



Research Degrees Committee

23 May 2023

Confirmed Minutes

Present Members: Professor David Bogle (Chair); Hamza Ahmed; Professor Simon Banks; Dr Josephine Barnes; Karen Barnard; Professor Annie Britton; Dr Andrew Flinn; Emma Francis; Elizabeth Halton; Professor Jasmina Jovanovic; Dr Rebecca Lindner; Professor Colin Marx; Professor Tania Monteiro; Professor Jill Norman; Helen Notter; Professor Jane Perryman; Paula Speller; Professor Dave Spratt; Dr Andrew Stoker.

Attendees: Zoe Harrison (for Minute 41) Dr Benet Salway (for Minutes 38 & 39); Gary Smith (for Minute 40) and Matthew Redmond (Secretary).

Apologies for absence: Dr Ruth Siddall; Professor Jane Holder; Professor Stan Zochowski; Dr Sally Leever

Part I: Preliminary Business

35. Minutes of the Last Meeting

- 35.1. **Approved** – the minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2023 (RDC Minutes 18-34, 7.3.2023) at paper RDC 3-01 (22-23)
- 35.2. It was confirmed that Professor Colin Marx would be acting as the member for Built Environment until September 2023. It was also noted that Karen Barnard, Director, UCL Careers, would be replacing Dr Rebecca Lindner on the Committee. The membership will be revised to reflect this.

36. Matters arising from the minutes

- 36.1. None.

37. Chair's Business

- 37.1. The Chair provided an update on the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) results. It was reported that the response rate had been 26% this year, down from 46% in the previous year. However, it was noted that the response rate was in-line with the sector and that results still provided a meaningful source of information.
- 37.2. The Chair provided an update on the systems utilised in the administration of postgraduate research students which require review and replacement, including the

Research Student Log and InkPath. It was noted that a system for Studentships was still required, and that work was on-going to progress this. Members were asked to ensure that they advocate for updated and new systems to support PGR administration in other forums to emphasise their importance. It was noted that PGR will be included in the review of admissions systems at UCL and if members had anything to raise in relation to PGR Admissions they can feed this back to the Doctoral School via the Doc School email address so it can be included in discussions.

- 37.3. It was highlighted to members that two links on Artificial Intelligence (AI) had been provided within the meeting agenda for their consideration. These related to engaging with AI in assessment and managing AI in relation to academic misconduct. The Chair recommended that AI was made a focus of discussions at the next RDC meeting. To support this a paper will be requested from the Digital Education Team outlining the impact of AI on Postgraduate Research awards. It was noted that a working group may need to be formed following this discussion to consider any changes to practice, regulations and guidance that may be required in relation to AI.
- Action: Secretary to request a paper from the Digital Education Team on the impact of AI on Postgraduate Research awards.**

Part II: Matters for Discussion

38. Research Degree Regulations Working Group - Changes to Research Degrees Framework, Section 3, Supervisory Arrangements

- 38.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-02 outlining proposed changes to Chapter 5 of the Academic Manual, Research Degrees Framework, Section 3, Supervisory Arrangements.
- 38.2. The key amendments and rationale for changes were highlighted to the RDC. It was noted that changes had been made with the aim of simplifying the regulations around supervisory arrangements and improving the student experience.
- 38.3. The substantive changes were reported as:
- Increase in overall number of students to be supervised from 9 to 10
 - Removal of rubric for number of full-time/part-time students as primary/secondary supervisor
 - Revisions to guidance form on appointment of supervisors
 - Addition of guidance on change of supervisors
- 38.4. In-light of the changes proposed, discussion was held regarding the role of Honorary Supervisors within supervision teams and ensuring that they have sufficient time and capacity to provide students with the supervision required, issues that may be particularly acute where Honorary Supervisors hold clinical roles.
- 38.5. Discussion was also held regarding issues faced by staff on the Teaching Track and their eligibility to be appointed as members of supervisory teams, including how this may impact on their career development. It was agreed that a paper should come forward to the next meeting of RDC to explore these issues, with input collated from the wider RDC membership on the issues faced by affected staff.

Action: Prof. Simon Banks to monitor issues related to staff on the Teaching Track and supervision in light of the updated Guidance and bring paper to future RDC if issues persist.

38.6. **Approved** - The proposed changes to Chapter 5 of the Academic Manual, Research Degrees Framework, Section 3, Supervisory Arrangements at RDC Paper 3-02, subject to the following amendments:

- 3.3, no. 3 – Wording should reflect that ‘supervisory team should be in-place from the ‘start of the project’ with caveats added where applicable (i.e. specific CDT requirements).
- 3.6, no. 4 – should be amended to state ‘... it is the student’s responsibility to identify a **potential** suitable supervisor.’
- 3.6, no. 5 - noted that there is nothing stated on when a supervisor has a planned absence.

Action: Prof. David Spratt & Elizabeth Halton

38.7. RDC members were also encouraged to look at the guidance on personal relationships within supervisory teams and comment back to the Regulations Working Group as applicable.

Action: RDC Members

39. Research Degree Regulations Working Group - Changes to Research Degrees Framework, Sections 5.3 and 5.4.

39.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-03 outlining proposed changes to Chapter 5 of the Academic Manual, Research Degrees Framework, Sections 5.3 and 5.4 Appointment of Examiners/Conduct of the Research Examination.

