RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

Wednesday 6 March 2013

M I N U T E S

Present:

Professor David Bogle (Chair); Dr Stephanie Bird; Mr Ben Colvill; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Caroline Essex; Mr Marco Federighi ; Professor Mike Ewing; Dr Tom Gretton; Professor Anthony Harker; Ms Bella Malins; Dr Stephen Marshall; Mr Dante Micheaux; Professor David Muller; Dr Joy Sleeman; Dr Dave Spratt; Professor Kaila Srai; Mr BenTowse;.

In attendance: Mr Gary Hawes (Secretary)

Apologies were received from: Mr David Ashton; Dr Donna Brown; Dr Wendy Brown; Dr Sally Leevers; Dr Ruth Siddall; Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu.

Key to abbreviations

AC	Academic Committee
DGTs	Department Graduate Tutors
DTCs	Doctoral Training Centres
ELE	E-learning environments
FGTCs	Faculty Graduate Teaching Committees
FGTs	Faculty Graduate Tutors
FTCs	Faculty Teaching Committees
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEIs	Higher education institutions
IP	Intellectual property
PGR	Postgraduate research
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
SSEES	School of Slavonic and East European Studies

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18   MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 15 NOVEMBER 2012

Confirmed:

18.1   The Minutes of the meeting of RDC held on 15 November 2012, issued previously *[RDC Mins.1-14, 15.11.12]*.

19   MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES *[see Minute 28A below]*

19A   Amendment of the offer letter for PGR students *[RDC Min.5, 15.11.12]*

Noted:

19A.1   At the previous meeting of RDC held on 15 November 2012, it was noted that discussions would still need to take place regarding the possibility of issuing a single offer letter in future for PhD programmes that included an integrated MRes, and that this would need to incorporate a broader discussion on whether the integrated MRes should be wholly integrated (and only offered as an exit award when students did not

go on to complete the PhD) rather than is the case currently where students completing the programme receive both an MRes and a PhD.

Reported:

19A.2   Discussions were continuing around the issue of whether it would be possible to issue a single offer letter in respect of PhD programmes that included an integrated MRes (*ie* 1+3 programmes). Although DTCs would prefer for a single offer letter to be issued, there were various complexities and technical issues that would not make it straightforward or appropriate to implement this arrangement across all PhD programmes that featured an integrated MRes, not least because completion of the MRes often served as a progression point for students onto the PhD programme. However, the Director of Student Services and Director of Admissions had been considering possible approaches for addressing the issue with a view to meeting with the Head of the Graduate School and discussing these in due course.

19B   Staff eligibility to supervise research students *[RDC Min.7, 15.11.12]*

Noted:

19B.1   The list of UCL staff categories that were eligible to supervise research students, which was agreed by RDC at its previous meeting, was available on the HR web pages at pages at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/docs/phd_student_supervision.php. A link to the list had also been included in the Academic Regulations for Research Degree Students, and the list would also be publicised more widely within UCL via Exchange and the Week@UCL and submitted for information with a covering note to the next meeting of HRPC.

20   APPLICATIONS, OFFERS OF ADMISSION AND ACCEPTANCES TO PGR AND MRES PROGRAMMES

Received:

20.1   At RDC 2-01 (12-13) a report on student applications, offers of admission and applicant acceptances to PGR and MRes programmes of study, covering both end-of-cycle data for the 2012 entry admissions round as well as the latest data on 2013 entry – introduced by Ms Bella Malins, Director of Admissions.

Reported:

20.2   There had been a 55% increase in applications for MRes programmes overall for 2012-13 relative to the previous year, largely as a result of new programmes that had been launched in the UCL faculties of Engineering Sciences and Social and Historical Sciences. For all other research programmes, there had been an 8% increase in applications overall, although this figure failed to give a true indication of the differing performances across UCL faculties.

20.3   While full-time research student numbers across all years of study were up by 7.7% for UK/EU and 15.8% for overseas, the intake for 2012-13 was down by 4% overall. However, since entry to research degree programmes did not follow the standard admissions cycle but operated on a rolling basis, it was difficult to draw definitive conclusions from these data.

20.4   UK/EU applications for research programmes for the current admission cycle were down by 2% overall compared with the previous year's snapshot data, while Overseas applications were down by 9%. With the exception of Medical Sciences,

Life Sciences, the Built Environment and SSEES, all UCL faculties were experiencing a decline in applications. However, despite fewer applications being received, the number of offers being made in both the UK/EU and Overseas categories was broadly comparable to the previous year's figures; whereas the number of acceptances was currently higher than at the same point in the previous year. However, as it was still early in the admissions cycle, little could be read into these figures at this stage.

