Senate

BOARD FOR GRADUATE SCHOOLS

Minutes of the meeting of the Board for Graduate Schools held on 27 February 2007.

Present: The Pro-Vice-Chancellor Professor A.H. Fitter (Chair), The Chair of the Standing Committee on Assessment Dr C.J. Fewster, Professor A.G. Burr, Dr D. Efird, Professor J.C. Sparrow, Miss A. Takshe, Professor M. Taylor, Mr A.W. Underwood, Miss J. Winter

In attendance: Mrs R.A. Goerisch (Assistant Registrar), Mrs R.J. Royds (Manager, Student Administrative Services), Mr P. Simison (Graduate Schools Office)

Apologies: Professor A.G. Burr, Dr G.D. Low, Ms A. Takshe, Dr C.A. Thompson, Dr R. Wooffitt, Dr R.J. Partridge

07/25 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 January 2007 were approved, amended by (a) the addition of the name of Dr. G. Tsoulas to the list of those present; and (b) the substitution of the phrase “had approved procedures for a pilot scheme” for “had approved a pilot scheme” in M07/2.

07/26 English language testing system

Arising out of M07/3, the Board received comments from Mr Bill Soden (Centre for English Language Teaching) on the level of the texts used by and the work required of students on the proposed eight-week pre-sessional course designed for applicants needing to improve their IELTS score from 6.0 to 6.5. The Board was satisfied that the level was appropriate for postgraduate students.

07/27 Amendments to Regulations 2.4, 2.5 and 2.7 (MPhil, PhD and EngD)

Arising out of M07/4, it was reported that the six departments which had responded to a
consultation had approved the proposed modification of Regulation 2.4(a)(iii), which made it clear that the requirement for the award of the MPhil consisted solely in submitting a satisfactory thesis rather than in passing an examination.

The Board also approved a further amendment to Regulations 2.4(h) and 2.5(e) as set out in M07/28 below.

07/28 Guidance on MA/MSc programmes by research

Arising out of M07/6, the Board received a further draft of the guidance for departments on MA/MSc programmes by research, prepared by a working group chaired by Professor Sparrow.

It was noted that, among other things, the group proposed:

(a) that each candidate should have a thesis advisory panel, comprising the supervisor and at least one other member of academic staff;

(b) that candidates should have access to, and might be required by their department to undertake, appropriate training provided by the department for research students;

(c) that assessment for the award of the degree should be wholly on the basis of a research dissertation (or other prescribed materials), and of an oral examination, if required;

(d) that programmes might nevertheless contain a requirement that candidates should complete appropriate taught modules;

(e) that candidates should normally submit within three months of the end of their period of registration for the degree;

(f) that an oral examination might be a requirement of the programme, or might be required for an individual candidate at the discretion of the examiners;

(g) that, if an oral examination was not a requirement of the programme, the programme should specify other procedures to verify that the work submitted was the candidate’s own;

(h) that, in the case of a referral, the department should forward to the Graduate Schools’ Office with the examiners’ report notification of the revisions to be made, for transmission to the candidate.

It was noted that, at its previous meeting, the Board had decided that the degree of MA/MSc
by research should not be awarded with distinction.

With regard to (d) above, the Board agreed that passing such taught modules might, if the department so determined, constitute a progression hurdle, and that the words “in which case, the level of attainment required of students must be clearly specified” should be added. It was also agreed that it should be open to a department to waive the taught module requirement in individual cases.

With regard to (g) above, it was noted that the other procedures could take the form, for example, of an internal presentation by the candidate with the internal examiner present.

It was also agreed that the guidance should make it clear that a candidate’s supervisor could not act as internal examiner.

The Board then approved the guidance, and agreed that departments should be asked to confirm that their MA/MSc programmes by research conformed to the guidance.

The Board agreed that any student who wished to downgrade from an MPhil/PhD programme to an MA/MSc programme by research should be able to do so, and that departments which did not currently offer such a programme should therefore be asked to make provision for one, even if it were not advertised but existed solely to allow the possibility of downgrading from MPhil/PhD. To this end, it was agreed that the departments concerned should be provided with a model programme proposal.

In view of the agreement above that it should be open to a department to waive any taught module requirement in individual cases, the Board agreed that the proposed addition to Regulations 2.4(h) and 2.5(e) of the phrase “provided that…..the candidate attains the level required for that degree” was not required.

07/29 MSc programme in Biology by research

Arising out of M07/7, the Chair reported that he had received a satisfactory statement regarding the training requirements and provision of training for the MSc in Biology by research, and that the programme was now approved.

