LONDON'S GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

5 June 2019

M I N U T E S

PRESENT:

Professor David Bogle (*Chair*); Mr Ben Colvill; Professor Hynek Pikhart; Mr Derfel Owen; Ms Helen Notter; Professor Stephen Marshall; Dr Paulo Drinot; Dr Virginia Mantouvalou; Dr Benet Salway; Professor Kaila Srai; Professor Tania Monteiro; Professor Alison Diduck ;Dr Mark Freeman; Dr Patti Adank; Dr Ruth Siddal; Ms Karolina Farrell.

In attendance: Mr Darren Payne (Secretary); Mr Adnan Ali (Doctoral School); Ms Bella Malins (item 4); Mr Peter Warwick (item 5); Mr Martin Moyle (item 7); Ms Anniina Wikman (item 9); Mr Nick McGhee (item 11); Ms Wendy Appleby (item 11).

Apologies for absence were received from: Professor Andrew Wills; Dr Andrew Stoker; Dr Sam Smidt; Dr Simon Banks; Dr Sally Leevers; Dr Jill Norman; Mr Saddiqur Rahman.

Key to abbreviations

CRS   Completing Research Status
DGT   Departmental Graduate Tutor
ISD   Information Services Division
OIA   Office of the Independent Adjudicator
PGTA   Postgraduate Teaching Assistant
PRES   Postgraduate Research Experience Survey
SMT   Senior Management Team
RDC   Research Degrees Committee

Preliminary business

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34   MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

34.1   **Approved**: The minutes of the meeting held 12 March 2019.

35   MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

35.1   The Chair noted that the PGR Wellbeing paper (RDC minutes 20, 12 March 2019) had still not been received, and that it had now been 18 months since the Wellbeing Team had said they would report to RDC on this. The Chair will

follow-up with them again, with a view to have something ready for the next meeting of RDC.

Matters for discussion

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36 CHAIR'S BUSINESS

36.1 The Chair reported to RDC with regards to the recent SMT away day, which had a focus on all aspects of Research - strategy, estates, Open Science, scholarships, and both doctoral and postdoctoral issues. A presentation identified the key strengths UCL has, and it was noted that the Provost wants a greater attention on research students and early career research staff (postdocs) going forwards as the Taught level has had the majority of focus in recent years. UCL is currently not performing well against benchmark competitors in surveys such as the PRES – students do not report receiving the excellent experience UCL would expect.

36.2 Three main questions were raised at the away day for SMT to work on – 1. What is going well within the faculties; 2. What would an excellent environment for researchers look like; and 3. Who has the responsibility for early career researcher matters across the institution . The Doctoral School has undertaken to prepare a report on current good practice within UCL and how this can be spread around and be made more consistent across the institution.

36.3 The Research Staff Development Strategy will be refreshed, as there have been particular problems for postdoctoral researchers, particularly as the growth in numbers has meant academic careers are not always realistic. UCL needs to be a great place to be a researcher, to train as a researcher, but also to ensure that people are more aware of the wide range of careers available after their postdoctoral positions beyond academia.

36.4 The Deputy Director of the Doctoral School informed RDC that the PRES 2019 raw data had just been made available to the Doctoral School by AdvanceHE, and that this would be circulated to members of RDC once it has been processed into a more readily accessible format. There would however be a delay in releasing faculty and departmental level data due to issues with staff illness.

37 TERMS AND CONDITIONS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

37.1 ***Received*** – the Terms and Conditions for Graduate Students paper at RDC 3-01 (18-19).

37.2 The Director of Access and Admissions introduced the item, noting that a great deal of work over the last 18 months had gone into the new Terms and Conditions to bring them up to standard with the current regulatory framework. The Terms of Conditions go out at the point of offer, and as soon a student accepts it becomes a contractual agreement, so it is imperative that these are fit for purpose. Ensuring these are strengthened also helps to mitigate complaints both internally and via external channels such as the OIA.

37.3   One key issue highlighted was the obligation to provide supervision, and that the Office for Students specifically requires a protection plan in place in the event that supervisors leave – a suitable alternative must be made available either from UCL staff or external staff with an honorary UCL contract should the student wish to remain registered at UCL. The student cannot be expected to resolve this, and the obligation is on UCL – a common position around the UK for such issues.

