ISTITUTO DI RICERCHE FARMACOLOGICHE MARIO NEGRI · IRCCS

The Open University

Affiliated Research Centre

THE PHD PROGRAM AT THE ISTITUTO DI RICERCHE FARMACOLOGICHE MARIO NEGRI IRCCS

ISTITUTO RICERCHE FARMACOLOGICHE IRCCS MARIO NEGRI

Elisa R. Zanier, MD
Research Degree Coordinator of the PhD School

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The International Graduate Program of the Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche Mario Negri (IRFMN) is organized in collaboration with the Open University (Milton Keynes, UK), which confers a PhD title recognized worldwide. The Program is part of the educational and training activities taking place in the two campuses of Milano and Bergamo. The major aim of the Graduate Program is to train students for research careers in the fields of Pharmacology and Toxicology with particular reference to Cancer, Neurological, Cardiovascular and Kidney diseases. Other areas of interest include Environmental Toxicology, Organ Transplantation, Rare Diseases, Molecular Pharmacology and Public Health.

The Research Degree Coordinator supervises the teaching, training, financial and administrative activities of the School. In addition, the Coordinator acts as the local contact person and is responsible for all communications with the Open University, UK, Research School. For all relevant matters, the Research Degree Coordinator reports only to the Director of IRFMN.

Since October 2021, Elisa Zanier, who is also the Head of the Laboratory of Acute Brain Injury and Therapeutic Strategies at IRFMN, has been acting as the Degree Coordinator, assisted by a Secretary and a Scientific Advisory Board (Valentina Bonetto, PhD, Head of the Laboratory of Translational Biomarkers, Laura Brunelli, PhD, Researcher of the Laboratory of Mass Spectrometry, Giovanna Damia, MD, Head of the Laboratory of Experimental Oncology, Stefano Fumagalli, PhD, Head of the Unit of Pathophysiology of Cerebrovascular Functions, Luca Guarrera, PhD Student, Christodoulos Xinaris, PhD, Head of the Laboratory of Organ Regeneration). The procedures of the PhD School, like all the scientific and administrative activities of IRFMN, are certified according to the ISO 9001 European standards.

The teaching and training staff of the School consists of the Director of Studies, Third Parties, and Internal Examiners to be selected among the permanent scientific staff of IRFMN. Supervisors and External Examiners are identified and selected outside IRFMN in compliance with the Open University, UK, guidelines and specifications.

Considering the current situation of the Covid-19 epidemics and the impossibility of foreseeing its evolution, we cannot exclude that the planning of the course may be subject to limitations and modifications due to a re-appraisal of the health emergency measures. In case of a suspension of the scientific activities inside our Institute, whenever possible, remote work will be allowed. Indeed, part of the scientific activity carried out in the context of the PhD course involves methodologies, such as scientific literature searches, research proposal submissions, research article writing etc., which can be carried out by remote work.

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STUDENT INDUCTION AND TRAINING

The PhD training program is based on a "hands-on" approach and focuses on teaching the scientific approaches and methodology necessary for successful completion of the specific thesis project. The know-how and expertise of the permanent scientific staff in the various fields of interest of the PhD program is witnessed by the amount and quality of the scientific literature produced. The quality of the scientific training of the single PhD student is predominantly the responsibility of the Director of Studies.

The Director supervises and has the responsibility for the student's scientific work and reports regularly and informally to the Research Degree Coordinator on the student's progress at the scientific and personal levels. As a mandatory part of this mentoring activity, students are required to have at least ten meetings per year with their Director of Studies. To provide evidence of these mentoring meetings, students must update the Supervision Meeting section available on the PGR manager.

The IRFMN Departments and Laboratories are equipped with state-of-the-art scientific instrumentation, which is fully accessible to the PhD students. The Director of Studies ensures that the student has proper training in the use of the instruments and is aware of the general and specific risks and hazards associated with the experimental work, when this is applicable.

The IRFMN has a regular schedule of scientific seminars and talks that are open to all staff and students (Institute seminars). Two types of talks are available: internal seminars presented by members of the scientific staff ("Two o'clock Club") and external seminars presented by invited Italian and foreign scientists. Also, smaller-scale Department meetings consisting of individual presentations are regularly organized by the single Departments of the Institute. Internal and external courses and mini-courses on specific topics are also organized on a regular basis. New high-level six-monthly training courses are proposed based on the https://www.edx.org platform implemented with internal tutoring. These are all important educational opportunities available, and attendance to a minimum of 3 internal courses over the 4-year PhD program is compulsory for all the PhD students.

