Research Degrees Committee

7 March 2023

Confirmed Minutes

Present Members: Professor David Bogle (Chair); Hamza Ahmed; Professor Simon Banks; Dr Josephine Barnes; Professor Yasminah Beebeejaun; Professor Annie Britton; Dr Andrew Flinn; Elizabeth Halton; Professor Jane Holder; Professor Jasmina Jovanovic; Dr Rebecca Lindner; Professor Tania Monteiro; Professor Jill Norman; Helen Notter; Dr Ruth Siddall Paula Speller; Professor Dave Spratt; Dr Andrew Stoker and Professor Stan Zochowski.

Attendees: Dr Richard Freeman (deputy for Professor Perryman); Bella Malins (for Minute 21); Dr Benet Salway (for Minute 23); Simon To (for Minute 27); Hannah Swallow (for Minute 28) and Matthew Redmond (Secretary).

Apologies for absence: Emma Francis; Professor Jane Perryman.

Part I: Preliminary Business

18.   Minutes of the Last Meeting

18.1.   **Approved** – the minutes of the meeting held on 31 October 2022 (RDC Minutes 1-17, 31.10.2023) at paper RDC 2-01 (22-23).

18.2.   It was confirmed that Dr Andrew Flinn would be acting as the member for Social and Historical Sciences during term 2 in addition to Arts and Humanities. The membership will be revised to reflect this.

18.3.   RDC welcomed the following new member, Emma Francis, Research Students Officer.

19.   Matters arising from the minutes

19.1.   Minutes 3.1 (Doctoral Mandatory Training) – The Director of the Doctoral School confirmed that there were no further updates for RDC on Doctoral Mandatory Training at this time.

20.   Chair's Business

20.1.   The Chair provided an update on the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) stipend. The stipend for the 2023/24 academic year was not yet confirmed and was due to be announced in April. It was noted that there may be a small reduction in the number of

studentships going forward owing to the stipend uplift in 2022/23 budget adjustments from central government and inflationary factors.

20.2. It was highlighted that the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) had now launched. Students who have not completed the survey will receive regular email reminders. Members were encouraged to promote the survey within their Faculties.

20.3. The Chair noted that several systems utilised in the administration of postgraduate research students required review and replacement at this time and activity was on-going to address this. This included systems for studentships, Research Log and skills assessment, and online workflows within Portico.

20.4. It was reported that work was underway to enhance research students' sense of being part of a cohort when studying at UCL. This involved co-ordinating induction events, welcome activities, careers support and training such as preparation for viva and research integrity training.

20.5. Members were made aware that the UCL Internal Quality Review (IQR) process had been updated and had moved to a risk-based system. This meant that reviews would be carried out where indicators highlighted a cause for concern, rather than all departments undergoing routine review every 5 years. As a result of this change the evaluation of research degrees was no longer part of the process. The Chair would be raising this with the Pro-Vice-Provost (Education and Student Experience) to establish how research programmes will be reviewed going forward.

Part II: Matters for Discussion

21.   MRes-MPhil-PhD Application and Admissions Annual Report

21.1. Received - the papers at RDC 2-02 and 2-02i (22-23), containing data on student applications, offers and acceptances to Postgraduate Research (PGR) programmes for the 2021/22 academic year. The papers were presented by the Director of Access and Admissions.

21.2. It was identified that research degree applications, offers and acceptances were down on the previous academic year, particularly in relation to UK applicants. However, more offers and acceptances were being made and taken-up by overseas students. MRes applications were down marginally on the previous year, however there had been an increase in offers (up 9%) and acceptances. PhD applications at this time were considered static, but acceptances were up 7% on the same point in 2022.

21.3. In relation to the figures presented it was noted that applications data does not reflect applications made outside of UCL Select (which is common for our funded students), which would give a clearer picture of how many applications are being received. It was further noted that changes to the number of start dates for research programmes

currently being implemented for 2024/25 would help to better align application and enrolment data.

21.4. The Chair considered that it would be helpful to understand if UCL is recruiting home PGR students from across the UK or primarily from London and the South East. It was also queried whether the decliners survey was still in operation as this information would also help provide context for applicant and admissions data. The Director of Access and Admissions reported that this survey was not currently active, but discussions were being held on implementing it again.