Discussion:

20.5   One of the student members of RDC enquired whether there was any evidence to suggest that the overall decrease in applications to research degree programmes would have any impact on the diversity of UCL postgraduate research student body. The Director of Admissions noted that although it would be possible to extract data on gender and ethnicity, it would be better to extract this information at the end of cycle with a view to comparing it to the previous year's enrolment data.

20.6   The decrease in Overseas applications for research degree programmes appeared to be off trend relative to other Russell Group universities and the rest of the sector generally. However, given that UCL had experienced above-trend increases in applications to its research programmes in recent years relative to its competitors, it was possible that demand had plateaued. While some members suggested that it would be interesting to discover how UCL's 'accepts as offers' rate of 71% for the 2012 entry admissions round compared to those of other Russell Group HEIs, it was noted that these data were commercially sensitive and were not available.

20.7   Some competitor HEIs routinely offered fee reductions as a recruitment incentive for overseas research students who were sponsored by overseas funding bodies. While this option was being looked at within UCL as part of the general review of funding for research degree programmes, it was noted that Deans of Faculty already had the authority to offer fee reductions as budget holders and already exercised this discretion in some areas, *eg* Engineering Sciences.

21   MPHIL/PHD UPGRADE AND SUBMISSION

Received:

21.1   At <u>RDC 2-02 (12-13)</u>, data on MPhil/PhD upgrade and submission, introduced by Mr Gary Smith, Head of Student Data Services.

21.2   At <u>RDC 2-03 (12-13)</u>, a note proposing a change to the timescale for the MPhil/PhD upgrade process, introduced by the Chair of RDC.

Reported:

21.3   For the 2005/06-2007/08 entry cohorts of postgraduate research students, between 62%-70% of students had submitted their MPhil/PhD theses within the prescribed time frame, while the number of students who had upgraded from MPhil to PhD within the prescribed 18 months ranged from 21%-25%.

21.4   The note at <u>RDC 2-03 (12-13)</u> proposed that the timescale in which the upgrade from MPhil to PhD was undertaken be changed to not less than nine months after initial registration for the MPhil degree for full-time students, and not less than 15 months after initial registration for the MPhil degree for part-time students.

Discussion:

21.5   With regard to the data on MPhil/PhD upgrade and submission, the following main points were noted during discussion:

- It would be interesting to consider information on how many students had withdrawn without upgrading at the twelve-month mark;
- In most cases, the data did not appear to show any significant correlation between upgrade and submission;
- While it was reassuring to see that submission rates had improved in a number of faculties, upgrade rates were generally less encouraging. In light of this, departments would need to be encouraged to implement closer monitoring of postgraduate research students during the initial stages of their studies;
- Data on rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees were produced annually by HEFCE and would be received at RDC's next meeting in June 2013. The most recent data had shown that UCL was close to the benchmark figure of 81% in terms of the number of students who had obtained their PhD qualification within seven years;
- Some members of RDC queried whether there needed to be a stricter approval process for considering student progression in cases where transfer of registration from MPhil to PhD had not been completed in the prescribed 18 months. Currently, the Code of Practice advised that such cases should be drawn to the attention of the DGT for consideration.

21.6   The Chair of RDC requested FGT members of RDC to take the MPhil/PhD upgrade and submission data back to their faculties for dissemination and discussion at FGTC/FTC meetings. He noted that it would also be helpful for the data to be disseminated to Deans, Heads of Department and DGTs with a view to re-confirming the importance of timely upgrade and completion for PhD students.

RESOLVED:

21.7   That the Head of Student Data Services be asked to clarify outside the meeting whether the data at <u>RDC 2-02 (12-13)</u>, included information on students who had withdrawn after one year, but before upgrading.
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<u>ACTION: Gary Smith</u>
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21.8   That i) Faculty Graduate Tutor members of RDC be asked to take the MPhil/PhD upgrade and submission data back to their faculties for dissemination and discussion at FGTC/FTC meetings and ii) the data also be disseminated to Deans, Heads of Department and DGTs with a view to re-confirming the importance of timely upgrade and completion for PhD students.
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<u>ACTION: Faculty Graduate Tutors/Gary Hawes</u>
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21.9   That i) the proposal at <u>RDC 2-03 (12-13)</u> be approved and ii) the Academic Regulations for Research Degree Students and related guidance be amended accordingly and notified to UCL colleagues as appropriate.
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<u>ACTION: Ben Colvill/Gary Hawes</u>
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22   GRADUATE SCHOOL RESEARCH STUDENT SURVEY 2012

Received:

22.1   The report at <u>RDC 2-04 (12-13)</u>, introduced by the Chair of RDC.

Reported:

22.2   There had been a total of 986 out of 4138 respondents to the Survey, which represented 23.8% of the registered research student cohort at the time that the Survey was commissioned in July 2012.

