



RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

Wednesday 16 October 2013

MINUTES

PRESENT:

Present:

Professor David Bogle (Chair); Mr David Ashton; Dr Stephanie Bird (vice Professor Claire Warwick); Dr Steven Bloch; Dr Donna Brown; Mr Ben Colvill; Professor Alison Diduck; Dr Caroline Essex; Professor Mike Ewing; Mr Marco Federighi; Dr Sally Leever; Dr Stephen Marshall; Ms Helen Notter; Dr Benet Salway; Dr Joy Sleeman; Dr Dave Spratt; Professor Kaila Srail; Mr Ben Towse.

In attendance: Mr Gary Hawes (Secretary); Mr Gary Smith (for Minute 10)

Apologies were received from: Dr Douglas Guilfoyle; Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu; Professor Claire Warwick.

Key to abbreviations

AB	Academic Board
AC	Academic Committee
CALT	Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching
DTC	Doctoral Training Centre
DGTs	Departmental Graduate Tutors
FGTCs	Faculty Graduate Teaching Committees
FGTs	Faculty Graduate Tutors
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEIs	Higher education institutions
IQR	Internal Quality Review
LSE	London School of Economics
PGR	Postgraduate research
PGTA	Postgraduate Teaching Assistant
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
SLMS	School of Life and Medical Sciences
StRAC	Student Recruitment and Admissions Committee
SRS	Student and Registry Services

1 CONSTITUTION AND 2012-13 MEMBERSHIP; TERMS OF REFERENCE

Received:

- 1.1 The constitution and 2013-14 membership and terms of reference of RDC at RDC 1-01 (13-14).

Reported:

- 1.2 The following updates to the membership details at RDC 1-01 (13-14) were reported by the RDC Secretary:

Faculty Graduate Tutors:
Laws
Population Health Sciences

Dr Douglas Guilfoyle
Dr Andrew Stoker

One Vice-Head of the Graduate School, nominated by the Head of the Graduate School

- Professor Alison Diduck

- 1.3 Owing to the fact that it had been confirmed that Dr Joy Sleeman had not yet completed her current six-year term of service on AB, she had been reinstated to the Elected constituency of RDC, from the Co-opted constituency, as one of the three academic staff members of RDC elected by and from among the professorial and non-professorial academic staff members of AB.
- 1.4 With the establishment with effect from 2013-14 of the StRAC, responsibility for formulating general policy on the recruitment and admission of PGR students had been transferred from RDC. Accordingly, RDC's terms of reference had been amended and the Director of Access and Admissions was no longer an ex officio member of RDC. However, in spite of this, it was proposed that RDC should continue to receive an annual report from the Director of Access and Admissions on PGR student numbers at its Spring Term meeting so that it could be kept apprised of developments on the recruitment and admissions front that might impact on the PGR student experience.

Discussion:

- 1.5 It was noted that the fact that there was some membership crossover between StRAC and RDC would help to ensure that any issues arising from meetings of StRAC could be reported if necessary at RDC. However, it was proposed that the possibility of the Chair of RDC serving on StRAC as an *ex officio* member in his capacity as Head of the Graduate School might also be suggested to the StRAC officers as means of helping to ensure that consideration was given to admissions and marketing issues in respect of PGR students.

RESOLVED:

- 1.6 That it be suggested to the StRAC officers that the Head of the UCL Graduate School be added to the *ex officio* constituency of StRAC.

ACTION: Gary Hawes (to inform StRAC officers)

2 MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 17 JUNE 2013

Confirmed:

- 2.1 The Minutes of the meeting of RDC held on 17 June 2013 [*RDC Mins.31-44, 17.6.13*] subject to the following amendments (through insertion of the underlined text and deletion of the strikethrough text):

- 35.6 It was agreed that it would be more useful in future if particular scrutiny was given by FGTs to Upgrade Panel Reports and Examiners' Joint Reports in instances where MPhil/PhD students ~~had either failed to make the criteria for upgrade or~~ had not fulfilled the requirements for an MPhil or PhD, with a view to extracting from these any generic issues or identifiable themes or trends that might be flagged for RDC's attention. It was further agreed that DGTs should also be advised to give similar scrutiny to Upgrade Panel Reports with a view to reporting any generic issues or identifiable themes arising from these up to FGTs.

[...]

