Research Degrees Committee

31 October 2023

Confirmed Minutes

Present Members: Professor David Bogle (Chair); Professor Simon Banks; Dr Josephine Barnes; Professor Yasminah Beebeejaun; Professor Andrew Bevan; Mr David Blundred; Professor Annie Britton; Dr Andrew Flinn; Professor Adam Gibson; Mr Nick Grindle; Ms Elizabeth Halton; Professor Jane Holder; Professor Jasmina Jovanovic; Professor Jill Norman; Professor Jane Perryman; Dr Ruth Siddall; Ms Issy Smith; Mrs Paula Speller; Professor Dave Spratt; Dr Andrew Stoker and Professor Stan Zochowski.

Attendees: Mr Shaban Chaudhary; Mr Peter Derrick and Ms Katherine Manley (for Minute 6); Dr Benet Salway and Mr Rob Traynor (Secretary for the meeting).

Apologies for absence: None received

Part I: Preliminary Business

1. Terms of Reference, Constitution, and Membership 2023-24

1.1. **Approved** - the terms of reference, constitution and membership for Research Degrees Committee (RDC) 2023-24 at paper RDC 1-01 (23-24), subject to correction of minor errors (member's title).

1.2. RDC welcomed the following new members:

- Mr David Blundred
- Professor Annie Britton
- Professor Adam Gibson
- Dr Nick Grindle
- Ms Issy Smith
- Professor Stan Zochowski

RDC noted that Professor Zochowski was the new Faculty Graduate Tutor for Mathematical and Physical Sciences (MAPS), but was already a member of the Committee as an elected representative of Academic Board.

2. Minutes of the Last Meetings

2.1. **Approved** – the minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2023 (RDC Minutes 35-46, 23.05.2023) at paper RDC 1-02 (23-24).

3. Matters arising from the minutes

3.1. Minute 37 (Chair's Business) - RDC had agreed to request a paper from the Digital Education Team on the impact of AI on Postgraduate Research (PGR) awards. The Chair recommended that AI was made a focus of discussions at the next RDC meeting, but the action was not yet enacted.
Agreed: that the Digital Education team are asked to provide a paper on the impact of AI on PGR awards.
Action: the Secretary

3.2. Minute 41 (Student Complaints Annual Report) - RDC had requested data on the number of PGR student complaints. Zoe Harrison from the Casework Team (Education Services) provided the following information regarding the previous two years:

2021-22
3 x PGR complaints at the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OfIA). 1 settled by reconsideration of original complaint, 2 were not justified.

2022-23
3 x PGR complaints still awaiting OfIA decision.

Agreed: that the Casework Team be requested to provide an update on the outcomes of the 2022-23 complaints.
Action: the Secretary

4. Chair's Business

4.1. Re-entry to the Horizon programme - the Chair informed RDC that the UK re-entry into the European Commission Horizon research and innovation programme will allow bids from doctoral programmes from next year. The UCL Office of the Vice-Provost (Research, Innovation and Global Engagement – RIGE) was keen to encourage bids. RDC noted that joint awards were not a requirement for bids, though they could still be made where there was a deep and lasting relationship with another university. RIGE will consider the existing partnerships at UCL and make suggestions for where they may be developed, for example, a partnership with the University of Leuven which is close to agreement. It should be further noted that the Horizon awards do not cover money for salaries, so interested departments will need to factor that in. Interested people should check with RIGE in the first instance.

4.2. UK Research and Innovation New Deal for PGR students – the Chair noted that there was no change in the approach to doctoral candidates and whether they should be regarded as staff or students. However UCL's view was that they should be properly recompensed and supported.

4.3. Doctoral School new website – the Director of the Doctoral School informed RDC that a soft launch of the website was underway with the official launch scheduled for 6 November. A staff portal would be added to it using SharePoint and colleagues were

invited to send any feedback on the site (to e.halton@ucl.ac.uk). An in-person student led question and answer panel session was also planned for new doctoral researchers.

4.4. Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) Dashboard - this would be made available to all staff soon. The Director of the Doctoral School thanked the Faculty Graduate Tutors (FGT) for their help with the dashboard and noted that work continued on improving it with the Data and Insight team. It was intended that work will also start on the overall PGR dashboard soon.

4.5. PGR Systems Update – RDC noted that payment for students, the research log replacement and online forms were all being considered as part of the Change and Portfolios work. A larger budget had been approved for the research portfolio so this work would hopefully start soon. Members were asked to support this initiative to ensure that it was clear there was a demand for it. The Director of the Doctoral School will circulate a slide deck of further information to colleagues soon.

