Senate

BOARD FOR GRADUATE SCHOOLS

Minutes of the meeting of the Board for Graduate Schools held on 23 January 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, Dr B.J. Keely, Dr G.D. Low, Professor J.C. Sparrow, Ms A. Takshe, Professor M. Taylor, Mr A.W. Underwood, Miss J. Winter, Dr R. Wooffitt

In attendance: Dr A. Field (for MM07/9 and 10 only), Dr K.V. Clegg (Director, Graduate Training Unit), Mrs R.A. Goerisch (Assistant Registrar), Mr P. Simison (Graduate Schools Office)

Apologies: Professor M.A. Maynard, Professor T.A. Sheldon, Dr C. Thompson

07/1 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2006 were approved

07/2 Pilot of audio-recording of oral examinations

Arising out of M06/64, it was reported that the Standing Committee on Assessment had approved a pilot scheme for the audio-recording of MPhil/PhD oral examinations. Four departments had agreed to take part (Biology, Health Sciences, History and Philosophy). The pilot drew on the experience of the Department of Health Sciences, which had begun to record examinations in 2006. For the purpose of the pilot, students would be encouraged, but not compelled, to have their examination recorded. The scheme provided for recordings to be securely stored. In the event of an appeal based on the conduct of the examination, the Deputy Chair alone would listen to the recording to help him determine whether or not the appeal should be heard; only if the appeal was heard would the recording be made available to the candidate, to the appropriate members of the department concerned, and to the members of the appeal panel.
07/3 English language testing scheme

The Board received for information a report from the Teaching Committee on a proposal from the EFL Unit for a University English language testing scheme, to be introduced in summer 2007.

It was noted that the scheme would provide a limited system of direct entry to University programmes, through successful completion of an eight-week EFL Unit pre-sessional course, for applicants who had achieved the University’s minimum entry requirement (IELTS 6.0 or equivalent) but needed an improvement to IELTS 6.5 (or equivalent) to satisfy a departmental requirement.

The Board welcomed this proposal, and expressed the hope that a scheme providing for improvement from IELTS 6.5 to 7.0 could be developed in due course.

It was agreed to enquire whether the proposed course would be at an appropriately advanced level (e.g., from the point of view of the texts used) for postgraduate applicants (particularly for research degrees).

07/4 Proposed amendments to Regulations 2.4, 2.5 and 2.7 (MPhil, PhD and EngD)

The Board considered proposed amendments to Regulations 2.4, 2.5 and 2.7 (MPhil, PhD and EngD). These were intended to (a) clarify the duration of the registration period; (b) regulate early submission of theses; (c) remove reference to provisional registration; (c) regulate downgrading to MPhil and to MA/MSc by research; (d) clarify the regulation on simultaneous registration; (e) clarify the regulation on the incorporation in theses of previous degree work; and (f) clarify the requirements for the MPhil degree.

It was agreed to consult departments regarding (f).

Subject to certain further changes, and to any comments on (f) received from department, the proposal was approved.

The proposal, as approved by the Board, is attached as Appendix 1.

07/5 Options open to MPhil/PhD examiners

The Board considered, following a comment from an external examiner, the options open to MPhil/PhD examiners, and in particular whether there should be an intermediate option
between (a) award of the degree subject to minor corrections being made to the thesis (normally within one month) to the satisfaction of the internal or another of the examiners and (b) referral of the thesis for resubmission, after a period of not more than twelve nor less than three months, and re-examination. The intermediate option, it was suggested, would be the award of the degree subject to more substantial corrections being made to the thesis within a period between one and three months.

It was noted that the University of Leeds permitted ‘minor editorial corrections’ to be made within four weeks and ‘stated minor deficiencies’ to be corrected within twelve weeks.

The Board agreed that it would be difficult to define the distinction between minor corrections and more substantial corrections. It was noted that in the latter case, the external examiner might wish to be satisfied that the corrections had been made, but that in this case the Regulation already provided for either of the examiners to verify that required minor corrections had been made.

It was felt that if an intermediate option were to be introduced, with more substantial corrections to be verified by the external examiner, that would become established as the normal option.

