PRESENT:
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Research Training) (Professor Robyn Owens) as Chair
Graduate Education Officer (Dr Krystyna Haq)
Postgraduate Students’ Association President (Ms Bronwyn Crowe)
Professor Craig Atkins (Deputy Chair)
Professor John Cordery
Professor Kevin Croft
Professor Matthew Knuiman
Associate Professor Andrew Lynch
Associate Professor Ian McArthur
Dr Allan McKinley
Associate Professor Brett Nener
Executive Officer (Mr Chester Cutinha)

BY INVITATION:
Manager, Graduate Research and Scholarships (Dr Sato Juniper)

OBSERVER:
Dr Srilata Ravi, School of Humanities

APOLOGIES:
Nominee of the Chair of the Academic Board (Associate Professor Annette George)
Professor Arun Dharmarajan
Professor Susan Prescott
Professor Jim Whelan
Director, Research Services (Dr Campbell Thomson)
Graduate Education Officer (Dr Michael Azariadis)

Dr Krystyna Haq left the meeting after the discussion of item 7(h).

WELCOME
The Chair welcomed Dr Srilata Ravi from the School of Humanities to the meeting as an observer.

1. CALL FOR DECLARATIONS OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST
Members and invitees were requested to declare any conflicts of interest that they may have with respect to any items on the agenda.

Professor John Cordery declared a conflict of interest with respect to items 3 and 8(c) on the agenda.

Professor Kevin Croft declared a conflict of interest with respect to the student referred to in item 7(g) and did not speak to this item.

Professor Matthew Knuiman declared a conflict of interest with respect to the student referred to in item 7(f) and did not speak to this item.

Associate Professor Ian McArthur declared a conflict of interest with respect to the student referred to in item 7(j) and did not speak to this item.
Dr Allan McKinley declared a conflict of interest with respect to the student referred to in item 6(a)(i) and did not speak to this item.

2. MINUTES – REF: F36

RESOLVED – 43

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Board of the Graduate Research School held on Tuesday, 8 May 2007 be confirmed.

3. MODE OF OPERATION OF THE BOARD

The Board heard that a member of academic staff had expressed concern about some aspects of the operation of the Board of the Graduate Research School and had requested that the Board reflect on his concerns and consider reviewing its mode of operation.

The main areas of concern expressed were: (1) that the Board normally does not consult with supervisors directly when there are concerns about theses under examination but instead consults with Graduate Research Coordinators; and (2) that the Board delegates some of its activities to anonymous members who act on its behalf, for example for the review of Research Proposals and, in some cases, theses under examination. In the view of the staff member concerned, members who are so delegated exert considerable influence over outcomes for individual students, but because they remain anonymous their expertise cannot be challenged from outside the Board.

The perception expressed was that the Board’s processes are not inclusive of supervisors and not transparent, and that there is little recourse for a supervisor who might disagree with a decision of the Board. Some aspects of the Board’s mode of operation have been construed as a lack of respect for, and trust in, the expertise and integrity of supervisors.

The Board heard that such criticisms and concerns were received from time to time and that it would be useful for the Board to reflect on its processes and either agree to change them or to re-articulate them, and then to communicate its position to the University community. The Board understands the context of its decisions, but for privacy reasons most others are not aware of the range of matters that come before the Board that form the background for some of its determinations. It is clear that misperceptions have arisen and that these need to be addressed.

The Board was invited to discuss the concerns that had been raised most recently. In the discussion the following points were raised:

- The Board is a panel of highly experienced staff whose collective experience makes them experts in various aspects of research training. However, some supervisors take the view that the Board should be concerned only with process and not with content.
- A member asked whether most concerns are about the process for review of Research Proposals. Many of the concerns raised are about the process for review of Research Proposals, usually from supervisors who question the expertise of the Board to assess particular proposals and wish to engage with the reviewer.
- The processes surrounding thesis examination and review of Proposals are very different. In the first case an expert member is asked to review the proposal on behalf of the Board and provide comments and questions to the student, and in the second case the Board collects information from a variety of sources, often including the school and sometimes including the opinion of an expert member, and then considers all the information and classifies the thesis accordingly. It is not true that in the case of thesis examination individual members decide on behalf of the Board.
- There may be a problem with communication between the GRS and schools/supervisors when the Board seeks the opinion of the school on adverse examiners’ reports. The standard letter, while seeking comment from the school on the examiners’ reports, currently says “…you may wish to consult with the supervisor regarding these comments”. This could potentially be considered to exclude supervisors, and should be changed to, say “…normally the school is expected to consult with the supervisor/s….”.
• In the case of review of Research Proposals, in every case the Proposal is signed off by the supervisor. There is no need to consult further with the supervisor prior to communicating the Board's response. The supervisor and student should discuss the criticisms and questions together when they receive them.

