



RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

5 June 2018

MINUTES

PRESENT:

Professor David Bogle (*Chair*)

Dr Patti Adank; Dr Simon Banks; Mr Ben Colvill; Mr Mark Crawford; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Paulo Drinot; Professor Kaila Srαι; Professor Kirsten Harvey; Dr Sally Leever; Professor Stephen Marshall; Dr Helen Matthews; Professor Tania Monteiro; Dr Jill Norman; Ms Helen Notter; Professor Martin Oliver; Dr Martins Paporinskis; Dr Hynek Pikhart; Dr Benet Salway; Professor Kaila Srαι and Dr Andrew Stoker;

In attendance: Ms Lizzie Vinton; Mr Geoff Lang and Ms Laura Tomson (for Item 32) and Rob Traynor (stand-in Secretary).

Apologies for absence were received from: Mr Derfel Owen; Professor Virginia Mantouvalou; Dr Ruth Siddall, Dr Sam Smidt; Professor Anthony Smith and Mr Darren Payne (Secretary).

Key to abbreviations

A&H	Arts and Humanities (Faculty of)
ARQASC	Academic Regulations and Quality Assurance Sub-Committee
CDT	Centre for Doctoral Training
CRS	Completing Research Status
DGT	Departmental Graduate Tutor
DTC	Departmental Teaching Committee
EdCOM	Education Committee
FGT	Faculty Graduate Tutor
FRDC	Faculty Research Degrees Committee
HoD	Head of Department
HRPC	Human Resources Policy Committee
IOE	Institute of Education (Faculty of)
MAPS	Mathematical and Physical Sciences (Faculty of)
PALS	Psychology and Language Sciences (Division of)
PGTA	Postgraduate Teaching Assistant
PHS	Population Health Sciences (Faculty of)
PRES	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
SHS	Social and Historical Sciences (Faculty of)
SLMS	School of Life Sciences, Medical Sciences, Brains Sciences and PHS
UKVI	UK Visas and Immigration

Preliminary business

29 WELCOME AND MEMBERSHIP

- 29.1 The Chair welcomed Dr Patti Adank, the new Faculty Graduate Tutor for Brain Sciences to the Committee. Dr Adank had replaced Dr Elvira Bramon in the role.
- 29.2 The Chair confirmed that Dr Benet Salway and Professor Andrew Wills had been elected to RDC as academic staff member representatives from Academic Board.

30 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

[RDC Minutes 17-28, 13.03.18, 2017-18]

- 30.1 **APPROVED:** the Minutes of the March RDC meeting subject to minor amendments to the list of attendees. The corrected March minutes will be circulated to members with these minutes.

ACTION: the Secretary

31 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

- 31.1 All matters arising were covered in the items below.

Matters for discussion

32 POSTGRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT ACTION PLAN UPDATE AND CODE OF PRACTICE

[Paper 3-01]

- 32.1 **Received** – PGTA Action Plan Update and Draft Code of Practice: at RDC 3-01 (17-18).
- 32.2 The Director of Human Resources Strategy and Planning and the Senior Employment Policy Advisor provided an update on the UCL response to the joint UCL Students' Union and NUS Postgraduate Employment charter which had made recommendations on the employment of PGTAs at UCL. This included a progress report on the action plan and a draft PGTA Code of Practice for consideration and approval by RDC. If approved by RDC, it would then be shared with the UCL trade unions for information and HRPC for final approval. RDC members were invited to send comments on the draft code of practice by the end of June 2018. It was intended that the Code of Practice would be in use for the beginning of the 2018-19 session.
- 32.3 The following points were noted in the discussion:
- a) The opportunity for feedback was welcomed as it was noted that some faculties (e.g. A&H and SHS) may be doing more than reflected in the draft PGTA Code of Practice and would like the opportunity to contribute their experience. There was agreement that the policy and

