**LONDON'S GLOBAL UNIVERSITY**



# RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

## 9 March 2016

## M I N U T E S

*Present:*
Professor David Bogle (Chair)
Mr David Ashton; Dr Simon Banks; Dr Steven Bloch; Mr Ben Colvill; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Caroline Essex; Dr Julie Evans; Dr Dilly Fung; Mr Rik Ganly-Thomas (vice Dr Virginia Mantouvalou); Professor Nikos Konstantinidis; Dr Sally Leevers (vice Dr Donna Brown); Dr Stephen Marshall; Ms Suguna Nair; Ms Helen Notter; Dr Martin Oliver; Mr Derfel Owen (vice Ms Wendy Appleby); Dr Benet Salway; Dr Ruth Siddall; Dr Joy Sleeman; Dr Dave Spratt; Professor Kaila Srai; Dr Andrew Stoker.

*In attendance*: Mr Gary Smith, Head of Student and Programme Data Services and Deputy Director of Academic Services, for item 5; Ms Lizzie Vinton (Secretary)

*Apologies were received from:* Ms Wendy Appleby; Dr Donna Brown; Dr Virginia Mantouvalou; Mr Abdul Rashidi; Professor Anthony Smith; Dr Dave Spratt and Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu.

| *Key to abbreviations* | |
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| CALT | Centre for Advancing Learning and Teaching |
| FGTs | Faculty Graduate Tutors |
| IELTS | International English Language Test System |
| IOE | UCL Institute of Education |
| PGR | Postgraduate Research |
| PGT | Taught Postgraduate |
| PRES | Postgraduate Research Experience Survey |
| RDC | Research Degrees Committee |
| UCLU | UCL Union |

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### PART I: PRELIMINARY BUSINESS

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### 21      WELCOME, APOLOGIES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

21.1    The RDC student rep, Abdul Rashidi, had now been appointed.

### 22      MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

22.1    **Agreed** – the minutes of the meeting held 14 October 2015.

## 23 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

### 23A Doctoral Supervision *[Minute 6.5 refers]*

23A.1 At the previous meeting, CALT agreed to work up more detailed plans for the development of doctoral supervision. 2016-17 would be an exploratory year offering a range of events. Faculties and supervisors would be asked to provide feedback on what worked well, and what would be most valuable, particularly to new supervisors. There would also be opportunities to add to the body of research about best practice, building on UCL's reputation for the quality of its doctoral supervision across the UK and Europe. CALT and the Doctoral School would then conduct a review at the end of the year and make some recommendations. Any member of staff with a particular interest in supervision was welcome to contact the Director of CALT, Dr Dilly Fung, if they wanted to be involved in the review.

### 23B UCL Australia *[Minute 9.3 refers]*

23B.1 The Departmental Graduate Tutor had now taken up a position elsewhere so another experienced member of staff had been appointed to act in the role. There were two remaining PGR students due to finish after the end of 2017 and discussions about their options were ongoing. It would also be important to mitigate the potential impact of decreasing numbers on the student experience. Students were also being encouraged to consider transferring to the developing UCL partnership with the University of South Australia.

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**PART II: MATTERS FOR DISCUSSION**

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## 24 UPGRADE AND ACADEMIC INSUFFICIENCY

24.1 **Received** – the paper at RDC 2-01 (15-16).

24.2 RDC was invited to consider proposals to change the current Upgrade regulations to work more seamlessly with the Academic Insufficiency process. Benchmarking had been undertaken to see how other institutions addressed the issue. It was suggested that an additional potential outcome be added to the Second Upgrade attempt. Where the upgrade panel were convinced that the candidate was unlikely to reach the standard needed to achieve the MPhil, the candidate would be moved on to the Academic Insufficiency process automatically. The Faculty would then decide what actions were needed to assure itself that the student was capable of continuing on the programme.

24.3 RDC warmly welcomed the proposals and agreed that this would help to address issues more quickly. It was noted that the model in many ways reflected the system on taught programmes, where students at risk of failure could be given a Learning Agreement outlining actions for the student to get back up to standard. RDC agreed that it would be helpful to have something agreed in writing between the student and the supervisory team which clearly defined expectations as well as the support available and the deadline for completing any actions. This could in turn help to prevent misunderstandings or appeals.

24.4 RDC also discussed whether potential academic insufficiency could be flagged at the first Upgrade attempt. There should be no sanction at this stage, but it could give the student fair warning to get up to standard, and provide advice about the sources of support available.

24.4 **Approved** – the proposed revisions to the Upgrade and Academic Insufficiency processes.

24.5 **Agreed** - a section would be added to the upgrade report allowing examiners to flag the need for a learning agreement.

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

24.6 **Agreed** – the Doctoral School would circulate the new procedures to FGTs and DGTs.

