LONDON'S GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

Wednesday 11 March 2015

M I N U T E S

Present:
Professor David Bogle (Chair)
Mr David Ashton; Dr Simon Banks; Dr Steven Bloch; Dr Donna Brown; Ms Mariana Ceccotti; Mr Ben Colvill; Professor Piet Eeckhout (vice Dr Virginia Mantouvalou); Dr Caroline Essex; Mr Marco Federighi; Dr Dilly Fung; Professor Nikos Konstantinidis; Dr Stephen Marshall; Mr Derfel Owen (vice Ms Wendy Appleby); Dr Benet Salway; Dr Ruth Siddall; Professor Kaila Srai; Dr Andrew Stoker; Professor Andrew Tolmie.

In attendance: Mr Mark Burgess; Mr Gary Hawes; Ms Judith Hillmore; Mr Calum Leckie; Ms Bella Malins; Ms Fiona McClement; Mr Gary Smith; Ms Lizzie Vinton (Secretary)

Apologies were received from: Ms Wendy Appleby; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Virginia Mantouvalou; Dr Blandine Poulet; Dr Joy Sleeman; Dr Dave Spratt; Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu.

Key to abbreviations	
AC	Academic Committee
ASER	Annual Student Experience Review
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CALT	Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching
DTC	Doctoral Training Centre
EdCom	Education Committee
EROS	Electronic Recording of Supervisors project
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FGTs	Faculty Graduate Tutors
FGTCs	Faculty Graduate Teaching Committees
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HoD	Head of Department
HR	Human Resources
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NSS	National Student Survey
OIA	Office of the Independent Adjudicator
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
PRES	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey
PTES	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
SSWG	Student Surveys Steering Group

14   2014-15 MEMBERSHIP

Reported:

14.1   The Chair welcomed the following new members of RDC: Dr Simon Banks, Dr Virginia Mantouvalou, Professor Andrew Tolmie.

15   MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 15 OCTOBER 2014

Confirmed:

15.1   The minutes of the meeting of RDC held on 15 October 2014 were approved *[RDC Mins.1-14, 15.10.14]*.

16   MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES *[see also item 6 below]*

16A   **Amendment of the offer letter for integrated MRes/PhD/EngD programmes**
        [RDC Min.3A, 15.10.14]

Resolved:

16A.1   The Director of Student Administration would contact the FGTs for those faculties with linked MRes/ PhD programmes to agree a uniform system for offer letters.

                    Action: Mr David Ashton, Dr Simon Banks, Dr Caroline Essex

17   SUMMARY REPORT OF DOCTORAL STRATEGY PLANS

Received:

17.1   The report at RDC 2-01 (14-15), introduced by the Chair of RDC.

Reported:

17.2   In May 2014, the Doctoral School, acting in line with the wishes of SMT, initiated a new annual Doctoral Planning Process and Faculties were invited to submit their Doctoral Strategy Plans for 2014-17. Each report was considered by the Doctoral Training Strategy Committee and comments and suggestions had been returned to the Deans. A series of meetings would be arranged by the Doctoral School with each Faculty to follow up any actions arising. The Doctoral School had drafted a summary response, highlighting areas of commonality and issues for further consideration. This would be received at AC and Council in due course.

Noted:

17.3   RDC thanked the Faculties for the work which had gone into the reports and noted that the plans would play a key role in creating and sustaining an optimal PGR environment. Deans and FGTs were working to address any issues that had been identified during the process.

Discussed:

17.4   The Doctoral School had identified a number of common issues which would benefit

from further consideration. Four KPIs were identified for Faculties to monitor and improve: uptake of the Research Log, submission rates (see item 20 below), accuracy of Portico supervisor records, and student satisfaction with supervision (see item 18 below). Additionally, it was felt that Faculties could better promote their distinctiveness and define more explicitly why students should study with them – the Bartlett and Brain Sciences provided some good examples of best practice in this area. The Doctoral School had also noted the reports' tendency to focus on RCUK-funded PGR students and highlighted the need to consider equally all student groups in future reports.

