

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

Annual Report from the Senate to the Council

Introduction/Background

- 1 As part of the review of its own effectiveness in 2011, Senate decided that it should submit an annual report to Council summarising the main items of business it had considered the previous year. This is the first such report, covering the academic year 2010-11.

Senate Business 2010-11

2 Examination Results

- 2.1 Senate received a report from the Academic Registrar confirming the process for approving and ratifying final examination results, as follows:

- Boards of Studies make recommendations for the award of degrees;
- the Standing Committee on Assessment (SCA) approves these recommendations, in accordance with the authority delegated to it by Senate in 2003;
- Senate ratifies the decisions of the SCA at its next meeting;
- 'conferment' refers to the ceremonial bestowing of an award (in person or in absentia) which is recorded on a parchment and to which the graduand is entitled following ratification of his/her result by Senate.

- 2.2 Senate noted that the point at which a student had been granted his/her degree was following ratification by Senate. This was noted to be of particular relevance to overseas postgraduates who might have specific visa or funding requirements.

3 Browne Report/Comprehensive Spending Review

- 3.1 Throughout 2010/11 Senate considered update reports on the Independent Review into Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (the 'Brown Report'), which had been published on 12 October 2010, and the government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), which had been announced on 20 October 2010.

- 3.2 The core proposals of these national developments and SMG's initial consideration of them were discussed in October 2010 and February 2011.

3.3 In May Senate received a report confirming the University's HEFCE funding settlement for 2011/12 and in July Senate noted that:

- Council had approved the recommendation that the University set its home/EU undergraduate tuition fee level for 2012/13 at £9,000 per annum;
- OFFA had approved the University's access agreement following clarification of the target for increasing the percentage of students from socio-economic groups 4-7 (section 9 below also refers).

4 University Development Plan

4.1 Senate considered a final draft of the University Development Plan and received summaries of the eight strategies supporting the University Plan.

4.2 The Development Plan acknowledged that if the University grew beyond 15,000 students it would become increasingly difficult to retain the collegial atmosphere that was so important for inclusivity and interdisciplinarity, and that more complex management arrangements might therefore become necessary.

4.3 The question of optimum size for an academic department related to issues of critical mass and responded to the increases in student numbers over the last twenty years. The Plan did not exclude the possibility of departments outside the stated optimum range but rather sought to highlight that such matters were central to future sustainability.

5 National Student Survey 2010

5.1 Senate considered a detailed report from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor on the 2010 National Student Survey (NSS) results.

5.2 Given the potential effect on outcome that small changes could make, as demonstrated by considerable changes in ranking for some departments nationally, it was important to communicate clearly to students examples of actions that had been taken in response to their feedback. Teaching Committee and the Academic Support Office could advise on the limits of such communication to ensure that it did not cross over into a perceived attempt to manipulate results.

5.3 The survey did not demonstrate volatility at an aggregate level, although it was acknowledged that different cohorts might respond differently and a varied experience was possible across different years. Given the very close distribution of departments in national comparisons, a constant process of engaging and involving students was vital to avoiding inconsistency of performance. It was

notable in this respect that there was a consistent pattern as regards the highest performing departments and the positive comments from students in those departments provided an insight into successful strategies.

6 *Destination of Leavers Survey and Employability Strategy*

6.1 Senate considered a report on the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education 2009 and, related to this, the new Employability Strategy.

6.2 Although the percentage of York graduates opting for further study (significantly exceeding 1994 and Russell Group averages) did not outweigh the overall poor performance that affected league table outcomes, it was nevertheless a consistent York trend that should be celebrated.

6.3 Workplace learning needed to be described in a range of terms appropriate to different disciplines (e.g. internships, industrial placements etc).

6.4 Having noted the destination statistics, Senate approved the Employability Strategy and associated action plan. As with the NSS results, it noted that the topic of employability was another area of increasing significance in which improved performance would be required across all disciplines.

7 *HEFCE Consultation on Public Information*

7.1 Senate considered a report on a HEFCE consultation on changes to the public information provided by institutions about programmes and teaching quality.

