LONDON'S GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

18 October 2016

M I N U T E S

Present: Professor David Bogle (Chair),
Dr Simon Banks, Dr Elvira Bramon, Mr Ben Colvill, Mr Mark Crawford, Professor Kirsten Harvey, Dr Sally Leevers, Ms Helen Notter, Professor Martin Oliver, Mr Derfel Owen, Dr Hynek Pikhart, Dr Benet Salway, Dr Ruth Siddall, Dr David Spratt, Professor Kaila Srai, Dr Andrew Stoker,

In attendance: Dr Elsa Arcaute (vice Dr Stephen Marshall), Mr Rik Ganly-Thomas (vice Dr Virginia Mantouvalou), Ms Bella Malins for item 5, Professor Tania Monteiro (vice Dr Caroline Essex), Dr Sam Smidt (vice Professor Dilly Fung), Mr Simon To for item 7, Ms Lizzie Vinton (Secretary)

Apologies received from: Dr Virginia Mantouvalou, Dr Caroline Essex, Professor Dilly Fung, Dr Stephen Marshall, Professor Joy Sleeman, Professor Anthony Smith

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Key to abbreviations:

DGT	Departmental Graduate Tutor
FGT	Faculty Graduate Tutor
MAPS	Mathematical and Physical Sciences
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PGTA	Postgraduate Teaching Assistant
PRES	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SSCC	Staff-Student Consultative Committee
StAR	Student Academic Representative
UCLU	UCL Union

PART I: PRELIMINARY BUSINESS

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1   TERMS OF REFERENCE, CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERSHIP

1.1   **Received:** The RDC Terms of Reference, Constitution and Membership for 2016-17 at RDC 1-01 (16-17).

1.2   The committee welcomed the following new members:
- Mr Derfel Owen, Director of Academic Services
- Mr Mark Crawford, UCLU Postgraduate Students' Officer
- Dr Elvira Bramon, FGT Brain Sciences
- Professor Kirsten Harvey, Academic Board nominee, School of Pharmacy

- Dr Hynek Pikhart, Academic Board nominee, Institute of Epidemiology & Health Care
- Dr Benet Salway, Academic Board nominee, History

1.3   There had been one addition/ clarification to the Terms of Reference:
"*4. To approve new research programmes and their subsequent amendment and withdrawal*".

1.4   New student members would be appointed in November 2016.

2   MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

2.1   **Approved:** The minutes of the meeting held 8 June 2016.

PART II: MATTERS FOR DISCUSSION

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3   QAA HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW OUTCOMES

3.1   **Received:** The QAA Report of the Higher Education Review of UCL in May 2016 at RDC 1-02 (16-17) and the UCL Action Plan at RDC 1-03 (16-17).

3.2   The Chair emphasised the importance of the positive outcome of the review which meant that UCL was now eligible for the first iteration of the Teaching Excellence Framework. The committee extended its thanks to the Director of Academic Services and his team, the student lead, Wahida Samie, and to the staff and students who had helped to compile the Self Evaluation Document and evidence, and taken time to attend interviews. RDC particularly welcomed the feature of good practice identified in relation to UCL's PGR provision: "*The single, institution-wide framework provided by the Doctoral School for facilitating and promoting the quality of the postgraduate research environment (Expectation B11)*".

3.3   It was noted that Education Committee would now assume responsibility for the approval and implementation of the Action Plan in response to the QAA report. The plan included a range of actions already in train, with a particular focus on enhancing UCL's student representation scheme, improving the processes for student complaints and appeals, embedding the new Personal Tutoring Policy and generic learning outcomes for interim qualifications, and improving the student experience of assessment and feedback. There were also affirmations for UCL's ongoing work to improve the estate.

3.4   RDC discussed ways to improve the complaints procedures and noted that there were perhaps opportunities to review the processes for students to appeal Upgrade and final result decisions as part of the review of the PGR regulations. The Committee noted that Student and Registry Services were taking forward a review of Student Casework, including complaints and appeals, and PGR specific issues would be discussed as part of this.

4   MRES/MPHIL/PHD APPLICATION AND ADMISSIONS ANNUAL REPORT

4.1   **Received:** The report at RDC 1-04 (16-17) from the Director of Access and Admissions.

4.2   RDC noted the headline figures which indicated a fall of 1.6% in overall applications from last year, with fewer UK and EU applications in particular. This was in large part due to a 14% reduction in the number of offers made by Faculties.

4.3   RDC noted the importance of maintaining healthy PhD numbers in order to maintain UCL's standing as a world-leading research intensive, to increase impact and performance in the REF and to grow the research vitality of the institution. The Committee discussed the potential reasons for a reduction in offers, such as the quality and quantity of suitable estate and resources, particularly for practical research projects, and the growth in UG and PGT numbers which impacted on PGR places. It was also suggested that, following a number of years of growth, numbers were possibly reaching a plateau.