- Code of Practice should be enabling and allow for appropriate flexibility in practice across the faculties.
- b) It was requested that the reference to Departmental Tutors and Departmental Postgraduate Advisors selecting PGTAs in the Code of Practice be amended. There was wide variation in practice across UCL, and Department Tutors were often not involved in PGTA selection and might in practice find such a role a burden if asked to do so. The Departmental Postgraduate Advisor position was also not universally used and may not be understood by many departments. It was also noted that academic staff with responsibility for UG teaching often had a role in PGTA selection. It was suggested that the reference to the two roles be amended to “*in practice Departmental Tutors, the Chair of the DTC Departmental Teaching Committee or the Teaching Coordinator (or equivalent), in association with the HoDs, will usually make the selection...*”.
 - c) The suggested annual 180 hours maximum load figure for PGTAs could be problematic for some departments, particularly where the work was closely linked to research projects, often lab-based. Students might be doing more than 180 hours and there may be limitations on funding available to pay them as PGTAs. The additional work was seen as important to the PGR student’s overall skills development and valued by them as such, with students wanting it to be formally recorded in their student logs. It was thus important to maintain a balance between this skill development as part of PGR training and in preventing the students being exploited. **Agreed:** for members to discuss this with the HR officers following the meeting and to consider whether a process might be developed to help departments and PGTAs in this position.
 - d) It was asked whether the policy applied to students engaged in ad hoc teaching arrangements and noted that the intention was to create consistent practice and terms and conditions for PGTAs by placing them on UCL contracts. Students thus engaged in one-off or other smaller teaching engagements could be employed on a casual basis, but for longer periods of employment, the PGTA policy should apply.

RESOLVED:

- 32.4 **APPROVED:** the PGTA Draft Code of Practice in principle, subject to the suggested amendments and to further discussion between members and Human Resources officers on the issues identified relating to research project PGTA employment.

ACTION: RDC and Human Resources Officers to note

33 POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREE REGULATIONS 2018-19

[Paper 3-02 – see also Item 18, RDC Minutes, 13.03.18, 2017-18]

- 33.1 **Received** – the draft Postgraduate Research Degree Regulations 2018-19 at RDC 3-02 (17-18).

- 33.2 The Assessment Regulations and Governance Manager (Academic Services) introduced the paper and noted that the draft regulations had been developed following an RDC Working Group's recommendations (2016-17) and discussion at the previous meeting. RDC Members had since provided feedback on each section of the draft regulations, which had been worked into the current draft, though many issues and queries were still to be resolved. As much work on the regulations was still necessary, RDC was asked to consider the best way to take this forward.
- 33.3 The RDC Working Group had aimed to develop a single set of PGR regulations to draw the various existing documents into one place in order to promote greater clarity and consistency. It was agreed that this had been successful overall for the taught level regulations, which then also enabled further discussions and improvements. Changes to these regulations were discussed and approved by Education Committee, with the Academic Manual re-published annually. It was noted that ARQASC, the EdCom sub-committee was able to discuss proposals for regulatory changes in detail and to then make recommendations for EdCom's approval. This worked well to free up EdCom's time for more strategic matters for consideration and it was questioned whether a group performing a similar function might be beneficial for RDC, to scrutinise and consider the PGR regulations. RDC would still need to approve any changes to PGR regulations.
- 33.4 The discussion then focussed on particular sections of the draft regulations and the following points were noted:
- a) *Professional and IOE Doctorates* – there was general agreement with the aim to promote greater consistency in the regulations for these doctorates. This also included the approach for recognition of Accredited Prior Learning. It was acknowledged that discussions needed to first be held in the IOE and the faculties offering the professional programmes.
 - b) *Exemption from the Standard Registration Period* – it was questioned whether the amount of time that could be exempted should be specified (i.e. *not offer an exemption of more than...*). There were also concerns that the end date should be made clear so that there was clarity for students transferring in from other institutions.
 - c) *Interruption of Study* – there was agreement with the Student Records suggestion that work commitments should count as significant other extenuating circumstances, as well as illness, as many part-time students were working. Student Records had also drafted an Interruption of Study form, following consultation with faculties including prompts for faculties to inform Student Funding England where students had PG loans etc. There were some different views on who would approve the requests, though there was agreement that the RDC Chair should continue to approve applications resulting in interruptions of more than two years and retrospective interruptions. The suggestion that Heads of Department, Departmental Graduate Tutors and/or Principal Supervisors make the approval for other interruptions (i.e one year or less) raised some concerns. Approval for the latter two could be problematic, particularly if the request was rejected, as they were more likely to know the student. Some also thought that HoDs may not have enough time to

fully scrutinise and consider requests. An alternative suggestion was that Faculty Graduate Tutors could grant approval, which would also help faculties to keep track of interruptions. However, it was noted that there were many hundreds of such requests each year and the FGT role, might be inundated by them. It was suggested instead that FGTs and DGTs be made aware of the decisions, particularly with requests from students with welfare needs and visa requirements. Further discussion on approval would follow the meeting.

