



Research Degrees Committee

14 March 2022

Confirmed Minutes

Present Members: Professor David Bogle (Chair); Dr Helen Matthews; Elizabeth Halton; Dr Sam Smidt; Helen Notter; Professor Simon Banks; Professor Jasmina Jovanovic; Dr Ruth Siddall; Professor Jill Norman; Dr Andrew Stoker; Professor Alex Mills; Dr Mark Newman; Dr Richard Bucknall; Dr Josephine Barnes; Dr Yasminah Beebeejaun; and Noora Almarri, Professor Sam Smidt, Viktoria Makai, Professor Jane Perryman; Dr Benet Salway

Apologies for absence: Professor Tania Monteiro

Attendees: Simon To (for Minute 21); Gary Smith (for Minute 22); Bella Malins (for Minute 23); Alison Edridge (Acting Secretary)

Part I: Preliminary Business

18 Minutes of the Last Meetings

18.1 **Approved** - the minutes of the meeting held on 28 October 2021 and the minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on 15 December 2021.

19 Matters arising from the minutes

19.1 None.

20 Chair's Business

20.1 Received – the following papers:

20.1.1 The paper at 3-01a (21-22), which provided an overview of Faculty statistics relating to research degrees for 2021.

20.1.2 The paper at 3-01b (21-22) containing a report on 2021 Early Career Researchers development meetings between Faculties and the Doctoral School. The Chair noted that the paper would be received by Research, Innovation and Global Engagement and would also be submitted to University Management Committee.

20.1.3 The paper at 3-01c (21-22) containing data on research staff at UCL in 2020.

Part II: Matters for Discussion

21 Student Academic Representatives Annual Report 2020-21

- 21.1 Received – the paper at RDC 3-02 (21-22) presented by the Policy, Governance & Insight Manager of UCL Students' Union. RDC was informed that there had been 1896 Academic Representatives in 2020-21 of which 161 were postgraduate research (PGR) students. All but one of the Faculty Representative roles had been filled. 16 of the 81 Lead Department Representatives appointed were PGR students.
- 21.2 The number of research student representatives had plateaued at around 150 in recent years and departments had been asked for suggestions as to how engagement could be increased. RDC agreed that it would be useful to know which departments had not had a PGR representative over the last 2 years so that targeted action could be taken. It was noted that the information that the SU held was at divisional level rather than at the level of research department. The SU also published a directory of representatives each year.
- Action: Simon To to provide the Doctoral School with a list of divisions that have not had a PGR representative for the last 2 years and to circulate details of the directory of representatives.**
- 21.3 The Faculty Graduate Tutor (FGT) for Life Sciences noted that the Faculty ran elections for academic representatives in September. Previous representatives were engaged with the process, shared details of their experiences, the benefits of undertaking the role and encouraged students to run in the elections. The Faculty sponsored the Postgraduate Society with around £2K each year to support their activities. It was noted that this created a sense of community and encouraged students to engage. There were similar initiatives operating in other Faculties.
- 21.4 RDC was informed that the Students' Union had an active programme to facilitate local societies including setting new societies up where they did not exist.

22. MPhil/PhD Upgrade and Submission Data

- 22.2 Received – the paper at RDC 1-02 (21-22) presented by the Head of Student Data, which was an annually updated report on upgrade (MPhil/PhD only), submission rates and the time taken to upgrade or submit. The data took account of changes to mode of attendance, extensions, periods of interruption and time spent in completing research status (CRS).

- 22.3 The prescribed time for CRS had been adjusted for relevant students (2016/17 cohort) to reflect the additional time agreed for CRS due to the pandemic. Generally, 65% of students were submitting within time. For the 2016/17 cohort, submission in time was 68% when the adjustment to CRS was applied. Without the adjustment, 42% of the 2016/17 cohort had submitted within time.
- 22.4 The Chair noted that the slight increase for the 2016/17 cohort compared to previous years was welcome but the target for in-time submissions was 75%. Funders were increasingly expecting students to submit within the funded period, and it would therefore be useful to review the current model of 3 years of full-time study plus 1 year of CRS. It was noted that most funders were only concerned with submission rates for students that they were funding but that some considered submission for the cognate discipline area.
- 22.5 The Office for Students (OfS) had indicated in a recent consultation on student outcomes that it would be setting minimum completion thresholds for PGR students against which institutions would be measured. However, it was unclear from the consultation how the OfS was intending to measure completion and this point had been fed back in UCL's response to the consultation.
- 22.6 The data showed that non-EU students generally took longer to submit than other students, which might reflect the time taken to settle in and possible language challenges. It was noted that UCL provided training and skills development for academic communication but that supervisors also had a crucial role to play in supporting students, for example reviewing drafts of theses. It was agreed that it would be useful for Faculties to identify challenges they were experiencing in this area as well as good practice.