However RDC noted that the data contrasted with the recent round of Faculty Strategic Plans which appeared to be aiming for modest growth, and agreed that this divergence needed further investigation.

4.4 RDC noted that the highly specialised nature of studentships often made marketing more complex, particularly because PGR applicants tended to contact Departments directly about available studentships. However it was also recognised that studentships only covered a proportion of UCL PGR places, and that non-studentship places would also benefit from more targeted marketing. RDC suggested that it might be beneficial to collate Departmental data to analyse enquiry-to-application ratios for both student groups.

4.5 **Agreed:** The Director of Access and Admissions agreed to work with individual Faculties to investigate these issues further and report back to RDC.

Action: Director of Access and Admissions, Faculty Graduate Tutors

5 INTERNAL QUALITY REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS 2015-16

5.1 **Received:** The summary of IQR recommendations at RDC 1-05 (16-17).

5.2 The Chair commended the IQR process which included a focus on the suitability of Departmental research environment, including the quality of lab space, training of staff and supervision by academics and post-docs as well as opportunities to hear from PGR students about the quality of their experience. RDC noted that the recommendations reflected UCL's continuing discussions about the Research Student Log, PGTAs and the physical environment. There were also some suggestions about how to improve induction for PGR students, and about the role of UCL, and RDC, in ensuring the quality of the student experience during the phasing out of UCL's standalone presence in Qatar.

6 StARS ANNUAL REPORT 2015-16

6.1 **Received:** The report at RDC 1-06 (16-17) from UCLU and the Director of Academic Services.

6.2 208 PGR StARs were recorded for 2015-16 contributing to an overall increase in the number of StARs across UCL of 41% from the previous year. This translated to a PGR StAR-to-Student ratio of 1:28, compared to 1:28 at PGT level and 1:36 at UG level. At all levels of study there was an increase in the proportion of SSCCs attended by StARs – coverage was now at 84%, up from 72% in 2014-15 (data were not included for SSCC attendance at PGR level alone). There were currently four PGR Faculty StARs in Built Environment, Brain Sciences, Laws and MAPS.

6.3 The StARs Steering Group was working on the Development Plan and had undertaken a scoping exercise asking students, StARs and staff to reflect on the scheme and their priorities for future years. The Steering Group particularly wanted to increase proactive ownership of the scheme by UCL and, to this end, it had been agreed that the StARs Steering Group would now report to RDC and EdCom on the topics being raised by StARs at every level, and on the extent to which feedback was being proactively addressed. The draft plan included a review of the SSCC terms of reference, and training opportunities for staff involved in the process.

6.4 RDC discussed ways to improve coverage of PGR Department and Faculty StARs, noting that this related closely to action 2b of the Doctoral Education Strategy: "Ensure that doctoral researchers are treated as colleagues and are involved in UCL governance". Those Faculties with PGR StARs spoke about their important role in helping to promote Faculty issues, gather feedback from students and communicate Faculty responses to that feedback. The report authors explained that the next iteration of the StARs Development Plan included a greater emphasis on promoting and recruiting to Departmental and Faculty roles. There would be more opportunities for StARs to gain experience in leadership at Department and Faculty level and a shift in focus from monitoring StARs coverage to ensuring that the issues raised by StARS at programme level fed through to the Department, Faculty and institution. There would also be an increased emphasis on ensuring that feedback was responded to in an appropriate and timely manner.

6.5 **Agreed:** RDC requested that the development plan include targeted actions to address the particular issues of recruiting PGR StARs at all levels.

Action: UCLU Representation and Campaigns Manager

6.6 RDC asked for a detailed breakdown of PGR StARs across faculties and departments, and of PGR StARs attendance at SSCCs, to assist the committee in identifying gaps, promoting the scheme and encouraging recruitment of Faculty and Departmental StARs in particular.

Action: UCLU Representation and Campaigns Manager

7 ANNUAL REPORT ON MINUTES OF MEETINGS OF FACULTY COMMITTEES RESPONSIBLE FOR PGR STUDENT PROVISION 2015-16

7.1 **Received:** The report at RDC 1-04 (16-17).

7.2 The report provided an overview of the operation of Faculty committees responsible for the oversight of PGR provision and a summary of the issues most commonly discussed. The committee noted that there appeared to be strong links between the matters discussed at RDC and local committees, including PGTA working hours, the Dilemma Game, the RDC Working Group on Mental Wellbeing, and diversity in the PGR student body.

