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

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 organised in collaboration with the Open University (Milton Keynes, UK) and confers a PhD title which is recognised worldwide. The Program is part of the educational and training activities taking place at 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, Toxicology and Experimental Medicine 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 coordinates and 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 Department of Acute Brain and Cardiovascular Injury and the Head of the Laboratory of Traumatic Brain Injury and Neuroprotection at IRFMN – has been acting as the Research Degree Coordinator, assisted by the PhD Educational Office and a Scientific Advisory Board (Valentina Bonetto, PhD, Head of the Laboratory of Translational Biomarkers; Laura Brunelli, PhD, Head of the Unit of Pre-clinical and clinical Biochemistry; Giovanna Damia, MD, Head of the Laboratory of Preclinical Gynaecological Oncology; Stefano Fumagalli, PhD, Head of the Laboratory of Stroke and Vascular Dysfunctions; 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 PhD School comprises Directors of Studies (DoS - Internal Tutors), additional internal Supervisors (if deemed necessary), Third Party Monitors and Internal Examiners, all of which are to be selected among the permanent scientific staff at IRFMN. External Supervisors and External Examiners are identified and selected outside IRFMN in compliance with the OU guidelines and specifications. Finally, Assessors – who are appointed for the student Upgrade Mini Viva – can be selected either within or outside the IRFMN, as long as they are independent and don’t influence the design or implementation of the student’s research project.
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 of 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.

Access to the PhD Course is regulated by a competitive Call for applications that is open to both internal (already working at the Istituto Mario Negri) and external candidates. The expected number of applications per year depends on the previous years’ trends. For this reason, for the current year, the Research Degree Coordinator expects to have between eight and twelve new students.

The Call can be issued at different times during the year and is subordinated to the existence of projects with available PhD positions. The Call is published on the institutional website and on the official LinkedIn profile of the Institute – together with the project’s abstract/s and the PhD program. It is expected that the calls will be open on a quarterly basis or even more frequently if the number of open PhD positions exceeds three.

The following aspects must be included in the Call for applications: admission requirements and selection criteria. Among them, all candidates are required to be fluent in English, Italian candidates must possess an Italian master’s degree (laurea magistrale) in any scientific discipline (though exceptions to the rule may apply), and foreign candidates must possess a graduate degree equivalent to those required for Italian candidates.

In response to the call, the candidate must submit the following pre-registration documents to the Educational Office (phd@marionegri.it):
- the applicant’s CV;
- the filled-in and signed Appendix 1 (also attached to the present Program) to the published competitive call, in which the candidate declares any conflict of interests with the Institute;
- 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, it is mandatory to possess a valid IELTS certificate, meeting the minimum requirements of a 6.5 overall score and no less than 6.0 in any of the four areas of competence (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), which has to be obtained no more
than two years before the predicted registration date. 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.

The candidates who meet the eligibility criteria specified in the Competitive Call can be involved in the actual selection process. The latter consists of an oral interview – to be held in English – in which two Advisory Board members and the project P.I. will take part. Such assessors impartially evaluate the candidate’s profile and suitability for the position with the aid of an evaluation sheet and according to objective criteria. To comply with the transparency standards established by the ISO quality framework, a final ranking is published on the Institutional website so that each candidate knows whether they can proceed with the following steps concerning the application for registration with the Open University.

In accordance with the international, European, and Italian legislation and the “equal opportunity employer” status of the IRFMN, all candidates are to be treated equally as far as sex, nationality, health status or religious opinion are concerned. Furthermore, the IRFMN has supported the drafting 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”.

**TERMS OF REGISTRATION WITH THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, UK**

The annual tuition fees (currently 2,500 GB pounds) for each PhD student are covered by IRFMN for the entire duration of the PhD programme and for no longer than the maximum accepted duration for the Course (four years).

In accordance with the Reimbursement Clause Letter (signed by the Applicant and sent to the PhD Educational Office before submitting their application documentation to the Open University), 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.

Throughout the PhD course, the IRFMN provides the student with a monthly stipend in the form of a studentship. 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 Educational Office and Coordinator are not involved in any step of the stipend negotiation.