17.5   RDC discussed whether more training and support could be provided for supervisors to help staff identify and resolve potential problems in their relationships with students. RDC noted that the review of doctoral supervision training had been postponed due to the IoE merger, but work was now underway to develop a comprehensive programme.

17.6   It was reported that there were a number of technical issues with recording supervisor details on Portico, affecting the accuracy of the KPI data. It was thought that, in the transfer of data from Admissions, only one of the two supervisors was retained by the system, and that supervisor records were removed completely from EROS as soon as a contract terminated, even if it was due to be renewed. Furthermore, supervisor details could not be added to student records for linked MRes/PhD/ EngD programmes until the second year. Nonetheless, ensuring that all students had a recorded supervisor was of great importance and inclusion of the KPI had helped to identify these system issues.

Resolved:

17.7   The Doctoral School would contact Student and Registry Services and HR to ask them to address the technical issues being experienced around supervisor records, including whether supervisors could be retained on EROS with an inactive status, and whether co-ordinators could be entered as supervisors for first year MRes/PhD/ EngD students.

Action: Mr Ben Colvill

Resolved:

17.8   The timetable for producing Faculty Doctoral Strategy Plans would be replicated for 2015-16. Updates to the faculty reports would be received in September 2015 with comments returned in December 2015. The reports and comments would then form the basis of the doctoral component of the Faculty three-year plans, which would be submitted in February 2016.

18   STUDENT SURVEYS

Received:

18.1   The paper at RDC 2-02 (14-15), introduced by the Head of Student Experience and Global Citizenship.

Reported:

18.2   There had been a range of developments around student surveys, including the appointment of a Student Experience Data Manager and the establishment of a Student Surveys Working Group (SSWG). The paper was being received at a wide range of committees and groups for discussion.

18.3 Concerns had been raised about over-surveying students, reducing the likelihood of good response rates. A key consideration was whether the Student Barometer might run once, rather than twice, a year. Although it provided a useful international benchmarking tool covering a broad range of student experiences, UCL currently only saw response rates of around 18%. It was proposed that the Barometer run once in October each year with some questions from the second wave being brought forward into the first to ensure comprehensive coverage. This would be complemented by the PRES, PTES and NSS. There was little appetite for the UK Engagement Survey as other surveys were felt to be more useful.

Discussed:

18.4 RDC discussed how UCL communicated with students about surveys. It was particularly important to ensure that UCL responded to survey results, as this encouraged students to feel that completing surveys was worthwhile. SSWG was in the process of developing a policy for surveying students. It was hoped that this would reduce the number of surveys being issued, minimise timing clashes, reduce question duplication and ensure that there was a clear rationale for every survey.

18.5 The committee discussed faculty-level student evaluation questionnaires as a means to complement surveys and provide more focused feedback. The student surveys team were investigating a single, central student evaluations system which would allow for department, faculty or module-level specificity, perhaps with some generic questions to assist in benchmarking. RDC members agreed that this was often the most valuable form of feedback, and that students were more likely to respond to something received from their Department Administrator, so were keen to ensure that any central system retained this local approach.

19 DEPARTMENTAL CAREERS ADVICE
[RDC Min.4, 15.10.14]

Noted:

19.1 At its meeting on 4 June 2014, RDC agreed that FGTs would consult with Faculties on the level of demand for more localised careers advice and events for PGR students. FGTs were invited to report their findings to RDC on either 15 October 2014 or 11 March 2015.

Reported:

19.2 The Careers Service had been working with the Faculties to identify and meet the needs of PhD students and post-doctoral researchers. A programme of events already existed – for example, an Early Career Researcher Network had been set up and there had been a number of DTC-related activities such as an ESRC workshop – but the team were particularly interested in developing more locally-delivered, department-specific events, and in learning more about events currently offered by departments and faculties.

