

The University of Edinburgh  
Senatus Quality Assurance Committee

**Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 26 April 2018 at 2pm  
in the Raeburn Room, Old College**

**Present:**

Professor Tina Harrison	Assistant Principal, Academic Standards and Quality Assurance (Convener)
Dr Shereen Benjamin	Associate Dean (Quality Assurance) College of Arts, Humanities and Social Science
Megan Brown	Schools Engagement Officer, Edinburgh University Students' Association
Brian Connolly	Secretary to Senatus Quality Assurance Committee, Academic Services
Dr Gail Duursma	School Representative (Engineering), College of Science and Engineering
Nichola Kett	Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement Team, Academic Services
Sarah McAllister	Head of Operations & Projects & Assistant Director, Institute for Academic Development
Dr Gordon McDougall	Dean (Quality Assurance), College of Science and Engineering
Dr Claire Phillips	School Representative (Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies), College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine
Dr Inger Seiferheld	School Representative (Business School), College of Arts, Humanities and Social Science
Tom Ward	Director, Academic Services

**Apologies:**

Bobi Archer	Vice President (Education), Students' Association
Brian Green	Deputy Associate Principal (Learning & Teaching), University of Strathclyde

## **1. Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 2 February 2018**

The Minutes of the previous meeting were approved.

## **2. Matters Arising**

The Committee noted that a report on actions from the last meeting arising from the College Quality Reports 2016-17 would be submitted to the next meeting.

### **For Discussion**

#### **3. Principal, Professor Peter Mathieson**

The Principal was welcomed to the Committee and outlined his emerging priorities.

The Principal noted the need for a culture shift at the University to counter the perception that research was valued to a greater extent than teaching and learning. This would not diminish the value of research and the fact that research largely determined a university's international reputation. However, teaching and learning were core elements of the University's mission and whilst recognising that measuring excellence in teaching and learning was more difficult than for research, this did not mean that the University should not seek to do so.

Members noted that data drawn from the University's quality processes, such as the annual school and college quality reports and internal review processes, were currently used to identify good practice. This was then shared at fora such as the Directors of Teaching and Quality networks. The Convenor also noted that the Learning and Teaching Conference in June (to be opened by the Principal) would focus on the theme of Inspiring Learning with a wide range of presentations about learning and teaching from staff and students. The Students' Association Teaching Awards was also noted as a valued mechanism for the recognition of teaching and learning excellence across the University.

Members noted that the annual appraisal (or review) processes for academic staff tended to focus almost exclusively on research with little, if any, consideration given to teaching or administrative duties. It was further noted that whilst the University had mechanisms for the recognition of teaching excellence these did not seem to be systematically applied. The Principal noted that consideration was being given to the introduction of a teaching-only pathway, into which the University could recruit staff with potential and within which it would be possible for someone whose predominant contribution to the University was teaching to see a career pathway leading to full professorship. The Principal also noted an ambition to abolish the term "support staff", which did not adequately describe or value the contributions that such staff members make, and replace it with "professional services".

Members noted that in the context of increasing student numbers and estates developments, insufficient suitable teaching and learning accommodation was highlighted consistently by students and staff as an issue of concern. Members suggested that in this context it was important for new estates developments, such as the new Quartermile project, to include an element of teaching and learning space in order to emphasise the University's priorities in this area.

**Action:** The Convenor to send the Principal information from the University's quality processes on the issue of space.

The Principal noted the intention to take steps to ensure that the University of Edinburgh was a destination of choice for the most talented students and staff from all over Scotland and the world. For students, this would include aspects of widening participation which could apply to Scottish-domiciled students but also to those from further afield. In this context the Principal welcomed the proposal to focus the next thematic review on support for Widening Participation.

#### 4. Undergraduate Degree Classification

The Committee received the annual report on degree classification outcomes of successfully exiting undergraduates and a paper highlighting sector trends in undergraduate degree classification outcomes.

The Committee noted that the proportion of top (first or upper second) degrees being awarded by UK higher education institutions was increasing, with the increase relating to the proportion of firsts in particular. Explanations for this upward trend were considered such as improved school education outcomes, improved student achievement at university, and changes in degree algorithms and marking practices across the sector. The Committee noted that the increasing trend had provoked political interest (particularly in England) in relation to the possible implications for academic standards. It was also noted that employers had expressed concern that the upward trend in higher degree awards was making it harder for them to differentiate between graduates and therefore devaluing qualifications.