- d) *Completing Research Status* – there was variable practice across UCL in who approved transfer to CRS applications and the draft regulations stated that this could be the Supervisor, DGT or HoD. There was general agreement to retain this text to allow departments flexibility. There was also agreement with the requirement for Tier 4 CRC students to meet their supervisor at least once a month, in order to meet UKVI requirements, and it was also considered good practice for students to be in regular contact whilst writing up.
- e) *Word Counts for Professional and Specialist Doctorate thesis* – it was noted that many of these doctorates request shorter word counts than the 100,000 stated in the Professional Doctorate regulations. Suggested that the text state that the total for all portfolio components required is up to 100,000 words.
- f) *Language and Format of the Thesis* – it was agreed that “must” should be used for the oral examination of a thesis (i.e. “the oral examination of a thesis *must* be conducted in English”). There was also a discussion of the format of the thesis and whether there should be more flexibility in how electronic formats are submitted. It was noted that they need to be easily accessible and stored by the Library.
- g) *Extensions to Completing Research Status* – it was queried whether this might be extended from one year for full-time and two years for part-time, as there were many requests for suspension of regulations to allow this. It was noted that the grounds for suspending the regulation were almost always on ill-health and it would not be in the students’ best interests to offer this within the regulations.

RESOLVED:

- 33.5 **APPROVED** - the Interruption of Study form, with further discussions on the levels of approval to take place following the meeting.
ACTION: Helen Notter, Ben Colvill and RDC Members
- 33.6 That a working group be set-up to consider the regulations and members invited to volunteer over the summer.
ACTION: RDC Members to note and the Secretary to contact members
- 33.7 That members send any further comments and feedback on the draft regulations to the Assessment Regulations and Governance Manager.
ACTION: RDC Members and Lizzie Vinton to note

34 ORAL UPDATES FROM EACH FACULTY ON 2017 PRES ACTION POINTS

[Paper 3-03]

34.1 **Received** – the faculty PRES Reports at RDC 3-03 (17-18).

34.2 The Faculty Graduate Tutors reported the following on action taken in response to the PRES 2017 student feedback:

- a) *General* – many faculties reported that there was wide variation between satisfaction scores for departments, with some very high whilst others were low. Results had been discussed at the FRDCs. Many faculties also reported that where scores were high, best practice was identified where possible for dissemination to the rest of the departments.
- b) *Supervision* – Laws had analysed student feedback on supervision and was planning a training session for staff at the start of the next session.
- c) *Resources* – MAPS noted that high satisfaction received where departments had moved to new buildings, but other departments had very low scores. Laws also reported improved student satisfaction since Bentham House re-opened. Laws had actively engaged students in the planning discussions on the re-developed space, with over 200 attending one of the meetings. PGR students were now able to access both staff and student areas, in addition to their own PhD room. The Built Environment reported that communication on space was improving and students were encouraged to take up Library Services seminars on time management and accessing its resources (e.g. an app which showed where free desk space was available).
- d) *Research Culture* – MAPS reported good scores received for research ambience where departments had students associated with CDT, but further analysis of the data was required to more closely ascertain the reasons for this. A&H/SHS reported a low score for research ambience with students apparently not connecting seminars offered through the University of London: School of Advanced Study with their departments, despite many of the staff being involved. This seemed to lead students to score lowly in this area and the Faculty was trying to address this. Medical Sciences was holding a number of events to encourage greater intra faculty engagement for students and linking them to the Dean's research prize, as well as a Faculty Research Day. PHS was organising a research symposium and other events for its students to address research culture concerns. Space was also an issue with the Faculty's widely spread out institutes leading to fewer opportunities for PGR students to meet. The Faculty was encouraging students to set up networks to compensate. The Built Environment was providing a number of events for students and utilising more proactive students to encourage the less engaged to attend. It was also improving information on training events and emphasizing the benefits for students to take advantage of these opportunities. The IOE had further developed its research training programme and was re-running sessions to enable part-time students to attend. A number of faculties reported involvement in the Three Minute Thesis competition.

