PRESENT:

Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Research Training) (Professor Robyn Owens) as Chair
Nominee of the Chair of the Academic Board (Associate Professor Annette George)
Graduate Education Officer (Dr Krystyna Haq)
Postgraduate Students’ Association President (Ms Bronwyn Crowe)
Professor Kevin Croft
Professor Matthew Knuiman
Associate Professor Ian McArthur
Associate Professor Brett Nener
Professor Susan Prescott
Dr Srilata Ravi
Professor Jim Whelan

BY INVITATION:

Director, Research Services (Dr Campbell Thomson)
Manager, Graduate Research and Scholarships (Dr Sato Juniper)
Graduate Education Officer (Ms Karen Hall)

OBSERVERS:

Graduate Research Coordinator, School of Animal Biology (Dr Dominique Blache)
Mrs Christine Monaco, Graduate Research and Scholarships Office

APOLOGIES:

Professor Craig Atkins (Deputy Chair)
Professor John Cordery
Professor Arun Dharmarajan
Associate Professor Andrew Lynch
Dr Allan McKinley

WELCOME

The Chair welcomed Dr Dominique Blache, the Graduate Research Coordinator from the School of Animal Biology and Mrs Christine Monaco and Ms Karen Hall from the Graduate Research and Scholarships Office to the meeting.

1. CALL FOR DECLARATIONS OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST – REF: F34

Members and invitees were requested to declare any conflicts of interest that they may have with respect to any items on the agenda.

Professor Robyn Owens declared a conflict of interest with respect to the student referred to in item 7(a)(i) of the agenda and left the meeting during the discussion of this item.

Professor Susan Prescott declared a conflict of interest with respect to the students referred to in items 7(b)(ii) and 8(b) of the agenda and left the meeting during the discussion of these items.

Associate Professor Ian McArthur declared a conflict of interest with respect to the student referred to in item 10 of the agenda and did not speak to this item.
2. MINUTES – REF: F36

RESOLVED – 61

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Board of the Graduate Research School held on Tuesday, 12 June 2007 be confirmed, subject to the reversal of the order of the terms ‘thesis examination’ and ‘review of Proposals’ in the first sentence of the third bullet point of item 3 on page 42 such that the sentence now reads “The processes surrounding review of Proposals and thesis examination are very different” and makes logical sense.

ITEMS FOR THE ATTENTION OF THE UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT FROM THE BOARD OF THE GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL MEETING HELD ON 10 JULY 2007

3. PROPOSED CO-TUTELLE WITH UNIVERSITÉ DE LA SORBONNE NOUVELLE PARIS III – REF: F20001

Members noted that the Board had approved [R60/2007] by circulation the proposed co-tutelle arrangement between the School of Humanities at The University of Western Australia (UWA) and the École Doctorale Littératures française et comparée at the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris III. (Attachments A1 – A10).

Noted.

4. PROPOSAL FOR NEW COMBINED COURSE – REF: F19830

Members had before them a proposal from the Faculty of Life and Physical Sciences for the establishment of a combined course: Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Infectious Diseases. The aim of the course would be to prepare PhD students to undertake research in aspects of infectious diseases for which undergraduate courses do not currently provide adequate background.

The Board heard that the proposed standard completion time for this course would be four years, and that the structure of the course would be 72 points of coursework units plus completion of the PhD thesis, for which no points were specified. Assuming that the course consists of 8 semesters of 24 points each, 72 points would represent slightly more than one third (37.5%) of the four-year course. It is not clear whether it is intended for the whole course, or only the Doctor of Philosophy component to be funded under the Research Training Scheme (RTS). If it is to be the whole course, then on the face of the documentation the proposed structure may need to be amended slightly to ensure that the course is eligible for RTS funding, which requires that a course consist of no less than two-thirds research.

Members also noted that in the proposal the due date for Research Proposals for full-time students would be 31st October in the year of commencement. Notwithstanding that this is a variation from the normal rules for the PhD, which stipulate that full-time students submit their Research Proposals within six months of commencement, it is not likely to present any particular academic or procedural issues.