39.2. The key amendments and rationale for changes were highlighted to the RDC. The substantive changes were reported as:

- Amendment to frequency of appointment for internal examiners
- No longer a requirement to get a suspension of regulations to appoint a viva Chair
- Location of viva clarified to confirm must be held on university premises, but not necessarily at UCL.
- Clarification that examiners may confer before the viva but not before they have written their preliminary reports

39.3. Through discussion of the proposed changes, it was raised whether the viva should be recorded to create a record for use if a student complains about the viva process.

39.4. It was considered that the routine recording of vivas could create other issues such as those regarding privacy. Therefore, Faculty Graduate Tutors were asked to consider this issue within Faculty Research Degree Committees to explore both the benefits and drawbacks of recordings being made. Once these discussions had

taken place further consideration could be given to the issue at RDC and whether any changes would be needed to the regulations.

Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors

39.5. **Approved** - The proposed changes to Chapter 5 of the Academic Manual, Research Degrees Framework, Sections 5.3 and 5.4, Appointment of Examiners/Conduct of the Research Examination subject to the following amendments:

- 5.3, no.5 - should state academic year, rather than given year.
- 5.3, no. 6 - should state where additional expertise is required.
- 5.4, no. 1 - the guidance related to this regulation should be amended to state 'You must ~~complete~~ **prepare** an individual preliminary report after reading the thesis but before conferring with your co-examiner. You must do this before the viva examination. Please exchange your report with your co-examiner before the candidate's viva and send a copy by email to Research Degrees.'
- 5.4, no. 5- it should be clarified that this is post-viva and consideration should be given to moving all references to third-examiners into section 6 of 5.3.

Action: Prof. David Spratt and Elizabeth Halton

39.6. It was noted that all regulation changes should be passed to the Chair once amendments had been made, and prior to submission for the Academic Manual 2023/24.

Action: Prof. David Spratt

39.7. It was noted to all members that revised supporting guidance and associated forms for the regulations had been circulated separately to the RDC Papers for this meeting. Members were asked to consider and comment on the revised guidance and forms outside of the meeting and feedback to the Working Group on Regulations.

40. MPhil/PhD Upgrade and Submission Data

40.1 Received - the paper at RDC 3-04 (22-23) an annually updated report on upgrade and submission rates and the time taken to upgrade or submit against UCL's expectations. The paper was presented by the Head of Student Data.

40.2 It was reported that for the 2019 data, where upgrade rates were low, an error had been identified that meant a cohort of consortium students had been included where they should have been excluded. It was noted that even with this error being corrected upgrade rates for 2019 remained low.

40.3 It was highlighted that the data for 2016/17 reflected those students particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic during their study. These students had received an additional 6 months to submit however the overall submission rate for this cohort had remained low.

40.4 It was agreed that the paper would be re-circulated to the RDC with the error in the 2019 data corrected. In addition, Faculty labelling would also be updated to ensure that the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences is referenced appropriately.

Action: Gary Smith

41. Student Complaints Annual Report (PGR)

- 41.1. Received – the paper at RDC 3-05 (22-23) containing an annual report on PGR student complaints, presented by Zoe Harrison, Casework Manager in Education Services.
- 41.2. RDC was informed that there had been 15 PGR student complaints in the previous academic year. The majority of complaints (7) had not been upheld, three had been partially upheld, whilst others were either informally resolved, withdrawn or not progressed. There were no significant or unexpected issues to report from the types of complaints received. It was noted that the number of complaints in the last two years had now returned to levels comparable to those seen prior to 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 41.3. It was noted that there had been delays in complaints being processed recently, this was being addressed through expansions to the Casework team in Education Services.
- 41.4. It was requested that data on the number of PGR complaints which have progressed to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator also be provided to the Committee, along with the associated outcome.
Action: Zoe Harrison

42. Additional Fee Element

- 42.1. Received - the paper at RDC 3-06 (22-23), a draft paper on issues related to the Additional Fee Element (AFE) a fee charged to Research students undertaking projects with additional costs, usually lab-based projects.
- 42.2. Prior to the paper being finalised and submitted to the Tuition Fee Working Group, members were asked to provide comments on the issues and options raised within the paper regarding the AFE.
- 42.3. It was noted within the Committee that better guidance around the AFE, such as how and when it is applied, and who approves fees would be beneficial. It was also noted by members that the name of the AFE can cause confusion and that further consideration should be given this, in-particular to separate it from any association with tuition fees.
- 42.4. There was strong endorsement for option 4 within the paper which would make AFEs a consumables fund for a research project with any underspend returned to the student/funder as applicable.
Action: Elizabeth Halton to consider options regarding the name of the AFE as part of finalising the paper for the Tuition Fee Working Group.

Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information

43. Anonymised Suspension of Regulations report since March 2023

- 43.1. Received – the paper at RDC 3-07 (22-23)

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

44.1. Approved - the paper at RDC 3-08 (22-23)

45. Any other business

45.1. The Chair expressed the thanks of the Committee to Helen Notter and Dr Rebecca Lindner who would both be leaving UCL shortly.

45.2. The Chair re-iterated to members to ensure papers are notified to the Secretary well in advance of the meeting. This enables them to be taken into consideration during agenda setting which occurs 2/3 weeks before RDC takes place.

46. Dates of Meetings for 2023-24:

- TBC

Matthew Redmond (RDC Secretary)
Education Services
May 2023