21.5. RDC discussed the way in which the data should be used at a Faculty level and the Chair advised that Faculties should be assessing the data to ensure it is in-line with expectations, and following-up where concerns with recruitment were identified either at Faculty or Departmental level.

21.6. Members raised that recruitment can be affected by how quickly offers can be made to potential students, with other institutions seemingly having quicker recruitment timescales. The Director of Access and Admissions discussed a transformation project that is currently being undertaken to improve admissions processes and systems, with the intention of removing unnecessary barriers to recruitment which would help mitigate these issues. It was also noted that different recruitment dates could be implemented by departments locally if this would support them in making earlier offers. Implementation of these dates could be discussed with admissions.

22. Update on Research Degree Regulations Working Group

22.1. An update was provided by the Chair of the Research Degree Regulations Working Group. This group, which includes representation from each School, had met regularly of late with the aim of delivering a programme of updates to the regulations, some for the 23/24 academic year, for RDC to consider at this meeting and the May meeting. More substantial changes would start to be presented at the October meeting for approval throughout the 23/24 academic year and embedding in processes by the 2025/26 academic year.

22.2. The schedule of updates was noted as follows:

   i. **March 2023 RDC** (this meeting): regulations on PhD requirements.

   ii. **May 2023 RDC**: appointment of examiners; finalisation of who can supervise, including honorary staff as supervisors; change of supervisors; updates on various guidance documents including upgrade.

   iii. **October 2023 RDC**: A more substantial piece of work would be considered by the group to modernise the UCL PhD programme and clarify expectations around progression and completion with the aim of improving

our PRES results in this area (UCL in bottom quartile as of PRES 2021). This would include considering a 4-year PhD structure with no completing research status, registration for PhD status (rather than MPhil) at the outset, and introduction of annual or more frequent reviews to replace upgrades. The group's intention is to bring forward these matters for full consultation by RDC throughout the 2023/24 academic year.

22.3. It was noted that the current focus had been on PhDs, but that other types of doctoral programmes would be reviewed in due course to ensure consistency between regulations, with programme specific amendments where needed.

23. Revised Regulations on the Requirements for Award of PhD or EngD

23.1. Received - the paper at RDC 2-04 (22-23) containing amendments to the regulations for the award of PhD or EngD. These amendments had been proposed to ensure that there was consistency between the regulations and the PhD report form provided to examiners and subsequently students.

23.2. The key amendments and rationale for changes were highlighted to the RDC. It was clarified that the form was designed to act as guidance to examiners and that not every item on the form needed to be marked off for the PhD to be recommended, provided examiners were satisfied the award requirements had been met overall. Work would be carried out to ensure this was clear within the form, and changes would be brought back to RDC if required.

Action: Helen Notter to take forward revisions to Joint Examiner Form.

23.3. It was noted that changes would be implemented from September 2023 in-line with normal practice for the introduction of new or amended regulations.

23.4. **Approved –** the paper at RDC 2-04 (22-23).

24. Guidance on the Award of a Posthumous PhD Degree

24.1. Received - the paper at RDC 2-05 (22-23) containing guidance on the award of Posthumous PhDs for consideration and approval by RDC.

24.2. A guidance document was considered by RDC relating to ensuring any PhD award made posthumously meets expected standards. It was highlighted that if a posthumous award was required, work already submitted to supervisors could be evaluated to support consideration of whether a PhD would have been awarded. It was noted that the guidance would be more relevant where a student had already completed a thesis, as opposed to when they are in the writing-up stage of a PhD.

24.3. It was clarified that any taught elements of a PhD award would need to be considered by the relevant Board of Examiners, in the normal way for posthumous awards, and would not therefore come under the guidance.

24.4. **Approved** – the paper at RDC 2-05 (22-23).

24.5. Through discussion of the paper a query was raised regarding whether the examiners are permitted to confer on a thesis pre-viva, with some clarification requested within relevant regulations and guidance. It was agreed that this issue should be considered by the Research Degree Regulations Working Group.

Action: Professor David Spratt to take forward as part of the review of Research Degree Regulations.

