



## RESEARCH DEGREES COMMITTEE

18 November 2010

### MINUTES

*PRESENT:*

Professor David Bogle (*Chair*)

Mr David Ashton

Dr Stephanie Bird

Dr Donna Brown

Professor Chris Danpure

Professor Alison Diduck

Dr Caroline Essex

Dr Sally Leever

Ms Anne Macdonald

Mr Dante Micheaux

Mr Alex Nesbitt

Dr Dave Spratt

Professor Philip Steadman

In attendance: Mr John Burnett, Mrs Helen Notter, Ms Karen Wishart (Secretary)

Apologies for absence were received from: Professor Mike Ewing, Mr Marco Federighi, Dr Tom Gretton, Dr Ruth Siddall

*Key to abbreviations:*

CALT	Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching
FGT	Faculty Graduate Tutor
GEESC	Graduate Education Executive Sub-Committee
GSMB	Graduate School Management Board
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
ISD	Information Services Division
RDC	Research Degrees Committee
RCUK	Research Councils UK
REF	Research Excellence Framework
QR	Quality-related [HEFCE] funding

1 **TERMS OF REFERENCE, CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERSHIP 2010-11**

**Received**

- 1.1 At APPENDIX RDC 1/01 (10-11) - RDC's terms of reference.
- 1.2 At APPENDIX RDC 1/02 (10-11) - RDC's constitution and membership for session 2010-11.

**Reported**

- 1.3 The Chair reported that as a result of the review of Academic Committee and its substructure in the previous session GEESC had been reconstituted as the Research Degrees Committee. There had been some changes to both the terms of reference and constitution and membership. A key change was that RDC was not a sub-committee of Academic Committee but a full standing committee and as such had the power to make decisions in accordance with its terms of reference.
- 1.4 It was noted that the representatives from ISD, Library Services, and the elected members had not yet been appointed, it was anticipated that they would be appointed prior to the next RDC meeting.

2 **MINUTES**

**Approved**

- 2.1 The Minutes of the meeting of GEESC held on 18 May 2010 [*GEESC Minutes 1-10, 2009-10*], issued previously, were confirmed by RDC and signed by the Chair.

3 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

*[See also Minute 4 below.]*

3A **Faculty Approval of Supervisors**  
[*GEESC Minute 2.1, 18 May 2010*]

**Noted**

- 3A.1 In June 2009 the Graduate School requested Faculties to provide lists of approved supervisors to GEESC. It was also requested, as a result of requirements in the report of the Post Institutional Audit Steering Group (PIASG), that these lists should be regularly maintained and published on Faculty web pages.
- 3A.2 Following the above request to Faculties, examples of good practice were evident on some Faculty web pages for example:  
Biomedical Sciences:  
[http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slms/staff-students/info/education/research\\_supervision](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slms/staff-students/info/education/research_supervision)  
Life Sciences:  
<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lifesciences-faculty/staff-intranet>  
MAPS: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/maps-faculty/intranet/ResearchSupervisors>

### **Received**

- 3A.3 The following examples of good practice:  
At APPENDIX RDC 1/03 (10-11) the Faculty of Biomedical Sciences form for the *Faculty Approval of MPhil/PhD Supervisor Status*;  
At APPENDIX RDC 1/04 (10-11) *Notes for the Approval of MPhil/PhD Supervisors* in the Faculty of Life Sciences;  
At APPENDIX RDC 1/05 (10-11) the contents page from the MAPS Faculty web page on *Research Supervisors* and a document on *Routes for appointment of research student supervisors*.

### **Discussion**

- 3A.4 It was noted that the form and Notes at APPENDIX RDC 1/03 (10-11) and APPENDIX RDC 1/04 (10-11) from the Faculties of Life Sciences and Biomedical Sciences provided an excellent model which other Faculties may wish to consider adopting when approving Supervisors. It was noted that if a supervisor had been approved in one Faculty s/he would also be eligible to supervise students in a different Faculty. It was reported that a senior Research Fellow may be eligible to supervise if he/she had sufficient experience and had attended the relevant mandatory briefing session run by the Graduate School, but should have Honorary academic status. It was noted that one of these sessions had taken place in October and the next was scheduled for May 2011. It was also noted that the criteria for Supervisor approval were set out in the Regulations.