Discussion:

22.3   With regard to the fact that 38% of respondents had indicated that they had not found the information skills training offered by UCL services to be very useful, some members of RDC noted that it would be helpful to gain a sense of whether this related to more specialised, advanced information skills training or to the more basic, introductory information skills training. It was understood that ISD colleagues would be undertaking their own training needs analysis with a view to helping to determine what sort of information skills training students wanted.

23   AMENDMENT OF THE OVERSEAS RESEARCH STUDENT STUDY LEAVE FEE

Received:

23.1   The note at <u>RDC 2-05 (12-13)</u>, introduced by the Chair of RDC.

Reported:

23.2   The note at <u>RDC 2-05 (12-13)</u> outlined a proposal by the School Finance Director for Arts and Social Sciences for amending the overseas research student study leave fee from 50% of the equivalent research student UK/EU fee to 50% of the research student overseas fee.

Discussion:

23.3   It was noted that one of the reasons set out in the note at <u>RDC 2-05 (12-13)</u> for proposing an amendment to the overseas research student study leave fee was that changing methods of communication had facilitated better levels of communication between supervisors and their students while the latter were away on Study Leave. However, opinion amongst RDC members differed as to the extent to which supervision levels altered from the usual model during periods when students were away on Study Leave. Moreover, RDC members noted that the impact of Study Leave on supervisory responsibilities differed across the disciplines.

23.4   RDC noted that while it was not clear why it was originally agreed that Overseas students should pay 50% of the Home/EU rate rather than of the Overseas rate, it was far from clear what impact raising the Study Leave fee rate for overseas research students would now have. In addition, RDC was concerned that the case for increasing the Study Leave rate for overseas research students would need to be fully justified given the higher fee levels paid by overseas research students relative to their Home/EU counterparts in general. It was also not clear to members of RDC how the proposed increase in the Study Leave fee for overseas research students articulated with the commitment in UCL's International Strategy to increase opportunities for Study Leave for students. It was noted that an increase in Study Leave fees might impact on current students' desire and ability to take Study Leave during their programme, and might also impact on the attractiveness of UCL research programmes to prospective students who were considering a Study leave element.

23.5   In view of the lack of agreement and lack of evidence in general to support any change in the Study Leave fee for overseas research students, RDC felt that it was not in a position to recommend a rise in Overseas Study Leave fees.

RESOLVED:

23.6 **That the proposal at <u>RDC 2-05 (12-13)</u> for amending the overseas research student study leave fee should not be endorsed by RDC.**
<u>*ACTION: Ben Colvill/Gary Hawes*</u>

24 **CONCORDAT TO SUPPORT RESEARCH INTEGRITY**

Received:

24.1 At <u>RDC 2-06 (12-13)</u>, the Universities UK's concordat to support research integrity, introduced by the Chair of RDC.

Reported:

24.2 The Concordat sought to provide a comprehensive national framework for good research conduct and its governance that would help to ensure, amongst other things, that research produced by or in collaboration with the UK research community was underpinned by the highest standards of rigour and a culture of integrity and conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards. Signatories to the concordat included the Department for Employment and Learning, HEFCE, the Research Councils UK, Universities UK and the Wellcome Trust.

24.3 Recent research misconduct cases involving experienced research student supervisors within UCL had brought to light issues around the integrity and conduct of research practices that had failed to seek the necessary ethics approval or deviated from agreed protocols. This had in turn raised concerns about the need to ensure that supervisors were aware of their responsibilities for making sure that research being undertaken by students under their supervision was being conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks and that the highest standards of rigour and integrity were maintained.

Discussion:

24.4 Members of RDC agreed that ethical practice and research integrity needed to be seen as important cultural value that was instilled in students as an integral part of their training and studies, and that it was an important role of supervisors to communicate these values. It would also be important to develop training methods and practices that incorporated this and trained students how to think about these issues as part of their research studies. Some members of RDC noted that a particular area where greater clarity was needed was the issue of student IP and copyright.

24.5 Some members of RDC noted that their own faculties, *eg* Laws, Medical Sciences, had already organised seminars and workshops that had been dedicated to the issue of research ethics and integrity and to the broader aspects of this for staff who were supervisors.

