



**Confirmed**

## **Research Degrees Committee**

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020

11am – 1pm

Minutes

Present Members: Professor David Bogle (Chair); Dr Helen Matthews; Ms Elizabeth Halton; Dr Sam Smidt; Ms Helen Notter; Professor Stephen Marshall; Dr Simon Banks; Dr Efrosyni Konstantinou; Dr Benet Salway; Mr Jim Onyemenam; Professor Jasmina Jovanovic; Dr Richard Bucknall; Dr Alan Ingram; Professor Jill Norman; Dr Andrew Stoker; Dr Patti Adank; Professor Alex Mills; Dr Mark Newman; Dr Richard Freeman; Dr Kathryn Walsh.

Attendees: Dr Rebecca Lindner (for item 5); Mr Nick McGhee (for item 6); Mr Simon To (for item 9); Mr Adnan Ali (observer); and Mr Darren Payne (secretary).

### **Part I: Preliminary Business**

#### **1. Terms of Reference, Constitution, and Membership 2020-21**

1.1. Approved - the terms of reference, constitution and membership for Research Degrees Committee (RDC) 2020-21 at RDC 1-01 (20-21).

#### **2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

2.1. Approved - the minutes of the meeting held on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2020.

#### **3. Matters Arising from the Minutes**

3.1. There were no matters arising from the minutes.

#### **4. Chair's Business**

- 4.1. The chair welcomed the following new members of RDC. New Faculty Graduate Tutors included Dr Richard Freeman (Institute of Education), Professor Alex Mills (Laws), Professor Jasmina Jovanovic (Life Sciences), and Dr Alan Ingram (Social and Historical Sciences). New elected members included Professor Richard Bucknall (Engineering), Dr Efrosyni Konstantinou (Built Environment), and Dr Mark Newman (Institute of Education). New nominated member included Professor David Spratt (Vice Head of the Doctoral School).
  
- 4.2. The Chair updated members of RDC on the special structure the Provost had set up to swiftly respond and make decisions related to Covid; this was originally a Bronze-Silver-Gold command structure but was then updated to group names which related more to existing governance structures. For Postgraduate Research (PGR) matters, the group was called the PGR Research Operations Group chaired by Prof David Bogle, and reported to the Research Operations Groups, chaired by Prof Alan Thompson. This group has discussed pertinent issues such as submission and stipend extensions in relation to Covid; its membership includes some RDC members.
  
- 4.3. The group had agreed automatic extensions to CRS for 6 months (FT) for all Doctoral students (pro-rate for Part-time students); the length of these extensions would continue to be reviewed as further lockdowns occurred.
  
- 4.4. It was noted that where funders were unable to extend stipends, UCL had been able to confirm that it would underwrite stipend extensions for up to 3 months, in the first instance. SMT approved a budget of approximately £2.5million for these extensions; so far expenditure had come in well under budget.
  
- 4.5. The question was raised as to what would happen with the non-final year students. The Chair noted that UCL could not consider any potential funding options until UKRI had announced what support they would be able to give to non-final year students. A new request for funds for these non-UKRI funded

students would eventually need to go to Senior Management Team (SMT) for approval.

- 4.6. It was noted that there were concerns regarding European students who would soon fall within the Overseas fee bracket. UKRI studentships only cover home fees, and so there would need to be either a Faculty level or Central funding scheme to cover the fee difference for UKRI funded programmes. A paper was being prepared by Prof Geraint Rees and the Doctoral School and would be submitted to the Research Operations Group for discussion in due course.

## **Part II: Matters for Discussion**

### **5. Barriers to Doctoral Education report: prioritised recommendations**

- 5.1. Received – the paper at RDC 1-02 (20-21). The Principal Research Fellow (Doctoral School) introduced the item, which summarised the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) meeting actions that needed priority. It was noted that UKRI had reinforced the need to focus on EDI issues for Research students.
- 5.2. There had been contact with Programme Directors and other staff around UCL who were interested in collecting socioeconomic status (SES) data or had already begun doing so. In addition, PGR Admissions had provided questions that were now included as optional questions to applicants regarding SES – this would be made available to RDC members who were interested.
- 5.3. The main EDI priorities noted were: Expanded Scholarship opportunities; Careers, particularly targeted PhD application support; and support for mental health and wellbeing in PGR students and supervisors.
- 5.4. It was noted that a PGR Admissions Working Group had been set up to discuss functionality of UCL Select and how EDI could better be addressed through the admissions system.

