



## RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

Thursday 15 November 2012

### MINUTES

*Present:*

Professor David Bogle (Chair); Mr David Ashton; Dr Stephanie Bird; Dr Donna Brown; Dr Wendy Brown; Mr Ben Colvill; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Caroline Essex; Professor Mike Ewing; Dr Tom Gretton; Professor Anthony Harker; Ms Bella Malins; Dr Stephen Marshall; Mr Dante Micheaux; Ms Martha Robinson; Mr Ben Towse; Dr Dave Spratt; Professor Kaila Srail; Professor Ijeoma Uchebu.

*In attendance:* Mr Gary Hawes (Secretary); Ms Lydia Harwood (International Officer (Research and Analysis)); Ms Helen Notter (Student Records Manager, Registry and Academic Services); Ms Martha Robinson (Vice-President, UCLU Postgraduate Association).

Apologies were received from: Mr Marco Federighi; Dr Sally Leever; Dr Jennifer Pocock; Professor David Muller; Dr Ruth Siddall; Dr Joy Sleeman.

*Key to abbreviations*

AC	Academic Committee
CRS	Completing research status
DGT	Departmental Graduate Tutor
ELE	E-learning Environments
FGTC	Faculty Graduate Teaching Committee
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IQR	Internal Quality Review
NSV	No significant value
PGA	Postgraduate Association
PGR	Postgraduate research
RAS	Registry and Academic Services
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
UKBA	UK Border Agency

#### 1 CONSTITUTION AND 2012-13 MEMBERSHIP; TERMS OF REFERENCE

***Approved:***

- 1.1 The constitution and 2012-13 membership and terms of reference of RDC at RDC 1-01 (12-13).

#### 2 MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 11 JUNE 2012

***Confirmed:***

- 2.1 The Minutes of the meeting of RDC held on 11 June 2012, issued previously [RDC Mins.31-43, 11.6.12].

### **3 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

#### **3A Turnitin for doctoral theses [RDC Min.34, 11.6.12]**

***Noted:***

- 3A.1 The RDC officers were currently liaising with ELE colleagues over the packaging of best-practice guidance for UCL research students and staff on use of the Turnitin software, which would broadly advocate use of the software as a formative tool for the submission of student reports to their supervisors and as a means of checking non-results sections of student doctoral theses.
- 3A.2 With regard to clarification of the various student copyright and intellectual property issues that had been raised around use of the software, JISC had sponsored a legal briefing on copyright, which was available at [http://archive.plagiarismadvice.org/documents/legal/CopyrightAndTurnitin\\_FactSheet\\_Revision.pdf](http://archive.plagiarismadvice.org/documents/legal/CopyrightAndTurnitin_FactSheet_Revision.pdf)

#### **3B New overarching award for professional doctorates [RDC Min.37, 11.6.12]**

***Noted:***

- 3B.1 At its meeting on 5 July 2012, AC formally approved, on the recommendation of RDC, the creation of the new overarching degree title of Professional Doctorate (DPro).

#### **3C Response to UCLU PGA report 'Part-time PhD students' [RDC Min.38, 11.6.12]**

***Noted:***

- 3C.1 At RDC 1-02 (12-13), the response from the Graduate School to the UCLU PGA report 'Part-Time PhD Students – Problems faced by part-time PhD students at UCL, and recommendations for improvement', which was received at RDC's previous meeting on 11 June 2012.

### **4 STUDENT BAROMETER DATA FINDINGS IN RELATION TO PGR STUDENTS**

***Noted:***

- 4.1 A presentation on the data findings of the Student Barometer in relation to PGR students, introduced by Ms Lydia Harwood of the UCL International Office, who was in attendance for this item.

***Reported:***

- 4.2 The Student Barometer survey, which took place twice a year in the Summer and the Autumn, was aimed at determining the current level of student satisfaction with a range of elements listed under the broader categories of learning, living and support. The survey also invited respondents to indicate whether they would recommend studying at UCL to other people.
- 4.3 Ms Harwood's presentation offered a comparison of the key findings in relation to PGR students who had responded to the Summer 2012 and Summer 2011 Student

Barometer surveys. For both of these surveys, there had been an overall response rate for PGR students of between 12-14%.