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

## 25 ANNUAL REPORT ON PGR UPGRADE, SUBMISSION AND COMPLETION STATISTICS

25.1 **Received** – the paper at RDC 2-02 (15-16).

25.2 RDC welcomed the Head of Student and Programme Data Services and Deputy Director of Academic Services. The data related to students entering in 2008-09 - the most recent available. The data included the IOE, although it was not yet possible to break the data down by IOE department. The data would be included in the annual report to SMT as one of the key indicators of quality in doctoral training.

25.3 The headline figures included a rise in rates of upgrade within 18 months from 33% to 44%. Submission rates were slightly up from 63% to 66%. RDC welcomed the upward curve in for both full and part time students, although the Doctoral Strategy aims for a target of 75% for submission rates, so there was still some way to go. The committee noted the high submission rates in Brain Sciences and a sharp rise in upgrade rates in the Bartlett and was keen to identify and share any good practice in the faculties. The FGT for the Bartlett noted that the faculty kept to strict upgrade timescales, helping more students to meet targets and reflecting a culture of timeliness amongst supervisors, departments and the faculty. Life Sciences found that good upgrade rates had been achieved by involving the student in arranging the upgrade committee (RDC confirmed that the Department was ultimately responsible for making these arrangements).

25.4 At the March 2015 meeting, RDC had asked if it was possible to compare the data with the PRES results. The PRES questions on supervision and overall satisfaction were used as signifiers of satisfaction. It was however noted that the PRES results came from a different cohort. No apparent correlation had been found. RDC had also asked if the data could be compared with the existence of thesis committees. It was suggested that Data Services might speak to Life Sciences as the faculty using the thesis committee model.

25.5 The committee also discussed whether upgrade and submission rates were improved by the quality of the intake – however the report showed that research council funded students were less likely to submit on time, not more. Data were also analysed by Age for the first time – rates were good up to the age 40 followed by a slight but not significant drop off thereafter.

25.6 **Agreed** – RDC requested that the data on research council funded students be broken down by Faculty, that data on thesis committees be added where available, and that more recent years of upgrade data be added.

**Action: Head of Student Data Services**

25.7 **Agreed** - Faculty PGR committees were asked to discuss the data and report back to the Doctoral School on any good practice which might be shared more widely across UCL.

**Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors**

**26      FACULTY REPORTS ON ISSUES RAISED IN EXAMINERS' JOINT REPORTS**

26.1    **Received** – the paper at RDC 2-03 (15-16).

26.2    The reports provided an opportunity to discuss and address any issues which might be common across UCL. It was noted that few theses were approved without corrections. A significant number of examiners gave three months for revisions, whilst very few gave 18 month referrals. Three themes arose consistently across the reports: statistics, issues around presentation - including typographical errors, referencing, stating word counts etc. – and the standard of English for both native and non-native speakers.

26.3    It was suggested that the IELTS requirements for PGR students might need to be reviewed. Doctoral supervision training could also include sessions on ensuring a high standard of English. RDC considered whether UCL might introduce a requirement for all supervisory teams to include at least one native-English speaker. It was recognised that this could be difficult to apply in some disciplines, but it could nonetheless be put forward as best practice.

26.4    However many of the problems were not about the standard of English but rather typographical errors and a lack of proof-reading. A number of reports found a significant disparity between the student's writing and their performance at the viva, indicating that whilst the research was of a high standard, the writing was less so. In some cases the traditional use of the passive voice made it difficult to determine the student's contribution to the work. A number of students were asked to make revisions to ensure that their thesis presented a coherent argument.

26.5    Examiners also noted a number of concerns about the use of statistics. Students often used the wrong test, or were not able to explain why a particular test had been used. Many struggled with statistics software, which was often discipline-specific. However it was acknowledged that many supervisors did not have specialist knowledge in statistics, and many institutions – including the IOE – instead ran statistics clinics to help students with both standard and more advanced methods. It might also be possible to offer online statistics and maths courses, based on the content of taught modules already offered by UCL. PhD students or Post-docs might also be willing to run clinics, and training in statistics could be included in the supervisors' development programme.

26.6    It was noted that there was a considerable cost in resourcing clinics and courses. However both statistics and language skills were fundamental to the Doctoral Skills Development Programme. Consideration should be given to expanding current capacity in these areas.

26.7    **Agreed** – CALT would identify any existing research about English language and supervisory teams.

                                                                        **Action: Director of CALT**

26.8    **Agreed** – CALT would liaise with the Doctoral School and Organisational Development - which organises the Doctoral Skills Development Programme - to discuss the potential for support and/ or a central resource to improve PGR students' English language, academic writing and statistics skills, perhaps in the form of drop-in centres or targeted sessions, and with reference to UCLU's English language support sessions and the IOE's academic writing centre and statistics clinics.

                                                                        **Action: Director of CALT**


**27      DISCUSSION ITEM: PUBLIC VIVAS**

27.1    **Received** – the paper at RDC 2-04 (15-16).