### PROCEDURES FOR REGISTRATION WITH THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, UK

Once the selection and evaluation procedures held at the Institute are completed, the PhD Educational Office notifies, via an official email, each candidate of the outcome of the interview and requests the necessary documentation to finalise the application to the Open University.

If the candidate accepts the offered position, they must transmit the following documents to the PhD Educational Office:

- Research Degrees Application Form - Affiliated Research Centres;
- Research Degrees Application Recommendation Form - Affiliated Research Centres;
- the Research Project (signed by both the Director of Studies and the Applicant);
- the applicant’s CV;
- Animal Care Unit certification (for thesis projects requiring the use of animals);
- the CV of the Director of Studies and of Supervisor/s (internal and/or external);
- 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 the exams record;
- the signed Reimbursement Clause Letter;
- two reference letters by the two referees as indicated in the Application Form.

After a thorough revision of the documentation by the PhD Educational Office and the approval by the Research Degree Coordinator, such documentation is sent by the former to the Open University within the deadline established for each case. According to the Open University Regulations, “The registration date for all students will be the first day of the month in which they registered” and “on admission to the MPhil/PhD programme all students, regardless of the ultimate degree aim, will be registered for the degree of Master of Philosophy (MPhil)” (pp. 25, 33 of the Research Degree Regulations).

Upon approval of the application for registration to the PhD Programme by the OU Research Degree Team, an Offer Letter is officially sent (via email) to the student, who has to sign and return it again via email. Once the registration is confirmed, the student is provided directly by the OU with a PGR Manager account and login credentials.
SELECTION AND TRAINING OF SUPERVISORS

Each PhD Student has to be supervised by at least two scientists (the so-called Supervisors) – one of which is necessarily PI at IRFMN (he/she usually plays the role of Director of Studies). They should be experts in the research field related to the study project and have proven experience in dealing with colleagues and students. When the Italian Director of Studies has had no experience in supervising a UK PhD student from the point of registration to successful completion, IRFMN proposes a further supervisor with enough experience to balance such lack.

The OU PhD School organizes yearly orienting and training sessions which all the active and prospective Directors of Studies and Supervisors are encouraged to attend. Such sessions, supervised by the OU PhD School Coordinator, are aimed at providing the guidelines for correct mentoring of the student’s work, in compliance with the general standards set by the Open University, UK.

To obviate the lack of official training, at the start of each academic year all Directors of Studies, Supervisors, Third Party Monitors, and Advisory Board Members attend a meeting (the so-called “Induction Meeting”) in which specific procedures concerning the management of the PhD Course and Students are outlined and illustrated. Suggestions on how to improve the PhD conduction scheme are always welcomed.

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 produced scientific literature. The quality of the scientific training of the single PhD student is predominantly the responsibility of the Director of Studies.

The Director of Studies 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 a scientific and personal level. As a mandatory part of this mentoring activity, students are required to set and attend 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 applicable.

The IRFMN has a regular schedule of scientific seminars and talks (among which are the so-called Two o’clock Clubs) that are open to all staff and students and which can be classified as “internal” - when they are presented by members of the scientific staff - and “external” when presented by invited Italian and foreign scientists.

Regularly organized internal and external courses and mini-courses on specific topics are also held – online (via platforms such as Coursera and EDX) or in person – by experienced researchers and professors, who also tutor the participants according to the topic. These are all important educational opportunities and attendance to a minimum of 3 training courses over the Ph.D. program is recommended for all the PhD students. The list of such courses can be found on the Intranet Page (Risorse > “Offerta Didattica”) at the following link: http://intranet.marionegri.it/it_IT/home/istituto/Informazioni/offerta_didattica.

Attendance to Seminars, Talks, and Courses is monitored through the following alternative modalities as part of the documentation necessary for ISO 9001 certification purposes:

- clockings in the classroom, as the preferred method;
- “Modulo Registrazione Incontri”, to be filled in and signed by the participants;
- only for virtual Seminars and Talks, it is necessary to register to the meeting by clicking on the dedicated link, available on the Clubs Calendar on the Intranet (“Club delle 2 e Seminari” section: http://intranet.marionegri.it/it_IT/home/istituto/Informazioni/club_intranet) before the meeting has started. This gives the participant the chance to be considered as an actual participant (thus monitoring and certifying the presence to the meeting) and to see the online recording also after the meeting has ended.