4.4 Key findings from the Student Barometer survey in relation to PGR students were as follows:

- For the Summer 2012 survey, 86% of PGR students had indicated that they would recommend studying at UCL to other people (cf. 84% for the Summer 2011 survey and 82% for the UCL average);
- Overall PGR student satisfaction had remained the same year-on-year, at 90% (cf. 87% for the UCL average and 88% for the UK PGR average).

4.5 In terms of areas of notable improvement on the previous year's survey findings, the level of PGR student satisfaction with laboratories and learning spaces had increased by 5% on the previous year's totals (from 84% to 89% and from 82% to 87% respectively).

4.6 Ms Harwood would provide an electronic copy of the findings of the survey in relation to PGR students to the RDC Secretary for circulation to RDC members. A full statistical analysis of the 2012 Student Barometer survey findings would be undertaken in due course. In the meantime, further breakdowns of the survey findings in relation to PGR students would be made available, including a split of the findings for PGR international and domestic students, as well as breakdowns by type of study (*ie* FT/PT), year of study, age and gender.

**Discussion:**

4.7 With reference to the issue of PGR student isolation from the university community, some members of RDC noted that this could be applied to PGR students who felt that they were lacking the opportunities to link with academic and research staff within their own departments, as well as to those PGR students who felt isolated from the wider UCL community. Although the UCL Union had been active in trying to raise awareness of the activities of its Postgraduate Association, some RDC members noted that the fact that PGR students could be admitted at different times of the year meant that they sometimes did not receive information about activities and services at the beginning of their studies in the same systematic way as undergraduate students.

4.8 The fact that only 74% of PGR student respondents had indicated satisfaction with the level of careers advice available to them was probably a reflection of the variability in the level of careers advice available to PGR students locally across the institution – particularly since, the level of satisfaction with the UCL Careers Service had increased by 7% to 87% relative to the 2011 survey response.

4.9 Disability support issues could be more acute for PGR students, particularly in instances where they had specific access needs, and it was incumbent on UCL to publicise information on disability support services that were available to PGR students throughout the course of their PhD studies.

4.10 Demand among PGR students for more opportunities to teach was regularly flagged as an issue during IQRs of UCL departments and academic units. However, it was recognised that there was sometimes a tension for departments between identifying opportunities for PGR students to teach and meeting the expectations of undergraduate students (particularly those from overseas) to be taught by academic staff. Since evidence pointed to an inconsistent picture across UCL in terms of the provision of teaching opportunities for PGR students, a more selective and comprehensive examination of this issue needed to be undertaken. It would also be necessary to take account of the level and scope of teaching training that was

currently available within UCL to PGR students who wanted to teach. In this regard, it would be helpful to solicit information from CALT on its future plans for teacher training for PGR students. However, some RDC members noted that in many instances, UCL departments would need to seek to manage the expectations of PGR students with regard to the opportunities for teaching that would be available to them.

- 4.11 It was agreed that the RDC Secretary would circulate the Student Barometer survey findings in relation to PGR students electronically to RDC members with a view to these being referred to and discussed in relevant Faculty-level committees.

**RESOLVED:**

- 4.12 That the Student Barometer survey findings in relation to PGR students be made available electronically to RDC members with a view to these being referred to and discussed in relevant Faculty-level committees.

**ACTION: Mr Gary Hawes**

- 4.13 That CALT be asked to provide information on its future plans for teacher training for PGR students.

**ACTION: Mr Gary Hawes**

## **5 AMENDMENT OF THE OFFER LETTER FOR RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENTS**

**Noted:**

- 5.1 A note at RDC 1-03 (12-13), introduced by the Chair of RDC, summarising discussion that had taken place at the July 2012 meeting of AC, along with ensuing developments, regarding concerns that had been raised by two UCL faculties about the current wording of the UCL offer letter for research degree students and its possible implications for those students seeking financial support from overseas scholarship agencies.