- 35.8 ***That DGTs and FGTs be asked in future to give particular scrutiny to Upgrade Panel Reports and Examiners' Joint Reports respectively in instances where MPhil/PhD students either fail to make the criteria for upgrade or do not fulfil the requirements for an MPhil or PhD, with a view to extracting from these any generic issues or themes from these that might be flagged for RDC's attention.***

ACTION: Faculty Graduate Tutors/Departmental Graduate Tutors

3 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

3A Amendment of the offer letter for PGR students

[RDC Min.32A, 17.6.13 – see also Minute 4 below]

Received:

- 3A.1 An oral report by the Director of Student Administration.
- 3A.2 Although the principle of sending a single offer letter covering both the MRes and PhD awards had been agreed, there were ongoing technical issues that were in the process of being resolved by SRS colleagues. The Director of Student Administration would send an update report via the RDC officers once the matter had been resolved.

3B Formatting of PhD theses

[RDC Min.43, 17.6.13]

Noted:

- 3B.1 The Chair of RDC wished for RDC to consider whether or not the proposal made at RDC's previous meeting on 17 June 2013 to review the current UCL guidance on the formatting of PhD theses with a view to permitting the submission of theses on double-sided paper would be likely to prove an inconvenience to examiners.

Discussion:

- 3B.2 RDC agreed that students should be given the option of submitting their PhD theses on double-sided paper, and that this would be unlikely to prove an inconvenience to examiners, particularly as double or one-and-a-half spacing would still be required to be used in typescripts. Some members of RDC also noted that examiners might in fact prefer this change on the basis that it would make PhD theses lighter to carry.
- 3B.3 It was suggested that options might also be explored for making electronic copies of PhD theses available to examiners on request, although it was noted that additional staff resources would likely be required to effect this.

RESOLVED:

- 3B.4 That the decision made at the previous meeting of RDC – that UCL guidance on the formatting of PhD theses be revised to permit the submission of PhD theses on double-sided paper – be confirmed.

ACTION: Helen Notter (to note)

- 3B.5 That the option of also making electronic copies of PhD theses available to examiners on request be explored along with additional staff resources that would be required to effect this arrangement.

ACTION: Helen Notter

4 PROGRESSION LEVEL FROM MRES to PhD ON 1+3 PROGRAMMES

Received:

- 4.1 A note at RDC 1-02 (13-14), introduced by the RDC Secretary.

Reported:

- 4.2 There has been some discussion within UCL around the issue of whether or not to raise the progression level from MRes to /PhD/EngD in 1+3 programmes of study from an overall average of 50% to an overall average of 60%.
- 4.3 Colleagues in some DTCs were strongly in favour of a change along these lines with a view to permitting automatic progression for students achieving an overall average of 60% or above, but with flexibility to review individual cases of students achieving an overall average in the 50%-60% range and to grant progression to the PhD/EngD for these students on a discretionary basis. Other colleagues, however, were opposed to such a change, citing among other reasons the inherent unfairness of requiring MRes students to achieve a 60% overall average to progress to a PhD/EngD while other Masters students could be admitted to a PhD programme having achieved an overall average of 50%, in addition to concerns that it would discourage students from taking up the MRes.

Discussion:

- 4.4 Some members of RDC expressed concern that raising the progression level for MRes/PhD/EngD 1+3 programmes of study from 50% to 60% would serve to deter students who performed less well in programmes such as the MRes that included a taught element but who then went on to excel at PhD level. In light of this, it was suggested that there should be some differentiation between the taught component and the dissertation/research project component on the MRes element of the programme when it came to giving consideration to student progression.
- 4.5 RDC agreed that it would be important to ensure that there were clear and consistent criteria for student progression that applied to all MRes/PhD/EngD 1+3 programmes of study and to each student case. In the light of this, RDC proposed the following:
- That the criteria for automatic progression for MRes/PhD/EngD 1+3 programmes of study be changed to require attainment of an overall average of 50% *in addition to* an average of 60% on the main dissertation/research project component of the MRes;
 - That DTCs wishing to permit the progression of any student who failed to meet these requirements be required to apply for a suspension of the regulations *via* the Chair of RDC.
- 4.6 The Chair of RDC proposed that FGT members of RDC be asked to consult with colleagues based in DTCs on the above proposals in the first instance with a view to determining whether it was possible to reach a consensus on the matter and reporting back to the RDC officers.

RESOLVED:

- 4.7 That relevant FGT members of RDC be asked to consult with colleagues based in DTCs on the proposals at Minute 4.5 above with a view to determining whether it was possible to reach a consensus on the matter and reporting back to the RDC officers.

