Advisory Board Review of Life Science Zurich Graduate School and the PhD Program Cancer Biology

October 2017

We (the advisory board, AB) found our visit well-organized and interesting, and enjoyed meeting with the various members of the Graduate School and the three Programs that we reviewed.

The Graduate School is now firmly established and appreciated by faculty and students alike as providing an important structure spanning ETH and UZH for the recruitment, training and support of Life Science Zurich PhD students. The Graduate School attracts high quality students from across the world, and provides the framework for them to receive first class training and research opportunities while carrying out their PhD research.

Below we have summarized our general comments relating to the Graduate School and all the Programs that we saw, followed by specific comments relating to the three Programs that we reviewed.

The AB was delighted to see that DissGo has come to life and is clearly providing an invaluable tool for the Program Coordinators, and a valued resource for the students. Supervisor engagement was more limited, but also less necessary. The system was clearly a worthwhile investment that has streamlined the admin required to operate PhD Programs and a Graduate School on this scale.

The AB was also pleased to see that the 2-hour scientific integrity course runs regularly, and is mandatory for 10 of the school’s Programs. We strongly encourage the remaining Programs to include it in their curriculum.

Likewise, thesis committees seem to be truly embedded across the Programs that we reviewed. We did not encounter any students without committees, and those who we spoke to clearly valued their committee’s advice and expertise. The timing of the first meeting continues to vary, and often to be later than recommended – the AB advises that this meeting should take place no later than 9 months after starting. We also note that an earlier first thesis committee meeting can be highly useful in providing a forum for students to discuss and receive advice on their project as it is being developed, rather than a forum to present data and progress. Indeed, we did encounter students who had benefited in this way from having a first meeting 3 months after starting.

There was also increased awareness of the Graduate School and the opportunities that it provides amongst students and staff, and a better understanding of the PhD Programs in general.

We noted that one of the Programs that we reviewed was particularly small. While we appreciated that university students are required to be members of a PhD Program, the Graduate School might want to consider introducing guidelines on an appropriate critical mass for a PhD Program, including the numbers of students, PIs and faculty members with ‘Promotionsrecht’.

The Directors of 2 Programs mentioned that using track 1 to recruit students presents difficulties with respect to the timing of SNF funding.

Following discussion, we understand that this timing is dictated, at least in part, by practical considerations and the start of the academic year.
The Graduate School mentioned that their funding from UZH and ETH has remained static while the number of students has increased significantly. It would be reasonable to consider increasing the financial contribution, perhaps with some of it provided on a per capita basis.

For PhD Programs with a broader scientific remit that, for example, spans both basic and clinical research, the AB recommends ensuring that thesis committees include both clinical and basic scientists, to provide students with appropriate expertise and guidance. Likewise, committees should have experienced as well as more junior members on them. The Graduate School may want to recommend some oversight of thesis committee composition by Program Directors as ‘good practice’.

There was considerable discussion with students and supervisors about the teaching load for some students, and a misunderstanding that increased requirements were being made by the Programs. We recommend ensuring that students understand where these directives come from, and that they are supported to obtain appropriate training and guidance on how to manage their teaching responsibilities.

Students on two of the Programs that we met had misunderstood the meaning/intention of the 60% protected time stipulation from the SNF, and we recommend clarifying what this means to students.

We noted that students are sometimes reluctant to raise concerns or difficulties with their thesis committees and wondered whether there might be an opportunity for students to seek advice from a nominated ‘ombudsperson/mentor’ from another Program within the Graduate School.

Overall, we remain impressed by the operation and status of the Graduate School, with its high visibility, international profile and ability to attract outstanding students. The Coordinator and Director are to be congratulated for their commitment and achievements.
Cancer Biology PhD Program

Strengths
This is a well-established PhD Program with considerable momentum, which some members of the AB were reviewing for a second time. Both the Director and Coordinator are highly engaged with the Graduate School and really value the opportunities it provides including DissGo.
The Program also benefits from its links with Cancer Network Zurich.
The AB is extremely impressed by the engagement of the students, their involvement in the steering committee, the Scooped newsletter that they produce, and the retreat that they organize (including sponsorship).
Both the Director and the PIs really value track 1 recruitment, particularly for junior PIs. They appreciate the number and quality of students that apply via track one, indeed the PIs suggested that maybe track 2 should not be used. However, we noted that the majority of the students we met had indeed come in via track 2.
Students were very happy with the courses provided by both the Program and the Graduate School, and with networking opportunities available to them. Both students and PIs valued the rearranged Program courses, with short modules and more student choice.
The Coordinator clearly has a high profile amongst the students, and is the go to person for any Qs or problems.

Opportunities / Areas for improvement
Students on this Program clearly have a heavy teaching load, which is particularly difficult to fulfill if their own supervisor is not involved in delivering courses, leading to them going into a ‘teaching pool’. They were also disappointed that Masters student supervision was no longer credited and that minimal credit was given for looking after undergraduates.
It also would have been interesting for the AB to meet more students carrying out their PhDs on sites other than Irchel and in more clinical settings.

Advisory Board:
Dr. Marieken de Krom, Coordinator of PhD program Clinical and Experimental Neuroscience of the UMC Utrecht Brain Center Rudolf Magnus and the Graduate School of Life Sciences of the Utrecht University, NL.
Dr. Sally Leevers, Director of Academic Programmes at The Francis Crick Institute, The Institute of Cancer Research, UK
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