



## RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

9 October 2018

### MINUTES

*PRESENT:*

Professor David Bogle (*Chair*)

Dr Sam Smidt; Mr Derfel Owen; Mr Ben Colvill; Ms Helen Notter; Dr Alex Mills; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Paulo Drinot; Professor Martin Oliver; Dr Benet Salway; Professor Kaila Srai; Professor Tania Monteiro; Dr Simon Banks; Professor Stephen Marshall, Mr Saddiqur Rahman; Dr Andrew Stoker; Dr Jill Norman; Dr Hynek Pikhart; Professor Andrew Wills; Dr Ruth Siddal; Dr Patti Adank.

*In attendance:* Mr Darren Payne (Secretary); Mr Adnan Ali (Doctoral School), Ms Aniina Wikmann (item 6), Ms Alex Standen (item7), and Mr Simon To (item 9)

Apologies for absence were received from: Dr Sally Leever; Dr Virginia Mantouvalou

*Key to abbreviations*

CRS	Completing Research Status
FRDC	Faculty Research Degrees Committee
HRPC	Human Resources Policy Committee
PRES	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
SMT	Senior Management Team

### Preliminary business

#### 1 TERMS OF REFERENCE, CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 **Received:** The RDC Terms of Reference, Constitution and Membership for 2018-19 at RDC 1-01 (18-19).
- 1.2 The committee welcomed the following new members:
  - Mr Saddiqur Rahman, UCLU Postgraduate Students' Officer.

1.3 Students' Union UCL nominated research graduate student due to be confirmed in November ready for next RDC.

1.4 One vacancy in elected staff was noted.

## 2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

2.1 **Approved:** The minutes of the meeting held 5 June 2018.

## 3 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

3.1 There were matters arising from the 5 June 2018 RDC minutes.

<b>Matters for discussion</b>
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## 4 CHAIR'S BUSINESS

4.1 The Chair informed members of RDC that the 2018/19 Regulations for Research Degree Programmes are now published in the Academic Manual.

4.2 There is still a list of substantive issues raised in the review last year that remain to be resolved with the Research Degree regulations. The Chair will be in contact with members of RDC to be part of a newly formed working group that will look into this, with a view to have a new set of regulations ready in time for the 2019/20 academic session.

**ACTION: the Chair**

4.3 The RDC chair presented a summary of the PRES results to the Provost's SMT which resulted in increased interest in the research degree experience by Deans.

4.4 The Provost is concerned that despite UCL having a better response rate, the institution remains in the bottom half of the Russell Group Universities. Although it was expected that the results would improve with a higher response rate this proved not to be the case indicating that the results are a reliable reflection.

4.5 Faculties and most key Professional Services division had also responded with actions to address PRES concerns. Responses were still outstanding from ISD, Registry, and Estates. Space was a particular concern in many cases. Estates has recently recruited a new director. The chair will meet with the new Director to press for more consideration for Research Student in any new estates strategy.

## 5 MRES/MPHIL/PHD APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS REPORT

- 5.1 **Received:** MRES/MPHIL/PHD Applications and Admissions Report at RDC 1-02 (18-19).
- 5.2 The report contained the end of cycle application data for 2018, comparing data with the same points in 2017 and 2016.
- 5.3 Overall, research degree applications were up 10.4% on last year representing increases across all categories – UK, EU and Overseas. This is a recovery from the 2017 cycle where applications were 8.3% down on 2016 figures.
- 5.4 Despite this increase, there had been a 2.7% decrease in offers to research students. This decrease is due to fewer offers being made to UK applicants. Both EU and Overseas categories had small increases above last year's figures. Acceptances were up 1% from last year.