ACTION: FGT members of RDC

5 PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO THE EXAMINATION CRITERIA FOR RESEARCH DEGREES

Received:

- 5.1 A proposal at RDC 1-03 (13-14), introduced by the Graduate School Administrator.

Reported:

- 5.2 UCL's current assessment criteria for research degrees focused on the submitted PhD thesis and on research skills as demonstrated by the thesis. However, given the shift in emphasis in PhD training to include the wider skills of the researcher and the importance of adequate communication skills and viva performance, RDC was invited to consider the proposal at RDC 1-03 (13-14) for amendment of the UCL PhD Joint Examiners' Report form.

Discussion:

- 5.3 Following discussion around clarification of how 'peers' and 'the larger scholarly community' should be defined in the context of requiring examiners to satisfy themselves that PhD candidates were able to communicate with these groups in general about their areas of expertise, it was agreed that the following modification to the amendment to the UCL PhD Joint Examiners' Report form that was proposed at RDC 1-03 (13-14) should be made (through deletion of the strikethrough text):

The examiners have satisfied themselves that the candidate, as evidenced by the thesis and the Viva, can communicate with ~~their peers and the larger~~ scholarly community in ~~general~~ about their areas of expertise

- 5.4 It was agreed that the above amendment should take effect from 1 January 2014 and should apply to all PhD examinations held thereafter.
- 5.5 In terms of communicating the above amendment to UCL faculties and departments, it was agreed that the revised UCL PhD Joint Examiners' Report form should be circulated to FGTs with the instruction for them to cascade this down to DGTs, supervisors and PGR students, drawing attention to the above amendment and to the fact that this simply made explicit what had previously been implicit.

RESOLVED:

- 5.6 That i) the proposal at RDC 1-03 (13-14) for amendment of the UCL PhD Joint Examiners' Report form be approved subject to the further modification proposed at Minute 5.3 above, ii) this amendment take effect from 1 January 2014 and apply to all PhD examinations held thereafter and iii) the revised UCL PhD Joint Examiners' Report form be circulated to FGTs with the instruction for them to cascade this down to DGTs, supervisors and PGR students, drawing attention to the above amendment and to the fact that this simply made explicit what had previously been implicit.

ACTION: Ben Colvill/Helen Notter

6 REPORT FROM THE WORKING GROUP ON NON-PERMISSIBLE FORMS OF SUPERVISION FOR PGR STUDENTS

Received:

- 6.1 A report at RDC 1-04 (13-14), introduced by Professor Alison Diduck.

Reported:

- 6.2 The report at RDC 1-04 (13-14) included proposed guidance for PGR student supervisors on the type of advice and the levels of assistance they should give to their research students. The proposed guidance had been drafted by the working group, chaired by Professor Diduck, that had been established by RDC in response to some of the issues raised by the Woolf Report on the Saif Gadhafi case at the LSE.
- 6.3 The working group had been particularly conscious about the need to clarify appropriate forms of supervision in the context of the relationship between supervisors and their PGR students without being too exhaustive or prescriptive and with a view to trusting the professionalism and better judgement of supervisors in such matters. Once approved, it was proposed to include the guidance either in the Code of Practice for Graduate Research Degrees or as separate guidance if this was deemed appropriate.

Discussion:

- 6.4 RDC members suggested various amendments to the text of the guidance at RDC 1-04 (13-14).
- 6.5 While it was accepted that all considerations around PhD thesis submission were matters for the student and supervisor to negotiate, some members of RDC suggested that the Submission of Thesis Form for Supervisors should be amended to make explicit the direction that supervisors should not divulge to examiners that a thesis had been submitted against their advice.
- 6.6 The following further suggestions were also made during discussion:
- That with a view to ensuring that all UCL guidance on PGR student supervision and the responsibilities of supervisors was available in a single location, a link to the guidance, once finalised, should be included in the Code of Practice for Graduate Research Degrees;
 - The guidance, once finalised, should also be routinely distributed to participants on the 'Introduction to Research Student Supervision at UCL' briefing session that was organised by the UCL Graduate School and mandatory for all research student supervisors;
 - That once finalised, the guidance should also be cascaded down to Heads of Department, FGTs and DGTs *via* the UCL Graduate School;
 - That a copy of the guidance should also be made available to the UCL Union Rights and Advice Centre.

RESOLVED:

- 6.7 That i) subject to incorporation of the amendments suggested by RDC members at the meeting, the guidance at RDC 1-04 (13-14) be approved and ii) the suggestions set out at Minute 6.5 above also be taken on board by the RDC officers in finalising and disseminating the guidance.