07/30 MA programme in Music by research

Arising out of M079, the Chair reported that he had received a satisfactory statement regarding the criteria for success at MA by research, MPhil and PhD level, and that the MA programme was now approved.
07/31 Submission requirements for MPhil/PhD in Music by performance

Arising out of M07/10, the Chair reported that he had received a satisfactory statement of the requirements for the MPhil in Music by performance, and that the proposed revised submission requirements for the MPhil/PhD in Music by performance were now approved.

07/32 Provision of development for established supervisors

The Board discussed the provision of development for established supervisors.

Ms Kate O’Sullivan, Director of Professional Organisation and Development, attended for this item.

She pointed out that the recently published QAA report on its review of research degree programmes stated that this was the issue on which variability between institutions of expectations and requirements was greatest. In most institutions, established supervisors were encouraged or expected, but rarely required, to engage in personal development activities in this area. A few institutions required supervisors to take an appropriate training course every two years as a condition of being allowed to continue to serve as a supervisor.

Ms O’Sullivan suggested that over the next twelve months the University should identify needs and formulate a plan for meeting them. A project manager needed to be appointed to superintend this task. If possible, needs and plans already identified should be included in the documentation for the QAA audit scheduled for November 2007.

The Board agreed that the University would need to provide departments and supervisors with: (a) training; (b) rewards; and (c) sanctions.

Training should cover University postgraduate student procedures, as well as the supervisory process itself. Aspects of the training provided through the YCAP programme, and for research students by the GTU, might serve as models. Mechanisms might be adopted from the Virtual Learning Environment. The National Postgraduate Committee might provide examples of good and bad practice. Training might be delivered by departments or groups of departments, as well as centrally.

Rewards might take the form of a Vice-Chancellor’s award for good practice in doctoral supervision, or other awards suggested by departments; good supervision could also be taken into account for promotion. Sanctions would be applied where rewards were ineffective; they might take the form of removing a department’s eligibility to receive University research studentships.

It was agreed that the Chair, accompanied by Ms O’Sullivan, Dr Clegg and Miss Winter,
should first discuss the matter at the next graduate chairs’ forum, and that a paper should be prepared for that meeting, including reference to the suggestion of a Vice-Chancellor’s award.

07/33 Sustainability of the Roberts project

The Board received a paper from the Deputy Chair and Ms O’Sullivan on the sustainability of the Roberts project. Ms O’Sullivan was in attendance for this item.

It was noted that the Roberts funding provided by the research councils for skills training was guaranteed until 2008, and was likely to continue until 2011. There was little prospect of earmarked funding beyond that date, since the expectation of government and the research councils was that skills training would be embedded in institutions’ normal activities; any funding made available would be included in existing grants rather than earmarked.

The Roberts Review Group was therefore looking at ways of embedding skills training, using Roberts funding, by changing not the content but the method of delivery, for example, by training departmental staff to provide skills training within departments.

It was agreed that the Graduate Training Unit provided a valuable service, and that some generic skills training was best offered centrally.

The Chair advised the Board not to assume that the University would discontinue funding for the Graduate Training Unit when the earmarked Roberts funding came to an end. Previous worthwhile initiatives which had begun with earmarked funding had subsequently been incorporated into the University’s budget.

07/34 Report on UKCGE conference

The Board received and noted the report from the Deputy Chair on the UK Council for Graduate Education’s conference held in York on 13 February 2007.

07/35 Revised proposal for on-line PhD programme in Social Policy and Social Work

Arising out of M06/67, the Board received a revised proposal for an on-line PhD programme in Social Policy and Social Work.

Ellen Roberts was in attendance for this item. She introduced the proposal by highlighting its perceived benefits, namely: (i) making the PhD programme available to a wider range of students; and (ii) providing on-line facilities which would be of equal benefit to campus-based students, to part-time students and to full-time students who were not in residence in York.
It was noted that the revised proposal sought to address the concerns raised by the Board about the original proposal submitted in June 2006. These were:

(a) the possibility of making student visits to York a requirement of the programme:

The programme would now begin with a compulsory residential induction week. In addition, in common with other PhD students, candidates would attend for the oral examination in York.

(b) enabling students to make presentations to an audience in real time:

This would be done using web-based conferencing.

(c) enabling students to participate in conferences, including assistance with travel costs:

E-based students would be subject to the same policies and assistance as campus-based students.