Since January 2006, in conjunction with other ARCs in Milan, IRFMN has been organizing a yearly scientific retreat for the Open University, UK, PhD students. These are meetings where students present their scientific work in the form of posters or short oral presentations. The scientific sessions are organized directly by the students after a scientific committee consisting of students' representatives has evaluated the abstracts. Scientific sessions are integrated with seminars and talks by prominent Italian and foreign scientists invited by the organizing committee. The meeting is open to Directors of Studies and Supervisors.

Modern science calls for access to and constant updating of the literature relating to the specific topics of interest. This is an essential part of the training program, and the Director of Studies checks that the student consults the literature regularly and keeps up to date not only in his specific field. The scientific literature is available at the

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Institute's Pfeiffer Library, and access to scientific publications is guaranteed by the subscriptions and licenses managed by the Pfeiffer Library, which is part of the large network of libraries of the Regione Lombardia.
Another aspect of the PhD training program, emphasized by the IRFMN scheme, is development of the student's communication skills. Students are encouraged and trained by the Director of Studies to present their data at Department meetings and at the Institute's internal seminars. After completion of the upgrade period, PhD students are requested to present at least one Institute's internal seminar in English. Further oral presentations in English can be delivered in the context of the Departmental seminars.
The Supervisor's role in the training strategy is obviously more limited due to logistic problems and is restricted to general and specific advice strictly connected to the thesis work. For these reasons, the external supervisor is required to meet the PhD student either alone or with the Director of Studies once a year. These yearly interactions can also be organized online.

SELECTION CRITERIA

The PhD course is an educational program of excellence. To guarantee the highest scientific standards, access is generally limited to young investigators with at least one-year experience in any field of experimental or clinical research and proven knowledge of the English language. When exceptions to these general rules arise, a case must be made and presented to the Research Degree Coordinator. Preferential qualifications include one or more original scientific articles, published in peer-reviewed international journals.
Effective January 2009, access to the PhD Course is regulated by a competitive yearly call for applications that is open to both internal (already working inside the Istituto Mario Negri) and external candidates. The yearly call is issued in April, and the specifics of each call are revised every year. The call is posted on the Mario Negri Institute website.
Italian candidates must have an Italian doctorate degree (*laurea magistrale*) in any scientific discipline, though exceptions to the rule may apply. Foreign candidates must have a graduate degree equivalent to those required for Italian candidates.
In accordance with the international, European, and Italian legislation and the "equal opportunity employer" status of the IRFMN, no distinction for applicants is made as to sex, nationality, health status or religious opinion. Furthermore, the IRFMN has supported the formulation of the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) internal to the organisation. The GEP describes the actions undertaken to follow the guidelines of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), aiming to "identify and implement innovative strategies to promote cultural change and equal opportunities in Universities and Research Centres".

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TERMS OF REGISTRATION WITH THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, UK

The annual tuition fees (currently 2,335 GB pounds) for each PhD student are covered by IRFMN for the entire duration of the PhD program and for no longer, than the maximum accepted duration of the course (four years). In case of withdrawal or extension requests by the PhD student and approval by the Open University, UK, the student is asked to reimburse the tuition fees advanced by IRFMN, based on a document describing the terms to be signed by the students.

Throughout the PhD course, the IRFMN provides the student with a monthly stipend in the form of a fellowship. The stipend is subject to negotiation and depends on a number of parameters, including availability of funds, prior scientific experience of the candidate, etc.

The PhD School Office and Coordinator are not involved in any step of the stipend negotiation.

PROCEDURES FOR REGISTRATION WITH THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, UK

A limited and variable number of new registrations is scheduled annually by the Research Degree Coordinator. One competitive call for new registrations is issued every year. The deadline for the submission of new registrations to the Open University, UK, is October 1st. The procedure for registration is divided into four phases. For the year 2023, the deadlines for the completion of each phase are listed below:

2023 DEADLINES

1. Publication of the competitive call	APRIL 3
2. Pre-registration	JUNE 5
3. Evaluation of the applications	JULY 3
4. Registration of the accepted students	SEPTEMBER 15

1. PUBLICATION OF THE COMPETITIVE CALL

The 2023 annual competitive call for applications, containing the indication of the number of positions available, is present in the document entitled "Applications for the PhD course organized by the Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche Mario Negri in collaboration with the Open University, UK".

