Minutes of the meeting of the Board for Graduate Schools held on 1 March 2005.

Present: The Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Professor A.H. Fitter (Chair)
The Chair of the Standing Committee on Assessment, Dr T.J. Crawford
The Provost of Wentworth Graduate College, Dr P.M. Lee
Professor C.A. Godfrey
Mr O. Lisagor
Dr G.D. Low
Professor J.C. Sparrow
Professor M. Taylor
Dr G. Tsoulas
Dr R. Wooffitt

In attendance: Dr F.M.K. Campbell (Graduate Recruitment Officer)
Dr K.V. Clegg (Senior Graduate Training Officer)
Miss C. Rees
Mr P. Simison (Assistant Registrar)

Apologies: Dr D. Efird
Professor E.R. Hancock
Miss J. Winter

05/21 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2005 were approved.

05/22 Membership of Working Party on Academic Misconduct by Research Students

Arising out of M05/3, the Board approved the appointment of Professor S.F. Jackson to membership of the Working Party on Academic Misconduct by Research Students (agendum 3a). It was reported that the Working Party was to have its first meeting on 10 March 2005.

05/23 Proposal for joint doctoral programme in Archaeology with l'Université Paul Cézanne (Aix-Marseille III)

Arising out of M05/6, the Board approved the revised proposal for joint doctoral programme in Archaeology with l’Université Paul Cézanne (Aix-Marseille III) (agendum 3b).
05/24 Proposed changes to arrangements for continuation fees for MPhil/PhD students

Arising out of M05/9, the Board approved the proposal that the continuation fee should be refunded (rather than waived) where a student submitted a thesis, with the approval of the supervisor regarding the examinable quality of the thesis, within three months of the end of the normal registration period (agenda 3c).

In reply to a question, it was reported that computing and library facilities would be made available to students pending payment of the continuation fee within a specified period.

05/25 ORS panel

Arising out of M05/12, it was reported that the panel appointed at the last meeting had met on the morning of 1 March 2005 and had selected 16 candidates (out of 127) for nomination for ORS awards in 2005. The results would be known in early May.

05/26 Guidelines on approval of extensions for MPhil/PhD students

Arising out of M05/15, the Board received proposed guidelines concerning the maximum period beyond the normal registration period that should be allowed for the submission of MPhil or PhD theses (agenda 3d).

The Board had agreed that such guidelines should take into account issues such as the timeliness of the research and the currency of the data, particularly where the research concerned an area of professional practice; whether the thesis remained publishable; fairness to other candidates; and safeguarding the University’s reputation. In addition, it had been agreed that extensions should only be granted prospectively, not retrospectively.

It was noted that the current Regulations (2.5(h) and 2.4(i)) provided for extensions not exceeding two years for full-time PhD students (or three years for part-time PhD students), and not exceeding one year for full-time MPhil students (or two years for part-time MPhil students).

For the future, the Board approved the following guidelines:

(a) Students should be notified, at the end of their “writing up” year or at the end of a period of extension, that they must request an extension (or a further extension) through their department; otherwise they will be deemed to have withdrawn. (Students are now routinely notified in this way.)

(b) The notification should include a warning that retrospective requests for extensions will not be accepted, and that there is a limit to the total period of extension beyond the original submission deadline that may normally be
allowed.

(c) All required research training must be completed before an extension is allowed.

(d) The issue of topicality identified by the Board applies equally to MPhil and PhD students and to full-time and part-time students. Similarly, all categories of student may be equally affected by medical or personal or unexpected academic circumstances. The total period of extension normally permitted should therefore be two years in every case. Exceptional circumstances arising from employment should also be admitted as a ground for requesting an extension, as well as medical or personal or unexpected academic circumstances.

(e) The maximum period of extension that may be approved at any one time should normally be one year.

(f) Providing the total period of extension does not exceed two years, extensions may be approved on the Board’s behalf by the Deputy Chair or another approved member of the Board.

