



RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

14 October 2015

MINUTES

Present:

Professor David Bogle (Chair)

Mr David Ashton; Dr Simon Banks; Dr Steven Bloch; Mr Ben Colvill; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Caroline Essex; 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: Dr Teresa McConlogue, Senior Teaching Fellow (CALT), for item 5; Dr Alex Standen, Senior Teaching Fellow (CALT), for item 9.

Apologies were received from: Ms Wendy Appleby; Dr Donna Brown;
Dr Virginia Mantouvalou; Professor Anthony Smith and Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu.

Key to abbreviations

CALT	Centre for Advancing Learning and Teaching
CRS	Completing Research Status
DGTs	Departmental Graduate Tutors
FGTs	Faculty Graduate Tutors
HEA	Higher Education Academy
IOE	UCL Institute of Education
IQR	Internal Quality Review
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PGTA	Postgraduate Teaching Assistant
PRES	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SAA	Special Assessment Arrangements
UCLU	UCL Union

PART I: PRELIMINARY BUSINESS

1 CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERSHIP 2015-16

- 1.1 **Received** – the RDC constitution and membership for 2015-16 at RDC 01-01 (15-16).
- 1.2 The committee welcomed the new sabbatical officer and noted that the RDC student reps for 2015-16 were still to be nominated.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

- 2.1 **Agreed** – the minutes of the meeting held 17 June 2015 [*RDC Mins.32-42, 17.06.15*].

3 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES [*see also Minutes 4, 7, 9 and 13 below*]

3A Update on the PGR Student Payment Process [*Minute 24 (14-15) refers*]

- 3A.1 **Received** – a paper on the bid to upgrade the research student payment review at RDC 01-02 (15-16).
3A.2 The majority of requests to make improvements in Portico had not been awarded funding by the Administrative Information Services Group (AISG), including RDC's requested improvements to the PGR student payment process. The UCLU representative confirmed that delays in processing payments were causing significant student dissatisfaction. The committee noted that the research strand of AISG might provide an alternative route through which to pursue the issue.

RESOLVED:

- 3A.3 A small group, including the Head of the Doctoral School, the UCLU PGR representative, and the Director of Student Administration, would meet to discuss the available options around the research student payment review. The UCLU representative would also publicise the support available to students from Student Funding if they were having difficulties.

Action: Head of the Doctoral School, UCLU PGR representative, and Director of Student Administration

3B Special Assessment Arrangements for PGR Students [*Minute 22.6 (14-15) refers*]

- 3B.1 **Received** – a paper on the handling of special assessment arrangements for PGR students at RDC 01-03 (15-16).
3B.2 At its meeting on 11 March 2015, RDC asked that further work be undertaken to ensure PGR assessment processes included a clear protocol for assessing and accommodating students' needs. There was already a procedure in place to consider reasonable adjustments for taught students via the Special Assessment Arrangements procedure which covered adjustments for examinations, coursework and a range of other assessment methods. The paper proposed that the same procedure be used for research degree students to cover thesis submissions, upgrade panels, vivas etc. Students would be required to make an application, supported by medical documentation, with help and guidance provided by Student Disability Services, for consideration by the SAA Panel. It was also suggested that a check be made when a student is due for upgrade or final examination in order to ensure that adequate arrangements are in place.

RESOLVED:

- 3B.3 Special Assessment Arrangements for PGR students would follow the same process as taught programmes, as outlined in the paper. The Director of Student Administration would oversee the process for incorporating PGR-specific considerations into the Special Assessment Arrangements procedure, such as the inclusion of check points before upgrade and final examination, and would communicate the requirements to departments.

Action: Director of Student Administration

4 CHAIR'S ACTION TAKEN SINCE THE LAST MEETING [Minute 34 (14-15) refers]

- 4.1 **Received** – a paper on updates to the UCL Academic Manual at RDC 01-04 (15-16).
- 4.2 **Received** – a paper on amendments to the regulations for MRes to PhD progression at RDC 01-05 (15-16).
- 4.3 RDC noted that Chair's Action had been taken over the summer to approve minor amendments to the research degrees sections of the new UCL Academic Manual, clarifications of the MRes Progression to PhD Regulations and a new MPhil/ PhD upgrade form and process. RDC noted that information on the new upgrade form had been included in the Doctoral School information pack circulated the previous week.