19.3 The remaining Faculties reported back on their findings:

19.3.1 *Arts & Humanities* and *Social & Historical Sciences* - a questionnaire had been circulated which had facilitated some useful discussions. Students greatly valued events which related to their specific subject area and there tended to be insufficient commonality across disciplines to run more generic events. The Faculties did however recognise the resource issues in offering department-level sessions and suggested that tutors might work in partnership with the Careers Service to run and promote events.

19.3.2 *Population Health Sciences* – the Faculty had also conducted a survey

which found strong support for departmental and faculty-level events. One-to-one surgeries were very popular but also time-intensive. The Faculty was in the process of locating all session details on a single website so that students and staff from across UCL could find out about events.

19.3.3   *Life Sciences* – the Faculty ran department-level events from the start of the PhD. Away days were found to be particularly helpful as it helped to engage the audience in the event. Alumni events also complemented the department's activities.

19.3.4   *Brain Sciences* – the Faculty also offered department-level events, training and one-to-one sessions. However, students also valued the one-to-ones offered by the Careers Service as the team could offer advice on a wider range of academic and non-academic research career options. Faculty also appreciated the team's expertise in how to run and shape sessions.

Resolved:

19.4   RDC noted that the UCL Arena programme offered an externally-recognised award for university teacher training for PGR students and post-docs. It was thought that some students might not be aware of the programme, or might not appreciate the transferability of the skills it recognised, and members were asked to promote the scheme to their early-career researchers.

Action: All members

19.5   The Chair of RDC commended the interviews with former PhD students who had gone onto a wide range of careers and which were available on the Careers Service website. RDC noted that more were being developed and asked FGTs to consider how to promulgate the interviews to students.

Action: FGTs

19.6   FGTs were asked to forward the notes or minutes of any related faculty or department discussions, or any other information which might be useful, to Calum Leckie in the Careers Service to feed into their investigations.

Action: FGTs

20   MPHIL/PHD UPGRADE AND SUBMISSION DATA

Received:

20.1   The report at RDC 2-03 (14-15), introduced by the Deputy Director and Head of Student Data Services.

Reported:

20.2   The report looked at trends in upgrade and submission for full-time students starting in 2009/10 and part-time students starting in 2006-07 – the latest available complete data. The headlines included an improvement in the rate of upgrades, with 38% taking place within 18 months, compared to 22% the previous year. However submission rates had decreased from 65% to 61%, compounding the drop from 73% the year before. Details of individual cases could be obtained from Student Data Services via a request to the RDC secretary.

Discussed:

20.3   Whilst departments would need to look at the circumstances of individual cases, the

trend in submission rates required further institutional scrutiny. RDC discussed the need for regular monitoring through the Research Student Log and considered whether there was a need to introduce a greater number of formal progress review points. The committee considered whether there might be a correlation between increased intake numbers and decreased submission rates, or between student satisfaction ratings and submission rates. Life Sciences also strongly advocated the Thesis Committee model which had been very successful at monitoring student progress, and it was suggested that submission rates could be compared pre- and post- Thesis Committee implementation, where they were in operation, to see if they had had a positive impact on submission rates.

Resolved:

20.4   The relationships between submission rates and intake numbers, student satisfaction and the presence of Thesis Committees would be investigated further, adjusting for the different cohorts represented in each data set. Further analysis might also be undertaken of student body characteristics, considering whether, for example, age, background or funding might have an impact on submission rates.

Action: Deputy Director and Head of Student Data Services

20.5   Faculties would take back the data to their Faculty Teaching Committees for further discussion and investigation. Faculties would be asked to report their intended actions to improve submission rates as part of the Doctoral Planning Process.

