



Confirmed

Research Degrees Committee

Wednesday 3rd June 2020

11am – 2pm

Minutes

Present Members: Professor David Bogle (Chair); Dr Helen Matthews; Ms Elizabeth Halton; Ms Helen Notter; Professor Stephen Marshall; Dr Simon Banks; Dr Paulo Drinot; Professor Jill Norman; Dr Andrew Stoker; Dr Benet Salway; Professor Tania Monteiro; Dr Mark Freeman; Dr Patti Adank; Mr Jim Onyemenam; Mr Graham Van Goffrier; Professor Jasmina Jovanovic; Dr Kathryn Walsh; Professor Hynek Pikhart; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Virginia Mantouvalou; Professor Andrew Wills; Dr Ruth Siddal.

Attendees: Professor Dave Spratt for item 4; Ms Karen Smith for item 5; Mr Simon To for item 12; Miss Natalie Humphrey for item 13; Dr Alex Standen for item 15; Professor John Martin for item 16; Mr Adnan Ali (observer); and Mr Darren Payne (secretary).

Part I: Preliminary Business

17. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

17.1. Approved - the minutes of the meeting held on 5th November 2019 and 11th March 2020 (COVID-19 meeting).

18. Matters Arising from the Minutes

18.1. Monthly Student Studentship Stipend Payments (minute 11.5, 19-20): It was confirmed that these are to go live in the September 2020 payment onwards, and that this would be communicated to students in advance.

19. Chair's Business

- 19.1. The chair welcomed Professor Jasmina Jovanovic, who was the new Faculty Graduate Tutor for Life Sciences, replacing Professor Surjit Kaila Singh Srail.
- 19.2. The chair also welcomed Dr Kathryn Walsh, who had been nominated by the Doctoral School in their capacity within Innovation & Enterprise. This would allow better engagement for issues within this area such as contracts and conflicts of interest.
- 19.3. It was noted that the Doctoral School, with RDC representation from each School, were leading the Aquamarine Bronze PGR committee set up to look at Covid-crisis related research student matters in the present and into the next session. The Gold/Silver/Bronze command structure has been dissolved but this committee will continue as Research Operations – Working Group on Research Students.
- 19.4. It was confirmed that the Doctoral School was working on a paper outlining the issues surrounding Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in relation to PGR students. The paper would outline some of the good practice that has been used around the World, and that a special meeting with Faculty Graduate Tutor involvement was organised to discuss known issues. Recommended actions should be ready for approval by the first meeting of RDC in 2020/21. A special meeting on this topic will be held in July.

Part II: Matters for Discussion

20. Research Degrees Academic Regulations Working Group Update and Discussion

- 20.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-01 (19-20). The Chair of the Working Group introduced the item, which provided an update to the on-going work in re-writing the Postgraduate Research regulations. The paper also outlined a number of outstanding queries that needed to be resolved before the working group could continue, but it was acknowledged some of the larger issues such as CRS would not likely be resolved at this meeting.

20.2. The first issue considered was Annual Leave, and whether there should be a formal regulation to mandate parity between research students and staff regarding the number of days of leave allowed. It was generally agreed that this approach would be best, however a number of issues would need to be considered such as Tier 4, how and where to log annual leave, and the interaction between conference attendance and annual leave. It was agreed that Annual Leave and these issues could be discussed within Faculties and brought back to the working group to finalise.

Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors

20.3. The second issue considered was whether Viva chairs could be introduced. It was noted that these had previously been rejected. It was also noted that recordings were currently being used for the virtual vivas and could be considered as an alternative. It was noted that the proposal was not to make viva chairs mandatory, but to have it as an option that would no longer require a Suspension of Regulations. This would then be a 'may allow' within the regulations, under specific circumstances such as complex 18-month resubmissions, at a student's request, or when the student was also a staff member of UCL.

20.4. It was agreed that a paper would be produced to outline the benefits and difficulties of having a Viva chair to be discussed further within Faculties.

Action: The Chair of the Working Group

20.5. The third issue considered was whether the following wording was still accurate, and if it could be extended to all staff: *"In the case of a student who is a member of the academic staff of UCL, no examiner may be appointed who is internal to UCL"*.

20.6. It was agreed that the removal of 'academic' was not contentious, and there did not seem to be any valid reason to separate out staff in this way. It was also noted that an internal examiner is important as they are familiar with UCL

Wednesday 3rd June 2020

practices, and part of their role is to ensure UCL processes are followed. A potential adjustment would be to amend the rule such that the internal cannot be from the same department as the student or supervisor(s). There would then be a clause that allows an internal examiner from the same department if necessary (e.g. if nobody with sufficient expertise available), if a Viva chair is used.

- 20.7. It was agreed that a paper would be produced to outline the benefits and challenges to be discussed further within Faculties, and to also help explore whether any important issues had not been considered by altering the wording.

Action: The Chair of the Working Group

- 20.8. The fourth issue considered was study leave fee variation, which was noted as having become a bigger issue with the COVID-19 situation since most students are studying away from UCL until the subsequent academic year.

