Minutes of the meeting of the Board for Graduate Schools held on 17 June 2003.

Present: The Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Professor A.W. Ellis (Chair)
        Professor B.C. Gilbert (Chair, Teaching Committee)
        Dr T.J. Crawford (Chair, Standing Committee on Assessment)
        Professor G. De Fraja
        Professor C.A. Godfrey
        Dr P.M. Lee
        Mr O. Lisagor
        Dr S.J. Marshall
        Dr L. Smith
        Professor J.C. Sparrow

In attendance: Dr F.M.K. Campbell (Graduate Recruitment Officer)

        Miss N.J. Cooper-Harvey (President, Graduate Students' Association)
        Dr S.J. Hutchinson (Graduate Student Training Officer)
        Ms C. Rees (Careers Director)
        Mr P. Simison (Assistant Registrar)

Apologies: Professor E.R. Hancock
        Professor G.J. Hitch
        Professor S.F. Jackson
        Ms Y. Li
        Miss C.L. Shobbrook
        Dr E.M. Tyler

03/39 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 February 2003 were approved and signed.

03/40 Membership of the Board

(i) It was reported that the Senate had agreed that the Chair of the Standing Committee on Assessment should be an ex officio member of the Board.

(ii) It was reported that Mr Oleg Lisagor (Computer Science) has replaced Miss Anne Hollings as the research student member of the Board appointed by the GSA;
(iii) It was reported that the Senate had invited nominations of members to replace Dr Stephanie Marshall (Provost) and Dr Elizabeth Tyler (Medieval Studies), whose terms of service ended on 31 July 2003. The Chair thanked Dr Marshall and Dr Tyler for their service on the Board.

03/41 PhD by publications

Arising out of M03/2, it was reported that the Senate had approved the proposal for the introduction of the degree of PhD by publications, together with guidelines for examiners (agendum 4a).

The Board considered and approved a draft regulation for the degree of PhD by publications. The regulation is appended to these minutes for the approval of the Senate (Appendix 1).

03/42 HEFCs consultation on improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes

Arising out of M03/20, the Board received a formal consultation document from the HEFCs on improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes (agendum 4b). It was noted that universities were invited to respond by 30 September 2003.

The Board considered in particular Table 1 of the document, which set out minimum threshold standards and good practice guidelines for research degree programmes. It agreed to recommend to the HEFCs:

(i) that paragraph 1b (AInstitution to monitor, review and act on the application of its code of practice@) should be a minimum threshold standard;

(ii) that paragraph 2c (A Adequate facilities for the research project, including library and IT facilities@) should be a minimum threshold standard;

(iii) that paragraph 5d (A Each examiner to provide an independent report on the thesis before the viva@) should remain a good practice guideline, and should not be a minimum threshold standard; the Board agreed that the University=s present requirement for the submission of a joint report following the viva was perfectly satisfactory;

(iv) that paragraph 6d (A Institution to formally review the training provided, to ensure that it is meeting the needs of its students@) should include reference to monitoring the impact of the training and the quality of the trainers.
It was agreed that the Chair and Secretary should prepare a response on the lines agreed above.

It was agreed that clarification should be requested on whether, in paragraph 7a.ii, A confidential feedback mechanisms for supervisory teams, review panels and examiners meant that feedback should be invited from, or on the operation of, supervisory teams, review panels and examiners.

The Board agreed:

(a) that special arrangements would need to be made for a small number of departments at York (including Management Studies and Philosophy) in order to comply with paragraph 2a, which required that, for units with small numbers of active researchers and students, provision should be made for interaction with related units at the same or other institutions;

(b) that the University should monitor submission rates institutionally, in response to the requirement in paragraph 2b that 70% of submissions should be made within four years for full-time students, or eight years for part-time students;

(c) that the Board should make provision for appropriate feedback mechanisms (paragraph 7) and for other arrangements which were proposed as good practice guidelines but which might subsequently become minimum threshold standards.

03/43 Policy on research degree programmes

Arising out of M03/21, it was reported that a final draft of the policy on research degree programmes had been circulated to departments with a request for comments in time for the Board’s October meeting (agendum 4c). This would allow the Board to submit the policy to the meeting of the Senate on 28 October 2003 for approval.

The Board agreed that the focus of the policy should be on MPhil/PhD students in the first instance, rather than on students taking MA and MSc courses by research.