Action: FGTs to raise issues non-EU students have at PGR meetings

23 MRes-MPhil-PhD Application and Admissions Annual Report

- 23.1 Received – the papers at 3-04 containing data on student applications, offers of admission and acceptances to PGR programmes presented by the Director of Access and Admissions.
- 23.2 Applications were down by 6% as of 24 February 2022 compared with the same time in 2021. It was noted that departments dealt with PGR applications locally before they were received by the central Admissions team so the data might not be fully representative of the actual numbers. There was variability across Faculties but the majority had received fewer applications this year. However, the number of offers

made was up by 5% and acceptances were also higher, which might be reflective of more efficient processing in central Admissions.

- 23.3 It was agreed that it would be useful to include details of student intake each year in the data tables to see how offer acceptances converted to students enrolling. This could be produced for the autumn meeting of RDC although some challenges with the data were noted, such as not all programmes using UCL's main application system. It was noted that all offers came from a single source so the offer numbers were accurate.

Action: Head of Student Data and Head of Access and Admissions to include intake data in the next applications and admissions report to RDC.

- 23.4 It would be useful for the Admissions Transformation Programme to consider challenges with PGR applications and admissions data in due course. It was noted that PGR students could currently start on any day of the year, which also created issues, and moving to one possible start date a month would be easier to manage although end dates during closure periods would need to be avoided. The Student Records Manager (Research) noted that she would be able to advise on this issue. It would be desirable for departments to reduce the number of possible start dates further to support cohort building and the provision of training, although monthly start dates would need to be maintained in the system for funding purposes.

24 Generic issues arising from Joint Examiner Reports

- 24.1 Received – the paper at RDC 3-05 (21-22). The Chair highlighted the following issues arising from reports:

- i. Unclear objectives and hypothesis;
- ii. Lack of clarity about the role of collaborators;
- iii. Content of the conclusion which should not simply be a summary.

The Chair requested that these issues and how they might be addressed be discussed within Faculties and subsequently in departments.

Action: FGTs to discuss the three issues above and their Faculty summaries within their Faculties and with departments

- 24.2 Variability in the length of the examiners' reports as well as consistency of outcomes had been identified as issues. It was noted that UCL did not provide training for research external examiners. The regulations were provided to external examiners but they were lengthy might not be read in detail. It was agreed that concise guidance for external examiners should be developed, which might include the creation of a

short video. It would be useful to include guidance on the time periods that examiners may agree for amendments and the circumstances in which these would apply.

Action: Doctoral School in collaboration with Arena to develop concise guidance for external examiners possibly in video format

24.3 **Approved** – the paper at RDC 3-05 (21-22).

25 Deputy Departmental Graduate Tutor Role

25.1 Received - the paper at RDC 3-06 (21-22) presented by Dr Jo Barnes, which set out proposed criteria for appointment and core and additional responsibilities of the Deputy Departmental Graduate Tutor role. It was noted that the role existed in a number of departments but the purpose and responsibilities of it were not currently documented within the Academic Manual.

25.2 The following comments on the role description were made:

- i. The responsibilities identified were ultimately those of the Head of Department who could delegate them, and the role description should make this clear.
- ii. Adjustments to the wording would be helpful to clarify the relationship between the Departmental Graduate Tutor (DGT) and the Deputy role. For example, amending 'To exercise...' to 'To assist the DGT in exercising...'
- iii. The references to 'Research Department/Unit/Group' should be amended to 'Research Department/Division/Institute'.
- iv. The proposed appointment criteria specified that staff should be a minimum of Grade 8. This had been included as there was concern that more junior staff would not have sufficient authority. However, staff grades were generally not included in roles in the Academic Manual and it could be helpful to focus on skills and experience rather than specific grades.
- v. The DGT role description had been written several years ago and currently included responsibility for postgraduate taught (PGT) students as well as PGR. It would be useful to make clear that the Deputy role was for PGR students only. The Chair noted that could be useful for UCL consider whether it would be appropriate to move to separate PGT and PGR DGT roles.
Action: Chair to raise the possibility of separate PGT and PGR DGT roles with the Vice-Provost (Education and Student Experience).
- vi. A suggested maximum time period for appointment to the role as good practice should be considered, with the possibility of one extension. It was

noted that some Faculties had made certain roles permanent substantive posts so it was not possible to be prescriptive about time limits.

- vii. The role description should specify that the Head of Department is responsible for appointing a member of staff to the role in consultation with the Faculty Graduate Tutor. Externality to the department in the appointment process would help to ensure consistency and appropriateness of appointments.