**Reported:**

- 5.2 Concerns had been expressed about the possible loss of funding opportunities for research degree students owing to the fact that some overseas scholarship agencies required their applicants to receive official offer letters from UCL confirming that the duration of PhD study that attracted fees was three years, whereas the letter that was currently sent by UCL to research degree students stated that research degrees were of four years' duration, *ie* three years in full registration and one year CRS status.
- 5.3 Following discussion at AC, it had been agreed that while the UCL offer letter should continue to indicate a duration of four years for PhD study, in line with the Sponsor Guidance that had been issued by the UKBA in respect of overseas student applicants who would be required to apply for a Tier 4 visa covering the total period of their studies, the text of the offer letter should be amended to make clear that PGR students undertaking PhD study would normally be expected to be registered only for three years, with the possibility of being registered for a fourth year with the status of CRS under certain circumstances (for which a fee would not be charged).
- 5.4 A separate but related issue had also been raised about the offer letter that was currently sent to applicants for PhD programmes that included an integrated MRes which needed to be completed successfully before registration for the PhD or EngD could take place. In these cases, two offer letters were presently issued concurrently, one covering the MRes year, and the second covering the PhD registration (including

the CRS year). However, concerns about the complications of issuing two offer letters concurrently had been raised by (the same) two faculties.

- 5.5 Colleagues in RAS had reported that they had not heard anything further from the UCL faculties concerned following the amendment of the offer letter to PhD students. On the separate issue of PhD programmes that included an integrated MRes, RAS colleagues had advised that discussions would still need to take place regarding this and the possibility of issuing a single offer letter in future. However, this would need to incorporate a broader discussion on whether the integrated MRes should be wholly integrated (and only offered as an exit award when students did not go on to complete the PhD) rather than was the case currently where students completing the programme received both an MRes and a PhD.

## 6 REGULATIONS FOR NON-RESIDENT PHD STUDENTS

### ***Noted:***

- 6.1 The note at RDC 1-04 (12-13), introduced by the Chair of RDC, inviting RDC to consider the current UCL Regulations for non-resident research students and whether these required any further amendment.

### ***Reported:***

- 6.2 Although the UCL Regulations for non-resident research students had recently been amended to make explicit the requirement for students and supervisors to be in regular communication during the whole period of the programme by, for example, telephone, email or Skype, the attendance requirements remained minimal and governed only physical meetings between students and supervisors.

### ***Discussion:***

- 6.3 Although no major communication problems or issues involving students who were registered on a non-resident MPhil/PhD programme had been reported to date, some members of RDC noted that it might be helpful to provide greater clarification on what 'regular communication' between supervisors and students should entail and how frequent this should be, taking into account the UCL requirements for frequency of contact set out in the Code of Practice for Graduate Research Degrees.
- 6.4 It was further agreed that until a definitive list of institutions which UCL had formal collaborative agreements with was produced and made available, all individual applications for non-resident MPhil/PhD study should be required to be submitted to the Chair of RDC for formal approval. In light of this, it was agreed that the following paragraph should be deleted from the 'Guidance for students and staff' section of the current Regulations and Guidance set out in section 2.10 of the Academic Regulations and Guidelines for Research Degree Students:

In cases where an approved research programme has been set up with a specific institution or institutions which have formal collaborative agreements with UCL, approval of individual applications, as described above, will not need to be submitted for approval by the Chair of the RDC.

**RESOLVED:**

- 6.5 That the paragraph at Minute 6.4 above be deleted from the 'Guidance for students and staff' section of the current Regulations and Guidance set out in section 2.10 of the Academic Regulations and Guidelines for Research Degree Students.

**ACTION: Mr Ben Colvill**

**7 STAFF ELIGIBILITY TO SUPERVISE RESEARCH STUDENTS**

**Noted:**

- 7.1 The note at [RDC 1-05 \(12-13\)](#), introduced by the Chair.

