



**Confirmed**

## **Research Degrees Committee**

Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2021

1pm – 3pm

Minutes

Present Members: Professor David Bogle (Chair); Dr Helen Matthews; Ms Elizabeth Halton; Dr Sam Smidt; Prof David Spratt; Ms Helen Notter; Dr Simon Banks; Dr Efrosyni Konstantinou; Dr Benet Salway; Mr Naheem Yaqub, Professor Jasmina Jovanovic; Dr Ruth Siddall; Dr Alan Ingram; Professor Jill Norman; Dr Andrew Stoker; Professor Alex Mills; Dr Mark Newman; Professor Tania Monteiro; Dr Jane Perryman; Dr Richard Bucknall; Dr Josephine Barnes; Dr Yasminah Beebeejaun; and Dr Kathryn Walsh.

Attendees: Mr Kevin Brice (for items 6 and 7; Ms Anniina Wikman (for item 10); Mr Dan Derricott (observer); Mr Punit Modi (observer); and Mr Darren Payne (secretary).

### **Part I: Preliminary Business**

#### **29. Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

29.1. **Approved** - the minutes of the meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

#### **30. Matters Arising from the Minutes**

30.1. There were no matters arising from the minutes held on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

#### **31. Chair's Business**

31.1. The Chair highlighted some membership changes which were already in effect or would come into effect at the start of the 2021-22 Academic session.

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These were as follows: Arts and Humanities – Dr Benet Salway would be replaced by Dr Andrew Flinn; Brain Sciences – Dr Patti Adank would be replaced by Dr Josephine Barnes; Built Environment – Dr Stephen Marshall would be replaced by Dr Yasminah Beebeejaun; RDC Secretary – Mr Darren Payne would be replaced by Ms Anniina Wikman.

- 31.2. The Chair thanked all for their work and contribution to RDC over the years.
- 31.3. RDC was informed of some tentative changes at the top of UCL's committee structuring with the introduction of a new 'University Management Committee' which RDC may report to, however this change was still tentative. The Chair would provide RDC with further details at a subsequent meeting of RDC once confirmed.
- 31.4. The Doctoral School noted that SMT had approved a further year of stipend support for non-UKRI student extensions. Additionally, student visa extension support had also been secured (£150k to cover ~150 students). In addition, the CRS extensions were still being applied (18 months for FT; 3 years for PT); these show in Portico records at the point when students are moved to CRS; this effectively gives students an extra 6 months (FT) of tuition-free study time.
- 31.5. Phase 2 UKRI student funding extensions was underway. Phase 2 is institution-led rather than Programme-led as Phase 1 was. For Phase 2, students must use underspend on their home training grant first, after which they can access an additional of £1.5million block award UKRI has given UCL. An interim report had been submitted to UKRI which included 400+ students; an additional round of funding will be run over the summer to allocate the remaining funds on the block award.
- 31.6. International tuition fees would now be charged to all EU citizens (from 1 August 2021 onwards). UKRI updated their studentship terms & conditions to allow up to 30% cap of international students on their programmes. However, only home fees will be covered. As a result, SMT has approved a new

scheme of 130 International Scholar Awards for Doctoral Training Centres (ISAD) which will cover the fee difference between home and international fees. Any funded training programmes which allow for international student recruitment can apply to the Doctoral School for ISAD allocations to their programme.

## **Part II: Matters for Discussion**

### **31.7. Changes to PGR Regulations for 2021-22**

31.8. Received – the paper at RDC 3-01 (20-21). The Deputy Director (Doctoral School) introduced the item, which summarised changes to PGR Regulations for 2021-22 and the ongoing work that was still being undertaken regarding the overall PGR Regulations.

31.9. The first change was for an Annual Leave entitlement for PGR students to be formally written into the regulations – the entitlement would mirror that of staff, i.e. 41 days; this had previously been discussed and agreed in principle at the November 2020 RDC - paper 1-08 (20-21). This was mainly designed for research students who find it difficult to take leave due to Supervisor expectations, although it was noted students do not necessarily have to take it. Some concerns were raised about the administrative burden of logging the leave; however, it was noted that supervisors and students could track leave in any way they both agreed on (some departments have decided to use a more formal logging mechanism). The tracking mechanism should be reviewed in due course.

