



## RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

8 June 2016

### MINUTES

*Present:*

Professor David Bogle (Chair)

Dr Simon Banks; Dr Steven Bloch; Mr Ben Colvill; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Caroline Essex; Dr Julie Evans; Dr Sally Leever (vice Dr Donna Brown); Dr Virginia Mantouvalou; Dr Stephen Marshall; Ms Suguna Nair; Ms Helen Notter; Dr Martin Oliver; Mr Abdul Rashidi; Dr Benet Salway; Dr Joy Sleeman; Dr Dave Spratt; Professor Kaila Srai; Dr Andrew Stoker.

*In attendance:* Mr Derfel Owen for items 4, 9 and 10; Mr Andy Saffery for item 7;  
Ms Lizzie Vinton (Secretary)

*Apologies were received from:* Ms Wendy Appleby; Dr Donna Brown; Dr Dilly Fung; Professor Nikos Konstantinidis; Dr Ruth Siddall; Professor Anthony Smith and Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu.

#### *Key to abbreviations*

BAME	Black Asian and Minority Ethnic
CALT	Centre for Advancing Learning and Teaching
DGT	Departmental Graduate Tutor
DTC	Doctoral Training Centre
FGTs	Faculty Graduate Tutors
IOE	UCL Institute of Education
OIA	Office of the Independent Adjudicator
OVPR	Office of the Vice-Provost: Research
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PGT	Taught Postgraduate
PRES	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
SDS	Student Disability Services
StAR	Student Academic Representative
UCLU	UCL Union

#### **PART I: PRELIMINARY BUSINESS**

#### **36 WELCOME, APOLOGIES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

36.1 RDC welcomed the new student rep, Abdul Rashidi, to the meeting.

## **37 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

37.1 The FGT for Engineering asked that minute 25.3 on Upgrade and Submission Data clarify that, although Life Sciences had found it useful to involve the student in organising the Upgrade Committee, RDC confirmed that it is the responsibility of the department to ensure that upgrades happen on time.

37.2 **Agreed** – the minutes of the meeting held 9 March 2016, subject to the amendment in 37.1 above.

**Action: Secretary**

## **38 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES NOT OTHERWISE ON THE AGENDA**

### **38A Upgrade And Academic Insufficiency [Minute 24 refers]**

38A.1 A section had been added to the upgrade report allowing examiners to flag the need for a learning agreement if the student failed to upgrade at the first attempt. The new process would apply from 2016-17. Details would be included in the Doctoral School's DGT pack circulated at the start of term, however members requested that the latest draft also be circulated before the summer vacation.

**Action: Senior Executive Officer, Doctoral School**

### **38B Public Vivas [Minute 27 refers]**

38B.1 The Chair reminded faculties to provide a summary of views on Public Vivas, focusing on what might improve the UCL PhD viva system, particularly with regards to transparency and fairness. UCLU were also reminded to canvas the opinions of students. The Doctoral School would collate a digest of responses.

**Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors, UCLU Officer**

### **38C Submission of Faculty Graduate Committee Minutes for Annual Report [Minute 16.4 15-16 refers]**

38C.1 Faculties were reminded to submit their 2015-16 Faculty Graduate Committee minutes to the secretary by 1 July 2016 to allow for the annual report to be collated and circulated to FGTs before submission to RDC.

**Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors, UCLU Officer**

## **PART II: MATTERS FOR DISCUSSION**

### **39 QAA HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW ORAL UPDATE [Minute 3A.3 15-16 refers]**

39.1 The Director of Academic Services thanked everyone who had contributed to the recent review process. A successful outcome had been received, although the decisions were embargoed until the full report was published on the QAA website in approximately 2 months' time. RDC would then be able to discuss the commendations and recommendations in more detail. UCL was now required to publish an institutional action plan in response to the report which would be signed off by RDC and EdCom Chair's Action over the summer.

39.2 RDC thanked Derfel Owen and his team for organising the review and achieving a successful outcome for UCL. The Chair had been involved in the first meeting of senior

officers which had included a number of specific questions relating to PGR provision. Interviews were also held with FGTs and some PGR students. The Director of Academic Services had observed all of the meetings and noted that those with Faculty and Departmental staff had been excellent, showcasing UCL at its best.