## 6 JOINT AND DOUBLE AWARD RESEARCH DEGREES

- 6.1 **Received** – Joint and Double Award Research Degrees paper at RDC 1-03 (18-19).
- 6.2 The Senior Policy Adviser (Academic Partnerships) introduced the paper which defines dual and double Research Degrees, and highlights the benefits and potential issues should RDC decide to offer such degrees.
- 6.3 It was noted that there is interest to offer dual or double PhDs within parts of the institution. It was also widely acknowledged by members that such programmes could be beneficial to students in terms of training, development, and the varied inputs they gain from two universities. In addition, these types of programmes could also help to cement relationships and research activity between institutions, and also potentially allow UCL to learn and share good practice as through the process of setting them up. Intelligence from other Universities indicates that joint degrees provide a greater risk since the programme needs to satisfy Quality Assurance conditions at both institutions and signifies a long term partnership. Double degrees are seen as being more flexible.
- 6.4 There was particular concern of the potential for risk to UCL's reputation should we partner with institutions with our strong QA, with inadequate support available for students, ensuring that regulations across two institutions are reconciled, that complaints processes are clear and compatible, and different registration periods, study leave rules, thesis requirements, assessment processes (such as upgrade), and viva processes. Given that these can all vary across institutions it is vital that any proposal submitted by departments consider these issues thoroughly and the subsequent agreements set out clearly the terms in these areas.
- 6.5 Assessment methods were raised as one of the more difficult issues to resolve, as upgrade processes and final examination processes can differ quite

drastically at different institutions. Negotiation with partners would be necessary to ensure that, even if there is a slight variance to the assessment process that UCL students would otherwise have followed, there is an assurance that UCL academic standards are maintained.

- 6.6 The Faculty Graduate Tutor for Engineering said the Faculty of Engineering is strongly in favour of UCL allowing these programmes, as they have a great deal of interest from potential partner institutions. They currently envisage these types of programmes working in the same way as Taught programmes, so feel it should be possible, whilst fairly difficult, to work out in practice. Whilst there are difficulties reaching a consensus between institutions, the burden largely falls on the team putting together the proposal, with Academic Services guidance. Proper due diligence, and clear justifications as to the benefits and clarity about processes to deal with difficulties are required to ensure that there is little risk once the programme is up and running.
- 6.7 The Chair noted that clear guidance needs to be drawn up to determine minimum standards and requirements (“red lines”) that UCL would expect in order to agree to such an arrangement with another institution; robust support for human rights for example was mentioned as a non-negotiable requirement. It was acknowledged though that there needs to be consideration on a case-by-case basis, and that it would not be feasible to draw up a single set of regulations or rules that fit all. It was noted that these “red lines” would be enforced rigorously, and if an unresolvable barrier was reached in the process then the proposal would have to be dropped.
- 6.8 Members raised how Joint and Double Awards would work with respect to alignment with the International Strategy, particularly to ensure that UCL would partner with strategically important partners, or those UCL currently has a relationship with on another basis. The Chair felt it was important to clarify the role that the Global Engagement Office would play.
- 6.9 Some members raised the point that a process led by the International Strategy is appropriate for taught programmes as they are far more widespread and cover broad subject areas. However, at Research level there were concerns it would be less appropriate because research degree programmes are far smaller and are often in very specialised areas. It is often the case that there are pockets of disciplinary excellence in institutions that UCL would perhaps not usually consider a “preferred partner”. The benefits and strategic importance to a specific programme or Faculty of partnering with such institutions should drive setting up partnerships.
- 6.10 The issue of funding was raised, for example whether Research Councils would recognise and fund joint or dual programmes, or whether partnering with institutions in other jurisdictions may open up additional funding opportunities. However, it was noted that Faculties do have control over their budgets, and wouldn't put forwards proposals that they did not wish to progress and have

budgets to support or to seek external finance.

- 6.11 **Agreed:** that UCL would begin considering proposals for Joint and Double Award programmes, but take a suitably cautious approach. Proposals that are already being developed will be looked at first, and they will be monitored closely to ensure the process are further developed and refined. The Chair will organise a sub-committee of RDC to begin designing the guidance and “red lines”, and to approve any proposals for official approval by RDC.