03/44 Working Party on Research Training

Arising out of M03/22, it was reported (agendum 4d) that a meeting of the Working Party on Research Training was being arranged.

The Board received the interim report of the Teaching Committee’s Student Skills Working Party, and commented as follows:
(a) The references (on page 3) to skills development being Astudent-centred@ and to the individual student having Aultimate responsibility for his/her personal development@ should not be understood to mean that skills training was optional. Training should be compulsory, though students might be able to choose from a variety of components.

(b) There was scope for the colleges to provide some skills training.

(c) There should be parity of provision between departments and between colleges.

03/45 Criteria for degrees of MPhil and PhD

Arising out of M03/23, the Board received a report from the Senate on the proposed criteria for the award of the degrees of MPhil and PhD (agendum 4e).

The Senate had discussed in detail the concept of Aan original contribution to knowledge or understanding@ and had decided to ask the Board to clarify the wording of this criterion to distinguish more clearly in this area between the MPhil and PhD.

The Board agreed that both MPhil and PhD theses should contain an original contribution to knowledge or understanding; the difference was one of degree. It accordingly agreed that the criteria should be amended to read, for the PhD, Aa substantial original contribution to knowledge or understanding@; and, for the MPhil, Aa recognisable original contribution to knowledge or understanding@. It was agreed, in consequence, to recommend to the Senate that Regulation 2.5(a)(iii), on the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, should be amended to read Ahave presented a thesis on his/her research which has satisfied the examiners and contains a substantial original contribution to knowledge or understanding@.

The Board also agreed that the enumerated items in the first paragraph of the MPhil criteria should be run together in a single unbroken sentence, to achieve parity of format with the PhD criteria.

The criteria, as amended above, are attached as Appendix 2.

03/46 Postgraduate recruitment strategy
Arising out of M03/24, the Board received reports from the Planning Committee and the Policy and Resources Committee concerning the postgraduate recruitment strategy (agendum 4f).

The Planning Committee had noted that, while research council stipends had risen significantly, the budget for University awards had not increased, leading to the allocation of fewer awards for 2003 entry. The Committee had asked the Board to consider how the limited funds available could be used in the most creative fashion. The Board agreed that the Awards Sub-Committee should explore this issue, and report back to the October meeting of the Board.

The Planning Committee had also asked the Board to consider the effectiveness of postgraduate courses with three students or fewer. The Board noted that such courses carried resource implications and that low numbers could disappoint those registering for the course; on the other hand it was pointed out that particular degree titles attached to courses which, as variants of existing courses, had no resource implications nevertheless attracted students because the title helped further their careers. It was also noted that, at the Board’s request, departments with low numbers on particular courses had reviewed their course offerings. It was agreed to return to this issue when numbers registered for courses in 2003/04 were considered.

03/47 Overseas postgraduate students and language training

Arising out of M03/27, the Board considered a paper from Dr Campbell and Dr Hutchinson on overseas postgraduate students and language training (agendum 4g). Attached to the paper was a report made to the Planning Committee in 2001 by a working group on language provision.

The working group had concluded that the current standard English language requirement for admission to the University should not be raised, but that individual departments might consider raising the requirement (across the department or for particular courses) or specifying required scores for components of the IELTS test, where courses were particularly linguistically demanding. To assist departments, the EFL Unit planned to produce and circulate a guide to English language tests.

The working group had also recommended that in-session English language provision should be offered free of charge to registered students up to a limit of 36 hours per student per annum. The group had noted that charging students for such provision was out of line with practice at other institutions. The Board agreed to ask the Planning Committee to revisit this recommendation. It also agreed to ask Dr Campbell to review the extent of free language provision at other universities in the 94 Group and in the Russell Group.

The Board also agreed to review, at its meeting in October, the policy on research degree programmes with regard to references to English language requirements and provision.
The Board did not approve the recommendation that graduate teaching assistants whose first language was not English should be required, before appointment, to have achieved a score of at least 6.5 in the speaking component of the IELTS test. It was felt that this would be impractical, given that many overseas students satisfied the University’s English language requirement by means of results in tests other than IELTS. It was agreed instead that departments should satisfy themselves that candidates appointed as graduate teaching assistants possessed proficiency in English adequate to the task.

The Board also agreed to ask departments to be alert to possible deficiencies in the English proficiency of graduate students following their arrival in York, so that early remedial action could be taken if necessary.