The Board nevertheless agreed that examiners sometimes felt constrained, because minor corrections were to be done within one month, to refer a thesis which in fact merited the award of the degree though subject to more substantial corrections to be done over a longer period than one month. A referral in these circumstances could be detrimental to the candidate’s career.

It was noted that it was not the Regulations, but the instruction given on the examiners’ report form, that specified that minor corrections should be made within one month to the satisfaction of the internal examiner. The Regulation specified no time limit and left it open to the internal or another of the examiners to verify the corrections.

The Board accordingly agreed to recommend that the Regulations should not be amended, but that the instruction on the examiners’ report form should be changed to specify that minor corrections should normally be made within two months and that the examiners should agree which one of them should verify the corrections.

It was agreed to forward this recommendation to the Standing Committee on Assessment for approval.

07/6 Guidance on MA/MSc by research

Arising out of M06/67, the Board considered draft guidelines on MA/MSc programmes by
The Board agreed that the word-length of the dissertation should be specified as not more than 40,000 words. It also agreed that since, unlike a taught programme, only one piece of work was assessed and no comparisons could be made with other students in the same cohort, the MA/MSc by research should not be awarded with distinction.

It was agreed that, where an MA/MSc by research programme had a significant number of candidates, the Board should be able to consider requests from departments to retain a pool of external examiners over a specified period, who could examine individual candidates where they had appropriate expertise.

The Board also considered whether an oral examination was necessary in order to confirm that the dissertation was the candidate’s own work, or whether it was sufficient for the internal examiner to verify this. It was proposed that an oral examination should normally be held, or that as an alternative the candidate should give a presentation as part of the examination in the presence of the internal examiner.

It was agreed to ask a group consisting of Professor Sparrow, Dr Keely, Professor Taylor and Miss Winter to formulate a further draft of the guidelines for the Board to consider, taking account of the points discussed above, and of other considerations including admission requirements, supervision, thesis advisory panels, skills training, taught components, other academic requirements, writing up period, presentation of dissertation, and outcomes of the examination.

07/7 Proposal for MSc in Biology (by research)

The Board received a proposal from the Graduate School Board in Biology for an MSc programme in Biology (by research).

It was agreed:

- that the proposal for a writing up period should be considered by the group referred to in M07/6 above, and that any such period should be limited to three months;
- that the proposal regarding training committees (equivalent to thesis advisory panels) should also be considered by the group;
- that any required training must be made available by the Department of Biology, since training for masters students was not provided centrally;
- that the Department should be asked to specify what the training requirements were.

Subject to resolution of the points referred to above to the satisfaction of the Chair, and to any general guidelines adopted on the recommendation of the group referred to above, the
07/8 Proposal for MA in Sociology (by research)

The Board received a proposal from the Graduate School Board in Sociology for an MA programme in Sociology (by research).

The proposal was approved, subject to any general guidelines adopted on the recommendation of the group referred to in M07/6 above.

07/9 Proposal for MA in Music (by research)

The Board received a proposal from the Graduate School Board in Music for an MA programme in Music (by research).

Dr Field, the chair of the departmental Graduate School Board, attended for this item.

It was noted that it was proposed that the MA should be assessed in one of three ways:

- by a dissertation of 30,000 to 40,000 words;
- by portfolio of compositions accompanied by documentation of at least 5,000 words; or
- by a portfolio of performance projects, documented through video/audio recording accompanied by appropriate commentary (5,000 words maximum), bibliography and discography.

These assessment methods reflected those available in Music at MPhil/PhD level.

The Board agreed to ask the Department to prepare a clear statement of the criteria for success in each of the three assessment methods at MA, MPhil and PhD level.

The proposal was approved in principle, subject provision of such a statement to the satisfaction of the Chair, and to any general guidelines adopted on the recommendation of the group referred to above.

07/10 Submission requirements for PhD in Music

The Board considered a proposal from the Graduate School Board in Music for a change in the requirements for the PhD in Music by performance.

Dr Field, the chair of the departmental Graduate School Board, attended for this item.
It was noted that there were currently three routes to the PhD in Music:

- by thesis
- by portfolio of compositions (written scores and/or electro-acoustic works on CD)
- by performance.