PART II: MATTERS FOR DISCUSSION

5 RESEARCH INTEGRITY

- 5.1 **Received** – a paper on Research Integrity education for PGR students at RDC 01-06 (15-16).
- 5.2 The Doctoral School had asked CALT to explore ways to educate students about Research Integrity. After looking at the available resources, CALT had selected the Dilemma Game and trialled it across five UCL faculties. RDC members involved in the pilot confirmed that they had received a lot of positive feedback, and particularly welcomed the opportunities for staff and students from different disciplines to work together. As a result, CALT recommended that the Dilemma Game be adopted across UCL.
- 5.3 RDC agreed that every faculty should be responsible for setting up its own small-group sessions (20-24 participants), but that every session could be advertised via the Doctoral Skills Development Programme to give students a range of options and to encourage cross-disciplinary interaction. RDC agreed that all students should be required to attend at least one session as a condition of upgrade, and that this could be added to the upgrade form (see minute 4.1 above) and monitored via the Research Student Log. It was acknowledged that it would take time to set up so, for 2015-16, students would be 'expected' to attend a session prior to upgrade with a formal requirement coming into place from 2016-17. Faculty plans could also be included in the next round of the Doctoral Planning Process.

RESOLVED:

- 5.4 FGTs were asked to brief DGTs on the Dilemma Game and determine a strategy for running sessions during 2015-16. FGTs were also asked to report back to the June 2016 RDC to help inform the system for 2016-17.

Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors

- 5.5 The upgrade form would be updated to reflect the new research integrity expectations for 2015-16 and the requirements for 2016-17 onwards.

Action: Research Degrees Office, Student and Registry Services

- 5.6 A small working group would work on the implementation of the Dilemma Game across UCL, with membership drawn from those who had taken part in the pilots. This would include printing of templates, setting up online resources, promoting the scheme to staff and students etc.

Action: CALT, Pilot Faculty Graduate Tutors

6 DOCTORAL SUPERVISION DEVELOPMENT

- 6.1 **Received** – a paper on the development of doctoral supervision at RDC 01-07 (15-16). The Doctoral School had commissioned CALT to review current arrangements for the induction and development of doctoral supervisors, and to make recommendations for future provision. The paper made six key proposals including plans to coordinate the work of

CALT, IOE and the Doctoral School under the UCL Arena scheme, to enhance the support currently on offer and make the programme more flexible, and to supplement training with online support materials. There were also plans for twice-yearly supervisor forum events, and plans to improve communications with FGTs and DGTs.

- 6.3 **Approved** - RDC warmly welcomed and approved the proposals and asked committee members to get involved, for example by helping to identify experienced supervisors who could help to run sessions, or by recommending key themes/ speakers for the biannual seminars. It was suggested that departmental and faculty administrators could also help with communications.
- 6.4 The committee noted that training for new supervisors would still be mandatory. CALT indicated that it should be possible to increase the frequency of the induction sessions.

RESOLVED:

- 6.5 CALT would work up more detailed plans for the development of Doctoral supervision, in conjunction with the Doctoral School.

Action: CALT

7 DOCTORAL STRATEGY *[Minute 36 (14-15) refers]*

- 7.1 **Received** – the final draft of the UCL Doctoral Strategy at RDC 01-08 (15-16).
- 7.2 The strategy had been well-received by the Provost and by Academic Board at its recent meeting. The paper had also been received by Academic Committee, which had been particularly interested to hear about the new Impact Statement which would be introduced as a requirement for all theses.
- 7.3 RDC noted that it might also be beneficial to reference the cross-institutional Connected Curriculum, Arena and Changemakers initiatives as they provided opportunities to involve PGR students. The Head of the Doctoral School agreed to speak to CALT about how this could be incorporated. RDC also noted that a working group had been set up to investigate PGR student wellbeing and, in particular, how UCL could promote mental wellbeing.