**ACTION: the Chair**

## 7 SUPERVISOR TRAINING

- 7.1 RDC was briefed by UCL Arena on updates to Supervisor Training. In subsequent discussions three key issues from all Faculties came out in relation to supervision that the training would need to address. Firstly, that supervisors need to be clear on expectations and possible changes to these through the course of a project. Secondly, the importance of networks and connections beyond students’ immediate environments should be highlighted. Thirdly, the course should emphasise the importance of supervisors to support the development of students as future research leaders and facilitate and support their wellbeing in addition to research excellence.
- 7.2 The new online provision, developed and now available in UCL Extend covers the mandated regulatory and administrative processes and information, but also covers skills and career development for students. It has 6 sections in total, with a final quiz being compulsory to prompt reflection and ensure completion.
- 7.3 Launched on 20<sup>th</sup> September, it received 240 signups in the first two weeks, with 83 competing the final quiz within that time span.
- 7.4 Members of RDC queried what would happen to completion data, and it was confirmed that this would be circulated to Faculty Graduate Tutors. There is an onus on supervisors to download the completion certificate to keep as proof of completion. Linking completion data into EROS is currently not possible. It was acknowledged that ISD will need to work in order to try and tie in these systems as it is important that the information is readily available when deciding to approve supervisors. Action: Deputy Director of the Doctoral School to raise with ISD
- 7.5 It was noted that there is a particular focus on early career researcher development, covering the range of their learning and teaching, and supervisory skills needs. Provision for PGTAs, Postdoctoral Research Staff, and academic staff new to teaching and supervising is coordinated by a small team in Arena to ensure enough resource is provided in this area. It was felt that supervision skills should be developed by staff early in their careers, as probationers, in preparation for immediate and future supervision duties.
- 7.6 An issue raised was that supervisor training is currently focused mainly in Bloomsbury. It was suggested that sessions might be given at sites away from Bloomsbury such as Stanmore if possible and practical. However, it was agreed that for staff from external institutions such as the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew or the Institute of Zoology there should be an expectation that they come to

parts of UCL to attend these sessions as part of their induction into the practices and culture of UCL. For such external institutions it is one of the conditions for confirming status as an approved supervisor at UCL.

- 7.7 The issue of continuing professional development for supervisors was raised, and a plan for this has not yet been drawn up by the Arena Team. However, an online course or follow-on session was suggested to ensure that supervisors are kept up-to-date with key developments that they may otherwise miss out on and briefings on the way the landscape for doctoral education has changed. It was suggested that such refresher training would need to be developed to carefully ensure experienced colleagues gain suitable knowledge and that the tone is right.
- 7.8 It was noted that the national PRES response analysis showed the key importance of regular and effective interactions with supervisors to the satisfaction of PGR students.
- 7.9 Wellbeing of researchers is very high on the international agenda currently, and that it needs to be a focal point of any training to highlight the wellbeing of both students and supervisors. The concept of “humane research supervision” has been raised where supervision is effective but sensitive to the development needs of the researcher as a person with individual needs and career aspirations.

## 8 PGR STUDENT SPACE SURVEY UPDATE

- 8.1 **Received** – PGR Student Space Survey Update paper at RDC 1-04 (18-19).
- 8.2 The Deputy Director of the Doctoral School introduced the item. He highlighted that from the PRES results the satisfaction with work space was one of the most concerning areas for UCL. It was noted there was considerable inconsistency across the institution in terms of provision of desk space and common rooms for PGR students; but cross referencing these data against PRES suggested a that students tend to be happier with the provision of work space if they have dedicated desks and access to common rooms.
- 8.3 There as been no response so far from Estates regarding the 2015 or 2017 PRES results which was noted as disappointing, and there is now a more urgent need to know their masterplan and in particular how it considers the needs of research students. This would allow RDC to have a better idea of central strategy and how these plans and affect local decisions. RDC was also interested in Estates’ views on what individual, common, and research space might look like in the future as the needs of research and researchers evolve.

## 9 STUDENT ACADEMIC REPRESENTATIVES ANNUAL REPORT

- 9.1 **Received** – Student Academic Representatives Annual Report paper at RDC 1-05 (18-19).
- 9.2 The Leadership Development & Change Manager introduced the item, and noted that the rebranding of ‘Student Academic Representatives’ (STaRs) to

'Academic Representatives' had been welcomed by students, and particularly by research students who did not like the old STaRs acronym.