A member queried the requirements for admission, which state that an applicant may be accepted if they have either (a) had a PhD Research Proposal approved by the Board or (b) an Honours degree of at least 2A level and have completed the first year of the Master of Infectious Diseases. The Board took this to mean that the requirements for admission would not be less than those for the standard PhD; however, a member queried whether it might also be advisable to require a minimum level of achievement in the units completed for the Masters in order for an applicant to be admitted under (b).

RESOLVED – 62

To recommend to the Academic Council that the proposal (Attachments B1 – B10) to establish the combined course: Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Infectious Diseases be approved, subject to
clarification of the intended arrangements for funding under the Research Training Scheme and confirmation that the course will be eligible for RTS funding. The Board also suggested that the Faculty of Life and Physical Sciences consider whether an applicant should be required to have achieved a minimum level in the units completed for the Master in order to be considered for admission on the basis of having completed at least 2A Honours and the first year of the Master of Infectious Diseases.

5. SUGGESTED AMENDMENT TO THE UNIVERSITY GENERAL RULES FOR ACADEMIC COURSES – REF: F10223, F10219

Members had before them a proposal for a minor change to the University General Rules for Academic Courses to remove the option for examiners of a resubmitted PhD thesis to recommend that the thesis be Passed for the Award of Master. Under the proposal the Board would retain the option of classifying the thesis as Passed for the Award of Master.

The reason for the suggestion was the perception that some resubmit examiners might be opting for a recommendation of Pass for the Award of Master as the middle, and therefore perhaps easy, option when the examination is problematic. It was suggested that it would be more useful if the Board had a clear recommendation from each examiner about whether the thesis should, or should not, pass as a PhD.

The following general points were made in the discussion:

- Might adoption of this suggestion create a problem if there is only one resubmit examiner (a "lone" examiner)?
- There should not be particular problems in this instance because a lone resubmit examiner must be one of the original examiners of the thesis. Thus, there will never be an instance where a lone examiner is assessing a resubmitted thesis for the first time.
- Adoption of this suggestion might produce a reduction of standards. Examiners might be loath to recommend Fail but tick the Master box out of compassion and to ensure that the student exits with something for their effort.
- If an examiner thinks that the thesis does not meet the required standard they should say so and recommend Fail. It is up to the Board to make the final decision.
- We could remove the Master option from the form and add a note that the Board reserves the right to pass the thesis as Master.
- Recommendation of pass as a Master in this instance is effectively the same as recommending a fail as a PhD. When an examiner recommends Pass as Master they are recommending clearly that the thesis not be passed as a PhD.
- In some instances there is a fuzzy line between what should pass as a PhD and what should pass as a Master. However, it means a great deal and is a very important decision.
- It is the Board’s right and responsibility to classify a thesis as it sees fit on the basis of all the information available to it, notwithstanding what a particular examiner might recommend.
- When was the form changed? The examiner’s recommendation form was amended in 2005 to provide examiners with the three options that reflect the current rules. Prior to that the form had incorrectly only provided examiners with the option of recommending either a Pass or Fail.
- Could we include a sequence of recommendations on the form, eg "If a fail as PhD is recommended, should the thesis be passed for the degree of Master", or a binary choice: "Should the thesis be passed as PhD? …Should the thesis be passed as a Master?"
- There are very few recommendations of Fail without an argument for this being provided. In contrast, many examiners recommend Pass without really justifying the recommendation. It seems to be simpler to recommend Pass than to recommend Fail. If we make this change we run the risk of simply receiving more unjustified recommendations of Pass.
- It is always up to the Board to decide what the final recommendation should be. If an examiner’s recommendation has not been justified the Board will assess the recommendation accordingly.

Members voted on the proposal, and by majority (5:4) the Board

RESOLVED – 63

To recommend that the University General Rules for Academic Courses be amended to remove the option for resubmit examiners to recommend that a thesis submitted for the degree of PhD be passed
for the award of Master (Attachment C1). The Board would retain the discretion to award the degree of Master.

The Board also agreed that the Examiners Recommendation form for resubmitted PhD theses be amended to: allow only recommendations of Pass or Fail; request an explicit justification for the recommendation; and note that the Board has the discretion to pass the thesis for the degree of Master.