- 5.5. The next step was to produce an action plan which would identify which teams/people would be responsible for each issue, and to provide costing for the actions.
- 5.6. It was noted that Office for Students and Research England had more put out a call for bids to support BAME Research Students. Each institution could lead on one, and be partners with another three. EDI issues had high political profile, and there was strong support across institutions to take it forward.
- 5.7. **Approved** – it was noted that the paper was formally approved by RDC.

## **6. Student Complaints Annual Report (PGR)**

- 6.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-03 (20-21). The Deputy Director (Casework and Governance) introduced the item which summarised the Complaints received from PGR students in 2019/20.
- 6.2. It was confirmed that there were no significant issues or concerns with the rates of PGR complaints which had been lower than both UG and PGT statistics within the same period.
- 6.3. It was noted that PGR complaints typically have a very wide scope and draw upon numerous sources of potential dissatisfaction across a long period of time. The importance of good record keeping was identified as good practice to ensure complaints can be addressed satisfactorily.
- 6.4. The Chair noted that the Institution of Education numbers were high due to a range of legacy issues and that the Doctoral School had met with the Faculty to build a plan to address this.
- 6.5. It was noted that although the numbers were low for formal complaints, it did not necessarily reflect the amount of time spent within Faculties handling informal complaints and issues. It was acknowledged it was difficult to capture

the extent of these informal complaints; however, the Student Mediator report would address this to some extent as students go through the mediation process first.

## **7. New online PGR processes MRes-MPhil-PhD Application and Admissions Annual Report**

- 7.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-04 (20-21). The paper summarised Postgraduate Research admissions for 2019/20.
- 7.2. Overall, the number of offers and acceptances were up by 7.3% and 3.5% respectively, in comparison to 2019. There was an increase in offers/acceptances to UK and Overseas applicants but a decrease to EU applicants.
- 7.3. **Annual Report on Minutes of meetings of Faculty committees responsible for overseeing PGR student provision**
- 7.4. Received - the paper at RDC 1-05 (20-21). The RDC Secretary introduced the item, which summarised the minutes of all FRDCs that had taken place during 2019/20.
- 7.5. It was noted along the same theme that there was the expectation from supervisors that their PGR students would supervise Master's students. It was suggested PGR students should undertake supervision training, and also that supervision time should be more regulated and monitored to avoid overburdening PGR students.
- 7.6. It was raised that there was a broad range of the level/amount of supervision work undertaken by PGR students – some were essentially the main supervisor for the students, whereas others would briefly train students on a particular piece of equipment or technique.

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020

- 7.7. It was suggested that a recommendation paper be drawn up on regulations for PGR students supervising Taught students. The Faculty of Medical Sciences and the Faculty of Population Health Sciences have local versions which could be used as a starting framework. The Deputy Director (Doctoral School) would circulate this to members of RDC for discussion at the next RDC.

Action: The Deputy Director (Doctoral School)

## **8. Student Academic Representatives Annual Report**

- 8.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-06 (20-21). The Leadership Development & Change Manager introduced the item which summarised the work of the Academic Representatives.
- 8.2. In 2019-20 there were 1,960 Academic Representatives, and 200 Research students involved in the roles. 100% of Faculty Representative roles were also filled, and over 98% of PGR Representatives had finished training which had indicated good engagement.
- 8.3. Further development of the PGR Student Representative role had been put on hold due to Covid-19 as the role currently has a similar structure to Taught students. It was confirmed that this was going to be picked back up in 2020/21 with a view to ensuring that PGR issues would be effectively represented.

## **9. MPhil Stud Regulations**

- 9.1. An oral update was provided by the Faculty Graduate Tutor for Arts and Humanities regarding MPhil Stud Regulations.
- 9.2. It was noted that no MPhil Stud specific regulations existed and that a meeting to discuss and agree suitable regulations was being planned.