For (c), the current requirement was submission of a thesis (normally 45,000 words) and a related recital.

It was proposed that the requirement should be changed to allow:

- a portfolio of up to six discrete performance projects, fully documented through audio/video recording and supported by appropriate commentary, bibliography and discography; or
- a single extended public or recorded performance, accompanied either by a thesis of 45,000 words, or by a portfolio of compositions (normally five or more substantial works).

The Board approved the proposal in principle, subject to provision by the Department of a statement satisfactory to the Chair of the requirements for the MPhil in Music.

**07/11 Extensions for MPhil/PhD students**

The Board considered a number of issues regarding extensions of submission deadline for MPhil/PhD students.

These included:

- recommendations for extensions not based on the grounds permitted in the Regulations;
- recommendations submitted after the original submission deadline;
- submission of thesis, or planned submission of thesis, on a date which exceeds a final submission deadline.

It was noted that (a) and (c) were most often the result of inadequate management by the department of the research project.

The Board discussed possible sanctions, including: publicly naming the department concerned; removing the department’s eligibility to receive University research studentships; charging the student a fee for permission to submit late; allowing submission only for the MPhil, unless the student successfully petitioned the Board for permission to submit for the PhD; or a combination of the last two.
It was agreed to ask Professor Sparrow to prepare specific proposals for consideration at the next meeting.

07/12 Roberts Policy Forum

The Board received a report from Professor Sparrow on the Roberts Policy Forum held at the University of Manchester on 10 January 2007.

Iain Cameron, of Research Councils UK, had expressed the view that Roberts funding was likely to continue until 2011 if the 2008-2011 spending review was favourable. Increasingly government was asking the Research Councils and universities to provide evidence for the efficacy of the training provided by universities as measured by key performance indicators that were being developed.

Gill Clarke, of the QAA, had identified key themes emerging from the special review of research degree programmes. These included the provision of development for established supervisors. The Board agreed to invite Kate O’Sullivan, Director of Professional and Organisational Development, to speak on this at the Board’s next meeting.

07/13 Graduate Training Activities

The Board received a report on graduate training activities from Dr Clegg.

The paper invited the Board to consider whether departmental graduate administrators should have access to student information on Skills Forge. The Board saw no objection to this in principle, providing access was not made available to the reflective areas.

The paper also invited the Board to consider how skills training could be sustained if Roberts funding were withdrawn in 2008. The Board asked Dr Clegg to prepare a paper on this for the next meeting. In this connection, it was suggested that, since an objective of skills training was to improve employability, it might be possible to secure industrial sponsorship, and that this should be explored with the Director of Development.

It was agreed to ask Professor Sparrow and Dr Clegg to discuss how best to determine how successful Skills Forge was proving (e.g., through focus groups, record of student interaction with supervisors).

07/14 Revised rules on appointment of external examiners for research students

The Board received a proposal for revised rules on the appointment of external examiners for postgraduate research degree candidates. It was noted that the proposals had been approved
by the Standing Committee on Assessment at its meeting on 19 January 2007.

The proposals were:

- The same examiner might be appointed to examine no more than two research degree candidates in the same department in any 12-month period, and no more than four research degree candidates in the same department in any 36-month period;
- For the purpose of this rule, research degree candidates comprised PhD, MPhil and MA/MSc (by research) candidates;
- The time limits set out above should have regard to the date of the formal letter of appointment.
- The internal examiner or supervisor of a research student at the University of York should not have been appointed, currently or within the last six months, to examine a research student in the proposed external examiner’s department.

The Board approved these proposals.

These rules notwithstanding, it was agreed that where an MA/MSc by research programme had a significant number of candidates, the Board should be able to consider requests from departments to retain a pool of external examiners over a specified period, who could examine individual candidates where they had appropriate expertise (see M07/6 above).

07/15 Dates for hearings

Members of the Board agreed to keep the afternoon of the following dates free for possible appeal hearings:

- Tuesday 20 February 2007
- Tuesday 20 March 2007
- Tuesday 24 April 2007
- Tuesday 22 May 2007

07/16 Next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was to be held on Tuesday 27 February 2007.

Philip Simison
Student Progress Officer