4.6. China Scholarships Council: UCL Joint Research Scholarship - RDC was informed that sixty joint research scholarships had been announced following a visit earlier in the year by the Provost to China. The scholarships, with the China Scholarships Council, would be offered in the IOE and the Mathematical and Physical Sciences (MAPS) faculties. This was also reported at the Student Recruitment, Admissions and Funding Committee (StRAFC) at its final meeting in the summer.

Part II: Matters for Discussion

5. Admission Transformation Programme and PGR admissions

5.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-03 (23-24), introduced by Mr Peter Derek, Director of Admissions Transformation, Student and Registry Services SRS and Ms Katharine Manley, Admission Manager, Admissions Transformation Programme (ATP). RDC's endorsement for the plans was sought, with formal approval of the proposed new admissions system and process changes required at a later stage.

5.2. RDC was informed that a new platform, Connected Universities, had been developed with UCL's partner PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), designed to replace UCL Select. It would enable improved data capture and monitoring of prospective applicant and supervisor engagement, whilst adhering to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) principles. It should also address problems with the current system, which often required local work-arounds and adaptations which have led to an unsatisfactory and divergent student experience.

5.3. The ATP intended to continue to work with the Doctoral School and the PGR community to develop the new system and next steps comprised the following:

- Mapping PGR applicant journeys to identify their engagement with the UCL admissions journey, from pre-application to entry in the new system.

- Facilitate workshops with PGR colleagues and central admissions staff to cover funding alignment with place of study and how anonymisation can support EDI principles.
- Provide PGR colleagues with demos of designed and built functionality, including scoring and interview booking / management.

It was intended to roll out the new system to applicants in the autumn 2024.

5.4. RDC noted that the new systems' development had only involved UCL so far and some concern was expressed that this could lead to later problems. A wider number of institutions involved in development would increase the understanding of PGR admissions needs and help create a more robust system. However, the overall design of the system would allow it to be highly flexible and responsive to individual institutional needs, and enable future improvements to functionality. As more institutions adopted it, updates could be made based on wider community feedback.

5.5. It was further noted that research councils increasingly requested EDI data and that the new system will allow specified users to access this. This will enable wide demographic data to be accessed easily and the system's flexibility will enable it to be adapted to meet other requests. It will also be able to take account of different student starting times. The system will be live in December 2023 to enable people to test it and provide feedback. Workshops will be held, with wide input sought from the PGR community, including admissions tutors and administrators.

5.6. **Agreed:** that RDC endorses the direction of travel and suggested approach planned to improve PGR admissions outlined in Paper 1-03 (23-24). Mr Derrick was also invited to provide updates on the progress of the ATP at the next two RDC meetings. **Action: Chair and Secretary to note**

6. Updating Departmental Graduate Tutor Role and PGR Support Structures

6.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-04 (23-24), introduced by Ms Elizabeth Halton, Director of the Doctoral School, which requested that RDC discuss initial ideas for restructuring PGR support systems and renaming Departmental Graduate Tutors (DGTs). It was intended that the paper would also be discussed with SRS, the Office of the Vice-Provost (Education and Student Experience (OVPESE) colleagues and Human Resources with a revised paper to return to RDC for formal approval.

6.2. RDC was informed that there was some concern that the "DGT" title implied that the role covered both PGR students and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students when it generally only covered PGR students. There were also concerns that the DGT and Deputy DGT roles were not always regarded as senior posts and often did not feature in the senior leadership roles in departmental websites. Recruitment for the roles could be difficult and it was suggested that they needed to be included in the appraisal and promotion processes, whether treated as citizenship or leadership roles.

6.3. In many departments DGTs were considered to be senior education roles, with experienced academics providing academic and pastoral oversight of PGR student provision, including monitoring and quality assurance. This approach closely followed the Academic Manual DGT role description. However the discussion noted variation in practice for the DGT roles, with some departments not adhering to the Academic Manual and regarding them as primarily a citizenship role. Some flexibility may be needed allowing a sharing of tasks provided that the full spectrum of tasks listed in the Academic Manual is covered.

6.4. It was suggested that the word “Tutor” in the name is an issue for understanding and recognition of the role and could be seen as opaque for those outside or new to UCL. This should be born in mind in any re-naming of the DGT role. Consideration would also be needed to how DGT workloads would be addressed in any changes to the role as there was wide variation across UCL. Wide discussions with departments would be required and socialisation of any recommendations for DGT role changes to ensure they were accepted across the institution. Further thought would also be required on the Deputy DGT role.