## **10. Modernisations to exam regulations**

- 10.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-07 (20-21). The Deputy Director (Doctoral School) introduced the item which outlined modernisations to exam regulations as a result of Covid-19.
- 10.2. The first proposal was regarding Remote vivas. These had previously required a Suspension of Regulations (SoR), but since the pandemic, they had been allowed without a SoR. It was recommended that this should continue as an option as it allows a vastly increased pool of examiners from across the world; it is also a 'greener' approach and allows for flexibility of examiners.
- 10.3. It was agreed that remote vivas and the current guidance around them would remain as an option, and no longer require a Suspension of Regulations. However, where there was not agreement on the configuration set-up (either in-person or remote or a mixed model), the default should remain in-person vivas.
- 10.4. The second proposal was electronic submission of the initial thesis. This has been allowed due to Covid-19 since no physical office has been open for submission. The e-submission system had gone well and most examiners were happy with the electronic version but hard copies were arranged where requested. It was recommended that going forwards this should be the default and that examiners should opt-in for a hardcopy rather than for e-version which had been the system pre-Covid.
- 10.5. The third proposal was electronic submission of the final thesis. This issue was considered slightly more controversial as this would mean no hard copy would be kept in Library. It was noted that the Library were generally supportive, but there were some minor issues to resolve around infrastructure to secure PDF electronic copies in perpetuity. The Doctoral School confirmed a meeting had been scheduled to discuss the issues.
- 10.6. The main concern raised by RDC was whether electronic PDF copies were a robust method of online storage and access. It was noted that some

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020

Universities had already implemented an electronic copy only policy successfully which suggested that these issues were surmountable.

10.7. **Approved** - it was noted that the paper was formally approved by RDC subject to further discussions between the Doctoral School and the Library.

## **11. Annual Leave Policy for Doctoral Students**

11.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-08 (20-21). The Deputy Director (Doctoral School) introduced the item which outlined the need for clearer policy regarding annual leave entitlements for Research students.

11.2. It was noted that at present informal guidance states that annual leave should match staff annual leave allowance. It was recommended this be officially included in the regulations. The allowance would equate to 27 days' annual leave; 8 Public and Statutory holidays; 6 UCL Closure Days; totalling 41 days over one year for a Full-time student. These entitlements would be pro-rata for part-time students.

11.3. There were no objections to this from RDC; however, it was noted that some issues would need further discussion such as how students would apply for leave, and how it would be monitored.

## **12. Paid parental and sick leave for funded doctoral students**

12.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-09 (20-21). The Deputy Director (Doctoral School) introduced the item which supported paid parental and sick leave for Research students.

12.2. It was noted that paid leave was last discussed in RDC at the 11th October 2011 meeting, but that it was unclear from the minutes of this meeting if UCL was committing to covering paid sick and parental leave for those where students' funder would not cover it. For example, the UKRI guidance states that there must be paid cover for parental leave and sickness up to 13 weeks with a medical certificate. The current guidance on UCL's Research Services

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020

webpage is also not clear whether departments have an obligation to cover the cost when the funder cannot pay.

- 12.3. It was noted that support for this policy would require budget and therefore would need SMT approval; costings should be done to estimate the maximum total financial exposure such a policy would create.
- 12.4. From the option presented in the paper, there was general agreement that options 1c, 2c and 3a would give the most parity across UCL. A central budget in particular was seen as the most appropriate source of funding and would be in-line with staff entitlements.
- 12.5. Some concerns were raised about funding sick leave as medical certificates are not difficult to get hold of.

### **Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information**

#### **13. Research Degrees Committee – Annual Report to Academic Committee**

- 13.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-10 (20-21). The paper provided an annual report of all RDC activities in 2019/20 that would be presented at the first Academic Committee of 2020/21.
- 13.2. **Approved** – the RDC Annual Report to Academic Committee 2019/20 was approved by RDC.

#### **14. Reduction in submission extension fee – Covid-19**

- 14.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-11 (19-20). The Student Records Manager (Research) introduced the item, which proposed a reduction in the submission extension fee levied to students in the 2020/21 academic session as part of the Covid-19 mitigation measures.
- 14.2. **Approved** – the proposal for a reduced submission extension fee for 2020/21 in response to Covid-19 was formally approved by RDC.

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020

**15. Mitigation of Covid-19 disruption in doctoral theses**

15.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-12 (20-21). The Deputy Director (Doctoral School) introduced the item, which outlined proposed measures to mitigate effects of Covid-19 on Doctoral Theses.

15.2. It was noted that some students and supervisors had expressed interest in being able to submit a statement alongside the thesis to explain issues due to Covid-19 which may have impacted on their thesis. There was disagreement about the need for a statement of this nature as it was felt examiners would generally take extenuating circumstances into account without being explicitly told this.

15.3. The paper was rejected as it was; however, it was noted that the idea could be discussed at upcoming FRDCs to develop the idea further so the paper could be revised and resubmitted to RDC.

**16. Anonymised Suspension of Regulations Report (since June 2020)**

16.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-13 (20-21)

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

17.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-14 (19-20)

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20<sup>th</sup> November 2020