LONDON'S GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

12 March 2019

M I N U T E S

PRESENT:
Professor David Bogle (*Chair*)
Dr Sam Smidt; Mr Ben Colvill; Ms Helen Notter; Dr Paulo Drinot; Dr Benet Salway; Professor Kaila Srai; Dr Simon Banks; Dr Andrew Stoker; Dr Mark Freeman; Dr Jill Norman; Professor Andrew Wills; Dr Ruth Siddal; Ms Karolina Farrell.

In attendance: Mr Darren Payne (Secretary); Mr Adnan Ali (Doctoral School); Ms Alex Standen (UCL Arena); Ms Fiona McClement (item 5); Ms Clare Herbert (item 5); Mr Nick McGhee (item 11).

Apologies for absence were received from: Mr Derfel Owen; Professor Hynek Pikhart; Dr Patti Adank; Dr Sally Leevers; Dr Virginia Mantouvalou; Professor Tania Monteiro; Professor Alison Diduck; Professor Stephen Marshall; Mr Saddiqur Rahman.

Key to abbreviations

CRS   Completing Research Status
DGT   Departmental Graduate Tutor
IRIS   Institutional Research Information Service
ISD   Information Services Division
PRES Postgraduate Research Experience Survey
SLMS School of Life and Medical Sciences
SMT   Senior Management Team
RDC   Research Degrees Committee

Preliminary business

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17   MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

17.1   **Approved**: The minutes of the meeting held 9 October 2018.

18   MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

18.1   There were no matters arising from the 8 October 2018 RDC minutes.

Matters for discussion

19   CHAIR'S BUSINESS

19.1   The Chair welcomed Ms Karolina Farrell, the Students' Union nominated research graduate student.

19.2   The Chair confirmed that the Doctoral School had met with all Faculties as part of the Doctoral Planning Process, and thanked them for all of the time and effort they had put into their submissions. A common theme arising was no appetite for growth in student numbers as these are already strong with no plans to increase significantly from the current figures of around 6000.

19.3   There is work currently underway to help build cohorts, which is part of an institutional strategy. Portico and Student Records are helping to identify cohorts more specifically by programme area, but there has been delays in moving forwards.

19.4   SLMS had reported that there was now a working group to help coordinate activity and good practice across their four faculties.

19.5   The Chair noted that they are asking the Organisational Development team to look at refreshing the Skills Self-Assessment Element in the Research Student Log, as this has been in the system for ten years and is in need of being refreshed. There is a lot of good practice around the institution that can feed into this process.

19.6   The Chair also informed members that Early Career Researcher development, for students and postdoctoral staff, is of particular interest to the Provost and SMT currently. The Provost is concerned about PRES results, as there is the expectation UCL should be in the top quartile across all topics surveyed.

19.7   It was confirmed that there will be an SMT away day at the end of March, and half of this will be focused on Researcher Development. In preparation, RDC members were told to expect questions from their Deans regarding researcher development, such as what good practice UCL is doing, what it should look like, and who is responsible for it.

19.8   Student web presence was raised as an issue by members, and it was agreed students should have a presence on IRIS.. Getting all research students onto IRIS is currently being worked on by ISD, but they have confirmed it is a slow rollout due to the numbers involved.

19.9   UCL Arena informed RDC that UCL had recently purchased a new blogging service that allows personal or collective blogs within departments. This came out of the connected curriculum to create outward facing work, but could easily be applied to research student matters.

20   PGR WELLBEING

20.1   The PGR Wellbeing paper at <u>RDC 2-01 (18-19),</u> a response from UCL
Wellbeing to the recommendations in the paper on <u>Enhancing Research
Student Mental Wellbeing at UCL</u>, had been confirmed as an agenda item and
was 'to follow', as this had not been received before the meeting. This had
originally been due   at the 8 October 2018 RDC.

20.2   It was also noted that this original paper was written in 2017, when UCL was
ahead on the point of recognising issues with PGR students. If no follow-up is
received soon UCL could miss the opportunity to catch issues early. The Chair
confirmed they will follow-up with Student Support and Wellbeing to understand
why this has not yet been received.

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ACTION: the Chair

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20.3   The Chair noted that the Lead Officer Report on UCL Student Welfare 2017/18
had been circulated at Academic Committee earlier this term, and the Secretary
will circulate to members of RDC for information. The Deputy Director of the
Doctoral School noted that it was disappointing that this report did not reflect the
differing needs of PGR students.