**Reported:**

- 7.2 The current regulations governing which staff categories were eligible to supervise research students were not extensive, specifically mentioning only “academic staff” and “Research Assistants”. In light of this, RDC was asked to consider the recommendations of the Graduate School Managements Board concerning which UCL staff categories should be eligible to supervise.
- 7.3 RDC was also asked to consider whether honorary staff should be eligible to supervise UCL research students, and if so, which categories of honorary staff should be allowed to act as principal and/or subsidiary supervisors. UCL’s current honorary contract gave it no sanctions over an individual in cases where problems arose with research supervision, other than the option of rescinding the honorary contract. It was recommended that UCL should retain the flexibility to be able to appoint staff on honorary contracts as supervisors of research students, but that RDC should be invited to consider how to ensure adequate quality control in the absence of a formal contract of employment.
- 7.4 HR was in the process writing a new standard contract of employment for clinical honorary staff appointments that would set out the duties and obligations of those holding such a contract. This would give UCL more accountability over this category of staff in cases of research student supervision over this category of staff in cases. However, the question remained as to the eligibility of non-clinical honorary staff to supervise research students and whether it was advisable to improve arrangements for this group.
- 7.5 Once agreed by RDC, the list of staff eligible to supervise research students would be confirmed to HR for publication on the HR website, and the relevant section of the Academic Regulations for Research Degree Students (section 4.2 – Supervisors: Eligibility) would be amended to link to this list of eligible staff categories.

**Discussion:**

- 7.6 Although cases of sanctions being taken against staff who were supervisors of research students were fortunately extremely rare, some issues had from time to time been reported involving supervisors who were on honorary staff contracts (eg clinical honorary staff who were involved in supervision students on MD(Res) programmes as well as staff with honorary status who were occasional visitors). However, in spite of this, RDC agreed that clinical or non-clinical honorary staff should not be excluded from supervising research students, and that ultimate discretion and accountability for

approving the appointment of these staff as supervisors should continue to rest with the relevant FGT.

**RESOLVED:**

- 7.7 That the Graduate School Management Board's recommendations for staff eligibility to supervise research students at RDC 1-05 (12-13) be approved, and that the list be amended as appropriate to indicate honorary staff as being eligible to act as both Principal and Subsidiary supervisor.

**ACTION: Mr Ben Colvill**

**8 GUIDANCE ON ADDRESSING POOR PERFORMANCE IN RESPECT OF RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENTS**

**Noted:**

- 8.1 The draft guidance at RDC 1-06 (12-13), introduced by the Chair.

**Reported:**

- 8.2 The proposed guidance at RDC 1-06 (12-13) had been drafted because it was felt that the current UCL-wide policy and procedures for addressing academic insufficiency was not appropriate to research degree programmes, and that special guidance on dealing with cases of poor performance up to and including the termination of studies due to Academic Insufficiency were needed that was closer to the HR policy model for managing underperformance in UCL staff.
- 8.3 In the current UCL-wide policy and procedures for addressing academic insufficiency, both the tasks that needed to be undertaken as part of the formal process along with the timescales involved remained undefined. In light of this, it was also felt that the guidance should seek to clarify the role of the FGT in the process, as well as the point at which he or she should become involved.

**Discussion:**

- 8.4 RDC agreed that the guidance at RDC 1-06 (12-13) represented a very helpful attempt to codify and make more explicit actual practice to date for addressing poor performance in relation to research students.
- 8.5 After some discussion, it was agreed that the right for a student to be accompanied by a "friend" should also be extended back to the stage of the process where unsatisfactory performance was referred to the DGT, and that the guidance should be amended accordingly to provide for this.
- 8.6 It was also agreed that referring a student to their Departmental Graduate Tutor constituted a formal element of the process rather than an extension of the informal discussions with the Supervisory team, and that the guidance should be amended to reflect this.

**RESOLVED:**

- 8.7 That the draft guidance at RDC 1-06 (12-13) be amended to take account of the points raised in the above discussion and submitted to the next meeting of RDC, for formal approval.

**ACTION: Mr Ben Colvill**

## 9 INTERNAL QUALITY REVIEW 2010-11

### *Noted:*

- 9.1 At RDC 1-07 (12-13), a summary of recommendations identified in IQR reports in 2010-11 in relation to postgraduate programme provision, introduced by the Chair.