(g) Where an extension is recommended which would take the total period of extension beyond two years, the recommendation should be considered by the full Board, which should be advised by the Deputy Chair on how to proceed. Any additional extensions approved by the full Board should not normally exceed one year, making the total period of extension three years.

The Board noted that the current Regulations made additional provision for extensions in the case of students who had completed all the requirements for the MA or MSc degree of the University but had transferred to MPhil/PhD registration without taking that degree. It was agreed to raise the need for this provision with those departments where these circumstances occasionally arose. It was agreed that PhD students should normally have a full three years of PhD registration after completing all the requirements for the MA or MSc degree of the University.

As a consequence of the guidelines approved above, the Board agreed to recommend amendments to the Regulations as set out in Appendix 1.

05/27 Committee on Research Skills Training

The Board approved the minutes of the meeting of the Committee on Research Skills Training held on 22 February 2005 (agendum 4).

In connection with M05/1, it was noted that the proposed terms of reference of the Committee were:
(a) to oversee the implementation of research student skills training;

(b) to evaluate the effects of Board for Graduate Schools policies on research student skills training;

(c) to initiate new developments and develop the strategy for research student skills training;

(d) to monitor and evaluate research student skills training.

The terms of reference were approved.

In connection with M05/2, it was pointed out that the contact for the graduate prospectus (sub-paragraph (a)) should be Dr Fiona Campbell. It was noted that a University induction process for research students was under consideration (sub-paragraph (d)). The Board queried whether the training courses attended by research students could be recorded on SITS rather than on a separate database (sub-paragraph (g)).

In connection with M05/04, it was agreed that the MPhil to PhD upgrade recommendation form should be amended (in consultation with departments) to include a reference to Graduate Professional Development, and to allow space for thesis advisory panels to comment on a student’s progress and training.

The minutes were then approved.

05/28 Issues highlighted by students’ complaints

The Board received a paper from the Graduate Students’ Association regarding issues highlighted by complaints made by research students.

In the GSA’s view, it was inappropriate for a department to admit a student to a PhD programme where only one member of academic staff specialised in the field of the research, with the risk that, should that supervisor become unavailable, the student would have to be supervised by a member of staff who was not sufficiently specialised, or would have to change the nature of the research. A department could not be certain that the supervisor would be available for the whole duration of the PhD programme.

The staff members of the Board were of the view that, particularly for smaller departments, it would be difficult or impossible for there to be a second member of staff equally specialised in the field of research. They also felt that the role of the supervisor was to provide general supervision as well as to provide specialised guidance. Where a change of supervisor became necessary, the new supervisor was able to provide general support for the research activity, but might need to use “consultants”, including the original supervisor, for specific needs. It was in the nature of research that there would always be a degree of specialism; where the original supervisor became unavailable, specific advice might no longer be available; in these circumstances, the University was
responsible for making the best provision possible.

The Board agreed:

(a) that a department should certainly not appoint as supervisor a member of staff who had a temporary contract or was known to be likely to leave, unless it had an acceptable alternative plan in place.

(b) that the supervisees concerned should be informed if a supervisor resigns from the University;

(c) that a member of the student’s thesis advisory panel should be expected to assume a general supervisory role if the supervisor left the University.

It was agreed that these points, together with the procedure to be followed should there be a breakdown in the relationship between student and supervisor, should be covered in the forthcoming code of practice on research degree programmes.

A second issue raised by the GSA was whether complaints from students should be brought to the attention of the Board for Graduate Schools. In this connection, it was pointed out that a report on appeals and academic complaints was submitted to the Board each year as reserved business (see M*05/30 below). It was agreed that an anonymous report, indicating the areas of complaint, should also be submitted to the Board as unreserved business. In addition, the Chair of the Board agreed that it was open to the GSA to advise students to send copies of complaints addressed to Heads of Departments also to him.

05/29 Next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was to be held on Tuesday 21 June 2005.