



Research Degrees Committee

31 October 2022

Confirmed Minutes

Present Members: Professor David Bogle (Chair); Mr Hamza Ahmed; Professor Simon Banks; Dr Josephine Barnes; Professor Yasminah Beebeejaun; Professor Annie Britton; Dr Andrew Flinn; Ms Elizabeth Halton; Professor Jasmina Jovanovic; Dr Rebecca Lindner; Professor Tania Monteiro; Professor Jill Norman; Ms Helen Notter; Professor Jane Perryman; Mrs Paula Speller; Professor Dave Spratt; Dr Andrew Stoker and Professor Stan Zochowski.

Attendees: Ms Noora Almarri; Professor Alex Mills; Dr Edward Payne (for Minute 9); Mr Darren Payne and Ms Rachel Port (for Minute 10); Ms Hannah Swallow (for Minute 11) and Mr Rob Traynor (Secretary for the meeting, on behalf of Matthew Redmond).

Apologies for absence: Professor Jane Holder; Mr Matthew Redmond; Dr Benet Salway and Dr Ruth Siddall.

Part I: Preliminary Business

1. Terms of Reference, Constitution, and Membership 2022-23

1.1. **Approved** - the terms of reference, constitution and membership for Research Degrees Committee (RDC) 2022-23 at paper RDC 1-01 (22-23), subject to correction of minor error (member's title).

1.2. RDC welcomed the following new members:

- Dr Rebecca Lindner
- Ms Paula Speller
- Professor Jane Holder
- Professor Annie Britton
- Professor Stan Zochowski
- Mr Matt Redmond, new RDC Secretary.

2. Minutes of the Last Meetings

2.1. **Approved** – the minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2022 (RDC Minutes 35-51, 07.06.2022) at paper RDC 1-02 (22-23).

3. Matters arising from the minutes

3.1. Minutes 40 (Doctoral Mandatory Training) – RDC had agreed to receive an update on the completion monitoring of the newly agreed mandatory training for doctoral

researchers. The Director of the Doctoral School informed the Committee that arrangements were still under consideration in collaboration with Organisational Development. RDC would be provided with an update in due course.

Action: Elizabeth Halton to provide further update at next RDC.

4. Chair's Business

- 4.1. The Chair informed RDC that UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) had increased its minimum student stipend by an additional 10% (13% in total) for the 2022-23 academic year. Many other major funders had also increased their stipends, though some smaller funders were unable to; however, UMC had agreed to uplift the stipend for all funded doctoral researchers for 2022/23 year only.

Agreed: that faculties should monitor and remind departments to ensure students are paid at least the UKRI minimum rate (£19,668) for 2022-23.

Part II: Matters for Discussion

5. Update on Recommendations Identified in the Barriers to Doctoral Education Report

- 5.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-03 (22-23), introduced by Dr Rebecca Lindner, Associate Professor (Teaching), Doctoral School and UCL Arena. The paper provided an update on the recommendations of the report approved by RDC in November 2020.
- 5.2. The paper identified the potential barriers to education for non-traditional, disadvantaged and under-represented students, including those with protected characteristics as defined in legislation. The paper also outlined the recommended actions taken to address the barriers and progress achieved so far. RDC noted that the barriers were complex and often inter-related. It was important to be open to re-evaluate priorities in the light of experience and new information.
- 5.3. RDC was also informed of the following key points in the paper:
- i. Academic barriers – ways to make Widening Participation (WP) part of good practice at PGR level, utilising where appropriate the practices in place at taught student levels. PGR contextual admissions could be explored as they have proved effective in improving access at undergraduate (UG) level. UCL has an opportunity to join a cross higher education project led by the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) and Leeds University, which aims to agree on contextual admission practice in the sector.
 - ii. Review UCL Select – to ensure the admissions platform also worked for PGR programmes, in particular doctoral training partnerships.
 - iii. Identification of Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) targets - establish a forum to identify and track the targets. This will need to decide which metrics to use. Consideration is also needed to ensure that data collection meets UKRI requirements and enables reporting to funding councils. The EDI data might be shared annually to ensure wider understanding of progress across UCL and from pilot schemes.