ACTION: Gary Hawes/Ben Colvill

- 6.8 That the Submission of Thesis Form for Supervisors be amended to make explicit the direction that supervisors should not divulge to examiners that a thesis had been submitted against their advice.

ACTION: Ben Colvill/Helen Notter

7 INTERNAL QUALITY REVIEW 2011-12

Received:

- 7.1 At RDC 1-05 (13-14), a summary of recommendations identified in IQR reports in 2011-12 in relation to PGR students and/or the Graduate School, introduced by the Chair of RDC.

Reported:

- 7.2 While the recommendations identified in IQR reports in 2011-12 in relation to PGR students and/or the Graduate School had not revealed any key institutional issues, a number of recommendations had pertained to the need for more training for PGTA's. This had been discussed at length within UCL and given rise to the development by CALT of a comprehensive scheme of PGTA training and development that was being run through each of UCL's three schools and centrally through the Graduate School's Skills Development Programme.
- 7.3 The Chair of RDC noted that guidance on providing teaching opportunities for PGR students had also been previously prepared by the UCL Graduate School and was available online at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/docs/guidance_to_teaching.php. This advised, amongst other things, that PGTA's should have a maximum load of 180 hours per year (to include teaching, preparation and training).

Discussion:

- 7.4 It was noted that questions pertaining to PGTA training and opportunities to teach were also included as part of the Graduate School Survey and the Student Barometer and International Students Barometer for the purpose of canvassing and keeping UCL informed of the views and comments of UCL students.
- 7.5 It was suggested that it would be helpful to invite CALT's Principal Teaching Fellow, Dr Paul Walker to attend the next meeting of RDC to discuss the scheme of PGTA training and development that had been implemented by CALT.
- 7.6 It was also suggested that it would be useful for RDC to receive at its next meeting the results of a survey of PGTA's that had been carried out within SLMS and which would be helpful in giving an indication of how much teaching PGTA's were actually undertaking.

RESOLVED:

- 7.7 That Dr Paul Walker be invited to attend the next meeting of RDC to discuss the scheme of PGTA training and development that had been implemented by CALT.
ACTION: Gary Hawes
- 7.8 That RDC receive at its next meeting the results of a survey of PGTA's that had been undertaken within SLMS.
ACTION: Gary Hawes (to consult with Dr Dave Spratt)

8 ANNUAL REPORT ON MINUTES OF MEETINGS OF FACULTY GRADUATE TEACHING COMMITTEES

Received:

- 8.1 A report at RDC 1-06 (13-14), introduced by the Chair of RDC.

Reported:

- 8.2 In accordance with arrangements agreed previously by AC and RDC, the report at RDC 1-06 (13-14) provided a summary of PGR issues arising from Minutes of meetings of FGTCs (or their equivalent bodies) that had been received by the RDC officers during 2012-13.
- 8.3 RDC was invited to discuss some of the main themes that had been flagged in the summary at RDC 1-06 (13-14). These included:
- Entry requirements for PGR programmes; did these need to be reviewed? Should candidates require a Masters-level degree as a pre-requisite?
 - Increasing opportunities for PGR students to teach (see Minute 7 above);
 - Response time for feedback on work submitted by PGR students – should there be more specific guidance apart from the Graduate School's recommendation of "reasonable time"?

Discussion:

Entry requirements for PGR programmes

- 8.4 While it was noted that some of UCL's competitors, eg Imperial College, required all entrants to their PGR programmes to hold a Masters Degree, this was not currently the case at UCL – although some UCL PGR programmes did require all applicants to hold a Master's Degree. RDC was not minded, however, to recommend a change to the general entry requirements for its PGR programmes for some of the following reasons:
- the introduction of four-year MSci and MEng undergraduate degree programmes in Physical Sciences and Engineering subject areas had to some extent helped to get around this issue, whereas European universities commonly offered five-year programmes (three-year Bachelors plus two-year Masters).
 - the rising costs of Masters degree and the withdrawal of funding opportunities for postgraduate study had made the option of doing a Masters degree less viable for many undergraduate students – so requiring entrants to UCL's PGR programmes to hold a Masters degree would risk excluding these prospective applicants.

However, it was noted that it would be important to keep the matter under review with a view to revisiting it at some point in the future if necessary.