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ACTION: the Secretary

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21   ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN PHD STUDENTS

21.1   ***Received*** – Ethnic Diversity in PhD Students paper at <u>RDC 2-02 (18-19).</u>

21.2   The Director of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion
Manager introduced the paper, which explores issues with ethnic diversity in
PhD students. Discussions had originally been had four years ago, with one
positive outcome being Faculties including data on ethnic diversity in their
Doctoral Strategies.

21.3   It was noted that UCL is about to renew its Race and Equality Charter, and all
areas of UCL activity is going to be analysed to feed into a four-year plan led by
the Provost. One aim of the paper is to start gathering ideas and feedback that
can be put forwards and eventually go into the institutional action plan.

21.4   Identifying areas where there may be blockages are were seen as a good
starting point and opportunity to get a conversation started on the issue. They
are currently trying to explore whether there are issues with the application,
offer, or retention of students.

21.5   In response to the paper, Student Registry Services and Admissions had
confirmed that there is 98% disclosure of ethnicity for applicants.

21.6   It was raised that whilst there is varying practice around the institution, and not
all applications necessarily go through the central system in the first instance.
However, it was suggested that the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion team discuss
this with Admissions to better understand the prevalence of such practice.

21.7   Qualification requirements were discussed, and it was noted that there is
already flexibility to these. It was noted that communication was key to ensuring
students are aware that they may be flexibility to qualification requirements.

21.8   The possibility of bringing anonymisation into the application process was discussed, and various issues were highlighted. Anonymising of certain details is possible and has no downsides to it. However, with references UCL does not have a standard process across the institution. Names could be blanked out, but this would be hard to implement widely without a standardised approach. Additionally, names of the referee and institution are difficult to anonymise as UCL needs to ensure referees are legitimate. It was noted a 2:1 in a specific discipline is very opaque, and knowing the institution can tell a great deal about the educational experience and content of the programme taken.

21.9   All applicants are expected to be interviewed during the application process to UCL, however there may be some element of unconscious bias which should be addressed through UCL training.

21.10   The concept of diversifying UCL research topics mentioned in the paper was briefly discussed, however it was unclear for some disciplines such as Engineering and Science what this might entail.

21.11   RDC members suggested that the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion team speak to more research students as this will enable them to better understand any perceived barriers to entry that students had prior to coming to UCL or taking up a PhD.

22   MPHIL/PHD UPGRADE AND SUBMISSION DATA

22.1   ***Received*** – MPhil/PhD Upgrade and Submission Data paper at RDC 2-03 (18-19).

22.2   The Chair noted that it was the first time that the submission rate had gone backwards rather than forwards. This year's figures are overall slightly worse, rather than improving as they had been.

22.3   It was noted that age groups seemed to impact submissions rates, with under 25's in the 75% range, and 30-39's in the 55% range. Different life priorities however were likely the cause. Faculties overall are fairly static, with some improvements in the IOE submission rates and drops in submission rates noted in the Bartlett and Laws.

22.4   It was noted that a recent SLMS review surfaced the need for a more formalised plan in year 3 for when a student is going into CRS. In response, some Faculties highlighted that this is essentially implicit in most areas, as the DGT will usually only ever approve CRS if a formal plan is in place.

22.5   It was raised that since CRS is not automatic, it is difficult to integrate into the Research Student Log and reports. Whilst a Log report is required in the 36-month , there should be a requirement that they have to upload a plan – if not, then this should be flagged up automatically. It was agreed that there are strengths of going through the DGT as it allows more external conversation, so this should be the minimum sign-off for progression to CRS.

22.6   It was noted that communication was likely a key factor, and ensuring people know what is expected to be done and to then gradually enforce compliance. Workflows being developed in Portico will hopefully make the process easier.

DGT workloads were highlighted as a potential issue, however they can delegate to sub-committees if necessary.

22.7   It was agreed that the Faculty Graduate Tutor for Engineering and Faculty Graduate Tutor for Mathematical & Physical Sciences will work together to gather stats for DGT approvals and refusals, and liaise with the Student Records Manager who will put together a paper outlining the implications of this.

ACTION: Faculty Graduate Tutor for Engineering, Faculty Graduate Tutor for Mathematical & Physical Sciences, and Student Records Manager

22.8   It was raised that CRS could potentially be made automatic, unless there was positive action to stop a student progression to CRS. The assumption would be that all are eligible, unless intervention is required for a particular student.