(d) access to library and other resources, given that not all were available electronically:

Students would now have access to a vast range of e-based resources through Metalib, and would be able to supplement these via inter-library loans.

(e) arrangements for transferable skills training:

Most students would be mature professionals and already possess transferable skills. In addition, they would be encouraged to take appropriate locally-based courses, and would use Skills Forge to map such courses on to the research councils’ joint skills statement. The Department would also explore developing on-line courses in transferable skills.

(f) creation of a student community:

Drawing on the experience of its e-based masters programmes, the Department would create a student community by means of asynchronous supported seminar discussions and a series of timetabled synchronous web conferences. Campus-based students would be encouraged to take part in these activities.

(k) quality assurance mechanisms:

These would be the same as for campus-based students;
(l) training of supervisors:

A training programme would be provided, drawing on the experience of supporting tutors and supervisors for the e-based masters programmes.

(m) examination arrangements:

Students would be required to attend an oral examination in York.

(n) verification of student identity

The induction meeting and the web video-conferencing events would provide a full opportunity to verify identity.

(o) evaluation of pilot (18 months after student admission) felt to be too early:

Some initial evaluation would take place at this stage, but as part of an ongoing process.

(p) the Department should seek information on arrangements for on-line PhD programmes offered by other institutions:

The Department had made contact with the University of Manchester’s School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work. This had already informed the revised proposal, for example in the introduction of an induction week, and there were likely to be opportunities for continued mutual learning.

In the course of discussion, the following additional points were made:

(q) thesis advisory panels:

Thesis advisory panels would meet twice a year, for part-time as well as full-time students. The student would take part by video conference link, and the meeting would be preceded by submission of required documentation and asynchronous discussion.

(r) availability of software:

It would be a condition of enrolment for the programme that candidates had available, or had access to, the necessary software to enable them to take part in synchronous and asynchronous on-line discussions.

(s) participation in research seminars:
Participation in research seminars and access to visiting speakers would be possible through the internet.

(t) eligibility for admission:

Overseas, EU and home applicants would be equally eligible for admission to the on-line programme.

(u) tuition fees:

Tuition fees would be at the same level as for standard full-time or part-time students.

(v) other administrative issues:

A number of other administrative issues remained to be resolved, including the enrolment procedure and eligibility for HEFCE funding for home/EU candidates.

While approving the proposal that candidates should be required to attend the University for the residential induction week and for the oral examination, the Board agreed that candidates should be encouraged to visit York at other times. At the same time, the Board agreed to consider at a future meeting whether it might be possible for the oral examination to be conducted on-line.

In answer to a question whether the extent of shared experience among students was less at PhD than at masters level, it was pointed out that PhD students would have in common their theoretical and methodological approach, along with the analysis of data.

The Board agreed that evaluation of the programme should take place continuously, and in particular at the time the first students upgraded, at which time it was requested that a report should be submitted to the Board.

The Board then approved the revised proposal, and agreed that it should be submitted to Senate as Category I business.

07/36 Proposed MPhil/PhD programme in Philosophy, Politics and Economics

The Board received a proposal from the School of Politics, Economics and Philosophy for an MPhil/PhD programme in Philosophy, Politics and Economics.

Professor Mozaffar Qizilbash was in attendance for this item.
It was noted that the proposed programme comprised three streams, in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, and that each student would follow the PhD programme offered by the department of their main supervisor. It was constructed in this way in order to meet the requirements of the different ESRC panels through which ESRC recognition would be sought. Nevertheless, the proposed programme contained distinctive PEP features:

- all candidates would have an induction session with the Director of the PEP School;
- candidates would attend interdisciplinary PEP seminars and graduate workshops;
- candidates would normally have a second supervisor in another of the PEP departments.

The question was raised whether the candidates would follow a sufficiently common programme to justify the distinctive Philosophy, Politics and Economics degree title. In response, it was argued that, without a strong affiliation to a department, students on the programme would not have a centre of allegiance. The Board agreed that, nevertheless, there was a need for greater coherence within the proposed programme, particularly with regard to the delivery of transferable skills training, where it was felt that there was scope for greater collaboration between the three departments. It was therefore agreed to ask Professor Qizilbash to amend the proposal in this respect, and to authorise the Chair to approve the amended proposal.

07/37 Proposed MPhil/PhD programme in Theatre, Film and Television

The Board received a proposal for an MPhil/PhD programme in Theatre, Film and Television. The proposal had received approval in principle from the Chair, acting on the Board’s behalf.