37.4   The Director of Access and Admissions confirmed, however, that it was a matter of what is considered to be "reasonable" in terms of student expectations but also what UCL can "reasonably" be expected to provide.

37.5   It was noted that under 'Surprising Terms', there was currently nothing regarding academic insufficiency to compel withdrawal if needed. The Director of Access and Admissions noted that whilst the list was not exhaustive as they are just examples, they would add this to section 1 in order to highlight it given its importance.

37.6   It was confirmed that students will get a copy of the Terms of Conditions during the admissions process, and that this will also be available on their admissions portal. In future an archive of all Terms of Conditions per year will be built up so these can be referred back to in order to see what was in place when a student was at UCL.

38   PGTA CODE OF PRACTICE - UPDATE

38.1   *Received* – PGTA Code of Practice – Update paper at <u>RDC 3-02 (18-19).</u>

38.2   The Acting Director of Human Resources introduced the item, informing RDC that the paper had resulted from discussions of the draft PGTA Code of Practice that went to HR Committee in April - specifically, the stipulation about PGTAs not working more than 180 hours a year had raised concerns from some Faculties. RDC had been asked to review this stipulation.

38.3   The proposals outlined in the paper did not distinguish part-time and full-time students – particularly given that part-time could work more whilst maintaining academic sufficiency. It was agreed that the wording should therefore make it clear that it refers to full-time students.

38.4   RDC discussions noted that full-time study should be 40 hours a week dedicated to their research, and that there may be welfare issues if students should then work 20 hours a week more as PGTAs (the maximum allowable for all paid work for tier 4 student under the terms of their visas). This can cause unacceptable pressure and wellbeing issues in students.

38.5   Whilst this was acknowledged as a potential issue, it was also noted that students who do need the income will always work via other means – it is arguably far better they are working as PGTAs where they can be working in an academic environment and gaining useful skills.

38.6   RDC discussed different options, and it was felt that there should be one rule for all students, not variable by Faculty. The cap of 180 hours was felt to be unnecessarily restrictive.

38.7   **Agreed**: It was agreed that UCL could adopt the Research Council wording on this as follows: "*the recommended maximum teaching time is no more than 6 hours in any week for full-time students, and students may in addition undertake a small amount of other paid work provided it does not interfere with their research or wellbeing*". This approach allows sufficient flexibility on hours worked, and also specifically distinguishes full-time from part-time students.

39   PROPOSED MOVE TO DEFAULT ELECTRONIC PHD DISSERTATIONS (E-THESES)

39.1   *Received* – Proposed Move to Default Electronic PhD Dissertations (E-Theses) paper at RDC 3-04 (18-19).

39.2   The Library Director of Services identified two main issues with the proposal – 1. In relation to submission of E-Theses for evaluation/examination - UCL does not current have the required secure software to enable such submission and provision of electronic versions to examiners, and this would require an ISD solution; and 2. It was not clear from the proposal whether it also included cessation of printed copy after submission – but currently no infrastructure is in place for long-term preservation of E-Theses. This is a significant and unacceptable risk given that UCL currently has hundreds of years' worth of theses in a reliable storage medium (hard copy).

39.3   It was suggested that examiners could potentially opt-in to receive E-Theses as part of the nomination process, and that this would be specifically just for the Examination process – with a hardcopy being submitted to the library at the end for storage purposes.

39.4   It was noted that Oxford University have a secure E-Thesis repository so examiners can be emailed a secure link to access these when needed. Due to size issues with email, and GDPR issues with other methods of sending, it is imperative ISD be involved in building an analogous system to handle electronic transmission of theses at UCL should e-theses be the preferred route in future. Issued were also raised with version control, and submission dates that would potentially be lost.

39.5   Whilst RDC supported a move to E-Theses in general, it was agreed that the implementation of such a system could not be brought in without the adequate infrastructure being in place. Any new system would require input from the Library Services, Student Records, and ISD to ensure the system works end-to-end, and would also require the relevant investment bid being put in to AISG (the Administrative Information Services Group) to fund this.

40   GENERIC ISSUES ARISING FROM JOINT EXAMINER REPORTS

40.1   *Received* – Generic Issues Arising from Joint Examiner Reports paper at RDC 3-05 (18-19).