Action: FGTs

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

Received:

21.1   The report at <u>RDC 2-04 (14-15)</u>, introduced by the Director of Access and Admissions.

Reported:

21.2   The report considered application data for the current admissions cycle from a snapshot taken on 1st March 2015. Overall, MRes applications were up 17.4% on last year and doctoral applications were up 10.4%. However, a large proportion of the latter increase was due to changes in the application timing for Life Sciences and this was distorting the figures somewhat – it was expected that, by the end of the cycle, there would not have been a significant increase in doctoral programme applications.

21.3   The number of offers to doctoral programmes was up 9.3% on the previous year whilst offers to MRes applicants had increased by 23.6%. Acceptances were currently higher than at the same point last year. Overall, it was thought that there would be little change from 2014 in terms of intake for UK and Overseas doctoral students but that both the EU doctoral intake and the MRes intake would probably see significant increases. IoE data would be included from next year.

Discussed:

21.4   RDC agreed that the data raised few concerns and welcomed the improvements.

The group noted that acceptances should be expected to remain constant as there were no plans to expand student numbers significantly, except through merger, and that UCL's strategic focus was to increase research quality rather than numbers.

21.5   RDC noted the difference in approaches between UCL and its international competitors who often had the resources to provide significant funding for talented researchers. It would be beneficial to explore how studentships might be made more attractive within the UK funding context, for example through philanthropic donation. RDC agreed that research studentships should be a key strategic priority for faculty funding and encouraged members to put forward proposals to their Deans.

Resolved:

21.6   The Chair of RDC requested that the latest applications data be received at every meeting during the year, starting with a summary of the previous cycle in the Autumn and continuing with emerging trends in the Spring and Summer terms. The group agreed that it would also be useful to include conversion rates, particularly for disciplines with fewer funded studentships.

Action: Director of Access and Admissions

22   STUDENT COMPLAINTS REPORT 2014

Received:

22.1   The report at <u>RDC 2-05 (14-15)</u>, introduced by the Director of Student Administration.

Reported:

22.2   Although there were relatively few PGR student complaints, numbers had increased from the previous year with the majority relating to breakdowns in the supervisory relationship. Data from other HEIs were not yet available to make comparisons.

Discussed:

22.3   It was felt that many formal complaints could be avoided by making better use of the processes for informal resolution and mediation, by the provision of better guidance for students on what they could expect from their supervisor, and by the provision of more wide-spread staff training on how to identify and address issues before they became problematic. The complaints team were setting up a series of staff workshops to promote greater understanding of this and other common causes of complaint, and were working on ways to improve the time taken to resolve cases.

22.4   It was acknowledged that more complaints could and should be resolved without recourse to the OIA. However concerns were also raised about the number of OIA cases being upheld where UCL's procedures had justifiably rejected them – for example where a student had provided evidence only after the event, or only at the point of contacting the OIA, or where a key member of staff had been disallowed from providing evidence. Debate continued across the sector on how to resolve these issues.

22.5   RDC discussed how HoDs and DGTs could support supervisors throughout their relationships with students, how the Doctoral School and Faculties could support departments in doing so, and how data might be used to identify issues. There might also be opportunities to offer more training, or to develop central policies to

better support staff and students.

Resolved:

22.6 Across taught and research programmes there was a number of complaints relating to disability support, and mental health support in particular. RDC recommended that further work be undertaken to ensure PGR assessment processes included a clear protocol for assessing and accommodating students' needs.

Action: Director of Student Administration

22.7 RDC requested that future Complaints reports include more years of data to track trends over time, and more information about which cases went as far as a panel hearing. It would also be useful to see benchmarking data in order to make comparisons and RDC receipt of the report might usefully be delayed until this was published.

Action: Deputy Registrar (Operations and Planning)

23   RACE EQUALITY CHARTER MARK PROJECT AND ACTION PLAN

Received:

23.1 The paper at RDC 2-06 (14-15), introduced by the Equalities and Diversity Adviser.

Reported:

23.2 UCL was participating in the Race Equality Charter Mark, a new initiative being piloted across 30 UK HEIs during 2014-15. The Provost was keen to promote UCL's involvement in the pilot. An action plan reflecting the range of related activity taking place across UCL would be submitted on 10 April 2015.