25.3 **Approved** – the paper at RDC 3-06 (21-22) subject to the above points being addressed.

26 Extension to UCL Doctoral Covid Stipend Extension Scheme

26.1 Received - the paper at RDC 3-07 (21-22). It was noted that the UCL Doctoral Covid Stipend Extension Scheme mirrored the UKRI scheme. Its purpose was to underwrite funding for up to 3 months where the original funder was unable to cover the costs. RDC was informed that use of the funds to date was under budget and it was recommended to extend the scheme until 31 December 2022 without any change to the overall budget.

26.2 **Approved** – the recommendations in the paper at RDC 3-07 (21-22).

27 Paid Leave for Funded Doctoral Students

27.1 Received - the paper at RDC 3-08 (21-22) which set out options for a consistent policy across Faculties for underwriting paid parental leave and for underwriting paid sick leave for funded PGR students.

27.2 It was noted that a policy for underwriting parental leave costs for funded students had been agreed at the June 2021 RDC meeting. This strongly recommended that departments endeavour to cover the costs of parental leave if they could not be covered by the funder but did not mandate this. For EDI reasons, it would be desirable to require that this happened consistently across departments. However, this would require Finance to agree how this would be funded.

27.3 **Approved** – to recommend that Faculties/Departments must underwrite parental leave. The source of funding would need to be determined by Finance.

27.4 It was noted that guidance from UKRI was that students should be entitled 3 months paid sick leave. It was difficult to estimate the costs of doing this as the reasons for interruption were not clearly identifiable from students' records.

27.5 Members expressed support for mandating that paid sick leave should be underwritten and funding this centrally would help to ensure consistent

implementation of the policy. However, some concerns were noted that this would not be available to all students and would depend on the source of their funding as not all external funders supported paid sick leave.

- 27.6 It was suggested that paid carers leave should also be included. The implications of this would need to be explored separately although RDC was supportive in principle. It was noted that UKRI was in the process of considering its policy on compassionate and caring leave and UCL could provide views on this as part of the response to a current UKRI consultation.
- 27.7 **Approved** – to recommend that paid sick leave for funded doctoral students must be underwritten from a central fund. Advice would be sought from the Pro-Provost (Equity and Inclusion) on next steps.

Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information

28 Anonymised Suspension of Regulations Report (since November October 2021)

- 28.1 Received - the paper at RDC 3-09 (21-22).

29 New and Amended Programmes and Qualifications Approved by RDC Chair's Action

- 29.1 Received - the paper at RDC 3-10 (21-22).

30 Unconfirmed minutes of the Academic Partnerships Review Group for Joint and Double Research Degrees

- 30.1 **Approved** – the paper at RDC 3-11 (21-22).

31 Guidance on Self-Plagiarism

- 31.1 Received - the paper at RDC 3-12 (21-22) which proposed updates to the guidance in the Academic Manual on self-plagiarism and a draft Declaration Form for students to declare where parts of their thesis had already been published. The intention was to clarify how self-plagiarism rules apply to PGR students.
- 31.2 Student representatives expressed their support for students to be able to include published work in their thesis noting that this already happened in some departments and for fairness, this should be possible for all students.
- 31.3 The FGT for Life Sciences suggested that it would be useful to develop guidance about when students should be expected to focus on their thesis rather than on work for publication.

Action: Head of Doctoral School and FGT for Life Sciences to discuss possible guidance on the above separately

- 31.4 **Approved** - the paper at RDC 3-12 (21-22) for publication in the Academic Manual 2022/23. It was agreed that the guidance should be circulated now as the Academic Manual would not be published until August 2022.
- 32 Summary of Recommendations Concerning PGR Students and/or the Doctoral School as Identified in IQR Reports in 2020-21**
- 32.1 Received - the paper at RDC 3-13 (21-22).
- 33 Report on Research Degree Administration and Examination Statistics 2020-21**
- 33.1 Received - the paper at RDC 3-14 (21-22).
- 34 Any other business**
- 34.1 The Chair noted that a special meeting of RDC had been scheduled for 17 May 2022 to discuss regulation changes for the next academic year, which would be focused on updates and tidying up. It was not intended to propose substantive changes at this point as these would require time for detailed consideration.
- 34.2 RDC was informed that UKRI was currently consulting on a new deal for PGR students and the Chair would be inviting colleagues to provide input to UCL's response. The student representatives were asked to encourage students to contribute to the response.

Alison Edridge
Acting Secretary to RDC
Interim Head of Academic Policy and Quality Assurance
Academic Services
13 April 2022