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2. PRE-REGISTRATION

In response to the call, the candidate must submit the following pre-registration documents to the School Office (phd@marionegri.it):

- the applicant's CV;
- where English is not the applicant's first language, the applicant must demonstrate sufficient proficiency in the English language to support successful study at research degree standard. In this case, a valid IELTS certificate, meeting the minimum requirements of 6.5 overall score and no less than 6.0 in any of the four elements (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and obtained no more than two years before the predicted registration date, is required. Applicants, who hold an English certificate other than IELTS at the date of submission, can also take part in the selection process, providing they are awarded the IELTS certificate before the beginning of the academic activities. In the event these applicants pass the selection process, their enrolment on the PhD Course is conditional upon providing proof that the IELTS qualification is awarded.

3. EVALUATION OF THE APPLICATIONS

A panel of two internal reviewers, including the Research Degree Coordinator, evaluates whether the submitted applications meet the eligibility criteria laid down in the Call.

The eligible candidates are invited to the admission test, which consists of a written and an oral session. The final decision on the acceptance of the candidate cannot be appealed and is communicated by the School Office.

4. SUBMISSION OF THE FINAL DOCUMENTS TO BE TRANSMITTED TO THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, UK, BY THE SCHOOL OFFICE FOR THE REGISTRATION

After notification of the acceptance, the student must transmit the following documents to the School Office:

- the Application and Applicant Recommendation Form for ARCs;
- the Research Project;
- the applicant's CV;
- Animal Care Unit certification (for thesis projects requiring the use of animals);
- the completed Supervisor CV forms of the Director of Studies and the external Supervisor;
- a copy of the IELTS certificate, if required;
- a copy of a valid identity document (identity card or passport);
- a copy of the Degree Certificate with exams.

The documents are transmitted to the OU by the School Office before October 1st.

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SELECTION AND TRAINING OF SUPERVISORS

A pool of selected experts from the Institute's staff, which we can call on depending on the topics of individual students' projects, has been identified. These scientists are not only authorities in their fields but have given ample proof of their ability to deal with colleagues and students. When the Italian Director of Studies has had no experience supervising an Open University, UK, student, IRFMN proposes a UK supervisor with experience of more than one.

The PhD School organizes one yearly orienting and training session that is open to all the active and prospective Director of Studies. These sessions, organized and supervised by the PhD School Coordinator, are aimed at providing the guidelines for correct mentoring of the student's work. The guidelines provided comply with the general standard set by the Open University, UK. Our Directors of Studies are encouraged to participate in facilitated training sessions that are and will be organized by the Open University, UK.

To obviate the lack of official training, at the start of each academic year, all the Directors of Studies and Third Parties attend a meeting in which are outlined and illustrated specific procedures. Suggestions are always welcome on how to improve the PhD conduction scheme. The Research Degree Coordinator keeps regular contact with the Directors of Studies and Third Parties.

UPGRADE PERIOD

As specified by the Open University, UK, the upgrade period is the first 11 months after acceptance of registration and serves as a vital interval for assessing the student's scientific and personal skills. During this time, the Director of Studies and the Supervisors monitor the progress of the initial thesis work and take a final decision about its quality. In addition, the student has the opportunity to evaluate the scientific environment in which he operates and the overall feasibility of the scientific program.

Based on the reports presented by the student, at the end of the upgrade period, the Open University, UK, can confirm the registration in the PhD program or ask for further information and documentation via PGR Manager. If the Open University, UK, confirms the registration, the student has access to the subsequent three years of the program.

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SUBSEQUENT YEARS

Normally, research work after the upgrade period continues as before. At the end of each year, the student is required to transmit the annual report, submitted as required by Open University, UK, regulations, via PGR Manager.

IRFMN generally discourages applications for extension. However, a student requiring an extension has to notify the PhD School Office several months ahead of the course's end. He/she must have approval from the Director of Studies and Open University, UK. The student is notified as soon as IRFMN has this approval.