- 9.3 UCL now has more Academic Representatives than previously, with 1600 overall, and with more engagement from them with 70% being fully trained at the time the report was submitted. Lead Departmental Representatives are particularly helping this, and it is often the case that research students are covering this as it provides more experience of leadership roles.
- 9.4 Last year there had been a dip in the number of PGR Academic Representatives, but this has now climbed to 192. In the future there is a need for more tailored individual support to the Representatives from the Students Union and parts of UCL to ensure that students see a positive benefit to becoming an Academic Representative.
- 9.5 The 2020 vision for the role of Academic Representative has as one of its focuses the way in which PGR students best represent the academic interests of Research Degree students. Members of RDC will be approached to explore this further, and to highlight any mechanism that can be drawn on. There is also a wish to address barriers to the take up of leadership roles, particularly for BME students. This is being explored in more depth by Students' Union UCL.
- 9.6 A question was raised as to how the Students Union deal with cases where elected Academic Representatives do not engage or participate in activities that are expected of them in the role. It was noted that information is available regarding students' attendance and voting records but it was difficult to monitor engagement overall. There are procedures to recall Academic Representatives that are open to the students that they represent.

## 10 POSTGRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT ACTION PLAN AND CODE OF PRACTICE UPDATE

- 10.1 **Received** – Postgraduate Teaching Assistant Action Plan and Code of Practice Update paper at [RDC 1-06 \(18-19\)](#).
- 10.2 A brief update was received by RDC. It was noted that the Code of Practice for PGTAs is being published this academic year, and the revision of contracts for PGTAs will start after Easter of this academic year.
- 10.3 Delays in getting this out were mainly due to the large volume of feedback received. RDC sought more information about the feedback and in particular the issues that were not taken into consideration as this was not clear from the update provided. The Secretary will follow-up with Human Resources to get a written report on this.

**ACTION: the Secretary**

**Other matters for approval or information**

**11 ANNUAL REPORT ON MINUTES OF MEETINGS OF FACULTY COMMITTEES RESPONSIBLE FOR PGR STUDENT PROVISION 2017-18**

11.1 **Approved** – Annual Report of FRDC Minutes at RDC 1-07 (18-19).

**12 DRAFT RDC ANNUAL REPORT TO AC 2017-18**

12.1 **Approved** – draft RDC Annual Report to AC at RDC 1-08 (18-19).

**13 ANNUAL NEW AND AMENDED PROGRAMMES AND QUALIFICATIONS APPROVED BY RDC CHAIR'S ACTION**

13.1 **Noted** – programmes approved by RDC Chair's Action at RDC 1-09 (18-19).

**14 ANONYMISED SUSPENSION OF REGULATIONS REPORT**

14.1 **Noted** – the suspension of regulations at RDC 1-10 (18-19).

**15 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

**A STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE – Conference FUNDING**

15A.1 The RDC Student Representative informed colleagues that students currently feel there is a lack of transparency on the dispensing of conference funds, and a lack of consistency across faculties and departments. They would welcome any information to clarify the process.

15A.2 Faculty Graduate Tutors were widely in agreement that there is a lack of consistency across departments, and that the Student Representative could request further information from Faculties to give them a better overall view of how funding is being handled.

**B PROPOSED CHANGES TO IQR 2018**

15B.1 **Received** – Proposed Changes to IQR 2018 paper at RDC 1-11 (18-19).

15B.2 The Chair introduced the item which had previously not come to RDC as part of the approval process. Whilst this was seen by Education Committee, the Chair felt that as part of the quality monitoring process RDC should have a chance to feedback on the new processes as it impacts Research Degrees.

15B.3 The Chair informed members of RDC that they can feedback directly to him. He will pass any feedback passed onto Academic Services to ensure that the process properly considers research students and their needs.



**16 DATES OF NEXT MEETING**

- Tuesday 13 March 2018, 11am to 1pm, IOE - Bedford Way (20) – 804.
- Tuesday 5 June 2018, 11am to 1pm, Malet Place Engineering Building 1.20.

DARREN PAYNE

Secretary to Research Degrees Committee

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