31.10. The second change was E-submission of the initial thesis being made the default configuration. Examiners will be able to opt-in for a hard copy. This had originally been introduced as a Covid amendment; however, it has been agreed to make this a permanent update to the regulations. This had previously been discussed and agreed in principle at the November 2020 RDC - paper 1-07 (20-21).

- 31.11. One outstanding query for RDC was how the examiners would obtain the hardcopies of the thesis, if required. The draft provided to RDC indicated that the External Examiner would print this locally and claim on expenses; however, RDC did not agree to this suggestion on the basis of the External Examiner experience and potential issues in print quality that could affect the thesis. Instead, it was agreed that when a hardcopy thesis was requested, the responsibility would reside with the student under the current model to produce it how they want and post it out via the Department or Printers. Once the Research Team has an office, this could be sent out by them. It was noted that who sends it out is an operational issue that did not necessarily have to be explicit in the regulations.
- 31.12. The third change was the removal of the 18-month expiration date for the exam entry form. There is a new online workflow for this process and it no longer tracks the submission date so we can no longer enforce this. It was agreed it was not critical to track this date and so the removal was approved.
- 31.13. The fourth change was E-submission of the final thesis which makes the final submission electronic rather than physical, although students may still submit a hardcopy to the library, which may be the preference for some disciplines. This had originally been introduced as a Covid amendment; however, it has been agreed to make this a permanent update to the regulations. This had previously been discussed and agreed in principle at the November 2020 RDC - paper 1-07 (20-21).
- 31.14. The fifth change was an adjustment to who can be an examiner for student who are also staff. The regulations currently are worded as “academic staff” which had been a source of confusion as to whether it applied to students who are often Research Assistants. This change had originally been raised at the June 2020 RDC where it was agreed that removing this phrasing would not be contentious. An additional clause was agreed to be added to ensure any internal examiner was not from the same department as the staff member (regardless of what type of staff) but that they could be used where necessary (i.e., for disciplinary expertise) as long as a Viva chair was used.

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31.15. The sixth change was in relation to Remote Vivas and making this a permanent option going forwards. Where an agreement cannot be reached on the configuration, the default configuration should be in-person. This had originally been introduced as a Covid amendment; however, it has been agreed to make this a permanent update to the regulations. This had previously been discussed and agreed in principle at the November 2020 RDC - paper 1-07 (20-21).

31.16. **Approved** – the paper at RDC 3-01 (20-21) subject to minor amendments to the second change for inclusion in the Academic Manual 2021-22.

## **32. MPhil Stud Regulations**

32.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-02 (20-21). The Faculty Graduate Tutor for Arts and Humanities introduced the item which was a final reading of the new MPhil Stud Regulations.

32.2. **Approved** – the paper at RDC 3-02 (20-21) for inclusion in the Academic Manual 2021-22.

32.3. The Chair thanks the Faculty Graduate Tutor for Arts and Humanities for all of their work in putting the new regulations together.

## **32.4. Student Appeals Procedure**

32.5. Received - the paper at RDC 3-03 (20-21). The Casework Manager introduced the paper which outlined a new approach to the Appeals procedures at UCL.

32.6. It was noted that historically UCL has had a broad complaints procedure covering both complaints and appeals. Good practice across the sector and OIA recommendations had suggested these processes be split as there is currently a lack of clarity for students as to what constitutes an appeal or a complaint.

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- 32.7. The aim of the new approach was to make minimal changes to the current procedures other than to split them into two distinct procedures. Other appeals procedures spread across different areas of regulations have also been identified to bring them into this new single appeals procedure.
- 32.8. It was noted that this could potentially be introduced from January 2022; however, this was still under discussion and subject to change pending discussions at other committees given it affects a wide number of areas.
- 32.9. The paper was agreed in principle, and the Chair confirmed that depending on timescales this could be agreed by circulation and approved by RDC Chair's Action.