### *Reported:*

- 9.2 Two issues raised in IQR reports during 2010-11 in relation to research degree programme provision and PGR students were:
- The need for departments to ensure that PG students with teaching responsibilities were given access to timely formal training;
  - The need for departments to keep under review procedural documents and practices, eg MPhil to PhD upgrade procedures, PhD supervision arrangements, to ensure that these were kept up to date and in line with UCL Regulations.

## 10 REPORT ON RESEARCH DEGREE ADMINISTRATION

### *Noted:*

- 10.1 At RDC 1-08 (12-13), the above report, introduced by Ms Helen Notter.

### *Reported:*

- 10.2 Although it had not been possible to provide a report on the number of research degree examiners not submitting the preliminary report on a student's PhD thesis prior to the *viva voce* examination, it was hoped that improvements to the functionality of the Portico system in due course (funding permitting) would enable colleagues to undertake and produce a more detailed data analysis of research degree examination statistics in future.

## 11 RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE – ANNUAL REPORT 2011-12

### *Approved:*

- 11.1 At RDC 1-09 (12-13), the RDC Annual Report 2011-12.

## 12 CHAIR'S BUSINESS

### 12A Chair's Action

#### *Noted:*

- 12A.1 At RDC 1-10 (12-13), action taken by the Chair of RDC on behalf of RDC since the Committee's previous meeting.

**Reported:**

12A.2 The Chair of RDC reported that as part of the review of AC and its substructure, it had been agreed at AC's meeting on 18 October that FGTCs should in future report to RDC in respect of PGR students. RDC would therefore be receiving at each of its future meetings a summary report of FGTC Minutes received by the RDC officers (and copies of these Minutes would also be made available on the RDC SharePoint). There would also in future be an annual report submitted to RDC highlighting areas of interest and concern arising from FGTC Minutes received during the previous year.

**12B Postgraduate education - an independent inquiry by the Higher Education Commission**

**Noted:**

12B.1 The key messages arising from the above report, at [RDC 1-11 \(12-13\)](#)<sup>1</sup>.

**Reported:**

12B.2 The Chair of RDC drew attention to the fact that the report had highlighted, amongst other things:

- The need to improve access to postgraduate education
- The need more home-domiciled students to undertake postgraduate education
- The need for a sustainable system for funding postgraduate education

**12C House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee inquiry into Higher Education in STEM subjects**

**Noted:**

12C.1 The full version of the Select Committee's report was available online at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldselect/ldsctech/37/37.pdf>

**Reported:**

12C.2 The Chair of RDC reported that part of the Select Committee's focus had been on the issue of funding for students and universities for postgraduate courses, and that he had himself appeared as a witness at the final evidence session of the enquiry at the House of Lords back in April 2012, where he had, amongst other things, expressed concerns about students being able to find finances to support themselves through their PG programmes.

**12D Establishment of working groups reporting to Research Degrees Committee**

**Noted:**

12D.1 The following working groups reporting to RDC were in the process of being established by the RDC officers and would submit reports to future meetings of RDC:

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<sup>1</sup> The full report could be accessed at [http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/hec/sites/pol1-006/files/he\\_commission\\_postgraduate\\_education\\_2012.pdf](http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/hec/sites/pol1-006/files/he_commission_postgraduate_education_2012.pdf)

- Working group on non-permissible forms and degrees of assistance for research students
- PhD Marketing and Admissions Working Group

### **13 HEFCE REPORT ON RATES OF QUALIFICATION FROM POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREES**

***Noted:***

- 13.1 The above HEFCE report published in May 2012, at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2012/201210/>

***Reported:***

- 13.2 UCL had not submitted a return to the above survey owing to concerns it had expressed to HESA over the way that the qualification data had been calculated.

### **14 DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS**

***Noted:***

- 14.1 The next meetings of RDC were scheduled as follows:

**Wednesday 6 March 2013, 10am, Foster Court 132**  
**Wednesday 10 June 2013, 10am, Foster Court 132**

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13 February 2013