Discussed:

23.3 The data revealed clear and compelling differences between the experiences of Black PhD students and other student groups, including lower satisfaction ratings and completion rates, a higher rate of attrition between PGT and PGR and a lower number of students going on to academia, with many citing a lack of Black academic role models as a key issue. Although UCL compared well with the Russell Group, in part due to its location, more could be done to address these inequalities. The action plan aimed to address these and other issues, and included examples of targeted funding and scholarships set up by UCL, awareness-raising initiatives for PGT supervisors and the recently-instituted BME alumni network.

23.4 RDC discussed what actions it might take to address the issues and contribute to the action plan, such as the inclusion of specific questions in the Doctoral Planning Process. RDC might also revisit its targets for BME PGR students, reflecting on UCL's widening participation obligations and priorities, and on whether, as an international institution, the UCL student body should be representative of the London, UK or international population. The committee also discussed how to make better use of alumni and how to support highly-talented students who nonetheless struggled with making the transition to the UK HE system.

Resolved:

23.5 RDC members would submit to the Equalities and Diversity Adviser any examples

of initiatives which might help to strengthen UCL's submission to the Race Equality Charter Mark.

Action: All members

23.6   The next round of the Doctoral Planning Process would include targeted questions around the BME PGR student experience.

Action: Chair

23.7   The Race Equality Charter Group would provide RDC with a briefing on good practice in supporting BME students for discussion at a future meeting.

Action: Equalities and Diversity Adviser

24   RESEARCH STUDENTSHIP PAYMENT REVIEW

Received:

24.1   The paper at RDC 2-07 (14-15), introduced by the Assistant Director, Research Services/Finance and Business Affairs.

Reported:

24.2   A small project had been initiated to review PGR student payments in response to ongoing dissatisfaction with the processes in Portico. The project team had been through the payment process in detail, identifying a number of inefficiencies which could be removed. It was thought that moving research student payment processes to the staff HR system might help to resolve many of the issues.

Discussed:

24.3   RDC welcomed the review and proposals, recognising the many benefits of using the staff HR system, such as the inclusion of iExpenses, the ability to pay in monthly instalments and the reduced volume of data entry and paperwork. Some concerns were raised about tracking student enrolments and the mapping of fees if details were held outside Portico, but members were reassured that, should the HR system be adopted, it would remain linked to Portico.

Resolved:

24.4   RDC endorsed the proposals to appoint a Business Analyst to investigate the options and report back with an optimum solution. A bid for funding would be put forward to the Student Information Project Board.

Action: Assistant Director, Research Services/Finance and Business Affairs; Director of Student Administration

25   REVIEW OF UCL'S ACADEMIC REGULATIONS, QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORKS AND PROCESSES

Received:

25.1   Proposals introduced by the Director of Academic Services:

25.1.1   The proposals at <u>RDC 2-08 (14-15)</u> for the overarching structure and organisation of the Academic Manual.

25.1.2   The proposals at <u>RDC 2-09 (14-15)</u> for a revised Quality Review framework.

25.1.3   The proposals at <u>RDC 2-10 (14-15)</u> for a new Qualifications and Credit framework.

25.1.4   The proposals at <u>RDC 2-11 (14-15)</u>, for the Assessment, Upgrade and Awarding: Research Programmes chapter.

25.1.5   The proposals at <u>RDC 2-12 (14-15)</u> for a new Academic Partnerships policy.

Reported:

25.2   Academic Services had initiated a project to review the contents and structure of the UCL Academic Regulations and quality assurance frameworks. The proposals would be circulated widely amongst a range of staff and students over the coming months in order to fine-tune the regulations.