The Committee noted that the University has a number of controls in place to ensure that degree classifications were robust and appropriate. The University operates a consistent approach to degree classification (with minor variations for a small number of subject areas), which has not changed for at least a decade, along with a Common Mark Scheme. The annual School and College quality reporting and Teaching Programme Review (TPR) processes provide institutional oversight, with data on undergraduate degree outcomes a key input. The External Examiner system also provides an independent oversight of the University's assessment and attainment processes.

The Committee discussed options for additional ways for the University to address the issue. It was noted that while most subject areas across the University were broadly in line with Russell Group comparators for their discipline and / or with the University average, there were a few significant outliers which diverged substantially from either the University average or comparators in their discipline. The Committee noted that while there may be good reasons for these areas to have these patterns of degree outcomes, it may be appropriate to clarify the position. The Committee agreed that a specific communication should be sent to each of the four Schools identified inviting them to reflect on their degree classification outcome data and provide an analysis of their context.

The Committee also agreed that a prompt/header should be added to the School Annual Quality Report template requesting a specific reflection on degree classification outcomes to include reasons for these patterns and actions taken to address any inappropriate patterns.

**Action:** Academic Services to contact statistical outlier Schools to request a detailed reflection on degree classification outcomes within their annual quality report. Academic Services to amend the reporting template and communicate changes to Schools and Colleges.

## **5. Student Support Thematic Review**

### **5.1 2017-18 Review - Progress Update**

The Committee received a progress report on this year's Thematic Review of support for Mature Students and Student Parents and Carers. It was noted that the review was currently in the consultation phase and that a number of meetings with students had been held. A number of issues and themes had been identified which would be further explored with stakeholders from across the University support services. It was noted that the review panel would seek to extend this consultation phase in order to ensure that the voices of younger parents and carers and distance learning students were encompassed by the review.

The Committee noted that the review panel would submit a report of initial findings to the next meeting in May identifying 'quick wins' and issues which could be actioned and resolved relatively quickly. A final report identifying good practice and areas for enhancement would then be submitted to the September meeting.

### **5.2 2018-19 Review – Theme**

The Committee discussed the proposal that the next Thematic Review focus on support for Widening Participation in the light of the recent approval by University Court of the new Widening Participation strategy. It noted that the Students' Association was very supportive of the work that the University had invested into Widening Participation.

The Committee **agreed** that the Thematic Review should focus on exploring the University's current position in relation to the aspects of the Strategy relating to the student (as opposed to applicant) experience – that is, the Support to Succeed and Support to Progress sections. It was suggested that, as part of this, the Thematic Review could focus particular attention to dimensions of the Strategy related to the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students.

**Action:** Thematic Review Coordinator to work with the relevant stakeholders to develop a more detailed proposal for the 2018-19 thematic review for the next meeting of the Committee.

## **6. Providing Summaries of Student Feedback to School Representatives**

The Committee discussed a proposal to pilot the provision of a standard high-level analysis of student feedback report to School Representatives. It was noted that the reports would likely take the form of a short visual representations of student feedback data provided to School Representatives at the beginning of the academic year. The Committee noted that this work may improve Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ) response rates by helping schools to promote the outcomes of these questionnaires with students. Communication with pilot Schools would be managed by Student Surveys, with the Students' Association managing communication with students. The pilot would be evaluated by Academic Services and the outcomes and any resulting actions would be communicated to relevant stakeholders by Academic Services.

The Committee endorsed the proposal. It was agreed that the proposal would be discussed at the next Directors of Quality Network meeting.

**Action:** Members to help promote the opportunity and seek volunteers in their Colleges and Schools.

## **7. Committee Planning**

The Committee discussed its full set of priorities for the coming 2018-19 academic session and agreed that it would:

- Work with the Students' Association to enhance the Class Representation System;
- Oversee and evaluate the effectiveness of the Personal Tutor system;
- Oversee institutional activities in response to 2015 Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR);
- Oversee initial preparations for the University's next ELIR;
- Embed mid-course feedback for undergraduate students, and develop appropriate mechanisms for evaluating its operation;
- Oversee the thematic review of student support services (topic to be confirmed).