- e) *Skills Training and Advice* – Engineering encouraged supervisors to draw up training and development plans, to be stored on the students' research log and regularly monitored, with feedback on their usefulness sought from students. Life Sciences reported very low scores for this (30%) and were introducing a pro-forma ("my personal training plan) for students to complete at induction and with their supervisors. It was noted that this could be problematic as some supervisors viewed development as the purely the students' responsibility, though a requirement for it to be submitted to the thesis committee should encourage greater take-up. PHS reported similar concerns and were also developing a proforma to be completed by staff and students and put on the e-log. A&H/SHS were providing a workshop on skills training for DGTs and administrators to improve their support skills. Medical Sciences was also looking at improving supervisor involvement in developing students' skills and was considering adding it to the conditions for upgrade. The IOE had run focus groups with students and was providing part-time students and their supervisors with more notice of training courses.
- f) *Teaching* – Brain Sciences reported mixed feedback on PGTA opportunities dependent on whether students were in the PALS Division, which offered UG programmes or had more limited access if based elsewhere. The Faculty had developed an International Summer School module to create further teaching opportunities, linked with applications for Arena Fellowships. PHS reported similar problems for providing PGTA opportunities as there was only one UG programme in the Faculty. An inter-faculty solution was being sought with PHS seeking to work with other SLMS faculties to find teaching opportunities for its students. Medical Sciences had discussed a low score for teaching with students and discovered that it was largely due to a lack of training for laboratory supervision of UG and PGT students. Appropriate training was provided with UCL Arena and positive feedback received, with discussions continuing with student representatives on how this work might be better recognised in students' records.
- g) *Feedback from students* – Engineering reported a low score (60%) for this question and much work was put into organising a "State of the Faculty" event to encourage students to come and provide feedback on key issues and concerns. Despite much effort to promote the event, no students turned up. Work was continuing with the PGR student representatives to ascertain how they would like to engage with the Faculty. Life Sciences also reported a similar disappointing response from students to three open surgery events for PGR students, with none attending in spite of large efforts to promote the events.
- h) *Code of Practice* – awareness of the code was 60% in Engineering, although the Faculty had made strenuous efforts to inform students of it at induction and other key points in the students' year and a link to it put on key Moodle pages. Brain Sciences were consulting with DGTs to increase student awareness of the Code.

- 34.3 The Senior Executive Officer (Doctoral School) also noted that there had been limited response from certain areas within professional services to a request for information on their actions arising from the PRES, made earlier in the year. Full responses were still awaited from Estates, SRS (although Academic Services had provided an update on the regulations) and ISD.

RESOLVED:

- 34.4 That RDC invite the Director of UCL Arena to discuss PGTA training provision in the next session.

ACTION: Chair and Secretary to note

35 DEPARTMENTAL PGR SPACE SURVEY UPDATE

[Paper 3-04 and see also Item 22, RDC Minutes, 13.03.18, 2017-18]

- 35.1 **Received** – Update on Departmental PGR Space Survey at RDC 3-04 (17-18).

- 35.2 The submissions from Engineering and the Built Environment were received in advance of the meeting, though the IOE and MAPS were still outstanding.

RESOLVED:

- 35.3 That the Secretary contact the IOE and MAPS Faculty Graduate Tutors regarding the still outstanding PGR Space Survey submissions.

ACTION: the Secretary

36 STUDENT COMPLAINTS REPORT

[Paper 3-05]

- 36.1 **Received** – the Student Complaints Report at: RDC 3-05 (17-18).

- 36.2 It was suggested that in future more details on the cases would be helpful in the report, though it was acknowledged that the limitations imposed through data protection regulations and the need for confidentiality made this challenging. The fuller report made to EdCom could be used or adapted to highlight the PGR data whilst retaining important contextual data on other student communities.

RESOLVED:

- 36.3 That the Casework Manager (Academic Services) be asked to review the current report to RDC with a view to augmenting it in advance of the 2018-19 submission.

ACTION: David Lloyd

Other matters for approval or information

37 MRES/MPHIL/PHD APPLICATION AND ADMISSIONS UPDATE

[Paper 3-06]

37.1 **Noted** –the MRES/MPHIL/PHD Application and Admissions Update at: RDC 3-06 (17-18).

38 NEW AND AMENDED PROGRAMMES AND QUALIFICATIONS APPROVED BY RDC CHAIR'S ACTION

[Paper 3-07]

38.1 **Noted** – New and Amended Programmes and Qualifications at RDC 3-07 (17-18).

39 ANONYMISED SUSPENSION OF REGULATIONS REPORT

[Paper 3-08]

39.1 **Noted** – Anonymised Suspension of Regulations at RDC 3-08 (17-18).

40 DATES OF NEXT MEETING*

- Tuesday 9th October 2018 – 11am to 1pm (Venue to be confirmed)
- Tuesday 12th March 2019 – 11am to 1pm (Venue to be confirmed)
- Wednesday 5th June 2019 – 11am to 1pm (Venue to be confirmed)

*Note, confirmed following the meeting.

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