#### **40 FACULTY DOCTORAL STRATEGIES**

- 40.1 **Received** – the paper at RDC 3-01 (15-16).
- 40.2 The 2016 Doctoral Planning meetings had now taken place with all the faculties. The Chair thanked RDC members for their contributions and noted that RDC should be proud of the process which was helping UCL to improve its PGR provision. It was noted that the process worked best when the broader Faculty was fully involved – for example in Brain Sciences the FGT, Vice-Deans Research and Education and Faculty Manager had all been involved in drafting and agreeing plans, and in the subsequent meetings with the Doctoral School.
- 40.3 The Chair had delivered a summary report on the 2015 Doctoral Planning Process to the 25 May meeting of the Provost's Senior Management Team. A further progress report would go back to SMT in October and the Chair would use the Leadership Forum to discuss some of the strategic priorities.
- 40.4 The Doctoral School had identified a number of key issues for institutional development, including a need to improve the PRES results. The Provost was particularly concerned that UCL was in the second lowest quartile for overall satisfaction in the Russell Group and was encouraging Deans to focus more strongly on improvements in light of the student feedback.
- 40.5 The SMT paper also identified a need to address disparities in PGR fees. It was felt that delegation for fee-setting to faculties was potentially problematic, and the way in which faculties addressed the gaps between Research Council funding and UCL fees differed significantly, for example.
- 40.6 The Chair had also highlighted a need to actively consider diversity amongst the PGR student body and to address BAME recruitment in particular. It was noted that data on BAME Home and International students needed to be disaggregated as these were two significantly different cohorts and more focus was needed on UK-domiciled students. It would also be useful to break the data down into different ethnicities. Work was needed to establish UCL's goals for PGR BAME students in particular, as these might differ from UG and PGT goals, and to focus on opening up routes to academic careers.
- 40.7 Faculties were reminded to submit their summaries for the website as soon as possible, providing an executive summary of their doctoral strategies and points of good practice.

**Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors**

#### **41 POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE SURVEY 3-02 [Minute 8.5 15-16 refers]**

- 41.1 **Received** – the paper at RDC 3-02 (15-16) and the tabled responses from Life Sciences and Population Health Sciences.
- 41.2 It had now been confirmed that the quantitative data could be broken down to department level without any risks to data protection and this would be circulated to faculties shortly. This would help to identify where particular work was needed.

41.3 Each faculty had been asked to identify three key actions in response to the PRES and to report back to RDC. The committee discussed the reports in detail, noting the following points:

- a) Work was needed to improve coverage of and communications with PGR student reps – those in place were very proactive but not all programmes had received nominations and attendance at meetings was not always good, particularly at Faculty level. It was agreed that RDC should obtain a list of StARs, Changemaker Scholars and SSCC representatives to see where engagement was weaker.

**Action: Secretary**

- b) It was suggested that Faculty PGR StARs should be elected from the Departmental StARs to improve uptake, and that a more distinctive approach was perhaps needed for PGR representatives. The PGR Students' Officer and Director of Academic Services agreed to take this back to UCLU and the StARs Steering Group who were currently writing a new three-year StARs development plan.

**Action: PGR Students' Officer, Director of Academic Services**

- c) RDC noted the disparity in results for two questions which essentially covered the same ground: 'My supervisor/s help me to identify my training and development needs as a researcher' and 'Agreeing a personal training or development plan'. It was suggested that UCL students might not always be familiar with the specific language used in PRES and hence be unsure that the Research Student Log covers such personal training and development planning. It was noted that this area appeared to be problematic across the Russell Group and the survey designers had been asked to improve the question wording. It was also suggested that supervisor training could place more emphasis on ensuring that the identification of training and development needs was part of the supervision process.
- d) Departments should also be encouraged to discuss the results, especially as these would soon be available at departmental level. It was suggested that Departments might circulate the PRES questions and results to their supervisors so that colleagues could understand what students were being asked and how that related to their own roles.
- e) The student experience appeared to be affected where programmes were spread across multiple sites, for students on multi-disciplinary programmes and those not involved in a DTC. Such students tended to find it more difficult to integrate into the research community and experience a sense of belonging. However, although faculties ran an extensive range of events for PGR students to help build cohorts, participation was not as strong as it should be. Faculties might therefore give further consideration to how participation might be encouraged, and ways in which to help students build their own communities. Some faculties had found that formal collaborative work helped to build relationships between students which continued beyond the specific project. Others had found it useful to have a website to advertise events and share information. Some had encouraged groups of students to apply for small funds to develop projects together. Student societies were also very important and it was noted that there was a Doctoral School Academic Societies Fund specifically for the support and development of research student-led academic societies, with cross disciplinary societies particularly encouraged. Although the Fund was periodically advertised to the research student community, it was agreed that the Doctoral School would re-circulate information to FGTs so that they could raise awareness further.

**Action: Senior Executive Officer, Doctoral School and FGTs.**

- f) RDC discussed the importance of ensuring that students have a physical location which they can think of as their own and in which they can build a community. Space was not currently mentioned in the Code of Practice and it was suggested that UCL

might consider a minimum service agreement on space. UCLU had also been investigating this issue, noting that students did not necessarily want a personal desk but they did want a common space to create a sense of identity and belonging. Without this, students tended not to come into UCL and therefore missed information about training and events. UCLU hoped to bring a report to a future meeting of RDC.