- iv. Positive access schemes - there was some progress with the schemes, with good examples across UCL. Consideration is required on the barriers and challenges for the positive access schemes, including knowledge barriers. There had been some experiments in departments to introduce pre-doctoral pathway schemes and summer schemes to address this, as well as research placements for UG and Postgraduate (PG) students. Research England and Office for Students (OfS) had given one scheme an award, but this was of limited duration and it was unclear whether funding would continue.
 - v. Career barriers – RDC had previously prioritised this area and UCL Careers had since developed career mentoring and advocacy programmes, including sessions for students from WP backgrounds.
 - vi. Research culture and wellbeing – many faculties were active in improving research culture though it was not yet clear how good practice and outcomes were shared in UCL and the wider sector. This included recruitment and training for disability advisors and a focus on accessibility for events and resources. However, there were questions over whether the right training and support was being provided to staff.
- 5.4. RDC discussed the need for consistent socio-economic data to help advance the contextual offers admissions process and to inform actions on addressing financial barriers to doctoral education. It was suggested that the data should be provided earlier to inform decisions on contextual offers,. The data was also available in the reports that the Doctoral School provides to Faculties
- 5.5. There were some concerns that additional EDI processes in PGR recruitment processes might slow down decision-making and risk losing highly qualified candidates to swifter competitors. Clarity was important in evaluation of student talent and previous experience to ensure the right questions were asked. There also needed to be recognition, as for taught students, that recruitment was only a part of the student journey and that the correct support structures were in place for students throughout the programme. For instance, the Engineering Faculty had increased the amount of mental health training for PGR students and staff as part of provision.
- 5.6. **Agreed:** that a forum be established to consider initiatives, share good practice and review policies, reporting to RDC and led by Dr Lindner. The forum should also consist of academic staff volunteers interested in WP, EDI and wider matters relating to PGR recruitment and include relevant professional services staff and student representatives. It might wish to link with the London Higher EDI working group consisting of twelve London institutions looking at wider PGR matters.
Action: Rebecca Lindner to initiate PGR WP forum.
- 5.7. **Agreed:** that faculties provide Dr Lindner with information on any additional PGR schemes designed to address the barriers to doctoral education or any updates to those already identified in the paper.

Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors to email Rebecca Lindner with local WP initiatives.

6. Start Dates 2023/24

- 6.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-04 (22-23), introduced by Ms Elizabeth Halton, Director of the Doctoral School, which proposed decreasing the number of possible start dates for PhD and EngD students from 2023-24 to three entry points per annum. This followed RDC's decision to introduce eleven entry points for PhD and EngD degrees for the current session, replacing the previous arrangements where students could start at any point during the session.
- 6.2. RDC noted that reducing entry points had many benefits including better induction, more transparent admissions processes and efficient administration and clearer funding periods for stipends and fees. Reducing the entry dates would also help address student feedback from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) that those enrolling later in the terms or in the summer had a poorer induction and then wider student experience.
- 6.3. The three entry dates proposed were as follows:
- 1 October 2023
 - 1 February 2024
 - 1 May 2024
- 6.4. Concerns were raised that reducing the entry points further could create more problems as some departments could request too many exceptions, particularly those which already used a wide spread of start dates. This was countered with the view that introducing fewer dates with proper planning would provide more clarity for students and staff and that once introduced, people would get used to it. It was also in line with wider sector practice and would help clarify student expectations. Exceptions could still be allowed where necessary.
- 6.5. RDC noted that Student Fees and Admissions were being consulted on the three proposed starting dates, as further thought was required as to how they would fit with taught student starting dates. RDC further noted that as application processing takes time, with obtaining visas taking up to four months, the dates needed to be carefully selected and able to work. There was some disagreement amongst faculties on the best dates, though there was general agreement to avoid the summer months when not many staff were at UCL.
- 6.6. **Approved** – the paper at RDC 1-04 (21-22), subject to the further discussions with Student Fees and Admissions on practical arrangements.
Action: Elizabeth Halton to confirm final arrangements with Student Fees and Admissions and disseminate communications widely on new dates.

7. Annual Report on proceedings of Faculty Research Degree Committees (FRDC) 2021-22

- 7.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-05 (22-23) containing an annual report on the proceedings of FRDCs during 2020/21. The FRDCs appeared to be working well overall and a summary of the key items discussed was contained in the report. RDC reminded faculties to ensure that the FTCs covered all the items from their terms of reference, particularly those relating to student representatives.

Note: the report was amended following the meeting to note the membership of an FRDC student representative missed from the report in error.

8. Re-writing of Research Regulations

- 8.1. Professor David Spratt, Vice-Head of the Doctoral School, informed RDC of the work underway to re-draft and update the research academic regulations. This work was interrupted by the COVID 19 pandemic and further delayed by turn-over in key professional services staff. A small RDC working group had resumed to consider the regulations and to make recommendations for RDC's approval.

- 8.2. The working group intended to split the work on the regulations into two main workstreams. The first would focus on the less complex regulations, where more straight-forward re-drafting was required and updates were not contentious. It was intended to put these regulations in place for 2023-24, with a paper submitted for consideration to RDC's third meeting in May.