Response time for feedback on work submitted by PGR students

- 8.5 Although some members of RDC felt that it would be helpful for the response time for feedback on work submitted by PGR students to be more clearly prescribed, other members posited that feedback timescales should not be prescribed and that an abstract standard for 'reasonable time' should instead apply that would need to be negotiated between the supervisor and student taking into account any individual circumstances.

9 REPORT ON RESEARCH DEGREE ADMINISTRATION

Received:

- 9.1 The report at RDC 1-07 (12-13), introduced by the Student Records Manager.

Discussion:

- 9.2 While it had not been possible for SRS colleagues to identify any generic issues or themes arising from research degree examination reports in the process of compiling the report at RDC 1-07 (12-13), the Chair of RDC reminded RDC that it had been agreed at the Committee's previous meeting on 17 June 2013 that FGTs should be asked in future to identify and bring to RDC's attention any systemic issues or trends arising from research degree examination reports in their faculties. In the meantime, the RDC officers would be giving further consideration to a mechanism for facilitating this arrangement.

10 HEFCE REPORT ON RATES OF QUALIFICATION FROM POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREES

Received:

- 10.1 At RDC 1-09 (13-14), the above HEFCE report published in July 2013, introduced by the Chair of RDC.

Noted:

- 10.2 The full report was available at:
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2013/201317/#d.en.82794>

Reported:

- 10.3 According to the method that had been used by HEFCE to produce the data set out in the report at RDC 1-09 (13-14), a projected 83% of PGR degree starters at UCL would qualify with a PGR degree over the projected period of 25 academic years.
- 10.4 While this projection was behind some of UCL's competitors, it was noted that UCL had the highest number of PGR degree starters overall of all of the HEIs included in the report. However, while it was noted that the information at RDC 1-09 (13-14) was useful for comparison purposes, RDC was advised against applying too much significance to the data. It was noted that concerns around how the data were processed had been previously raised by UCL, which had led to a decision to suppress the calculated UCL values in the previous year's report which had been published by HEFCE in May 2012, and that results for a number of HEIs, including Imperial College and Leeds, had been suppressed in the latest HEFCE report.
- 10.5 For future HEFCE reports on rates of qualification from PGR degrees that would be received by RDC, the Head of Student Data Services agreed to look into the feasibility of providing a breakdown of the information by Faculty and funding status of student.

RESOLVED:

- 10.6 That for future HEFCE reports on rates of qualification from PGR degrees that would be received by RDC, the Head of Student Data Services look into the feasibility of providing a breakdown of the information by Faculty and funding status of student.

ACTION: Gary Smith

11 HIGHER DOCTORATES

Noted:

11.1 Since being conferred degree-awarding powers, UCL had not offered Higher Doctorate Degrees. The University of London had put on hold its award of Higher Degrees over ten years ago, for the following reasons:

- the demand had significantly reduced as they were no longer seen as essential for promotion to Professor;
- the standards were felt to have diminished;
- they were difficult to administer as examiners were reluctant to take on the responsibility.

11.2 UCL had given thought to introducing Higher Doctorates in the past as a very high-standard qualification; however, this had not been high on the priority list and had not been widely discussed. Also, it did not seem that there was a strong demand.

RESOLVED:

11.3 That owing to shortness of time, discussion of this item and the principle of UCL offering Higher Doctorate Degrees in the future be carried over to RDC's next scheduled meeting.

ACTION: Gary Hawes (to note for next meeting's Agenda)

12 RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE – ANNUAL REPORT 2012-13

Received:

12.1 At RDC 1-08 (13-14), the RDC Annual Report 2012-13 for forwarding to the December 2013 meeting of AC.

13 DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

Noted:

13.1 The next meetings of RDC were scheduled as follows:

Wednesday 5 March 2014 - 10am (Wilkins Garden Room)

Wednesday 4 June 2014 - 10am (South Wing Council Room)

CONFIDENTIAL (RESERVED) BUSINESS

14 CONFIDENTIAL (RESERVED) MINUTES OF 17 JUNE 2013 MEETING

Confirmed:

- 14.1 The Confidential (Reserved) Minutes of the RDC meeting held on 17 June 2013, issued previously [*RDC Mins.45-46, 17.6.13*].

15 CHAIR'S RESERVED BUSINESS

15A Suspension of Regulations report

Received:

- 15A.1 At RDC 1-10 (13-14), a report on suspensions of the regulations for students proceeding to research degrees.

GARY HAWES

Academic Support Officer (and Committee Operations Co-ordinator)

Academic Services

Student and Registry Services

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27 January 2014