- 3A.5 Other Faculties described their processes for supervisor approval as follows:

**Built Environment:** the Faculty PGR Admissions Committee consider applications to supervise.

**MAPS:** had adopted a similar procedure to Life Sciences with the submission of a form and CV to the FGT, via the DGT. The Faculty was commended for the information for Research Supervisors on its website.

**Arts and Humanities:** it was noted that the procedure was informal and that Supervisors were accepted on the basis of their experience. The Chair noted that a more formal process should be implemented, perhaps using the templates from other faculties.

**Laws:** supervisors were required to submit a CV outlining relevant experience. The FGT held a list of all approved Supervisors. The Chair noted that the list of approved Supervisors should be made available on the Faculty website.

- 3A.6 The Chair reported that an IT project had been initiated by the Graduate School in collaboration with Registry, Human Resources, Academic Services and Management Systems to enable approved Supervisor status to be held within the Human Resources database for members of academic staff, with a facility to view and extract these through PORTICO, MyView and IRIS. In due course, it was planned that Unit of Assessment codes would be assigned via this system to Supervisors (and thus their research students), for the purposes of the REF. The record would specify whether the Supervisor was a Principal and/or Subsidiary Supervisor.

3A.7 The supervisor training was commended, particularly the follow-up one-day workshops run throughout the year by CALT on behalf of the Graduate School. It was confirmed that student comments, and where appropriate information from student grievance cases, were fed into the workshop to raise awareness of relevant issues.

3A.8 It was agreed that the Faculties of Engineering Sciences and Social and Historical Sciences would be requested to provide information on the supervisor approval process.

**Action: RDC Secretary/Chair**

**3B Late submission of theses**

[GEESC Minute 2.2, 18 May 2010]

**Noted**

3B.1 Following discussion at previous GEESC meetings regarding the regulation on *Submission of a thesis after the end of CRS*, at APPENDIX RDC 1/06 (10-11) was the regulation with the revised text shown in bold italic text. This had been approved by the Chair on behalf of the Committee.

**3C Doctoral Training Centres as Academic Units**

[GEESC Minute 2.6, 18 May 2010]

**Noted**

3C.1 The Head of the Graduate School had discussed with senior academic and administrative staff the possibility of the establishment of Doctoral Training Centres with more formal status (time-limited) within the structures of UCL. This proposal would not be pursued further at the present time.

**3D Continued funding for skills development programme**

[GEESC Minute 4, 18 May 2010]

**Noted**

3D.1 Following discussion at the previous meeting regarding funding for skills development, it had been noted that a rise in PGR fees at UCL would be dependent on the RCUK raising the cap on the fees they were willing to pay. Subsequently, the Chair had received a letter from RCUK confirming its agreement to a rise in RCUK studentship stipends. The letter was attached for information at APPENDIX RDC 1/07 (10-11), and expressed the Research Councils' expectation that the provision of skills training for research students would be maintained

3D.2 The Chair noted that funding for PGR training would be managed only by the Graduate School in future, rather than a proportion being managed by Departments.

**ONLINE SURVEY ON RESEARCH STUDENT NUMBERS**

[GEESC Minute 9, 18 May 2010]

**Received**

- 4.1 At APPENDIX RDC 1/08 (10-11) a report from the PGR recruitment survey, May 2010.
- 4.2 An oral report from John Burnett, Graduate Marketing Manager.