RESOLVED:

- 7.4 The final document would be completed and disseminated online internally and externally. Faculty graduate committees were also asked to add the strategy to their agendas.

Action: Doctoral School, Chairs of Faculty Graduate Committees

8 POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE SURVEY (PRES) 2015 REPORT

- 8.1 **Received** – a paper on the results of the PRES 2015 at RDC 01-09 (15-16).
- 8.2 UCL had seen a response rate of 36% compared to a sector average of 40% and a Russell Group average of 41%. However, this was considered a good result for a first attempt at a survey, and compared well with previous in-house surveys. RDC agreed that UCL should aim to be in the upper quartile across all themes.
- 8.3 Areas identified for development included teaching, progression and supervision. In particular, UCL lagged behind competitors in providing opportunities for teaching and development. However, the sector had raised concerns about PGTAs undertaking too much teaching, impacting on their own learning and leading to complaints from undergraduates. Nonetheless, UCL could explore how to offer more teaching opportunities as appropriate.
- 8.4 RDC noted that the Doctoral School had worked with the Russell Group to lobby for improvements to the PRES questions, and the HEA had asked for feedback about the revised survey. The Student Survey Working Group had also been exploring UCL's engagement with student surveys, considering how they were presented to students and how UCL used the feedback received. It was suggested that the results could be introduced into supervisor training to raise awareness of key areas for development.

RESOLVED:

- 8.5 FGTs were asked to take the PRES data back to Faculty graduate committees for discussion, noting that the Doctoral School would shortly be providing bespoke Faculty reports to assist them in their planning. Each Faculty was asked to report to the next RDC meeting on three key areas of work which they would be undertaking in response to the survey, for further discussion by the committee.

Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors

- 8.6 The PRES results would be included in the biannual supervisors' newsletter.

Action: Director of CALT

9 UPDATE ON UCL AUSTRALIA [Minute 37.7 (14-15) refers]

- 9.1 **Received** – a paper on progress in the run-out at RDC 01-10 (15-16).
9.2 Engineering Sciences provided its regular update on the transformation of UCL's stand-alone presence in Australia. Four PGR students were due to finish after the end of 2017 and the paper outlined the particular issues pertinent to each. Although UCL did not yet know each supervisor's plans post-2017 - which would have a significant impact on each student's decision - communication lines were open and there was a high level of support in place. However the situation was being monitored carefully, particularly in relation to the two students who would not reach CRS before 2017 - the Faculty was aware that any interruption or resubmission could be complex to manage. RDC also asked the Faculty to consider how the student experience would be maintained if no new research students were to be recruited at UCL Australia.

RESOLVED:

- 9.3 The UCLU representative was keen to ensure that all UCL Australia students were aware of the support available from the Union. The FGT for Engineering Sciences agreed to email the UCL Australia PGR students, putting them in touch with the PGR representative and highlighting the communication channels that were available.

**Action: Faculty Graduate Tutor Engineering Sciences,
UCLU PGR representative**

10 PROPOSAL FOR PRACTICE-RELATED PHD

- 10.1 **Received** – a proposal for the development of a generic practice-related PhD at RDC 01-11 (15-16).
10.2 A proposal for a practice-led PhD in Human Geography had been received as a request for RDC Chair's Action. However the Chair felt that the issues could potentially apply to a range of disciplines and had requested that the full committee discuss the principle. UCL already permitted practice-related and practice-led MPhil/ PhDs in creative disciplines, but the proposal suggested that such a model might be attractive to students in other disciplines – for example, English had indicated an interest for drama-related topics.
10.3 The proposal built on the practice-related model of one third practice to two thirds written thesis. At upgrade the student would have to demonstrate competence and progress in both elements. At the final examination the student would need to demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge in both areas. A lower maximum word count of 80,000 words was proposed, together with a lower limit, of e.g. 60,000 words. The Slade had agreed to provide expert advice on the development of the proposed programme, and the proposals stressed that this would not impact upon admissions thresholds. The proposal did not include an MPhil outcome, instead suggesting that students failing upgrade might transfer to a standard PhD programme without a practical outcome.

