



Research Degrees Committee

Tuesday 5 March 2024, 10:00am

Confirmed Minutes

Present Members:

Professor David Bogle (Chair); Dr Josephine Barnes; Professor Andrew Bevan; David Blundred; Professor Annie Britton; Professor Paul Dodds; Dr Andrew Flinn; Yasmin Garcia Sterling, Dr Nicholas Grindle; Elizabeth Halton; Professor Jane Holder; Professor Jasmina Jonanovic; Professor Jill Norman; Professor Jane Perryman; Issy Smith; Paula Speller; Professor David Spratt; Dr Andrew Stoker; Professor Stan Zochowski.

Apologies:

Dr Sally Leevers, Karen Barnard and Professor Adam Gibson.

In Attendance:

Shaban Chaudhary, Education Officer, Students' Union UCL
Natalie Connor – Governance Officer
Bella Malins, Director of Access and Admissions (for Minute 19)
Holly Rose – Doctoral School Support Officer
Dr Benet Salway
Simon To, Director of Policy, Governance & Advocacy, Students' Union UCL (for Minute 16)

Olivia Whiteley – Governance Manager

Part I: Preliminary Business

13. Minutes (2-01)

13.1. Research Degrees Committee (RDC) approved the minutes of the meeting held on 31 October 2023.

14. Matters Arising

14.1. The Chair welcomed Paul Dodds (interim Faculty Graduate Tutor for Built Environment) and Yasmin Garcia-Sterling (Research Students' Officer, Students' Union UCL) to their first meeting as new members of the Committee.

- 14.2. The action for the Digital Education team to provide a paper on the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on Postgraduate Research (PGR) awards remained in progress. The Committee acknowledged this was an area that was rapidly evolving, therefore broader feedback from the PGR community was required ahead of a report being presented to RDC.
- 14.3. Arising from Minute 3.2, 31 October 2023, concerning RDC's request to receive an update on the outcomes of the 2022-23 Student complaints, the Committee was updated that two complaints were found to be unjustified, one case remained ongoing.

Part II: Strategic Items for Discussion

15. Chair's Business

- 15.1. The Chair updated the Committee on the development of support for doctoral training. The Committee noted that steps were being taken to access the funding opportunities for doctoral focal awards from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).
- 15.2. The Chair shared with the Committee that he would be retiring in September 2024, therefore the next meeting of RDC would be his final meeting as Chair of the Committee.

16. Student Union – Student Academic Representation Annual Report (2-02)

- 16.1. Simon To, Director of Policy, Governance & Advocacy, Students' Union UCL, introduced the report that provided the Committee with a review of the work undertaken in the 2022/23 academic year with Academic Representatives and the plans to develop this work moving forwards. While overall the number of Academic Representatives had increased, the spread of representatives across the faculties was uneven, with some faculties holding significantly lower numbers. In response to this, work was being undertaken to reach out to specific faculties. Academic Representatives were keen to have further opportunities to increase their impact and connect across the institution.
- 16.2. The Committee positively received the report and were particularly pleased to see the increased number of Academic Representatives, and subsequently queried what else tutors could do to support their development and increase their sense of belonging within their academic community. The Committee was advised that there were specific challenges in relation to research representatives and it would be positive to see increased opportunities for PGR representatives to link up with other research students.

- 16.3. The Committee noted the report and welcomed opportunities to support the development of Academic Representatives.

17. Attendance of PhD Researchers (2-03)

- 17.1. The Chair introduced the report that reviewed PhD research students' ways of working following the Covid-19 pandemic and invited the Committee to consider how to provide a flexible and rich research environment for research students to thrive including how to develop their sense of inclusion as part of a wider research community.

- 17.2. In the ensuing discussion the Committee raised the following points:
- a. The Committee echoed concerns about the potential loss of organic learning opportunities and the impact on students' broader development.
 - b. Increased in-person attendance was a matter that should include academic staff, since it followed that increased in-person tutor attendance would in turn support increased student attendance.
 - c. Dedicated workspace was a key factor in incentivising research students to undertake research and study from campus, however the Committee acknowledged that there were limited physical spaces available on campus.
 - d. The Committee acknowledged that in finding suitable physical spaces for students that would encourage increased in person attendance, consideration should be given to inclusivity for neurodivergent students.
 - e. There was a case made that students should be encouraged to build their own communities, supported by enhanced opportunities and resources from their faculties to run events.
 - f. Recognising the potential for the cost of living crisis to be a factor limiting in-person attendance for both staff and students, it was considered important to maximise opportunities to enhance the student experience when staff and students were on campus.

- 17.3. The Committee noted there would be value in having broader discussion across the institution of PhD research student attendance. The Chair would explore avenues for a cross University discussion to support an effective resolution.

Action: Chair.

18. Updated Doctoral Progression Regulations – Removing DGT Approval from the Exam Entry Online Workflow

- 18.1. David Blundred, Research Degree Manager, introduced the paper that detailed the recommendation to remove the Departmental Graduate Tutor (DGT) as an approver for the exam entry application task, with the aim of

achieving a more streamlined process and reducing the administrative burden on DGTs and the Research Degrees Team.

- 18.2. During discussion the following points were raised:
- a. It was acknowledged that the process of having DGT approval ahead of exam entry had different time implications for the DGT dependent upon the faculty. Some DGTs considered it was an unnecessary and time-consuming step, whereas others felt it added value to the process for both the DGT and the student without being onerous.
 - b. It was suggested that if the DGT approval process was removed there needed to be a mechanism introduced that allowed students to submit their thesis and take responsibility for their Viva, in the event that their DGT deemed the student was not ready to submit their work.
 - c. Paula Speller, Head of Portico Governance & Research Student Management, advised that to support the suggested improvements, various modifications could be applied to Portico to allow for a more efficient process whereby DGTs would receive notifications of approval of exam entries and, where submissions were not ready, information would be shared for follow-up action.
- 18.3. The Research Degrees Committee were satisfied with the suggested enhancements to the process and approved the removal of the DGT as an approver for the exam entry application task.

19. MRes-MPhil-PhD Application and Admissions Annual Report

Bella Malins, Director of Access and Admissions, introduced the report that outlined admission cycle data on student applications, offers and acceptances to Research and MRes programmes of study. The Committee was advised of changes underway that would help refine the data used to monitor admissions and enrolments along with the other planned improvements encompassed within the Admissions Transformation Programme.

- 19.1. The Committee considered that it would be important to monitor trends closely as it was noted that specific departments were significantly affected by lower enrolment rates. It was agreed that RDC would receive an update on planned improvements, including timescales, as part of the Admissions Transformation Programme.

Action: Bella Malins, Director of Access and Admissions.

Part III: Other Business for Approval or Information

20. Anonymised Suspension of Regulations (2-06)

- 20.1. Research Degrees Committee noted the report.

21. New and Amended Programmes Approved by RDC Chair's Action (2-07)

21.1. Research Degrees Committee noted the report.

22. Report on Research Degree Administration and Examination Statistics 2022-23 (2-08)

22.1. Research Degrees Committee noted the report.

23. Doctoral Researchers in Profiles (2-09)

23.1. Following the IRIS researcher profile system being replaced by a new system, 'Profiles', it was highlighted that there were issues in relation to the terminology used in referring to Doctoral Researchers as students and with staff information taking priority over the student information. In response to this, and following discussion, the Committee agreed to approve the recommendations as detailed in the Committee report.

Natalie Connor, Secretary to the Research Degrees Committee
March 2024