On top of that, an auto declaration of such participation is to be sent via email to simona.rizzardi@marionegri.it.

- For the Educational Courses held online, instructions and participation links will be shared every time an online course is activated.

On top of the above-mentioned opportunities, smaller-scale Department and Laboratory meetings - consisting of individual presentations - are regularly scheduled by the single Departments and Laboratories of the Institute, and are a valuable opportunity for the student to show their results and discuss them with other researchers. To prove their attendance to such meetings, students have to fill in and sign a specific form.

Since January 2006, in conjunction with other ARCs in Milan, IRFMN has been organizing a yearly scientific retreat (the so-called “PhD Meeting”) for PhD and Doctoral students, where they have the opportunity to display their scientific work in the form of posters or short oral presentations. The scientific sessions are arranged
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 the Directors of Studies and the Supervisors of the students, the Researchers of the Institute, and the scientific staff of the invited Companies.

Modern Science calls for access to, and constant updating of, the literature relating to 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 but also in other scientific domains. The scientific literature is available at the 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 the 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 internal seminar in English. Further oral presentations in English can be delivered in the context of Departmental seminars and during the so-called “Passion Talks”.

The Supervisor’s role in the training strategy is more limited due to logistic issues 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 at least once a year. These yearly interactions can also be organized online and, as all supervision meetings, must be recorded using the PGR Manager.

**UPGRADE PERIOD**

As specified by the Open University, UK, the upgrade period corresponds to 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 period, the Director of Studies and the Supervisors monitor the progress of the initial thesis work and express a final decision about its quality. In addition, the students have the opportunity to evaluate the scientific environment in which they operate and the overall feasibility of the scientific program.
In order to be upgraded from the program of Master of Philosophy to the program of Doctor of Philosophy – thus overcoming the upgrade period – the student has to submit their first progress report - ideally within the first five months from the start date, and conduct an oral presentation (the so-called “mini-viva”) in front of two independent Assessors compulsorily by the end of the first year. Therefore, the re-registration for the second year is not only dependent on the positive outcome of the mini-viva, but also on the approval of the overall upgrade period by the Supervisory Team and the Research Degree Coordinator. Based on the reports presented by the student, the Supervisory Team and the Research Degree Coordinator at the end of the upgrade period, the Open University can confirm the student’s application for re-registration in the PhD program or ask for further information and documentation via PGR Manager.

**SUBSEQUENT YEARS**

Normally, research work after the upgrade period continues as before. At the end of each year, the student is required to submit the so-called progress report and then proceed with the re-registration - both actions via PGR Manager. The OU Research Degree Team will then assess the student’s academic progress, and eventually approves the re-registration for the subsequent year.

IRFMN generally discourages applications for extension of registration. However, a student requiring such an extension has to discuss it carefully with their Director of Studies and notify the PhD Educational Office and the Research Degree Coordinator several months ahead of the course’s end. In such case, the student must submit the request (via PGR Manager) no later than one month prior to the maximum registration date and should provide supporting evidence and a plan of work for completion approved by the Director of Studies and the Research Degree Coordinator. The student is notified of approval via PGR Manager.

The procedure for students applying for suspension can be initialized by the student or, if the student is indisposed, by the Supervisor(s) or the PhD RDC via PGR Manager. Any request should be approved by the DoS and the PhD RDC and submitted together with the supporting evidence. cannot happen, then the form should be submitted, and the supporting evidence should be forwarded, to the OU Research Degrees Team as soon as possible. Study break is not an automatic right and is not retrospective.

When a student decides to terminate their registration to the OU, the IRFMN must inform the OU Research Degrees Team using the relevant form via PGR Manager. The procedure can be initialized by the student and confirmed by the DoS and the PhD RDC. Then, the OU Graduate School Director will take notice of the decision.
THESIS SUBMISSION AND NOMINATION OF EXAMINERS

The student has to notify - via email - the Research Degree Coordinator and the PhD Educational Office of the intention to submit their thesis before starting the examination workflow (i.e. *Notice of Submission, Exam Panel Nomination, Thesis Submission, Viva Scheduling*) via PGR Manager. Such email has to contain a provisional date for Thesis submission and the title of the thesis.

