 77% of respondents felt that academic support and advice from Advisory Committees was useful, up from 65% previously, and 8% felt it was not, encouragingly down from 17% previously. 88% felt the PhD Upgrading or DrPH Review process was beneficial, slightly up from 85% in the last survey.

7. **Student/staff interaction, and the research environment:** Whilst students' integration into their Faculty and department communities, and the general research environment in the School, again returns some of the weaker results from the survey, they had nevertheless improved from the previous survey. 72% of School respondents agreed that their department provided a good seminar programme (up from 46% previously) and 61% agreed that the research ambience in their department or Faculty stimulated their work (up from 45%). However, only 51% of School respondents agreed that they had frequent opportunities to discuss their research with other research students (also up from 45%), with 25% disagreeing and 24% neutral (by Faculty, results for this question were weaker for EPH than for PHP and ITD) and only 49% agreed that they were provided opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, up slightly from 47% agreement in the previous survey (by Faculty, results were weaker for PHP and stronger for ITD). Interaction between students and students and staff was also frequently mentioned in comments; these included the lack of opportunities to discuss and share research being carried out (either the students' own or within the Department itself), how opportunities to become more involved with the research culture are heavily dependent on a good supervisor, and the barriers to interaction faced by the many students studying part-time or based abroad.

8. **Progress monitoring:** Some 52% of respondents felt that Department or Faculty progress monitoring meetings were useful and 21% felt they were not useful (no change from the previous survey). 84% of respondents agreed that they understood the requirements and deadlines for formal monitoring of their progress (up from 61%) and 77% agreed that the academic support and advice received from their Advisory Committee was a useful addition to their supervision (up from 65%), with just 8% disagreeing (down from 17%). However, there were a small number of critical written comments about progress monitoring and upgrading linked to issues around staff confusion over School policy. 78% agreed and 10% disagreed that they felt confident in completing their research degree within the School's expected timescale, another good result and an improvement on 60% agreed and 12% disagreed seen in the last survey, and broadly in line with national results.

9. **Guidance and information:** Satisfaction levels with the Research Degrees handbook rose considerably this year with 81% of students agreeing that it was helpful, up from 50% in the previous survey and back to pre-2008/09 satisfaction levels seen before it changed to a web-based-only format. Similarly, ratings for understanding the standard of work expected also showed an improvement, up from 68% to 79% and agreement that the final assessment procedures were clear was up from 60% to 75% (with 11% disagreeing). However, there were a number of critical comments regarding the information and guidelines available for the newly-introduced "PhD by publication" option.

10. **Non-academic support:** 75% of respondents agreed, and 9% disagreed, that Faculty and Department support staff were helpful in meeting their needs – an improvement from 56% agreement and 18% disagreement from the previous survey. Results were better in EPH and lower in PHP. 63% of respondents agreed that Registry staff were helpful in meeting their needs and 77% of respondents with a disability agreed that the disability support they received was helpful

in meeting their needs. 52% agreed that the Student Advice & Counselling Service was helpful in meeting their needs (up from 40% previously), with 37% neutral and 11% disagreed (down from 30%).

11. **Office and desk space:** 72% agreed and 10% disagreed that they had a suitable working space – a fall in satisfaction from 80% agreed and 8% disagreed seen in the previous survey. A number of critical comments were received, chiefly regarding issues with facilities in Tavistock Place (which have since been, or were due to be, addressed) or with the lack of communal meeting spaces for students to socialise or discuss their research. The unsuitability of open office space for writing up a thesis was also mentioned, as was the lack of sufficient space to hold Skype conversations without disturbing others.

12. **General or other facilities:** Satisfaction with facilities and resources generally showed some small improvement from the previous survey. 89% of respondents agreed there was adequate provision of computing resources and facilities (slightly up from 86%), although there was a slight increase in those disagreeing (up from 4% to 7%). Agreement that there was adequate provision of library resources also rose to 73% (65% previously). However, only 66% agreed, and 18% disagreed, that they had access to the specialist resources necessary for their research, with a small number of critical comments citing the lack of resources on social science-related subjects available at the School. This is a drop from a comparable question asked in 2010-11 that returned 81% agreement and 6% disagreement.

13. **Professional development:** This area of the survey had changed considerably since 2010-11 and no comparable questions were asked. 79% of respondents agreed (4% disagreed) that they had increasingly managed their own professional development during their programme and 74% agreed (5% disagreed) that their ability to manage projects had also developed during their programme. These compare well to national results, although School respondents were less likely to agree that they have developed their abilities to communicate information effectively to diverse audiences during their programme – School agreement of 70% vs 77% nationally (disagreement was broadly the same – School 7% vs 6% nationally).   Comments were varied, although a small number students noted they had already acquired most skills prior to coming to the School or that they found networking somewhat difficult with little support.