**Reported**

- 4.3 It was noted that as detailed in the report, one of the key findings of the survey related to concern about not recruiting the best students because there was limited funding available. There was also concern about the high fees for overseas students and the admissions process, which could be slow. It was reported that applicants who declined offers were now asked to provide a reason. This was a recent development, but from the limited records available 11% of applicants had refused offers because of the time which elapsed before offers were received.
- 4.4 It was proposed in the report that it would be helpful to applicants to have a central UCL record of all the PGR funding available and how this could be applied for. It was also noted that Departmental websites could be improved to give clearer guidance to applicants on PGR funding. Mr Burnett reported that he had been working with "FindaPhD" which, through its database, provided an on-line list of current postgraduate research studentships. He had been working with UCL Departments and had also embedded FindaPhd's IModule into the graduate research section of the UCL website. It was anticipated that an announcement about this new facility would be sent to Departments in the near future.

**Discussion**

- 4.5 . It was noted that additional PGR funding could be provided by the provision of Teaching Assistantships. Regarding charity funding, it was possible that this might be reduced in future as a result of Government cuts and the Browne Comprehensive Spending Review; however there was no information currently available on the potential impact of this. On a more positive note it was reported that the European Commission had stated its intention to set a target of achieving a population of one million researchers to drive the "Innovation Union" which is a key European policy. It was possible that funding may become available to support this objective, although there have been no announcements yet.
- 4.6 It was noted that another constraint on PGR recruitment was the lack of space in some Departments, particularly in the Faculty of the Built Environment and in some Departments in the Biomedical Sciences.

5 **EXAMINER TRAINING**

***Noted***

- 5.1 Training for examiners was done 'on the job' by ensuring that new examiners were paired with experienced examiners. Guidelines were provided, although there was little information about the conduct of the examination. The Graduate School provided access to research students to the 'Good viva' video and was investigating the possibility of making it available to staff. There was increasing national interest in training of examiners and some demand by UCL staff.

***Received***

- 5.2 A report by the RDC Chair on the establishment of a Working Group to develop guidelines for MPhil/PhD examiners.

***Reported***

- 5.3 It would be beneficial to produce guidelines for MPhil/PhD examiners. RDC agreed with this proposal and the Chair confirmed that a working group would be established to include representatives of RDC and the Registry, as appropriate. Training requirements would also be considered by the Working Group.

**Action: RDC Secretary/Chair to establish the working group**

6 **THESIS COMMITTEES**

***Received***

- 6.1 At APPENDIX RDC 1/09 (10-11) a report by Professor Danpure on the establishment of Thesis Committees.

- 6.2 An oral report by Professor Danpure on thesis committees.

***Reported***

- 6.2 Professor Danpure reported that in many instances student performance issues were related to a breakdown in communication with supervisors. He proposed that by introducing a thesis committee for each research student at the outset of their research, this would help to identify and alleviate communication problems or misunderstandings. The suggestion was that a thesis committee would meet after 3 months of registration and then at approximately 6 monthly intervals. The thesis committee may then develop into the upgrade committee when required.

***Discussion***

- 6.3 Dr Brown confirmed that this approach was adopted by the NIMR and was beneficial to students. There was some concern that in small Departments it would increase the work load of a small number of academics and would also prevent them from being internal examiners. It was suggested that the thesis committee did not need to be constituted from experts in the field but might include staff from other Departments who had some knowledge of the subject area.

6.4 It was reported that students were advised to seek support from the DGT and, if appropriate, the FGT when problems arose that could not be solved with the supervisors. However it was suggested that if a thesis committee was established at the outset it might prevent problems arising.

6.5 The Chair proposed that it would be useful to establish a working group to review current practices and consider best practice in this area.

**Action: RDC Secretary/Chair to establish the working group**

## 7 CRITERIA AND PROCESS FOR APPROVAL OF MRes SUPERVISORS

### *Noted*

7.1 MRes degrees are research degrees and are covered by the QAA code of practice for research degrees. All MRes courses contained a significant research project element which should be supervised by at least two supervisors, as required for all research degrees by HEFCE. There was currently no approval process for MRes project supervisors.

MRes project supervisors were recorded in Portico. Departments had been reminded of this with particular reference to the REF and Student Records had confirmed that most Departments had complied.

It was proposed that the approval process for MRes project supervisors be the same as for MPhil/PhD project supervisors with the same criteria. This could apply only to the major project or to all research project elements.