27.2    RDC requested that faculties consider the recent article by Professor David Bogle in the Times Higher Education supplement on public vivas in advance of the meeting. Some written comments were tabled and would be collated after the meeting.

27.3 The item generated an extensive debate about whether such a model, often used in European countries, could be adopted at UCL. The general consensus was that it was an interesting idea, which could promote the visibility of UK research and celebrate the candidate's success whilst also potentially increasing transparency and addressing concerns which had been raised about occasional cases where the examiners were not thought to have acted fairly.

27.4 There were however significant concerns about the extent to which a public viva could really test the student's knowledge. Concerns included:
   i. Whether the student would feel confident in answering questions in front of an audience
   ii. Whether the examiners could really interrogate the thesis in depth
   iii. Whether the issue of corrections or referrals should be handled in a public forum
   iv. How costly such events might be
   v. That the UK system was robust and did not require such a major revision
   vi. That there may be issues with intellectual property, publicising sensitive data or compromising commercial concerns
   vii. That a 'jury' system could be problematic if it included potential employers

27.5 It was suggested that the public viva could help to increase transparency in the examination process, with some UK students feeling that decision-making was done 'behind closed doors'. However the committee felt that there might be better means of increasing transparency, such as appointing independent chairs or making audio-recordings which are destroyed after a set period of time. The presence of the primary supervisor could also help, as a witness or to take notes.

27.6 RDC members welcomed the celebratory aspect of the public viva and suggested that students could instead be asked to do a talk or take part in a symposium after the examination – many faculties already ran such events. Presentations would help the candidates to improve their communication skills, and other PhD students could learn a great deal from such events. Such an approach would also help UCL to achieve its objectives under the Connected Curriculum, inviting audiences to listen to and engage with UCL research, and could be based on the student's impact statement, feeding into the UCL Doctoral Strategy. It was also suggested that the presentations could take place on the same day as graduation to increase the celebration, and that UCL might also consider awarding Distinctions to recognise exceptional students.

27.7 **Agreed** - RDC asked all members to provide a summary of views in their faculty, focusing on what might improve the UCL PhD viva system, particularly with regards to transparency and fairness. UCLU were also asked to canvas the opinions of students. The Doctoral School would collate a digest of responses.

**Action: All members, UCLU representative, Chair**

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

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## 28 RESEARCH STUDENT APPLICATIONS REPORT

28.1 **Received** – the paper at <u>RDC 2-05 (15-16)</u>.

28.2 The data indicated a slight reduction in applications for this stage in the recruitment cycle although it was too early to draw any conclusions. Most notably, MRes applications were down in a number of faculties, and RDC discussed how this might be addressed. It was felt that departments and students were often confused about the status of the MRes as a PGR or PGT qualification (it receives PGR funding), and that the award might benefit from some additional promotion and branding.

**29    ANNUAL REPORT ON RESEARCH DEGREE ADMINISTRATION AND EXAMINATION STATISTICS**

29.1    **Received** – the paper at RDC 2-06 (15-16).

29.2    RDC noted an increase in the volume of queries about examiner nominations and agreed that guidance on eligibility would be helpful.

**Action: Research Degrees Office**

**30    REGISTER OF RESEARCH DEGREE ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS**

30.1    **Received** – the paper at RDC 2-07 (15-16).

30.2    Academic Services provided a register of all the research degree academic partnerships currently in place at UCL. RDC members were asked to advise Academic Services of any existing or potential partnerships of which they were aware.

**31    NEW PROGRAMMES APPROVED BY RDC CHAIR'S ACTION**

31.1    **Approved** – the following programmes as at RDC 2-08 (15-16):

   a) MRes Reproductive Science and Women's Health
   b) MRes Advanced Neuroimaging
   c) PhD programme route in African Studies
   d) PhD programme route in Sustainable Prosperity

**32    ANONYMISED SUSPENSIONS OF REGULATIONS REPORT**

32.1    **Approved** – the suspensions of regulations at RDC 2-09 (15-16).

**33    ANNUAL REPORT ON THE MINUTES OF FACULTY GRADUATE TEACHING COMMITTEES – FINAL**

33.1    **Received** – the updated version of the report including all faculties at RDC 2-10 (15-16).

**34    ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

34A    **Three Minute Thesis**

34A.1    The organisers of the Three Minute Thesis competition asked RDC members to encourage students to take part and attend rounds - last year's winner had reached the national final. Faculties were also asked to provide any feedback on the process.

**35    DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS**

35.1    • Wednesday 8 June 2016 at 10.00am in the Council Room

35.2    **Agreed** - Future meetings should take place between 11.00am and 1.00pm and that the day of the week should be varied to allow as many members as possible to attend.

**Action: Secretary**

LIZZIE VINTON
Secretary to the Research Degrees Committee
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