THESIS AND NOMINATION OF EXAMINERS

In accordance with the examination guidelines issued by Open University, UK, and the specifications therein, the student notifies to the Research Degree Coordinator and the Secretary at IRFMN by email about his intention to submit the thesis. As specified by the Open University, UK, the notification includes confirmation of the thesis title and provisional submission date. The notification has to be sent at least 3 months before the date of the actual thesis submission. Upon approval from the Research Degree Coordinator, the student starts the examination workflow via PGR Manager. Once the student has completed the Notice of Submission via PGR Manager, the Director of Studies is invited to indicate the names of potential internal and external Examiners and the Chair of the Panel (via PGR Manager). Upon approval from the Research Degree Coordinator, the proposed panel is evaluated by the OU, which can request further information/changes or approve the appointed members. The student is notified by PGR Manager of approval by the OU revision panel. A copy of the thesis along with the student form will be submitted to the PhD School Office via PGR Manager by the student. Upon approval from the OU, the thesis will be available to internal and external Examiners and Panel Chair via PGR manager along with the Pre-Viva Report form.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

The Research Degree Coordinator meets all the PhD students two times/year. At the first meeting, the Coordinator illustrates the structure and the characteristics of the course and seeks ideas and suggestions from the students as to the organization of specific internal courses meeting some of their needs. In addition, he/she answers the questions and replies to doubts relating to the internal and Open University, UK,'s procedures. The second meeting is mainly intended to obtain the student's feedback on the quality of the individual training and

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to discuss any specific problem or matters arising during the first part of the year. Minutes of these meetings are available. IRFMN has not yet set up any specific mechanism or procedure to obtain feedback from individual students. However, the Research Degree Coordinator has many individual meetings with students and is available practically on a daily basis to meet them and discuss questions related to the school.
Two questionnaires evaluating the PhD's level of satisfaction are administered to the students at the end of each year and after graduation. The two questionnaires are anonymous.

STUDENT COMPLAINTS

A simple and flexible procedure for the presentation and filing of internal student complaints has been devised. As specified by the Open University, UK, instructions, the Third Party serves as a first filter for student complaints. IRFMN selects Third Parties among the permanent scientific staff on the basis not only of their scientific experience but also of their proven capacity to interact with people and young scientists. The Third Party is selected by the Research Degree Coordinator upon registration to the PhD course. The Third Party is generally accessible and meets the student when the need arises. Third Parties meet regularly and informally the Research Degree Coordinator reporting to him about any complaints from individual students. If the Third Party cannot deal with the complaint, the Research Degree Coordinator will ask for an individual meeting with the student. To activate an internal complaint procedure, the student submits an internal complaint form *(Appendix 2)* to the PhD Research Degree Coordinator. The form is compulsory if the student subsequently, intends to file for a formal complaint to the Open University, UK. The PhD Research Degree Coordinator, the Director of Studies and the Third Party evaluate the complaint jointly. An answer is returned to the student within ten days from the receipt of the internal complaint. If the matter cannot be settled internally, a formal complaint is filed by the student and communicated to the Open University, UK, according to the guidelines and specifications contained in the relevant section of the "Research Degrees Handbook" and on the Open University, UK, website: https://help.open.ac.uk/how-to-make-a-complaint-or-appeal.

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APPENDIX 1

To comply with the guidelines contained in the Italian Legislative Decree, D.LGS. 231/2001, the prospective student must declare any previous working experience with the Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche Mario Negri. In addition, the prospective student must declare previous collaborations with any Italian Public Administrative Service or Agency. Finally, the prospective student must declare any possible conflict of interest due to family links or associations with members of the Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche Mario Negri.

Do you have any conflict of interest to declare? /__/ **YES** /__/ **NO**

In case your answer is **YES**, please specify:

.....

.....

According to Section 7 of the Legislative Decree No. 196/2003, you are allowed to exercise your rights as far as the shared data is concerned.

Date ..... Signature .....

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APPENDIX 2

INTERNAL COMPLAINT FORM FOR THE PHD COURSE

Name of the student .....

Registration number / / / / / / / / /

Nature of the complaint *(Please describe briefly the reasons for your complaint)*

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Date ..... Signature .....

This is an internal Complaint Form to be filled out by the student and submitted to the PhD Research Degree Coordinator. Submission of this document is compulsory if the student is planning to submit a formal complaint form to the Open University, UK. The document will be evaluated by the PhD Research Degree Coordinator, the Director of Studies and Third Party and an answer to the student will be given within ten days from the receipt of this form.

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