14. **Research Skills:** This area of the survey had also been changed since 2010-11 and no comparable were questions asked. 88% of respondents agreed that their skills in critically analysing and evaluating finding and results have developed during their programme (4% disagreed), 86% of respondents agreed that their skills in applying appropriate research methodologies, tool and techniques have developed during their programme (4% disagreed), 83% agreed (4% disagreed) that their understanding of 'research integrity' has developed during their programme, and 72% agreed (10% disagreed) that their confidence to be creative or innovative has developed during their programme. These results are broadly similar to national figures, with the exception of the latter where School respondents were less in agreement that they had grown in confidence to be innovative or creative than those nationally (79% agreed nationally, 10% disagreed).

15. **Teaching opportunities:** 43% of respondents indicated that they had taught or demonstrated at their institution and of these, 75% agreed that they had been given appropriate guidance and support (9% disagreed) and 29% agreed that they had received formal training for their teaching (63% disagreed).

16. **Student representation:** Resulting from recommendations made by the QAA following the School's institutional review in December 2012, a number of questions were asked about student representation and opportunities for getting the voice of research degree students heard. 57% of respondents agreed that Department, Faculty and School staff were receptive to the view of research degree students (10% disagreed). Results were better in EPH and lower in PHP. Results were also better from students aged 36-40 but were lower for those students aged 31-35. Only 46% of respondents agreed that Research Degree Student Representatives were effective in getting staff to respond to students' concerns (46% were neutral and the remaining 8%

disagreed). Again, students from PHP were less happy with this and those from EPH were happier. North American students were also somewhat less inclined to agree, whereas students from Africa, Southern Asia and Southeast Asia were more inclined to agree. Finally, 46% of respondents agreed they would like to see the Students' Representative Council (SRC) become more involved with research degree issues (48% neutral and 6% disagreed). ITD students were more likely to agree with this and EPH students less likely to agree. Students from Africa, Southern and Southeast Asia were also more likely to agree, whereas students from North America, Western Europe and those aged 30 or younger were more likely to disagree. Comments were very varied, with a number of students stating they did not know enough about the SRC or student representation in general to comment or noting that it was very MSc-focussed. A small number of respondents who had served as representatives noted they would have liked to have seen issues and concerns better represented but the time or commitment needed to do so was problematic or that representatives lacked resources or training.

Comparison to national results

17. For the majority of survey questions, LSHTM results were reasonably in line with those from PRES nationally. Key areas of difference were as follows:

(i)   The main area where LSHTM results considerably exceeded those nationally were for **responsibilities** and **support and guidance for teaching**.

(ii) The main areas where LSHTM results were appreciably lower than those nationally included those on –

- **resources** – such as **adequate provision of library facilities**, including physical and online resources (School agreement of 73% vs national 83% and School disagreement of 17% vs national 9%); and **having access to the specialist resources necessary for their research** (66% agreement vs 76% nationally). This **does not include** access to adequate computer resources and facilities, where the School fared considerably better with 89% of respondents in agreement vs 78% nationally.

- **research culture** – such as **having frequent opportunities to discuss their research with other research students** (School 51% agreement vs national 64%, with 25% School disagreement vs national 18%); and **opportunities to become involved in the wider research community** (School 49% agreement vs national 58%, with School 25% disagreement vs national 19%).

- **teaching opportunities** for RD students - 43% of School students (vs 52% nationally) stated they had taught or demonstrated at their institution. Of those who had taught, 29% at the School (vs 56% nationally) stated they had been given formal training to teach. However, in response to the question asking to what extent they agreed they had been given appropriate support and guidance for their teaching, 75% of School respondents agreed they had vs 57% nationally, with 9% of School respondents who disagreed vs 29% nationally.

Next steps/actions

18. Detailed results and comments from the survey would be distributed to Faculty and other staff with a view to developing an action plan in time for the Research Degrees Committee meeting of 4 December 2013. This may include a follow-up meeting in the Autumn Term to agree more specific next steps and key topics/results to pursue further.

19. Students would be thanked for their participation and advised of how the results are being followed up, via an email from the Dean of Studies.

Prepared by the Quality & Management Team Administrator, 30 Sept 2013; revised by the Dean of Studies, 7 Oct 2013.