The Committee approved the priorities and also **agreed** that Academic Services should add an item regarding collating information on good practice in relation to developing academic communities.

## **8. Industrial Action**

The Committee discussed the University's approach to monitoring the impact of the recent industrial action on the quality of the student experience.

The Committee noted the steps taken by the Senate Curriculum and Student Progression Committee (CSPC) to assist the University to mitigate the academic impact on students of the recent industrial action while maintaining academic standards. It was further noted that once the impact of the industrial action on students had been addressed, CSPC would reflect on how these temporary arrangements had operated in practice (for example, whether they have been as effective as anticipated in maintaining academic standards and the impact on students has been addressed).

The Committee discussed the guidance issued to Schools and Colleges on 16 April 2018. Members noted issues regarding the arrangements for External Examining set out in the guidelines. The Director of Academic Services confirmed that the guidelines had been devised and approved in line with guidance from Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) recognising that institutions had obligations to their students which meant that they could consider alternate ways of managing assessment and making awards. He emphasised that the temporary arrangements would only allow Boards to operate without the participation of External Examiners for specific points of time in very specific circumstances, and when accompanied by robust internal arrangements to allow the maintenance of academic standards. He noted that CSPC was satisfied that the concessions and guidelines agreed were consistent with the QAA statement, and that, by approving the guidelines prior to the spring Boards of Examiners diet, it was fulfilling the QAA expectation that institutions should 'confirm decisions regarding temporary arrangements'.

The Committee discussed how the University could use the annual quality review process to review the impact the industrial action may have had on the quality of learning, teaching and assessment. It agreed that a prompt/header should be added to the Annual Programme Monitoring and the School Annual Quality Report templates for 2017-18 requesting a high level statement reflecting on whether the disruption caused by the industrial action had led to any issues regarding the quality of the provision, and, if so, how this had been mitigated. This would also be included in the 2018/19 templates in order to capture postgraduate taught and resit outcomes.

**Action:** Academic Services to amend the reporting templates and communicate changes to Schools and Colleges.

#### **For Information and Formal Business**

##### **9. Analysis of Institutional Annual Statements 2016/17**

The Committee noted an analysis, carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland, of institutional annual statements submitted to the Scottish Funding Council.

##### **10. Committee Membership**

The Committee approved minor changes to the Terms of Reference to align with the other Senate Committees and allow more flexibility in terms of aligning membership with the Committee's priorities.

**Action:** College Deans to discuss membership of the Committee with School representatives for 2018-19.

##### **11. UK Quality Code for Higher Education – Update on Redevelopment**

The Committee noted the new Expectations and practices and plans to develop underpinning advice and guidance. It also noted that, due to time constraints, there would be no public consultation on the advice and guidance.

##### **12. Enhancement Themes**

The Committee noted the update on Enhancement Theme (Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience) activity.

##### **13. Service Excellence Programme**

The Committee noted the update on the work being undertaken by the Student Administration & Support strand of the Service Excellence Programme.

##### **14. Knowledge Strategy Committee**

The Committee noted the update on matters considered by the Knowledge Strategy Committee.

**15. Internal Review Reports and Responses**

The Committee approved the following final report:

- Student-Led, Individually- Created Courses (SLICCs) Review Report February 2018.

The Committee confirmed that it was content with progress for the following responses:

- Postgraduate Programme Review of Chemistry (14 week response 2017/18);
- Postgraduate Programme Review of Engineering (14 week response 2017/18);
- Teaching Programme Review of Social Anthropology (14 week response 2017/18);
- Postgraduate Programme Review of Business (Year on response 2016/17);
- Postgraduate Programme Review of History, Classics and Archaeology (Year on response 2016/17);
- Teaching Programme Review of Art (Year on response 2016/17).

**Action:** Academic Services to request a more detailed response from Social Anthropology for the next meeting.

**16. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

**17. Date of Next Meeting:**

Thursday 24 May 2018 at 2pm in the Hodgson Room, Weir Building, Kings Buildings