7.3 The report suggested that the Faculty Teaching Committee Terms of Reference might be reviewed to more specifically refer to PGR committees, their membership and the specific items that they should cover in their agendas. It also asked RDC to consider whether there was adequate coverage of PGR issues where committees covered both taught and research student matters. Whilst the majority of Faculties now operated separate committees, the minutes of combined committees suggested that taught issues tended to dominate agendas, and that PGR students might be better represented by a separate committee. Those who had recently created separate committees had found it beneficial, that it had increased engagement from StARs and helped to address PGR-specific issues more thoroughly. It was however recognised that separate meetings would not be viable in faculties with limited PGR numbers.

7.4 **Agreed:** All faculties would be required to have a separate PGR Faculty Research Degrees Committee, with the exception of Laws where it was recognised that the numbers of PGR students would not make this viable. Separate terms of reference should be drawn up, and committees should include a broad representation of PGR students.

Action: Director of Academic Services

8 UCLU PGTA REPORT

8.1 **Received:** The report at RDC 1-08 (16-17) presented by the UCLU Postgraduate Students' Officer.

8.2 In 2014, UCLU launched the 'Fair Pay for TAs' campaign calling for PGTAs to be paid a fair wage for all hours worked, and to have their rights secured through contractual employment. In August 2016 UCLU ran two online surveys, totalling 267 responses from PGTAs and a further 157 from other, non-teaching research students. The paper presented the findings of the survey and made some recommendations for RDC's consideration.

8.3 The paper acknowledged the many positives in the current UCL policy, which included a formal recruitment process, interviews for positions, a minimum grade 5 salary and contracts for students with significant responsibilities. However the report indicated that some positions had not been subject to a formal recruitment process and that UCL hourly pay appeared to be lower than other London institutions once preparation and marking were factored in. The report also showed that there may be a gender pay gap for like-for-like work, although this needed further investigation. The report included recommendations to increase the hourly rate of pay, to take steps to ensure that preparation, marking and administration were fully remunerated and to standardise recruitment processes.

8.4 RDC discussed the report in detail and were keen to support UCLU in raising their concerns at a higher level. The committee endorsed the recommendations to ensure that students were fairly remunerated for preparation, marking and administration and to ensure that there was a transparent recruitment process for all positions. RDC questioned the benefits of mandating participation in the advanced teaching programme for all PGTAs, but did agree that more spaces could be made available and that participation could be strongly encouraged. There was also a wide-ranging debate about the mandate for teaching as a condition of studentship stipends, noting that teaching gave students a great deal of skills and experiences which would help them in their future careers, but that high levels of teaching could adversely impact upon their own research. It was suggested that UCL might revisit its policy on the expectations of students awarded a stipend.

8.5 **Agreed:** RDC requested that UCLU further interrogate the findings on pay by gender and the potential causes of any differentials uncovered. The Vice-Head of the Doctoral School, Professor Diduck, also offered to report these findings to the Provost's 50/50 group for further exploration.

Action: PG Students Officer, Vice-Head of the Doctoral School

8.6 **Agreed:** The Chair would contact the Director of HR to flag the key issues and discuss ways to address the report's findings.

Action: Chair

9 STUDENT SPACE SURVEY

9.1 **Received:** The report at RDC 1-09 (16-17) presented by the UCLU Postgraduate Students' Officer.

9.2 RDC welcomed the report which helped UCL to understand better the needs of PGR students. The report recommended that every student should have their own desk if possible, but there was also a need for common and social spaces in which students could discuss their work, share ideas, and develop a sense of belonging whilst having access to desks, wifi etc. However students were only likely to use and benefit from such spaces if they were close to their Department and colleagues. It was noted that students in different disciplines tended to have different needs – those working with equipment or with high volumes of paperwork were more likely to need their own desk, but these needed to be configured so that students felt a sense of belonging to their research group, echoing some of the recommendations which were emerging from the PRES. The report's findings also reflected some of the recent discussions around PGR mental wellbeing, further enforcing the need to address this issue.

9.3 **Agreed:** Social and Historical Sciences would share their report on the establishment of social spaces for PGR students.

Action: Faculty Graduate Tutor, SHS

9.4 **Agreed:** The Chair would discuss the report with the Vice-Provost Research and UCLU to determine appropriate institutional actions in response, such as gathering data on the current space available in each Faculty and taking the report to Estates Committee to promote discussion of the specific needs of PGR students.

Action: Chair

10 UPDATED PORTICO REPORTING TOOL

10.1 **Received:** The report at RDC 1-10 (16-17) from the Faculty Graduate Tutor for Population Health Sciences.

10.2 Population Health Sciences had helped to develop a new Portico reporting tool called 'Research Students Report by Supervisor' which allowed Faculties and Departments to report on the numbers of research students supervised by each member of staff, including where staff supervised across Departments. The tool was now available in the Portico suite of reports for all Departments to use.

11 UPGRADE

11.1 **Received:** The paper at <u>RDC 1-11 (16-17)</u> from the Faculty Graduate Tutor for Engineering Sciences.