### *Discussion*

7.2 It was noted that some MRes students completed a number of 'mini modules' rather than one long research project, it was suggested that it could be a requirement that supervisors of all projects, including mini projects, should be approved. It was reported that if a member of staff was registered as a PGR supervisor they would automatically be approved as MRes supervisors. It was noted that because MRes students were only registered for a year those appointed as MRes supervisors would only need a year left on their contracts of employment.

7.3 The committee approved the decision that MRes project supervisors should be approved by Faculty Graduate Tutors. The Graduate School would email Faculty Graduate Tutors asking them to remind Departmental Graduate Tutors and MRes Co-ordinators of this requirement

**Action: Graduate School Administrator**

## 8 INTERNAL QUALITY REVIEW 2008-09

### *Received*

8.1 At APPENDIX RDC 1/10 (10-11) the summary of good practice identified in IQR reports in 2008-09. There was no specific section for PGR students but elements were embedded throughout the document.

At APPENDIX RDC 1/11 (10-11) the summary of recommendations noted in IQR reports in 2008-09 with particular reference to PGR students.



### **Discussion**

- 8.2 It was noted that the IQR good practice was fairly generic and did not include many specific references to PGR students. The Institute of Ophthalmology was commended for introducing strategies to improve PhD completion rates and the Division of Medicine was commended for improving the monitoring of PGR students.
- 8.3 The Chair noted that, where students had supervisors from more than one Faculty, it should be made clear to the student which was their Faculty for registration purposes and therefore who would be their FGT. Best practice would be for PGR students to meet the relevant Deans and FGTs during their induction. The Chair noted that when members of RDC were members of IQR teams they should scrutinise the paperwork relating to the induction of PGR students.
- 8.4 The importance of providing a paper copy of Departmental Student Handbooks was noted and the Chair proposed that information be sought from Departments by Faculty Graduate Tutors on the distribution of handbooks to students.

**Action: Faculty Graduate Tutors**

## **9 SUBSTITUTE FOR CALT MODULES IN THE ENGD PROGRAMME**

### **Noted**

- 9.1 Following an enquiry from the FGT, Engineering Sciences, concerning the procedure for approving substitutes for CALT generic skills modules included in MRes programmes, it was agreed that approval should be given by the Doctoral Training Centre, the Faculty Graduate Teaching Committee/Faculty Teaching Committee (with a representative from CALT) and the Programme and Module Approval Steering Group. It was agreed that such approvals should also be reported to RDC.

## **10 HEFCE STATISTICS ON RESEARCH DEGREE QUALIFICATION RATES**

### **Received**

- 10.1 At APPENDIX RDC 1/12(10-11) a report from HEFCE on UK Research Degree Qualification Rates (FT UK/EU students and FT overseas students) for students starting in 1999-2000, for information.
- 10.2 The Chair noted that it was interesting to view the research degree qualification rates over a 7 year period. The Committee was reminded that at the next meeting of RDC, UCL's 4 year submission rates would be considered as part of the normal reporting and review agenda. Consideration would be given to other ways to analyse PhD completion rates, for example by looking at the median length of time to submit a thesis.

**Action: Graduate School Administrator**

11 **PRIZES FOR PGR STUDENTS**

***Received***

11.1 A report from Dr Essex, **Mathematical & Physical Sciences FGT**.

***Reported***

11.2 Dr Essex noted that in her Faculty there were no prizes awarded to PGR students. It was noted that there were no general UCL prizes but some Faculties had their own arrangements. For example, FLS had a prize for the best presentation from a PGR student and the RCUK and NIMR representatives confirmed they awarded prizes.

11.3 The Chair noted that, due to the diverse nature of the research at UCL, it was more appropriate to offer PGR prizes at Faculty level rather than as an institution.

12 **NEXT MEETING**

***Noted***

12.1 The next meeting of RDC was scheduled for 22 February at 2.30pm. A further meeting would be take place in May, date to be confirmed.

KW  
25/11/2010