• It is important for students to learn how to receive and respond to academic feedback – the process of receiving and responding to questions about or criticisms of their Research Proposals can assist this. Supervisors could model desired behaviour.

• The Board is charged with the authority and responsibility to make academic decisions and not to simply administer process.

• There is a need to be clear about the role of the supervisor in the thesis examination and classification process. There are some ambiguities in the present system that could be causing problems.

• Concern was expressed about how the supervisors are drawn into the examination process. Sometimes we seem to switch the focus onto the supervisor rather than the student. We do not ask students to defend their theses, but our process could be interpreted as asking supervisors to defend theses on behalf of students. Could this be encouraging supervisors to see themselves as the targets of criticism of theses?

• Supervisors sign off on theses. It is reasonable for them to take some responsibility.

• Part of research training involves being able to communicate research outside your particular area of expertise. It is reasonable for the Board to expect well-reasoned academic arguments in response to the concerns expressed by examiners.

• The Board should clarify the role of the supervisor/s in key Board processes. One change that should be made is to signal that the Board "will normally" seek the advice of supervisors, via the Graduate Research Coordinator, in relation to thesis classification.

• The Board should continue to communicate with supervisors via Graduate Research Coordinators rather than directly. The Board requests the input of the Graduate Research Coordinator for clarification and advice in relation to adverse reports, not for a defence of the thesis.

• A member questioned whether the mechanism for appeal of a classification is clear. The Board heard that there is a mechanism and that students are advised of this.

• There is no opportunity for a student to provide a written defence of the thesis prior to classification because students do not see the examiners' reports until then.

• If our processes included an oral defence the student would need to see the reports prior to the classification.

• In the case of Research Proposals, the large majority of proposals that are not accepted at first are found wanting for technical rather than conceptual grounds. That is, the errors are unequivocal. This argues against the idea that the Board should refrain from comment on a document that a supervisor has approved.

• What is the authority of the Graduate Research Coordinator? Technically, the Graduate Research Coordinator is acting on the delegated authority of the Head of School. A person who questions the authority of the Graduate Research Coordinator is actually questioning the authority of the Head of School.

The Board requested the Manager, Graduate Research and Scholarships, to prepare a Discussion Paper on the role of supervisors in thesis examination. The Board will discuss this at a subsequent meeting.

4. PROPOSED JOINT DOUBLE-BADGED PHD WITH DALIAN UNIVERSITY

Members had before them a proposal from the School of Civil and Resource Engineering to establish a Co-tutelle PhD agreement with Dalian University. Members were invited to consider the Memorandum of Agreement for a general exchange programme and a Checklist for the Joint/Double-Badged Agreement. The Manager, Graduate Research and Scholarships spoke to this item. Members heard that there was a potential problem with this proposal in that the draft agreement states that the candidate can attend graduation ceremonies at both universities, and there is no information about the proposed design of the testamur. A similar problem was noted with respect to a recent proposal for a co-tutelle with Harbin University. The Head of the School of Civil and Resource Engineering had verbally agreed that the wording of the agreement could be changed to "the candidate can attend a graduation ceremony at either university". However, this had not yet been discussed with either University.
Current policy at UWA is that a student who has completed a double-badged programme is permitted to graduate only at one university. Similarly, UWA policy implies that only one testamur is to be issued. This creates a potential problem in that other universities with whom UWA wishes to form partnerships may have contradictory policies. In particular, it has been suggested that a general expectation of Chinese universities is that separate testamurs will be issued by each universities engaged in a joint double-badged programme.

The Board agreed that it is reasonable for both universities to issue testamurs as long as it is clear that the graduate has not received two different degrees. Given that in any case UWA is not in a position to control what another university might do, it might be prudent to accept that in some cases separate testamurs can be issued and ensure that every testamur issued by UWA with respect to a joint double-badged programmes indicates clearly that it is for a joint programme and names the other university.

The Board

RESOLVED – 44

to approve the proposal for a Joint double-badged PhD with Dalian University subject to agreement by the Academic Council that it is permissable for each university to issue its own testamur.