## **42 RESEARCH STUDENT COMPLAINTS REPORT 2015**

42.1 **Received** – the paper at RDC 3-03 (15-16).

42.2 The report showed a significant increase in the number of PGR academic complaints, from six cases in 2013 to 24 in 2015. Whilst it was difficult to categorise definitively the different grounds for complaint as many complaints covered a number of grounds, it was noted that the majority related in some way to the supervision process. The number of complaints going to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for HE (OIA) was also a matter of concern. Three complaints had been justified by the OIA, indicating that UCL's own processes had been unable to address some problems adequately. The Registrar's Office was currently in the process of reviewing the student complaints procedure. This would include the option for students to appeal a complaint decision without having to involve the OIA. Education Committee had also discussed the report and recommended that there should be a stronger line on requiring students to seek informal resolution before submitting a formal complaint.

42.3 RDC requested an analysis of the number of Research Student complaints in comparison to the rest of the Russell Group. As the OIA categorised data by size of institution, it might be difficult to obtain data on the Russell Group specifically, but the Registrar's Office agreed to investigate and report back to RDC.

**Action: Student Complaints Co-ordinator**

## **43 THE DILEMMA GAME [Minute 5 15-16 refers]**

43.1 The Doctoral School had asked CALT to explore ways to educate students about Research Integrity. After looking at the available resources, CALT had selected the Dilemma Game and trialled it across five UCL faculties. RDC members involved in the pilot reported very positive feedback and, as a result, CALT had recommended that the Dilemma Game be adopted across UCL. RDC had recommended that a small working group should be set up to work on implementation across UCL and FGTs were asked to brief DGTs, determine a strategy for running sessions during 2015-16 and report back to the June 2016 RDC to help inform the system for 2016-17. The project leaders had disseminated information to FGTs but the working group had not yet convened. An Opinion survey had been set up and a full report was expected in August.

43.2 Detailed feedback was received from faculties including, inter alia:

- a) Laws and the IOE had their own ethics training in place and so would not be using the Dilemma Game.
- b) MAPs and Engineering had joined forces and tested the game extensively. Overall the exercise was deemed useful by staff. About a third of students had found the sessions useful, although a fifth did not and most students did not find that their approach to ethics had changed as a result of the session. However the faculties felt that this could be improved by including more department-specific scenarios.
- c) Life Sciences had conducted a demonstration for DGTs and Programme Leaders who gave an enthusiastic response. There were also plans to test out the game with some student representatives across the division.
- d) Medical Sciences were rolling the game out to DGTs before approaching students.
- e) Arts & Humanities and Social & Historical Studies had conducted an event with a small group of students, which they had tried to tailor to the subject area. This did

appear to challenge students' ideas about normal and acceptable behaviour. The group had felt that it would be beneficial to run the sessions across faculties to expose students to a range of different research cultures, helping them to confront very different problems and challenge their own ideas.

- f) The Arena programme had also found that mixed groups gave some of the most positive feedback.

- 43.3 Overall, RDC members felt that the game was worthwhile, although there was a considerable amount of work involved in organising sessions. It would help to have an online sign-up system, and room bookings were challenging for the numbers of students and sessions involved. These challenges would increase if the game became a mandatory part of research training to be recorded in the Research Log. Members felt that it should perhaps be part of a wider programme of research integrity training – some felt that students needed some experience of research ethics prior to taking part in order to truly benefit from the game, and that students benefited from interacting with other students who were at different stages of the upgrade process.
- 43.4 The committee discussed the other training options open to departments including that provided by the OVPR. Whilst it was not possible for the OVPR to provide training for all students, online/ self-study might be possible. Teresa McConlogue in CALT had also been looking at the viability of running introductory sessions at UCL level. RDC noted that departments would welcome greater clarity on the training which students should undertake at key stages in their programmes.
- 43.5 **Agreed** - The working group should convene in the new year to discuss how to implement a suite of options across UCL. Terms of reference and membership would be drawn up by the RDC secretary.

**Action: Secretary**

#### **44 REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS - RESEARCH STUDENTS** [*Minute 3B.3 15-16 refers*]

- 44.1 **Received** – the paper at RDC 3-04 (15-16).
- 44.2 At the October 2016 meeting, RDC agreed that Special Assessment Arrangements for PGR students would follow the same process as taught programmes. During 2015-16 Education Committee had redeveloped the Assessment Framework for Taught Programmes including a new set of regulations for Reasonable Adjustments for students with disabilities and longer-term medical conditions. The resulting regulations encompassed PGR students and a section on PGR students' specific needs was included.
- 44.3 The Chair raised two concerns – that research students were often unwilling to declare at the start of their programme, particularly if they experienced mental health difficulties, and that students were often concerned about disclosure to examiners. It was clarified that the proposed regulations encouraged students to declare their condition so that UCL could ensure they receive the help they need. No student should feel that there is a stigma in declaring a condition, and any information that they do disclose with Student Disability Services will be held in the strictest confidence. SDS will work closely with each student to establish their support needs and determine the exact people with whom information would be shared. Only information about reasonable adjustments would be shared – details of the condition itself would remain confidential – and the student would decide whether their supervisor, examiners or any other member of staff should be informed about their adjustments. However if students did not declare – either at enrolment or at some point during their programme - UCL would not be able to offer them the support they needed and this could mean that they were disadvantaged.