### **33. Student Complaints Annual Report**

- 33.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-04 (20-21). The Casework Manager introduced the paper which provided an annual report based on the last calendar year to align with the OIA on Student Complaints data.
- 33.2. A large increase was highlighted compared to last year, with 49 complaints in 2020 compared to 20 in 2019. However, it was noted the raw numbers were less useful than looking at upheld complaints, and that in general given the overall low numbers the percentage increase tends to look big. Covid was also the most likely cause of the increase given the impact it had on students.
- 33.3. The proportion of overall complaints which were upheld or partially upheld was higher in 2020 than in previous years (36.8% compared to an average of 25.0% over the previous three years). This higher figure was due mainly to the large proportion (approximately half) of non-academic complaints which were partially upheld.
- 33.4. The Student Mediator provided a brief oral report and had noted that the workload had not increased as a result of Covid. There had only been some issues related of refusal to wear masks, and a slight increase, but not

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statistically significant, in student/supervisor relationships due to mental health issues.

### **34. Updated upgrade guidelines**

- 34.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-05 (20-21). The Deputy Director (Doctoral School) introduced the item which was a draft for RDC to comment on regarding Upgrade guidelines.
- 34.2. Main issue noted was making timelines tighter by changing 1<sup>st</sup> attempt from between 9 and 18 months to 9 and 12 months; and changing 2<sup>nd</sup> attempt from between 15 and 24 months to 15 and 18 months. RDC generally welcomed the potential change.
- 34.3. For procedures following a second failed upgrade attempt, it was noted that at a previous RDC it was agreed to 'skip the first step of Academic Insufficiency'. There was, however, a lack of clarity around what step this referred to. It was agreed that this should mean the step involving the DGT assessment could be skipped and that a student could be referred straight to the FGT. The DGT should of course be informed and included in all communications regarding this wherever possible.
- 34.4. Within the 'Guidance on Addressing Poor Performance in Research Students', it was noted that the wording around 'Enthusiasm/motivation' under general measures of performance could have some potential Equality, Diversity & Inclusion issues depending on culture.
- 34.5. For failed Upgrades, it was noted that a standard research student learning agreement template needed to be developed for Departmental Graduate Tutors to use if they wished. In general, failed upgrades should be seen as a much more formative learning event than they are currently.
- 34.6. It was suggested that the Upgrade should be an exercise which helps support and moderate expectations of students who are struggling, and also to check

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feasibility of project before a student has spent considerable time on it when there is still ample time to change course. There were concerns that an early upgrade would not be able to sufficiently assess the potential success of a project or student; however, it was noted that substantive data was not necessary at this point of assessment, and that this timeline would also bring us into line with the rest of the sector.

### **35. Policy for parental leave for research students**

- 35.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-06 (20-21). The Deputy Director (Doctoral School) introduced the item which outlined a new parental leave policy.
- 35.2. The main principles were agreed; however, the main issue in question was the source of funding to cover the parental leave. It was agreed that central support could be looked into as an option in the future; however, for the current version of the policy, it was agreed that the policy should state that 'it would be strongly recommended that the Department would cover it', with no obligation to.
- 35.3. It was noted that the Deputy Director (Doctoral School) would work with the Research Studentships team to ensure this policy is updated on their website as well as the Doctoral School website.

Action: The Deputy Director (Doctoral School)

### **36. Academic Partnerships Framework Update for 2021-22: Split-Site PhD**

- 36.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-07 (20-21). The Senior Policy Adviser (Academic Partnerships) introduced the item which sets out the context for the PGR-relevant amendment that is proposed to Chapter 8 of the Academic Manual for 2021-22.
- 36.2. Only one update was proposed for 2021-22, which was to remove references to split-site PhD from the Framework on the basis that these are not used. It was noted this would be reviewed if there was a desire or need for it in future.



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36.3. **Approved** – the paper at at RDC 3-07 (20-21).

**Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information**

36.4. **Student Attendance Policy 2021-22**

36.5. Received - the paper at RDC 3-08 (20-21).

36.6. The Chair noted that members of RDC should contact Academic Services with any queries related to this paper.

**37. MRes-MPhil-PhD Application and Admissions Update**

37.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-09 (20-21)

**38. Anonymised Suspension of Regulations Report (since November 2020)**

38.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-10 (20-21)

**39. New and Amended Programmes and Qualifications Approved by RDC  
Chair's Action**

39.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-11 (20-21)

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Secretary to RDC

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19<sup>th</sup> July 2021