- 10.4 RDC was very interested in the proposals but wanted further information about the nature of creative practice in Geography. Whilst it was clear that the practice element could be, for example, an exhibition or a documentary film, it was less clear how this might be an appropriate outcome for a discipline which was not traditionally involved in producing artefacts. The committee also queried the recruiting pool for such a programme, and whether there was evidence of demand, and queried whether students would have sufficient training and experience in creative thinking. RDC also wondered whether a professional doctorate might be a better route for incorporating practice into research. On the other hand, RDC noted that many disciplines had long traditions of producing artefacts as part of the thesis, for example some students might develop computer code or music, whilst other subjects, such as archaeology and anthropology, already incorporated images and diagrams. However these were usually produced in addition to the thesis and were not substituted for word count. UCL would also need to ensure that examiners were qualified to examine the artefact, and consider whether the artefact could be archived.

RESOLVED:

- 10.5 RDC requested that the team proposing the new programme provide some examples of other UK institutions that offered a practice-led PhD in Geography, perhaps providing some case studies describing the artefacts that had been examined, and how they had enhanced and expanded upon the student's submission.

Action: Faculty Graduate Tutor, Social & Historical Sciences

11 PGTA TEACHING HOURS

- 11.1 **Received** – a paper on PGTA teaching hours at RDC 01-12 (15-16).
- 11.2 The Faculties of Arts & Humanities and Social & Historical Studies had noted some difficulties with the HR policy limiting PGTA employment to 180 hours per year and had put together a proposal for RDC to consider. The two faculties had met with HR, who had agreed to follow the lead of RDC on the matter.
- 11.3 Efforts in departments to remunerate students fairly by paying them for a realistic amount of preparation time for seminar teaching had led to some departments being in breach of the policy. Whilst departments wanted to ensure that students were not overburdened by teaching the two Faculties felt that 180 hours was too restrictive for the amount of preparation time required. The paper also argued that PGTA employment - where work was directly relevant to future academic careers and workload could be monitored - was preferable to part-time employment outside UCL, over which departments had no control. The paper proposed that the allowance be 20 hours a week, in line with the hours which international students were entitled to work by law. The UCLU representative confirmed that a number of students had raised concerns about fair pay for PGTAAs, and that some were not being paid for preparation and assessment.
- 11.4 RDC expressed some reservations about the proposals which could amount to some 600 hours over an undergraduate year – a significant increase from 180 hours. RDC strongly felt that students should be focusing on their studies and it was felt that 20 hours a week was too big a distraction which could hinder their research. Although international students were entitled by law to work 20 hours a week this should not necessarily be viewed as a target figure – for example the European working time directive permitted a maximum 48-hour working week, leaving 8 hours for PGTA work on top of the 40 hours required for full-time study. The Research Council also advised that students should not undertake more than 6 hours per week, and it was also noted that the 180-hour rule helped to protect students in receipt of studentships to cover fees and maintenance. RDC noted that other universities had tackled this in a variety of ways – for example Royal Holloway had followed the RCUK ruling, leading to a maximum of 168 hours over an undergraduate year. The committee also noted that the PRES results (see minute 8 above) had indicated that many PGR students wanted more opportunities for teaching, so it might be preferable to spread the workload between more PGTAAs rather than increasing the hours of a few.

RESOLVED:

- 11.5 The committee concluded that reservations about the proposals were sufficiently strong to not recommend any immediate change, but acknowledged the need to further consider what was reasonable and appropriate. RDC agreed to establish a small working group to look at the working week and what policies and guidance could be put in place. It was confirmed that all PGTAs should be paid for preparation time and assessment, not just contact hours, and Faculties were asked to ensure that the current policy was being followed until a decision could be reached.

Action: Chair, Faculty Graduate Tutors

12 PGR ENGAGEMENT MONITORING REGULATIONS

- 12.1 **Received** – a paper on the new Engagement Monitoring process for the 2015/16 session at RDC 01-13 (15-16).
- 12.2 The UK Visa and Immigration authority had published new requirements which meant that Tier 4 PGR students would need to be monitored via ten contact points based on activities within academic departments. Although the number of engagement points had increased, a new online system had been developed to support the process and initial feedback from testing had been very positive. Information on the new system had been included in the Doctoral School information pack circulated the previous week.