7.2 During discussion of the report the following specific points were noted:

- a) There was a risk that the proposed Key Information Set (KIS) might actually represent harmful 'misinformation' that could be misused (e.g. by competitors, league tables etc).
- b) As it was unlikely that much improvement could be expected in developing a standard data set that sought to cover such a diverse sector, the University should instead concentrate on ensuring that the information it made available offered a clear picture of its programmes.
- c) Changing terminology to a standard format (e.g. in respect of seminars, tutorials, supervisions etc) would involve high transaction costs and cultural change at an institutional level.

- d) The assumption of a 40-hour study week did not correlate with recent studies on this matter (e.g. by the Higher Education Policy Institute) which revealed a wide disparity of experience across programmes and institutions.
- e) Chairs of Boards of Studies had been asked to comment on how departments might best complement the KIS with supporting information about the nature and quality of their programmes.
- f) In developing bespoke marketing strategies and clear messages for individual departments it was important to ensure partnership working between academics and students and the professional service colleagues from offices such as External Relations, Communications and Student Recruitment.
- g) In addition to marketing its curriculum, a holistic approach needed to be adopted to presenting an image of the University to the outside world, including improved use of new social media and continuation of the current improvements to the University web presence.

7.3 Senate noted that the public information working party would continue in existence beyond the HEFCE consultation in order to maintain focus on this area of activity, and it was suggested that its membership be increased to include input from the External Relations directorate.

8 Review of Senate Effectiveness

8.1 Senate approved the membership and terms of reference for a group to conduct a review of its effectiveness, noting that this arose from the review of corporate governance conducted by Council in 2010.

8.2 During discussion of the final report in July 2011, the following points were noted:

- a) For elected academic members of Senate, the electoral process was defined in University Regulation 9.
- b) It was noted that the Student Services Committee would cease to be a sub-committee of Senate. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students) confirmed that, in the event of any business arising which had academic implications for students (e.g. in respect of disability provision), the matter in question would be referred either to Teaching Committee or Senate as necessary.
- c) With regard to the statement in the report on the respective roles of Heads of Department and Chairs of Boards of Studies, it was noted that the statement

had not attempted to clarify whether the Board of Studies or Departmental Research Committee should be the body with ultimate responsibility for research students. It was suggested that departmental views might be sought on this matter.

- d) On the question of the election of Chairs of Boards of Studies, it was noted that departmental practices varied. It was agreed that the statement should be amended to reflect that the electoral process combined open democracy with ensuring the establishment of an effectively functioning Departmental Management Team.

8.3 Following the above discussion, Senate approved the report's recommendations.

9 Access Agreement

9.1 Senate received a digest of the University's access agreement as submitted to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and made the following comments:

- (a) Following Council's decision in respect of tuition fees, written materials confirming the University's fee and student support arrangements would be provided for use at Open Days in July.
- (b) The fee arrangements would include proposals in respect of Foundation and 4-year integrated masters programmes. As this affected their medium-term planning and budgeting, further clarification would be provided to those departments offering such programmes.
- (c) No changes were proposed at this time in respect of the fees for postgraduate programmes as the same student support mechanisms (i.e. loans) did not apply to such programmes.
- (d) In the event that the government introduced further changes to the funding regime in order to ensure delivery of the Treasury's initial assumption about HE's contribution to reducing the national deficit, the University would review its agreed principles for fee-setting accordingly.
- (e) With regard to changing student expectations in respect of contact hours under the new higher fee regime, it was agreed that there was a range of factors involved in the delivery of a high-quality learning experience, of which contact time was only one. The Teaching Committee would be holding an open meeting for staff and students to consider what the University priorities should be for enhancing the learning experience.

- (f) Following agreement that the University's system should not be overly complex with multiple trigger points and awards, the income threshold for fee waivers and bursaries and the level of the support package had both been based on the government's National Scholarship Programme. It was noted in this context that £25k was roughly the average salary in the UK.
- (g) The criteria and process for awarding national and University scholarships (171 in total) were yet to be finalised. This was likely to involve a combination of central University guidelines with some discretion across disciplines.

10 Contingency Plans for Assessment

10.1 Senate re-affirmed its 2009 policy on contingency arrangements in the event of staff unavailability, noting that it had been updated to accommodate modularisation and changes to Ordinances/Regulations. It was noted that the policy sought to ensure business continuity and minimise the potential impact on students in the event of staff absence.