24.6 The Chair of RDC agreed to keep RDC informed of developments within UCL around implementation of the Concordat.

25   GRADUATE SCHOOL – ANNUAL REPORT 2011-12

Received:

25.1   At RDC 2-07 (12-13), the Graduate School Annual Report 2011-12.

Reported:

25.2   The Chair of RDC drew attention to the following areas of the Annual Report in particular:

- As part of the Yale UCL Collaborative Partnership, the UCL Graduate School had designed and launched an Exchange Scheme for doctoral students at both at both institutions, giving Yale and UCL research students the opportunity to undertake a period of research at the partner institution as part of their doctorate.
- There had been a significant rise in the number of submissions to the Graduate School's annual Research Poster and Research Images competitions relative to the previous year;
- The Graduate School had achieved the joint highest satisfaction rate of support services at UCL in the International Student Barometer, maintaining a 95% satisfaction rate.

25.3   The Chair of RDC conveyed his thanks to the team of colleagues in the Graduate School for their dedication and hard work in the course of the previous year.

26   MINUTES OF FACULTY GRADUATE RESEARCH COMMITTEES

Received:

26.1   The note at RDC 2-08 (12-13) summarising proposed arrangements for the future monitoring by RDC of the work of FGTCs in relation to postgraduate research provision, introduced by the RDC Secretary.

Reported

26.2   One of the recommendations arising from the review of AC and its substructure that was agreed by AC its meeting on 13 December 2012 was that with effect from 1 January 2013, FGTCs should report to RDC in respect of postgraduate research students, and that RDC should put in place arrangements for the monitoring of the work of FGTCs in relation to postgraduate research students, including the preparation and scrutiny of an annual report on the proceedings of FGTCs. Accordingly, the RDC officers had begun asking for copies of Minutes of the meetings of FGTCs (or equivalent bodies) to be supplied to them, and it was proposed that all Minutes received would be made available on the RDC SharePoint[1] so that RDC members could access these.

26.3   An annual report on the proceedings of FGTCs identifying salient issues and themes in relation to postgraduate research provision would be prepared in future by the RDC officers for submission to RDC's final meeting of the session.

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[1]   See https://sharepoint.adm.ucl.ac.uk/sites/rdc/Shared%20Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx

27   LAUNCH OF THE EROS PROJECT

Received:

27.1   The note at <u>RDC 2-09 (12-13)</u>, introduced by the Chair of RDC.

Reported:

27.2   The second and final phase of the EROS project, a new facility for UCL departments to add and maintain details of approved Research Student Supervisors against their research student records in Portico, had been launched in January 2013. This would speed up the recording of supervisory responsibilities and allow departments to keep records up-to-date without needing to go through Student Records, thereby ensuring that supervisor data in the student record were robust and complete.

27.3   The Chair of RDC asked FGTs for their assistance in ensuring that UCL departments added and updated supervisory records in a timely fashion.

28   CHAIR'S BUSINESS

28A   Chair's Action

Received:

28A.1   At <u>RDC 2-10 (12-13)</u>, a note of the following actions taken by the Chair of RDC on behalf of RDC since the Committee's previous meeting:

- Amendments to MRes and Research Degree regulations
- Guidance on addressing poor performance in respect of PGR students *[RDC Min.8, 15.11.12 refers]*

29   ANY OTHER BUSINESS

29A   Approved field of study for PhD thesis

Reported:

29A.1   It was reported that there had been some discussions around the requirement for research students to include details of the 'approved field of study' for their theses on the Research Degree Exam Entry form in the absence of any current guidance on this. While some RDC members noted that this information was useful for the purposes of conveying a sense of the richness of research being undertaken at UCL, other members of RDC noted that it was their understanding that this information did not appear on the student's degree certificate.   It was agreed to ask the Student Records Manager to provide a note for RDC's next meeting on how this information was currently recorded and used within UCL.

RESOLVED:

29A.2 That the Student Records manager be asked to provide a note for RDC's next meeting on how information provided in the 'approved field of study' on the Research Degree Exam Entry form was currently recorded and used within UCL.

<u>*ACTION: Gary Hawes*</u>

29B   Introduction to Research Student Supervision course

Reported:

29B.1 Some members of RDC enquired whether consideration had been given to offering an electronic version of the Introduction to Research Student Supervision course that was mandatory for or all members of academic staff wishing to be appointed as research student supervisors at UCL, with a view to giving more options to facilitate the participation of clinical staff who found it difficult to attend the physical sessions that were offered twice a year. In confirming that there were no current plans to offer the course electronically, the Chair of RDC noted that the fact that the course was currently offered at six-monthly intervals should offer colleagues plenty of notice to plan their attendance.   It was also noted that ELE colleagues had reaffirmed the importance of face-to-face contact as part of the course.

29B.2 It was further noted that there had been discussions around the prospect of increasing the frequency of the Introduction to Research Student Supervision course to three sessions with effect from 2013-14.

30   DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

Noted:

30.1   The next meeting of RDC was scheduled as follows:

Wednesday 10 June 2013, 10am, Foster Court Room 114

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4 June 2013