- 20.9. It was agreed that discussion with Finance is necessary first, and this could then be escalated as necessary through the COVID-19 groups.

Action: The Chair of the Working Group

- 20.10. The fifth issue considered was re-submission timings. It was noted that at numerous FRDC meetings and in joint examiner reports this was highlighted as an issue. In some cases, 18-month re-submissions were incorrectly being utilised to simply give students additional time rather than its intended use to indicate that significant further work is required.

- 20.11. It was noted that 1, 6, and 18 months could have benefits and that it was important to inform supervisors that the times are “up to” and not necessarily intended to be the full duration. There could also be a renewal system, where a student is given 3 months and then could be renewed further if necessary, without requiring a suspension of regulations as is the situation currently.

20.12. It was agreed that the Working Group will take the suggestions forward, and these will be bought back to be considered by RDC once ready.

Action: The Chair of the Working Group

21. PGR Mental Wellbeing

21.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-02 (19-20). The Head of Wellbeing introduced the item which provided an update on the recommendations and actions produced by the PGR Mental Health Working Group.

21.2. It was confirmed that progress was being made and the Working Group has collaborated across different parts of UCL to ensure there is sharing of good practice. Currently all of the actions are “in progress”, but it was noted that work to improve PGR Mental Wellbeing would continue even after the actions are “completed”.

21.3. The Working Group had originally had a focus on staff and students, but it was now a key focus of the Working Group to draw out key issues for students and have a clearer line between staff and student needs. PGR students are officially students but many of the issues are more similar to staff issues.

21.4. It was agreed that regular updates to RDC would be beneficial, and could also help to guide the work of the group when input is needed from RDC.

Action: The Head of Wellbeing

22. New online PGR processes

22.1. The Student Records Manager (Research) gave an oral update on some of the updates to PGR processes that had been bought in during the 2019/20 academic year.

Wednesday 3rd June 2020

22.2. It was confirmed that a new online process for CRS extensions and exam entry was in place, and that it was hoped this would provide a more secure, transparent, and effective means way to process these for all participants.

22.3. It is hoped that more processes can be moved online when funding is made available for further development work. In the short term, the remainder of document-based forms were in the process of being re-formatted to ensure they are accessibility compliant ready for 2020/21.

23. Internal Quality Review 2018-19 (PGR Recommendations)

23.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-03 (19-20). The item outlined the key PGR related recommendations that had come out of the 2018/19 IQRs.

23.2. One of the key issues that appeared across multiple IQRs was space provision for PGR students, which was known as to be a challenging issue at UCL. The lack of common rooms and shared space was highlighted as being important for building a sense of research community. Virtual social spaces for students was noted as something that was being utilised in the COVID-19 environment, and it was agreed the Doctoral School would initiate a discussion on this to be raised at Faculty meetings and to share good practice.

Action: The Doctoral School

24. MPhil/PhD upgrade and submission data

24.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-04 (19-20). The item provided a report on Upgrade and Submission Rates for UCL Doctoral Programmes.

24.2. It was noted that there was a desire by UCL for submission rates within the allotted timescale to be improved. There is increasing scrutiny by funding agencies. Further clarification of CRS regulations could potentially help, with students encouraged to submit early rather than leaving it until late in the CRS year which can then spill over into another year.

25. Generic issues arising from Joint Examiner Reports

- 25.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-05 (19-20). The item provided an update from Faculty Graduate Tutors outlining generic issues that are relevant across UCL.
- 25.2. Re-submissions were highlighted in multiple reports – particularly the lack of a 6-month re-submission option. This issue was discussed under the paper at RDC 3-01 (19-20).
- 25.3. Poor structure, presentation, and style issues were also noted as problems in some cases. It was agreed that it is part of the supervisor's role to train students in these matters and refer them to training courses in the Doctoral Skills Development Programme.

26. MRes-MPhil-PhD Application and Admissions

- 26.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-06 (19-20). The item provided an update on end of admission cycle data for student applications, offers of admission, and applicant acceptances to Research programmes of study at UCL.
- 26.2. The key area highlighted was that overall research applications were up from the same point as the previous academic year. COVID-19 does not seem to have had a negative impact, but it was noted students may defer.
- 26.3. RDC was informed that Tableau now contained Admissions and Applications data that is updated regularly, and that Faculties may find this information useful.

27. Student Academic Representatives Annual Report

- 27.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-07 (19-20). The Leadership Development & Change Manager from the Students' Union introduced the item which outlined the work done by the Student Academic Representatives in 2018/19.

Wednesday 3rd June 2020

- 27.2. It was noted that student representative numbers had stayed largely static from the previous year. Due to COVID-19, everything was being done remotely, however this had increased engagement by students.
- 27.3. The capacity within the Students' Union to provide support to representatives had decreased from 2 full time members to 0.2, meaning that a skeletal support structure was in place. It was confirmed that this was under review, and more resources were being bid for. There is also a potential move to a partnership approach with Faculties. Support for more resources by Faculties would be greatly appreciated by the Students' Union.
- 27.4. There is a plan to review PGR representation, and how effective the Students' Union is representing the interests of research students. However, this is on hold until after the COVID-19 pandemic is stabilised.