11 Analysis of Degree Classifications

11.1 Senate considered the annual report on degree classifications, noting that it also included data on PhD submission rates.

11.2 During discussion the following points were **noted**:

- (a) Given the different levels of achievement across A-level subjects, direct correlation between entry tariffs and degree outcomes needed to be viewed with some caution. The proposed deeper analysis would attempt to correct this by comparing specific A-level scores (rather than average entry tariffs) with university subjects.
- (b) The data on PhD submissions was potentially confusing and could be presented in a more user-friendly manner.
- (c) In addition to disability, age and ethnicity, the deeper analysis should also consider gender as part of its review of input measures and characteristics of the student body.
- (d) The purpose of Senate considering this data was to gain oversight and assurance that the University was acting equitably towards students in its degree awards. While performance issues (of both staff and students) were a factor, the statistical analysis aimed to reveal any areas of undue bias.

- (e) Discipline-related effects had been considered in the previous year's report via subject-level data focused on comparator institutions. The proposed deeper analysis would include benchmarking at the institutional level.

11.3 Following the above discussion, Senate approved the proposal that a multilevel analysis should be undertaken.

12 UK Degree Classification System

12.1 Senate considered a report from the Registrar on discussions at national level on the UK degree classification system, and specifically the potential benefits of moving to a Grade Point Average (GPA) system.

12.2 The following comments were made by Senate:

- (a) It was uncertain to what degree employer behaviour would be altered by changing the classification system; degree outcomes were generally weighted with other factors and many graduate selection processes took place before they were known.
- (b) It would be useful to consider evidence from other systems (e.g. the US) on the extent to which a more differentiated system could lead to an increase in the volume of student dissatisfaction and appeals, especially with regard to academic judgement.
- (c) Moving from a 100- to a 10-point scale for modular marks would make it harder to indicate exceptionally high performance in some disciplines.
- (d) One Head of Department (Social Sciences) reported that the departmental management team had identified a number of advantages with the GPA system and was generally supportive of it.
- (e) If only a small number of institutions moved to a new system, they would be required in the first instance also to maintain the old system alongside the new classifications in order not to disadvantage their graduates, and this would involve a considerable administrative burden.
- (f) Although GPA might more accurately represent student performance, moving to such a system would require changes to current marking practices.

(g) The level of incomparability, at least in public or employer perception, between the same classifications from different institutions would remain under the GPA system.

(h) Whatever system was used, it needed to be readily understandable and useful to all stakeholders. This might disadvantage a small group of 'early adopters', although it was possible that interest might grow swiftly across the sector with the majority of other institutions following.

12.3 Following the above discussion, it was agreed that the University should continue to take part in the national discussions about the issue.

13 QAA Institutional Audit

13.1 Senate received for information a report on the QAA Institutional Audit scheduled to take place during 2011/12, noting that a drafting group had been established to prepare the required Self Evaluation Document (SED) and that comments on the draft would be invited via York Extra.

14 Other Business

14.1 In addition to the specific items of business reported above, Senate also received reports in respect of the following during 2010/11:

- business from its sub-committees (Teaching, Planning, Special Cases and HYMS Joint Senate Committees);
- Professional Associates Scheme in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television;
- Annual Report of the Community & Volunteering Unit;
- Teaching Committee periodic review reports in respect of programmes in Chemistry, Health Sciences, Music, Computer Science and the School of Politics, Economics and Philosophy, as well as interim reports in respect of the Department of Theatre, Film and Television (and the York Law School (S.10-11/52);
- Online Employability Tutorial;
- committee appointments;
- register of validated programmes.

15 Reserved Business

15.1 During the course of the year Senate also received and/or approved reports on the following items of 'reserved' business:

- examination results (at its meeting on 12 July 2011 Senate signed off the results of 3,410 final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students after these had been made available by Registry Services for checking online by departments);
- award of first-class honours degrees with distinction (55 such 'starred firsts' were awarded in 2011);
- senior appointments (including appointments or re-appointments of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Estates, the Academic Co-ordinator for Sciences, two Provosts and 14 Heads of Department);
- academic promotions;
- honorary academic appointments;
- student suspensions;
- students selected to participate in international exchange programmes;
- revocation of a University qualification.

September 2011

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Vice-Chancellor
Chair of the University Senate**