11.2 The paper noted some inconsistencies in the procedure to be followed for initiating the Upgrade between the Doctoral School Code of Practice for Research Degrees and the Guidelines for Upgrade from MPhil to PhD Status. The paper also highlighted that Departments, whilst charged with ensuring that students Upgrade within the stipulated timeframe, did not have a mechanism to enforce this. This was felt to be problematic as Upgrade rates were used as a Key Performance Indicator in strategic planning.

11.3 RDC noted that it was the responsibility of the Department and the DGT to ensure that students upgraded within the appropriate timeframe. Whilst there was support for ensuring clarity and consistency, there was a reluctance to make the timeframe a regulatory stipulation as it was felt that this would place unnecessary restrictions on both Departments and students, was likely to lead to higher numbers of requests for Suspensions of Regulations and would also necessitate a formal process for the notification of extenuating circumstances. If the timeframe was instead viewed as a guideline this gave students and supervisors far greater flexibility, ensured that students only upgraded when ready and provided assistance for students who might be facing personal or academic difficulties. Many Faculties were keen to ensure that the onus did not fall on students alone as delays could be caused by supervisors failing to meet deadlines or by problems in the supervisory relationship. Whilst a guideline might be more difficult to enforce, Departments were still able to define local processes for managing their cohort.

11.4 There was a wide ranging discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of regulation against guideline, incorporating the views from each Faculty. Many had defined their own local polices which ranged from administrators issuing regular reminders to Upgrade panels enforcing penalties, such as failure of the first attempt unless there was evidence of extenuating circumstances. Others had a formal panel which determined whether a student could be granted an extension in advance of the deadline. Whilst a number of Faculties stated a preference for clear regulation there appeared to be an equal number who felt that this would be detrimental to the student experience.

11.5 **Agreed:** that the RDC working group on the PGR Regulations should a) further discuss the issues raised, consult with students and staff, and bring back recommendations to RDC and b) ensure that all policies and regulations were consistent.

Action: Chair of the RDC Working Group on PGR Regulations

12 ORAL UPDATE ON UCL AUSTRALIA

12.1 **Received:** An oral update from the Faculty Graduate Tutor for Engineering Sciences.

12.2 The Faculty reported little change since the last update, with the closure progressing to plan. Of the six PGR students currently registered, three were on schedule to complete by the closure date. The remaining three were scheduled to complete between 2018 and 2020, one of whom would be on Completing Research Status by the closure date. Discussions were continuing with the other two students. All students were receiving appropriate supervision.

13 UPDATE ON UCL QATAR

13.1 **Received:** The CONFIDENTIAL report at <u>RDC 1-12 (16-17)</u> from the Director of UCL Qatar.

13.2 RDC noted that the document was confidential to committee members as it anticipated some decisions which had not yet been formally taken nor communicated. The committee noted that there were currently 12 PGR students registered, two to four of whom were not likely to complete before the end of UCL's standalone presence in Qatar. UCL Qatar was working closely with the Institute of Archaeology and the Doctoral School to ensure that the student experience and the research environment were maintained during the phasing out of UCL's standalone presence in

Australia, and that clear plans were in place for every student. As with UCL Australia there were risks involved where students might need to interrupt their studies, where students might not be able to complete their studies in London due to visa requirements and where staff might find posts elsewhere before the closure was complete. RDC would continue to keep a watching brief over the process via the Faculty Graduate Tutor in S&HS.

PART III: OTHER MATTERS FOR APPROVAL OR INFORMATION

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14   RDC ANNUAL REPORT TO ACADEMIC COMMITTEE 2015-16

14.1   **Noted:** The RDC Annual Report to AC at RDC 1-13 (16-17).

15   NEW AND AMENDED PROGRAMMES AND QUALIFICATIONS APPROVED BY RDC CHAIR'S ACTION

15.1   **Noted:** The programmes approved by RDC chair's action at RDC 1-14 (16-17).

16   ANONYMISED SUSPENSIONS OF REGULATIONS REPORT

16.1   **Approved:** The suspensions of regulations at RDC 1-15 (16-17).

17   ANY OTHER BUSINESS

A   PGR Regulations Working Group

17A.1   The Chair of the PGR Regulations Working Group was standing down and Professor Martin Oliver had kindly offered to take up the chair. This left a vacancy for one more group member, preferably in the areas of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Dr Benet Salway, Faculty Graduate Tutor in S&HS, agreed to join the membership of the group.

18   DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

- Monday 20 March 2017, 2.00pm – 4.30pm, Haldane Room, Wilkins Building
- Monday 5 June 2017, 10.30am – 1.00pm, Haldane Room, Wilkins Building

LIZZIE VINTON
Secretary to Research Degrees Committee
Assessment Regulations and Governance Manager | Academic Services | Student and Registry Services
25 October 2016