25. **Generic issues arising from Joint Examiner Reports**

25.1. Received - the paper at RDC 2-03 (22-23) summarising the generic issues raised across all Faculty's Joint Examiner Reports.

25.2. It was highlighted that common issues found included the length of reports and the variation in their style, with consideration given to whether further guidance on completion of reports would be of benefit to examiners.

25.3. The Chair stated that they would be open to a working group being formed to consider this issue further, if any members wished to volunteer to lead and co-ordinate such work.

Action: Any Faculty Graduate Tutors wishing to establish a Working Group on Guidance to Examiners to advise the Chair.

25.4. It was requested that the current fee for examiners be looked at, in-line with sector practice, to establish if this should be subject to an increase.

Action: Helen Notter to take forward consideration of current examiner fee level.

26. **Exploring Student Experience Using PRES**

26.1. Received - the paper at RDC 2-06 (22-23) providing an analysis of PRES results from 2020/21 academic year using classical statistical approaches and machine learning.

26.2. Dr Josephine Barnes provided a summary of the paper, highlighting to RDC that it had examined PRES results in two ways. The first looking at the characteristics that were predictive of a good experience overall; the second looking at whether there was heterogeneity in the responses of those students reporting a good experience. It was noted that the findings showed non-binary, disabled, and MRes students all had a

worse experience overall, whilst supervision was highly ranked amongst all groups reporting a positive experience overall.

26.3. There was agreement amongst Members that support for students with disabilities and students who require reasonable adjustments via the Summary of Reasonable Adjustments (SoRA) procedures, should be considered further and that there was existing practice which could be adopted in relation to this. For example, the Student Wellbeing office had implemented SoRA leads/contacts across the institution who it is intended will support supervisors with identifying and responding to student needs.

26.4. It was also highlighted that a recent report on the PGR experience of students with disabilities had led to a recommendation that local disability advisers be introduced with consideration now being given to how this can be implemented effectively.

27.   Student Academic Representatives Annual Report 2021-22

27.1. Received – the paper at RDC 2-07, presented by the Director of Policy, Governance & Advocacy, UCL Students' Union.

27.2. It was reported that there had been c.1900 Academic Representatives in 2021/22, of which 131 were PGR students. It was also noted that there were 21 lead department representatives who were PGR students, aligning with the number of Staff-Student Consultative Committees for PGR programmes.

27.3. It was highlighted that engagement with training had improved amongst PGR representatives over the 2021/22 academic year and that a review of rewards and recognition for PGR student representatives was being carried out this year.

27.4. The Director of Policy, Governance & Advocacy thanked the Faculty representatives of RDC for their on-going support.

28.   Updated Student Protection Plan 2023/24

28.1. Received – the paper at RDC 2-08, presented by the Compliance Manager, Student Registry Services.

28.2. RDC were asked to consider and approve a revised Student Protection Plan for implementation from 2023/24 academic year. It was noted that the plan had been updated in-line with feedback from students, with the intention that it is more student focused and more accessible. It was further noted that the report had already received approval from Academic Committee and Education Committee.

28.3. **Approved** - the paper at RDC 2-08 (22-23).

Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information

29.   Anonymised Suspension of Regulations report since October 2022
29.1.   Received – the paper at RDC 2-09 (22-23).

30.   New and Amended Programmes and Qualifications Approved by RDC Chair's Action
30.1.   Received - the paper at RDC 2-10 (22-23).

31.   Report on Research Degree Administration & Examination Statistics 2021-22
31.1.   Received - the paper at RDC 2-11 (22-23).

32.   LERU's View on Holistic Doctoral Supervision
32.1.   Received – the paper at RDC 2-12 (22-23).

33.   Any other business
33.1.   The Chair asked members to ensure papers are notified to the Secretary well in advance of the meeting. This enables them to be taken into consideration during agenda setting which occurs 2/3 weeks before RDC takes place.

33.2.   The Chair further requested that if members require a paper to be discussed at a certain point in the meeting agenda, that this also be made known well in advance of the meeting and papers being circulated.

34.   Dates of Meetings for 2022-23:

•   Tuesday 23rd May 2023, 11am-1pm.

   Deadline for papers is the 9th May 2023.

Matthew Redmond (RDC Secretary)
Academic Services
March 2023