- 8.3. The working group's second workstream, to run con-currently, would focus on the more complex regulations where greater consideration was required. Faculty Graduate Tutors feedback suggested that these regulations needed plenty of time for review and a special meeting of RDC might be required to consider them. RDC will be kept informed of the Working Group's progress and a list of the regulations under review would be provided to the next meeting.

Action: Professor David Spratt to update on progress at next RDC.

9. Student Complaints Annual Report (PGR)

- 9.1. Received – the paper at RDC 1-06 (22-23) containing an annual report on PGR student complaints, introduced by Dr Edward Payne, Senior Casework Officer, Casework & Regulations (SRS).
- 9.2. RDC was informed of a significant decrease in PGR student complaints with sixteen received in 2021, down from forty-nine in 2020. The higher 2020 numbers appeared to have been affected by the pandemic and the lock-downs. The two largest areas of complaints were deficiency in supervision and programme organisation and delivery. Of the sixteen complaints, one was upheld and another partially upheld, eleven were not upheld, and three either withdrawn or not taken forward.

- 9.3. A breakdown of complaints by faculty was provided although it was noted that there were different numbers provided for the total figures between two of the tables. It was explained that one table also included non-academic complaints which had since been separated in the process.
- 9.4. RDC noted that from this year academic appeals had been separated from the complaints process to ensure that UCL was more in line with the sector and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). The Casework team had recently expanded and would be able to provide greater assistance, including training and workshops. Colleagues were thanked for their support as casework was not one of the more pleasant areas of university life to deal with.
- 9.5. **Agreed:** that the Casework team also inform Faculty Graduate Tutors of the outcomes of complaints cases in their faculties to ensure they were updated on decisions. This would mirror the practice of providing Faculty Tutors with complaint outcomes for taught students.
Action: Dr Edward Payne to update notification workflow of complaint outcomes.

10. UCL Student Academic Misconduct Procedure - Research Students

- 10.1. Received – the paper at RDC 1-07 (22-23), introduced by Mr Darren Payne, Policy Adviser (Regulations and Quality Assurance), Academic Services and Ms Rachel Port, Governance Manager: Research Integrity, Office for General Counsel.
- 10.2. RDC was informed that the Student Academic Misconduct procedure was updated to include research student work relating to assessed work or to draft unpublished work. RDC was asked for its view on chairing Academic Misconduct Panels convened for PGR students and whether this should be by the same arrangement for taught students or if a different chair with a PGR background was preferred. RDC was informed that the cases for PGR students were low and that only one misconduct panel was convened last year.
- 10.3. **Agreed:** that the RDC Chair will chair Student Academic Misconduct Panels convened for research students. Should additional specialist knowledge be required for the panel, this would be co-opted as necessary.
Action: The Chair, Darren Payne and Rachel Port to note

11. OfS Conditions of Registration and Reportable events – Research Degrees Committee Responsibilities

- 11.1. Received – the paper at RDC 1-08 (22-23), introduced by Ms Hannah Swallow, Compliance Manager, SRS.
- 11.2. RDC was asked to have oversight of the following condition in the Office for Students (OfS) Regulatory Framework, relating to reportable events which UCL must comply with:

d) Matters relating to student and consumer protection, including but not limited to:

- The provider receiving a complaint that it has charged or advertised fees that exceed a statutory fee limit or a fee limit imposed as a result of an approved access and participation plan.

11.3. RDC noted that the government statutory fees limits and access and participation plans only related to undergraduate students. Research student fees were hence outside the scope of this OfS condition.

11.4. **Agreed:** that the Compliance Manager further discuss with the Registrar which committee should have responsibility for the OfS condition.

Action: Hannah Swallow

Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information

12. Research Degrees Committee – Annual Report to Academic Committee

12.1. **Approved** - the paper at RDC 1-09 (22-23).

13. Anonymised Suspension of Regulations report since June 2022

13.1. Received – the paper at RDC 1-10 (22-23).

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

14.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-11 (22-23)

15. Approved Regulations for Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) Health

15.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-12 (22-23)

16. Any other business

16.1. Additional Fee Element - the Director of the Doctoral School noted that this would be reviewed soon by the Tuition Fee Working Group and members were invited to forward any concerns (e.halton@ucl.ac.uk). It was further suggested that the item was added to the RDC agenda for the next meeting.

Action: RDC secretary to add to agenda for next meeting.

17. Dates of Meetings for 2022-23:

- Friday 10 February 2023, 11am
- Monday 15 May 2023, 11am

Rob Traynor on behalf of Matthew Redmond (RDC Secretary)

Academic Services

November 2022