28. PGR/PhD SoRA template

- 28.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-08 (19-20). The Head of Student Support and Wellbeing introduced the item, which outlined the new SoRA (Statement of Reasonable Adjustments) template designed specifically for PGR student needs and the issues outstanding that are needed to finalise it.
- 28.2. It was also confirmed to RDC that during the COVID-19 pandemic PGR students still had access to support services, and that rules for access had been loosened to ensure students could readily access support.

29. Remote Vivas and Thesis submission

- 29.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-09 (19-20). The Student Records Manager (Research) introduced the item, which provided a report on emergency arrangements to ensure research degree examinations could continue during the period of lockdown due to the coronavirus emergency.

Wednesday 3rd June 2020

- 29.2. It was noted that processes had had to be moved online very quickly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this it had been very successful and allowed for a great level of flexibility given that everybody was working remotely.
- 29.3. Going forwards, it was suggested that many of the remote processes could be adopted into the regulations. Remote vivas allow greater flexibility in timing and access particularly for externals. It is currently recommended that they be recorded as an additional level of scrutiny in case of problems. In addition, digital thesis submission was allowing theses to be accepted, stored, and sent to examiners with no adverse comments being noted.
- 29.4. It was noted that RDC had previously rejected digital thesis submissions. However now that they had to be adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was potential to re-open the discussion in future with a view to adopting this into the regulations.

30. Professional development of UCL research supervisors

- 30.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-10 (19-20). The Associate Director (Early Career Academic and Research Supervisor Development) from the Arena Centre introduced the item, which outlined a proposal for the continuing professional development of research supervisors.
- 30.2. It was noted that Arena had developed an online course for mandatory training of new supervisors and those who are also new to UCL. Face-to-face training for those who had not supervised before are also being held on a monthly basis.
- 30.3. There was a push to expand the continuing professional development to include ad-hoc events on specific topics, an annual forum, and to support the process for supervisors to gain recognition from the approved supervisor scheme organised by UKCGE. Continued eligibility to supervise would be tied to undertaking some form of training every 5 years.

- 30.4. It was noted that Continued Professional Development could take a variety of forms including of online courses, attendance at Arena events, attendance at external events (e.g. SRHE, UKCGE, Vitae), participating in the UKCGE recognition scheme, or attending a departmental or faculty event or training.
- 30.5. RDC supported continuing professional development for supervisors, however did note there was a number of practical issues that would need to be considered. It was noted that the systems in place to facilitate this have had some problems. A question was raised as to whether MyHR can automatically flag when CPD is required, so that the process could be automated.
- 30.6. The appraisal process was noted as a potential means of highlighting this to supervisors, with a potential countdown visible as to how long before supervisory CPD is required. It was noted however, that there would need to be a degree of flexibility, as once the 5 years expires there would be consequences for automatic removal if the supervisor has students that they are supervising.
- 30.7. The proposal was approved in principle, however there were some outstanding practical issues that would first need clarifying.

31. MD(Res) Degree Review

- 31.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-11 (19-20). The Chair of the MD(Res) Review Committee introduced the item, which outlined the findings of the MD(Res) Review Committee.
- 31.2. The last review took place in 1996 leading to actions proposed for the University of London that were not followed up. It was considered timely for a review which has been considered by a working group chaired by Prof John Martin (Div of Medicine) over the last 12 months.

Wednesday 3rd June 2020

- 31.3. The main conclusions of the review found that: the MD(Res) does not fulfil the criteria of a Doctorate as students can submit after a minimum of two years (the Bologna Process states that a Doctorate should take three to four years of individual led enquiry); it has a poor completion rate at just 22%; the 'MD' in the title is not internationally recognised; and funding was often ad-hoc as funding does not have to be secured prior to start.
- 31.4. The review had suggested three proposals: withdrawal of the MD(Res), to reform it, or to continue as it is. There was support from different areas for withdrawal with some suggesting reform as there is a need for a two-year degree to help clinicians develop research skills.
- 31.5. It was agreed that it would be recommended to Academic Committee to withdraw the MD(Res), and to monitor numbers of students coming into PhD study and to consider introducing a new M level qualification to take its place. A group would be set up to create this new programme led by clinical units within SLMS.

Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information

32. UCL Qatar Postgraduate Research Teach-out Plan - Update

- 32.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-12 (19-20).

33. Anonymised Suspension of Regulations Report (October 2019 to March 2020)

- 33.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-13 (19-20)

34. Anonymised Suspension of Regulations Report (since March 2020)

- 34.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-14 (19-20)

35. Report on Research Degree Administration and Examination Statistics 2018-19

- 35.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-15 (19-20)

Wednesday 3rd June 2020

**36. New and Amended Programmes and Qualifications Approved by RDC
Chair's Action**

36.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-16 (19-20)

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