6.5. RDC noted that there were also parallel discussions taking place on changes to the Departmental Tutor role, both by Education Committee (EdCom) and in UCL Education Strategy discussions led by OVPESE, but it was unclear where they had reached as RDC was not included in the conversations.
Agreed: that the Chair discuss the Departmental Tutor role with the Pro-Vice-Provost (Student Academic Engagement).
Action: the Chair to contact Dr Kathryn Woods

6.6. **Agreed:** that RDC members discuss the possible DGT role changes is in their Faculty Research Degree Committees (FRDC) and consider the role title, the structure and responsibilities they would like to see included. Members should send feedback to the Director of the Doctoral School: (e.halton@ucl.ac.uk).
Action RDC Members and Elizabeth Halton

7. Proposed Regulation Changes: Off Campus Study

7.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-05 (23-24)), introduced by the Director of the Doctoral School, which requested that RDC discuss and approve amendments to the Academic Manual to the Off Campus study regulations. This is to reconcile the current two enrolment statuses allowed, study leave and non-resident, with a new off campus study status.

7.2. The following points and concerns were raised in the discussion:

a) Tuition fees - there were queries regarding how tuition fees would be calculated and how UKVI requirements and field work would be factored in. Some members felt that fees should not be reduced for students studying remotely, whilst others suggested that any fee changes would need to be carefully timed, with consideration given to what students were missing in terms of supervision, training or resource access whilst away from UCL.

b) Support to students while away - there were significant differences between non-resident status and study leave and providers had to be able to demonstrate that they have the right facilities and support for students when they are away. It was important to retain this oversight to ensure students didn't slip through cracks whilst away from UCL.
c) Thirty day boundary for approval of off campus study - it was suggested that the regulation would need to distinguish whether this was for thirty consecutive days or thirty working days. There were also some concerns that due diligence and risk assessments of external bodies and locations would still be required for students spending less than thirty days away from UCL.

7.3. It was felt that further consideration was required on the paper's recommendations before RDC could approve them.
Agreed: that RDC members provide comments and suggestions on the paper to the Director of the Doctoral School: (e.halton@ucl.ac.uk). The paper to then be considered by Regulations Working Group before being brought back to RDC.
Action RDC Members and Elizabeth Halton

8. Proposed Regulation Changes: Approvals for Continuation Beyond the End of Expected Study Period

8.1. Received - the paper at RDC 1-06 (23-24)), introduced by the Director of the Doctoral School, which requested that RDC consider and approve amendments to the Academic Manual relating to approvals for students to continue beyond the expected end of study dates.

8.2. RDC noted that whilst students currently applied for extension of their registration on the CRS system and required departmental support in order to do so, there was a problem. Once the student reached the 'Expected end date of research programme', they were then able to re-enrol indefinitely as long as they continued paying fees. As the end date of the programme does not automatically update as it does when students move to CRS, this enables students to continue studying beyond their end date in the system.

8.3. RDC was informed that in one instance this this had caused legal concerns as a student with whom we have an ongoing case questioned why they were allowed to study beyond their end date but there is no process in the system to update this. UCL Legal Services noted this was concerning. A new process was proposed where departments would need to approve the continuation of studies past the programme expected end date and then determine a new expected end for the student concerned.

8.4. The proposal for students in jeopardy of having their studies terminated to be given at least four weeks' notice of the end date and a mandatory faculty interview was queried, as a third of PGR students currently completed beyond their original end date and this could lead to an unsustainable faculty workload. However, it was noted

that most of these students would be in the CRS system and be picked up before that.

8.5. It was noted that students on 3 year programmes normally have 4 years of registration and students on 4 year programmes normally have 5 years of registration. It was also questioned how appeals would work where continuation of study was not approved. It was noted it was necessary to offer an appeal in case students had any extenuating circumstances or another case for extension.

8.6. **Agreed:** that RDC endorses the proposals to tighten the approval process for study beyond the expected end date, though further consideration was required on the changes outlined in the paper. This would be discussed outside the meeting and considered by Chair's action.
Action: the Chair and Elizabeth Halton

Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information

9. Office for Students (OfS) Annual Update

9.1. Noted – the paper at RDC 1-07 (23-24).

10. Anonymised Suspension of Regulations report since June 2022

10.1. Received – the paper at RDC 1-08 (23-24).

11. Any other business

11.1. None received.

12. Dates of Meetings for 2023-24:

- Tuesday 5 March 2024, 10am
- Tuesday 21 May 2024, 10am

Rob Traynor (Secretary for the meeting)
Education Services
December 2023