All the phases of the examination workflow in anticipation of the actual examination (the so-called *Viva Voce*) have to be approved by the Research Degree Coordinator. As specified by the Open University, UK, the *Notice of Submission* (by the student on the PGR Manager) includes, among other details, the confirmation of the thesis title and provisional submission date, and has to be transmitted at least 3 months before the actual thesis submission date.

In tandem with the student’s Notice of Submission (a minimum of three months ahead of thesis submission), the Research Degree Coordinator – in consultation with the Director of Studies – proposes the members of the *Exam Panel* (via PGR Manager). The proposed panel is then evaluated by the OU, who can request further information/changes or approve the appointed members. The student is notified by PGR Manager of approval by the OU Research Degree Team. The *Thesis Submission Student Form*, which comprises a copy of the student Thesis, is submitted via PGR Manager by the student, and is consequently available to the PhD Educational Office who can download and consult it via PGR Manager.

In the meantime, the Exam Panel Chair proceeds – with the help of the PhD Educational Office – with the *Viva Scheduling* providing details about Examiners Arrivals, Attendees and any special arrangements.

Upon approval from the OU, the thesis will be available to internal and external Examiners and Panel Chair along with the Pre-Viva Report form via PGR Manager. Only after all these phases can the Viva Voce take place.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

The Research Degree Coordinator meets all the PhD students twice a year. At the first meeting (the so-called “Induction Meeting”), the Research Degree Coordinator illustrates the structure and the characteristics of the course, seeks ideas and suggestions from the students concerning the organization of specific internal courses and tries to meet some of their needs and answers any questions. The second meeting (usually called “Annual Final Meeting”) is mainly intended to obtain the student’s feedback on the quality of the individual training and
to discuss any specific issues arisen during the first part of the year. Minutes of these meetings are made available to the students upon request. On top of such collective meetings, the Research Degree Coordinator is also available for student individual meetings on a daily basis.

Each year every PhD student is required to fill in an anonymous satisfaction evaluation questionnaire to express their opinion on the PhD Course, the PhD Educational Office, and the offered opportunities. A further questionnaire is to be completed by those students who already discussed their thesis. At the end of the PhD Course the student must also fill in a form on future job carrier.

STUDENT COMPLAINTS

A simple and flexible procedure to file internal student complaints has been devised. As specified by the instructions shared by the Open University, UK, the Third Party Monitor serves as a first filter for student complaints. The Third Party Monitor is selected by the Research Degree Coordinator - upon the student’s registration to the PhD course - according not only to their scientific experience but also to their proven capacity to interact with people and young scientists. The Research Degree Coordinator may select the Third Party Monitor either among the Third Parties who were selected in the previous years or among the broader scientific staff of the IRFMN provided that they meet the standards set out by the OU Regulations. The Third-Party Monitor is generally accessible, meets the student(s) when the need arises, and regularly reports any complaints from individual student(s) to the Research degree Coordinator.

If the Third-Party Monitor cannot deal with the complaint, the Research Degree Coordinator will ask for an individual meeting with the student to discuss the problem and eventually find a suitable solution. To activate an internal complaint procedure, the student submits an internal complaint form (Appendix 2 to the present PhD Program) to the PhD Research Degree Coordinator (which is compulsory if the student subsequently intends to file a formal complaint to the Open University, UK). The PhD Research Degree Coordinator, the Director of Studies, and the Third Party Monitor 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 at the following link: https://help.open.ac.uk/how-to-make-a-complaint-or-appeal-public.
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:

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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 ________________________________

Research Degree Coordinator of the PhD School
Elisa R. Zanier, MD (+39.02.39014204 - elisa.zanier@marionegri.it)
Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche Mario Negri IRCCS, Via Mario Negri 2, 20156 MILANO (Italy)
tel +39.02.39014317 - fax +39.02.3546277 - phd@marionegri.it - www.marionegri.it
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.