22.9   It was noted that funders give 3 years of fees, although this is generally not felt to be enough and has always been 3 plus 1 with the grace year as a given. Essentially it is a 4-year programme with 3 years fees, with the last year being for finishing up. Changing this would be a radical departure from the current, and CRS is common around the World just under different names.

22.10   A change on rhetoric around CRS could also help, rather than being considered 3+1, it should be seen as finishing up without fees. CRS is seen as a positive thing for students as it serves as a reminder that they have a year remaining, rather than leaving things to a 4-year deadline.

23   REPORT ON RESEARCH DEGREE ADMINISTRATION AND EXAMINATION STATISTICS 2017-18

23.1   *Received* – Report on Research Degree Administration and Examination Statistics 2017-18 paper at RDC 2-04 (18-19).

23.2   The Student Records Manager introduced the item, noting that figures remained static overall, but with a slight increase in awards conferred.

23.3   There has been, however, a difference in the number of re-submissions in the last 18 months, with a particular increase this year. There is the possibility that the push to submit in time could be rushing students, and leading to more re-submissions.

23.4   There has been an increase in the number of viva dates, and there is plans to automate this at the start of the exam process to get reminders out in a timely way after each exam event.

23.5   A significant issue raised was the number of examiner nominations and late nominations coming through, and the advice was that earlier appointments are best as it causes fewer issues downstream. Currently an online process is being explored, as this would enable everybody to see where issues are in the nomination process whereas currently the paper process is slow and difficult for people to see what is happening.

23.6   The Student Records Manger confirmed that a proposal had been submitted to the Academic Model Project with ways the process can be improved. The proposal will be sent to members of RDC, and it was agreed that endorsement from Faculty Research Degrees Committee would help to give it more weight. It was noted that there is also scope if necessary, to work this up through the infrastructure and governance group in ISD as they may have some minor works project money available to develop this.

ACTION: Student Records Manager

24   BEST PRACTICES: FACULTY DOCTORAL PLANNING PROCESS 2018

24.1   *Received* – Best Practices: Faculty Doctoral Planning Process 2018 paper at RDC 2-07 (18-19).

24.2   The Deputy Director of the Doctoral School introduced the paper which presented a digest of best practice from across the faculties in relation to PGR students. The elements listed had been selected by the Doctoral Training Strategy Committee as particular items of best practice from Faculty Doctoral Planning submissions, and a subset highlighted for consideration to roll out across all faculties.

24.3   It was noted there was a large focus on teaching in the report, particularly opportunities to teach and consistency of provisions for advertising opportunities. It was agreed that Moodle is too localised, and that ideally there would be a single UCL Portal across the institution so students can find opportunities outside of their department. Delays in UCL content management systems were highlighted by Arena as a key factor in developing such a system.

24.4   It was noted that many areas are sharable across Faculties, and there was a strong encouragement to consider implementing best practice from other faculties albeit within the differing disciplinary contexts of each faculty. Faculties were asked to discuss the paper at forthcoming meetings of their FRDCs to identify practice that could be implemented within their own faculty.

ACTION: Faculty Graduate Tutors

25   RECOMMENDATIONS FROM IQRS IN 17-18 CONCERNING RESEARCH STUDENTS

25.1   *Received* – Recommendations from IQRs in 17-18 Concerning Research Students paper at RDC 2-05 (18-19).

25.2   A brief update was received by RDC. It was noted that the plan was to publish the Code of Practice for PGTAs this academic year, and the revision of contracts for PGTAs will start after Easter of this academic year.

25.3   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

25.4   Space was also highlighted as an issue, which has been a growing concern in recent years. It was noted that the Director of Estates is developing a new Estates Strategy, and that research/researcher space would be one subject of the SMT away day in March, so there could be new developments in this area soon. The Doctoral School would be working with Estates colleagues to embed research student and staff space needs in institutional strategy.

25.5   Committee involvement for students was noted as concern, and there needs to be greater encouragement for students to take part in the process.

25.6   Peer Mentoring and Mentoring in general was the last key issue raised, and is something that should be discussed further at Faculty committees to see if there is good practice that can be utilised from other parts of the institution.