It was noted that the proposal had been submitted by the Head of Department, Professor Andrew Tudor. A Board of Studies in Theatre, Film and Television had not yet been constituted, but would be in place for the academic year 2007/8.

It was agreed that the proposal should be amended to specify that thesis advisory panels should consist of academic staff, and that references to ‘Graduate Committee’ should be replaced by ‘Graduate School Board’.

The proposal foresaw that some candidates would submit, in place of a conventional thesis, creative work (e.g., film, theatrical production, or video). It was agreed that the Department should seek approval from the Board for any unconventional submission requirements before they were published in student handbooks or elsewhere.

It was agreed that members should send any further comments to Philip Simison for transmission to Professor Tudor.
07/38 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey

The Board received the invitation from the Higher Education Academy to make use of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. This was a survey tool that allowed institutions to collect information, by means of an on-line questionnaire, from research students about their experiences in a consistent and objective way. Institutions would be able to subject their own results to detailed statistical analysis, and to see the aggregate results for all institutions taking part, to allow benchmarking.

The Board agreed that the University should accept this invitation, noting that the Survey offered it a valuable way of evaluating research student experience and comparing it to the national response. It would also enable the effectiveness of the code of practice on research degree programmes to be evaluated.

Dr Clegg and Miss Winter expressed a wish to add questions to the core questionnaire.

It was noted that two other questionnaires were to be sent to graduate students in the near future. It was agreed that students should be alerted to this and encouraged to complete all three questionnaires.

It was agreed that the results of the Survey should be considered at a meeting of the Board in the autumn term 2007.

07/39 Electronic theses on-line

The Board received information on the Joint Information Systems Committee’s new EthOS service (electronic theses on-line).

It was noted that the University would pay an annual fee (£4,000), and that the British Library would digitise York PhD theses to that value each year. Priority would be given to theses requested by readers outside the University; any balance from the fee would be used to cover other theses which the University wished to have digitised. Once digitised, the theses would be stored both locally and by the British Library. Digitised theses would be searchable through one interface, and accessible internationally.

The Board noted that the scheme raised questions about the method of submission as well as the storage of PhD theses. Any change would require a change to the Regulations.

The view was expressed that the University should require submission of theses for examination in electronic form, as well as in hard-copy. This would make it easier for examiners to have access to the thesis and to insert comments or required revisions, and easier
to check for plagiarism.

It was agreed to ask Rosemary Royds and Rosemary Goerisch, in consultation with Professor Sparrow and Dr Fewster, to draw up proposals for the Board’s consideration.

07/40 Policy on staff fee waivers

The Board received a proposal designed to clarify the policy on tuition fee waivers for members of University staff.

The proposal made it clear that the University was prepared to waive fees for staff who registered for certain publicly-funded postgraduate programmes where there was an obvious institutional benefit to be gained. Where registration for a postgraduate programme was a condition of employment expressly stated in the contract of employment, a waiver would be automatic; in other circumstances, a decision would be made in each case entirely on the balance between institutional gain and loss.

The procedure was that the head of the employing department made an application for a fee waiver to the Assistant Registrar: Registry Services, who would decide whether or not a fee waiver should be authorised, or in case of uncertainty, refer the matter to the Chair of the Board for Graduate Schools, who might in turn refer the case to the full Board. Retrospective applications would not be considered.

Where tuition fees were waived, candidates would pay an annual registration fee, and examination fees.

The Board agreed that, where registration for a postgraduate programme was a condition of employment, the fee waiver should be 100%, but that the teaching department should receive no departmental grant in respect of the candidate. It was agreed that, in other circumstances, the fee waiver should be 50%, and the teaching department should receive departmental grant in the normal way.

The Board agreed that Senate should be asked to approve the policy for implementation from 1 September 2007.

07/41 Paid maternity leave for University research award holders

The Board approved a proposal that, from 1 March 2007, the period of paid maternity leave allowed to holders of University research awards should be increased from four to six months in line with current research council practice.
07/42 Delegation of approval of upgradings, suspensions and extensions

The Board approved a proposal that the approval of upgradings, suspensions and extensions should, in specified circumstances, be delegated to administrative staff in Student Administrative Services.

It was noted that revised recommendation forms for these processes, together with notes for departments on completing them, were to be posted on the University’s website. It was agreed that the upgrading form should ask the thesis advisory panel to confirm that it had discussed the candidate’s skills training needs.

07/43 Next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was to be held on Tuesday 19 June 2007.

Philip Simison
Student Progress Officer

PS/ February 2007