MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE BOARD OF THE GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL HELD IN THE OLD SENATE ROOM, ON TUESDAY, 13 NOVEMBER 2007

MEMBERS:
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Research Training) (Professor Robyn Owens) – Chair
Nominee of the Chair of the Academic Board (Associate Professor Annette George)
Members Nominated by Academic Board:
    School of Plant Biology (Professor Craig Atkins) – Deputy Chair
    School of Anatomy and Human Biology (Professor Arun Dharmarajan)
    School of Social and Cultural Studies (Associate Professor Andrew Lynch)
    School of Physics (Associate Professor Ian McArthur)
    School of Biomedical, Biomolecular and Chemical Sciences (Dr Allan McKinley)
Co-opted Members:
    Business School (Professor John Cordery)
    School of Electrical, Electronic and Computer Engineering (Associate Professor Brett Nener)
    School of Humanities (Dr Srilata Ravi)
    School of Medicine and Pharmacology (Professor Kevin Croft)
    School of Paediatrics and Child Health (Professor Susan Prescott)
    School of Population Health (Professor Matthew Knuiman)
Graduate Education Officer (Dr Krystyna Haq)
Postgraduate Students’ Association President (Mr Daniel Bond)

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

Executive Officer (Dr Kabilan Krishnasamy)

OBSERVERS:
Graduate Research and Scholarships Office (Mr Chester Cutinha)

APOLOGIES:
School of Biomedical, Biomolecular and Chemical Sciences (Professor Jim Whelan)

WELCOME – REF: F

The Chair welcomed Dr Krishnasamy as the incoming Executive Officer for the Board of Graduate Research School, and Mr Bond as the newly elected PSA President.

[Chair’s note: Members joined the Chair in thanking Mr Cutinha for his outstanding support and exemplary work he has contributed as Executive Officer to the Board over a number of years, and wished him well for his new career.]

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.

- Dr McKinley declared a conflict with respect to the students referred to in items 6 (d) and 7 (g);
- Associate Professor George declared a conflict with respect to the student referred to in item 6 (a);
- Professor Dharmarajan declared a conflict with respect to the student referred to in item 7 (a)
2. MINUTES – REF: F36

RESOLVED – 124

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Board of the Graduate Research School held on Tuesday, 9 October 2007 be confirmed.

3. REVIEW OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS OF UWA GRADUATES – REF: F19237

By R7/07 and R8/07 the Admissions Committee and the Teaching and Learning Committee resolved to establish a joint working party of the two committees to review the English language skills of UWA graduates. One of the key aims of this review was to investigate ways to ensure that the University can have confidence in the English language skills of its graduates.

At its meeting held on 16 October 2007, the Admissions Committee by R26/07 resolved to endorse the report of the joint working party and also to forward Recommendation One, which relates to the setting of higher entry scores for the reading and writing components of the IELTS (International English Language Testing System), to the Board of the Graduate Research School for its consideration.

Traditionally, the speaking and writing tests were reported in whole band scores, ranging from 1-9. In July 2007 this was modified in that the speaking and writing tests were being reported in either whole or half bands in the same way as the reading and listening tests. Arguably, the half band scores would help to specify the required language levels more precisely.

Further, it was noted that according to IELTS, while a minimum score of 7.0 was generally regarded as the acceptable score for entry into linguistically less demanding academic courses, most of the linguistically demanding academic courses required a minimum score of 7.5 to be considered acceptable for entry.

It was in this context that members were asked to consider the joint working party’s recommendation that the minimum bands for reading and writing components of the IELTS be increased from 6.0 to 6.5.

While a majority of the Board members were generally supportive of this increase, a few expressed concerns in relation to raising the band for the writing test. Given that some areas of research study may be more linguistically demanding than others, it was noted that the entry scores should be set to apply accordingly. Further, it was also pointed out that high entry scores for the writing test should not be set at the expense of a student’s ability to make good research contribution to knowledge. Notably, students’ language capabilities may improve over time during their research study and therefore it was not advisable to raise the entry requirements. Doing so, however, could result in the loss of students.

On the other hand, a few members argued for the need to maintain the university’s high academic standards and that students should take responsibility for obtaining adequate training in order to achieve the language requirements for entry.

Members also considered the option of making conditional offers to students who may have obtained a minimum score of 6 in writing instead of the proposed score of 6.5. In such a situation, students may be offered a place in a postgraduate program on the condition that they undergo English language training via CELT (Centre for English Language Training) and achieve the required standards for entry. However, this raised questions about the availability of resources to support such a scheme. One member also queried the entry requirements for students writing their thesis in a language other than English. The Board

RESOLVED – 125

- to endorse Recommendation One which read: “That from 2009 admission to postgraduate research study at UWA requires and IELTS (or the equivalent) overall score of 6.5, with scores no lower than 6.0 for speaking and listening and no score lower than 6.5 for reading and writing” and
- to forward its endorsement to the Admissions Committee for noting and to the Teaching and Learning Committee for further action.
CONFIRMED

Professor Robyn Owens
Pro Vice Chancellor (Research and Research Training)
CHAIR, Board of Graduate Research School