40.2   The Chair highlighted two particular issues. The first, prompted by comments from the IoE, was whether 3 months and 18 month referrals were appropriate – where 3 month was for drafting issues, and 18 month indicated more substantial problems that required further research - as the IoE had historically also had a 6 month referral . After discussion, it was felt that the current 3 and 18 month referral structure was sufficient

40.3   The second issue was issues with handwritten reports being problematic, although this was acknowledged as something that would be resolved if this moved to an online process.

41   RESEARCH DEGREE UPDATES TO THE ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS FRAMEWORK 2019-20

41.1   *Received* – Research Degree Updates to the Academic Partnerships Framework 2019-20 paper at <u>RDC 3-06 (18-19).</u>

41.2   Senior Policy Adviser (Academic Partnerships) introduced the item, noting that the updates to the Partnerships Framework 2019-20 were all related to those previously agreed at RDC minute 6, 9 October 2018.

41.3   **Agreed**: The amendments to the Academic Partnerships Framework 2019-20.

42   STUDENT COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT 2018 (PGR)

42.1   *Received* – Student Complaints Annual Report 2018 (PGR) at <u>RDC 3-07 (18-19).</u>

42.2   Deputy Director (Casework and Governance) introduced the item, noting that there were no concerns from the data with respects to PGR students. Complaints were up in general, but not for PGR students – it was noted that the reason for this is unclear, perhaps indicating that PGR students are less aware they can complain about issues. However, there is an expectation that the rate for PGR students would be lower, as most complaints at UG and PGT level are regarding assessment, so the figures are likely accurate and not of concern.

42.3   The number of upheld research complaints had gone up, but it was noted that the number of informally resolved complaints had gone up also, and this feeds into the overall upheld complaints figures. It was also noted that the report doesn't include all complaints that do not make it up to a formal process.

43   APPROACH FOR HANDLING ALLEGATIONS OF RESEARCH MISCONDUCT BY UCL PGR STUDENTS

43.1   *Received* – Approach for Handling Allegations of Research Misconduct by UCL PGR Students paper at <u>RDC 2-08 (18-19).</u>

43.2   The Registrar introduced the item, noting that currently all research misconduct investigation and resolution goes through the Research Misconduct procedures, even relating to plagiarism for research students. Several recent cases have highlighted issues with the procedure as it applies to students that seem to suggest the approach is too heavy handed, but that no lighter touch approach exists such as a more nimble panel process that sits within departments.

43.3   It was acknowledged there should be a distinction between researchers in training (i.e. research students), and full researchers, and between work submitted for examination/assessment and published research– misconduct within a thesis could go to an academic misconduct process, and misconduct for work going to publication could go to a research misconduct process. Such a model was used in several comparable institutions. The penalties available at

the academic misconduct level are also more suitable for these types of offences –such as the option to revoke an award.

43.4 **Agreed**: It was agreed that UCL should adopt a hybrid approach, where any offences relating to the research award or publication go through the research misconduct process, and assessed work and unpublished work goes through the academic misconduct process.

Other matters for approval or information

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44 SUMMARY: ACADEMIC MODEL PROJECT – DEVELOPMENTS TO PORTICO FOR RESEARCH STUDENT PROCESSES

44.1 *Noted* – Summary: Academic Model Project – Developments to Portico for Research Student Processes paper at RDC 3-09 (18-19).

44.2 The Student Records Manager (PGR) noted that the Academic Model Project were developing an online process for students to apply for CRS extensions and to enter for examination. Additional bids to the Academic Model Project would include the nomination of examiners process.

44.3 RDC expressed distinct approval for this proposal and bid, and noted that the committee should support future papers submitted to the Academic Model Project that can benefit the Research Degree process.

45 MRES/MPHIL/PHD APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS UPDATE

45.1 *Noted* – MRes/MPhil/Phd Applications and Admissions Update at RDC 3-10 (18-19).

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

46.1 *Noted* – New and Amended Programmes and Qualifications Approved by RDC Chair's Action at RDC 3-11 (18-19).

47 ANONYMISED SUSPENSION OF REGULATIONS REPORT

47.1 *Noted* – Anonymised Suspension of Regulations Report at RDC 3-12 (18-19).

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