RESOLVED:

- 12.3 FGTs were asked to ensure that all departments were aware of the new requirements and to encourage students to record engagement in their Research Student Log as this would act as an evidence base.

Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors

13 APPLICATIONS DATA [Minute 21.6 (14-15) refers]

- 13.1 **Received** – a paper on the latest PGR applications data at RDC 01-14 (15-16).
- 13.2 The paper provided a review of the whole of the 2014-15 session. The figures provided a healthy picture. However RDC noted that, whilst total acceptances had increased by 1.8 %, UK acceptances had fallen by 11.8%. The Doctoral School had been speaking to the marketing team to explore the overall marketing strategy for research programmes.

14 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM INTERNAL QUALITY REVIEW 2013-14

- 14.1 **Received** – a paper summarising the recommendations relating to PGR students from Internal Quality Reviews taking place in 2013-14 at RDC 01-15 (15-16).
- 14.2 Internal Quality Review is UCL's central academic quality management and enhancement process. IQR is a rolling programme of peer review, in which all academic units of UCL (as well as a small number of interdepartmental degree programmes) are reviewed on a six-yearly cycle. Each year, RDC is asked to consider any recommendations pertaining to research degree programmes or other aspects of doctoral education within the IQR reports.
- 14.3 RDC noted that a number of recommendations related to PGTAs (see minute 11 above) and the Research Log. The committee noted the importance of developing the Log and that the Doctoral School had plans to set up a supervisory board to ensure responsiveness to UCL's needs.

15 RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT TO ACADEMIC COMMITTEE

- 15.1 **Received** – the RDC annual report to Academic Committee at RDC 01-16 (15-16).

16 ANNUAL REPORT ON THE MINUTES OF FACULTY GRADUATE TEACHING COMMITTEES

- 16.1 **Received** – a summary of Faculty Graduate Teaching Committee minutes from 2014-15 at RDC 01-17 (15-16).
- 16.2 RDC discussed the process of reviewing Faculty Graduate Teaching Committee minutes each year and agreed that this was a useful way to gain an oversight of discussions and developments. It also helped to reveal the extent of discussion over particular issues. The committee noted that the different faculty arrangements had led to a significant variance in the amount of PGR business considered by each committee. It was agreed that, where PGR matters were considered as part of a joint committee also covering taught programmes, FGTs should try to promote the inclusion of PGR matters on agendas.
- 16.3 There were some very good examples of committees highlighting feedback from students in their agendas. FGTs were asked to consider how their own committee might encourage attendance by PGR student representatives and ensure that student issues were at the forefront of agendas.
- 16.4 Some minutes had not been available at the time of writing the report and would need to be chased up after RDC. FGTs were reminded that faculties were required to post minutes online for students to access in a timely manner, and to respond to the regular requests from Academic Services to supply minutes. This would allow time for the report to be developed in collaboration with the faculties, and for factual accuracy etc. to be checked.

RESOLVED:

- 16.5 RDC agreed to add a reminder to the June meeting's agenda.

Action: Secretary

PART III: OTHER MATTERS FOR APPROVAL OR INFORMATION

17 APPROVAL OF NEW RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

- 17.1 **Approved** – the research components of the following programmes as listed at RDC 01-18 (15-16):
- i. MRes Child Health
 - ii. MRes Architecture Digital Theory
 - iii. MRes Sensory Systems, Technologies and Therapies
 - iv. MSc/ MRes Robotics and Computing

18 ANONYMISED SUSPENSION OF REGULATIONS REPORT

- 18.1 **Approved** – the suspensions of regulations listed at RDC 01-19 (15-16).

19 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- 19.1 No further business was raised.

20 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 20.1 Wednesday 9 March 2016 at 10.30am in the Council Room.

LIZZIE VINTON

Secretary to the Research Degrees Committee

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21 October 2015