44.4 It was also confirmed that the department, supervisor and examiners if necessary could be involved in working out the best support for the student, with the student's consent. SDS would make recommendations based on their professional expertise in disabilities but they would also need the department's input to tailor adjustments to the specific disciplinary context, taking specialisms such as lab work or experimental work into consideration.

44.5 **Approved** - Subject to the decision of Education Committee, RDC approved the Reasonable Adjustments regulations in relation to research students.

#### **45 PROGRAMME AND MODULE APPROVAL FRAMEWORK – RESEARCH DEGREES**

45.1 **Received** – the paper at RDC 3-05 (15-16).

45.2 Education Committee had developed a new Programme and Module Approval Framework, primarily for taught programmes but also covering PGR provision. The new chapter would apply to all new MRes proposals and there was a short section on the relatively simple process for the approval of doctoral programmes which included scrutiny of the research environment, research objectives and proof of market by the Chair of RDC.

45.3 **Approved** - Subject to the decision of Education Committee, RDC approved the Programme and Module Approval Framework in relation to research students.

#### **46 EXAMINER APPOINTMENT GUIDANCE [Minute 29.2 refers]**

46.1 **Received** – the paper at RDC 3-06 (15-16).

46.2 The proposals drew together existing guidance from a range of sources with the aiming of departments to identify and appoint examiners and to make the process more consistent across departments. The guidance represented UCL's minimum requirements – faculties could add more criteria if appropriate.

46.3 **Approved** – the guidance for nominating examiners. RDC members were invited to provide any feedback or suggestions.

### **PART III: OTHER MATTERS FOR APPROVAL OR INFORMATION**

#### **47 INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION REGULATIONS 2016-17**

47.1 **Received** – the paper at RDC 3-07 (15-16).

47.2 Whilst all new IOE students fell under the UCL regulations from 2015-16 onwards, continuing students were still subject to the IOE regulations and some minor amendments had been made for 2016-17. This included amendments to the maximum period of registration for students on IOE regulations – the IOE had agreed with the Doctoral School that students reaching the end of their registration would be required to transfer to the UCL regulations if they wanted to extend their period of study. This would have the added benefit of capping the length of time needed to run-out the IOE regulations.

46.3 **Approved** – the Institute of Education Research Degree regulations 2016-17.

## **48 STUDY LEAVE FOR RESEARCH STUDENTS**

- 48.1 **Received** – the revised Study Leave Form at RDC 3-08 (15-16).
- 48.2 The research degrees administration team had made a number of improvements to the Study Leave Form, such as a check to ensure that ethical approval was granted before the student went on leave, and a check to ensure that appropriate risk assessments were carried out. The new form tried to balance the need for detail with simplicity.
- 48.3 RDC asked the Research Degrees Student Records Manager to check whether the UCL insurance policy covered students taking study leave in their own country.

### **Action: Research Degrees Student Records Manager**

- 46.4 **Approved** – the revised Study Leave form.

## **49 RENAMING OF LATE SUBMISSION FEE**

- 49.1 RDC noted that the Late Submission Fee had been renamed 'Submission Extension Fee' in response to a request from the Competitions and Marketing Authority which felt that the terminology implied a tuition fee penalty.

## **50 NEW AND AMENDED PROGRAMMES AND QUALIFICATIONS APPROVED BY RDC CHAIR'S ACTION**

- 50.1 **Noted** – the following programmes, as detailed at RDC 3-10 (15-16), had been approved by RDC Chair's Action:
- a) MRes Brain Sciences
  - b) MRes Neuromuscular Diseases
  - c) MRes Social and Educational Research
  - d) MRes Translational Neurology
  - e) MPhil exit point from Documentary Track PhD

## **51 ANONYMISED SUSPENSIONS OF REGULATIONS REPORT**

- 51.1 **Approved** – the suspensions of regulations at RDC 3-11 (15-16).

## **52 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

- 52.1 No further business was identified.

## **53 DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS**

- Tuesday 18 October 2016, 10:00 - 13:00, Haldane Room, Wilkins Building
- Monday 20 March 2017, 14:00 - 17:00, Haldane Room, Wilkins Building
- Monday 5 June 2017, 10:00 - 13:00, Haldane Room, Wilkins Building

LIZZIE VINTON

Secretary to the Research Degrees Committee

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1 July 2016