25.3   A key objective was to create a single, accessible point of reference for all academic regulatory matters and reduce the volume of (sometimes conflicting) information. Regulations would be rationalised and clearly demarcated as necessary, advisable or desirable, and regulatory changes would be more strictly controlled. Each new chapter would cover taught and research students, except in the area of assessment where PGR would have its own chapter. This would be developed via a specialist working group during 2015-16.

25.4   The new Qualifications and Credit Framework would collate in a single location the full list of UCL awards and the routes to achieving them, whilst the Academic Partnerships chapter would provide a governance framework to both approve new partnerships and safeguard the quality of the student experience on joint programmes. The Quality Review chapter would incorporate PGR programme monitoring processes within a new Annual Student Experience Review, building on the existing good practice developed through the Doctoral Planning Process. Academic Services would also conduct more in-depth data analyses to help departments and programmes in their self-evaluations.

Discussed:

25.5   RDC welcomed the proposals and was particularly pleased to see the recommendations for Academic Partnerships which would help to assure the quality of DTC arrangements with other HEIs. The committee noted that further work was needed to establish the optimum time for PGR annual monitoring, recognising that there was no obvious generic completion point - instead there could be an annual census point where data were collected and analysed, facilitating cross-institutional and longitudinal comparisons, or it might even be more appropriate to undertake monitoring biennially. The issues of credit, accredited prior learning and extenuating circumstances on PGR programmes would all benefit from further discussion and the regulations would need to be clearly aligned with the Codes of Practice for Graduate Research Degrees. A clear communications strategy would be needed to disseminate the new UCL Academic Manual.

Resolved:

25.6   RDC members would contact the Director of Academic Services directly with any comments, feedback or suggestions for the individual chapters. Academic Services would compile these into a digest for circulation to RDC.

Action: All members, Mr Derfel Owen

Approved:

25.7   The proposal to develop a consolidated *Academic Manual*, including the proposed contents list, style for drafting and project timeline.

25.8   The proposals and timeframes for the development of the revised chapters covering *Quality Review*, *Qualifications and Credit*, *Assessment, Upgrade and Awarding: Research Programmes* as well as the *Academic Partnerships* policy and the definitions of types of partnerships.

26   QAA HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW

Received:

26.1   The paper at RDC 2-13 (14-15), introduced by the Director of Academic Services.

Reported:

26.2   RDC noted that the UCL QAA Higher Education Review was scheduled for May 2016 and that the Self Evaluation Document and Student Written Submission would be submitted in February 2016. The reviewers were expected to start accessing the UCL website and other public data as soon as they were appointed in Autumn 2015 so all websites would need to be reviewed over the next few months. The review team was likely to incorporate six reviewers including one student, and reviewers would be chosen from a wide range of HE mission groups. Academic Services would contact Faculties for examples of good practice and other documentation that was required for the submission.

Resolved:

26.3   Members would ensure that central, faculty and department websites were up to date and that local regulations, policies, procedures and student handbooks were current and in line with the main UCL regulations.

Action: All members

27   AMENDMENTS TO THE TEMPLATE TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR FACULTY GRADUATE TEACHING/ RESEARCH COMMITTEES

Received:

27.1   The note at RDC 2-14 (14-15).

Approved:

27.2   RDC approved the amendments to the template terms of reference for Faculty

Graduate Teaching/Research Committees.

28 SUSPENSION OF REGULATIONS REPORT

Received:

28.1 At <u>RDC 2-15 (14-15)</u>, the anonymised report on suspensions of the regulations for students proceeding to research degrees.

Resolved:

28.2 Following a request from EdCom, the report would henceforth be anonymised and included in the main committee business for both EdCom and RDC and not included under reserved business.

29 CHAIR'S BUSINESS

Noted:

29.1 The Chair raised no further items.

30 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Noted:

30.1 No further business was raised.

31 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted:

31.1 The next meeting of RDC was scheduled as follows:

- **Wednesday 17 June 2015 - 10am**