26   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE RESEARCH SUPPORT OF PROJECT STUDENTS BY PGR STUDENTS

26.1   ***Received*** – Recommendations for The Research Support of Project Students by PGR Students paper at <u>RDC 2-06 (18-19).</u>

26.2   The Faculty Graduate Tutor for Population Health Sciences introduced the paper which focused on research support of project students by PGR students. This was noted as being a concern within SLMS, but would be applicable to other Faculties too.

26.3   Concerns are focused on the ad-hoc support from research students, and how students get recognition, training, and support for this type of activity.

26.4   It was noted that the type of support and training PhD students undertaken in labs should be recommended as part of the degree, go on a student's CV, and potentially count towards Arena training as there is a clear benefit for those students.

26.5   How this activity is recorded was discussed, and it was suggested that a section of the e-log could be developed in future so students have an area to formally record instances of supporting an MSc student in the lab. Such formal recognition would allow students to take this forward as part of building skills and then form part of their CV. It would need to be made clear that this is not formal teaching at this level.

26.6   There would need to be recognition of those cases where students can potentially be exploited, and there should be a limit to the number of students that can be taken on to avoid overloading. This is a common topic that arises in IQR reports, so needs to be carefully considered.

26.7   In terms of training, UCL Arena has a programme and workshop that could be set-up for this type of support, and would also be logged in the e-log when completed.

26.8   RDC members agreed this was a useful template, and it was confirmed that guidelines would be produced within SLMS, but that these would ideally be generic enough to be applicable across other Faculties.

26.9   The issue of remuneration was raised, but there was no clear agreement. It was noted on one side that students should be remunerated if they are taking on

work that would otherwise be part of an academic's workload. However, it was also noted that students are already remunerated as part of their training and development, so is essentially already remunerated as part of that.

26.10 It was raised that if no remuneration is to be provided in this area, then the language would need to be adjusted as 'Supervision' implies a formal role, whereas 'Support' implies a mentoring and guidance role.

27 STUDENT COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE – REVISION FOR 2019/20

27.1 ***Received*** – Student Complaints Procedure – Revision for 2019/20 paper at RDC 2-08 (18-19).

27.2 The Deputy Director (Casework and Governance) introduced the paper, which outlined the upcoming revisions for the Student Complaint Procedure, which removes the external appeal stage due to risks involved with handling cases internally then handing them over externally, and introducing a single appeal route regardless of how the original decision was made.

27.3 RDC members agreed the paper is very clear, and the additional clarity on what types of students go where will help avoid issues in the past where a Research case ended up at a Taught appeals panel.

28 RESEARCH DEGREES ACADEMIC REGULATIONS WORKING GROUP UPDATE

28.1 ***Received*** – Research Degrees Academic Regulations Working Group Update paper at RDC 2-09 (18-19).

28.2 The Secretary introduced the item, which provided an update on the progress of the Research Degrees Academic Regulations Working Group created by RDC.

28.3 Key proposals by the group include separating and updating the MPhil PhD regulations from everything else as they encompass the majority of students then adding the difference on separately, a focus on usability of the regulations for the end user, and a 2-year plan to complete the regulations with a 2020-21 publication date.

28.4 It was also noted that going forwards, a permanent group will be proposed that can look at regulatory changes in more depth, before submission to RDC for approval. This structure would allow better oversight of the regulations, and ensure there aren't divergences when regulations change as there will be more dedicated time for scrutiny of any changes.

28.5 The Chair noted that it would be useful to have more RDC members involved in future so there is continuing diversity of input going forwards.

Other matters for approval or information

29   UCL DOCTORAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME ANNUAL REPORT 2017-18

29.1   ***Noted*** – UCL Doctoral Skills Development Programme Annual Report 2017-18 at RDC 2-10 (18-19).

30   MRES/MPHIL/PHD APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS UPDATE

30.1   ***Noted*** – MRes/PHil/Phd Applications and Admissions Update at RDC 2-11 (18-19).

31   NEW AND AMENDED PROGRAMMES AND QUALIFICATIONS APPROVED BY RDC CHAIR'S ACTION

31.1   ***Noted*** – New and Amended Programmes and Qualifications Approved by RDC Chair's Action at RDC 2-12 (18-19).

32   ANONYMISED SUSPENSION OF REGULATIONS REPORT

32.1   ***Noted*** – Anonymised Suspension of Regulations Report at RDC 2-13 (18-19).

33   DATES OF NEXT MEETING

- Wednesday 5 June 2019, 11am to 1pm, Wilkins Building (Main Building) Haldane Room.

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22/03/2019