Finally, the Board agreed to ask the Director of the EFL Unit to speak to the Board at its meeting in October about the Unit’s current provision, how that compared with provision elsewhere, and his recommendations for future developments.

03/48 Proposals for joint doctoral programmes in Economics with the Universities of Bologna and Padova

The Board received proposals for joint (i.e., bilateral) doctoral programmes in Economics between the University of York and the Universities of Bologna and Padova (agendum 5). It also received a copy of the University’s agreed procedure for proposing joint graduate programmes, and noted that the current proposals were the first to be brought forward under the procedure. Professor De Fraja was present at the meeting to answer questions.

The Board considered the proposals carefully. It was noted that students could be admitted to the programme from October 2003. It was expected that at most two students a year would be admitted to the programme. Students registered on the programme would spend a minimum of one year at each of the two institutions concerned (York and Bologna or York and Padua). The University of York’s PhD Regulations regarding transfer, suspension and extension of registration, notification of intention to submit, options open to examiners, and appeals, would all apply. The title of the degree to be awarded on successful completion of the programme would be Doctor of Philosophy in Economics at the Universities of York and Bologna or Padova. The joint degree would be conferred, and a joint certificate presented, at one of the participating institutions, at the graduate student’s choice.

The Board agreed that, in section (f) of the Annex of each proposal, the arrangements for the appointment of examiners should be amended to read: At least two internal examiners (one from each of the participating institutions) and one external examiner will be appointed. Neither supervisor can be appointed as internal examiner. Where a candidate is a member of staff at one of the
participating institutions, the number of examiners external to the participating institutions shall exceed the number of internal examiners. The Board agreed that the University’s procedure for proposing joint graduate programmes should be amended to remove the requirement that, where a candidate was not a member of staff at one of the participating institutions, the number of external examiners should equal or exceed the number of internal examiners.

The Board also agreed that, in section (i) of the Annex of each proposal, the reference in the final sentence should be to the complaints procedure rather than the appeals procedure.

Finally, the Board agreed that the Department of Economics should issue students on the programme with a handbook containing the procedures which were peculiar to the programme.

Subject to the amendments referred to above, the Board agreed to approve the proposals, and to recommend them to the Senate for approval.

03/49 Implementation of the QAA framework for higher education qualifications

The Board received and noted a report from the Implementation Group on the implementation of the QAA framework for higher education qualifications (agendum 6).

The Board noted that the recommendations of the Group’s original report on the development of specific criteria for the degree of MPhil had now been implemented (see M03/45 above). It was noted that the Standing Committee on Assessment had been asked to consider whether there was a need for a separate graduate mark scale (in addition to the undergraduate and postgraduate mark scales).

03/50 Proposed common 51-week year for masters courses

The Board received the proposal, from the Working Party on Arrival Arrangements, that the duration of a full-time one-year masters course should be 51 weeks maximum, beginning in the week before the start of the autumn term, leaving a clear week for rooms to be prepared for incoming occupants (agendum 7). The comments which had been received from three departments were also noted.

The Board endorsed the reasons which underlay the proposal, and recommended it to Senate for approval. It was noted that the proposal, if approved, would take effect from 2004/05.

03/51 Provision of facilities during the vacations
The Board received a paper from the GSA, forwarded by the Business Services Consultative Committee, concerning the provision of facilities during the vacations (agendum 8).

With regard to academic facilities, the Board noted:

(i) that the Library was to monitor the pattern of usage over the summer vacation, in order to identify where the greatest need lay. This would help in the planning of Library opening in future vacation.;

(ii) that the GSA had received a helpful letter from the Director of the Computing Service, undertaking to give notice of proposed work during the vacations. It was agreed that the computer room in Wentworth College should not be used by conferences, and that the Board should send a letter to that effect to the Computing Service;

(iii) that Wentworth College would be the open college for graduate students during the vacation, and that events for graduate students would be organised there.

03/52 Paid maternity leave for University research award-holders

The Board received a report from the Equal Opportunities Committee recommending that the University should provide paid maternity leave for University research award-holders (agendum 9).

It was agreed that University research award-holders should be allowed up to four months= paid maternity leave where their expected date of confinement occurred during the three-year period of the award. It was accepted that, where this provision was taken up, it would represent an additional cost on the awards budget, which might result in a reduction in the number of awards that could be allocated in a future year.

03/53 Long-term registration fees for research students

The Board received a letter from the graduate chair in Physics, proposing that long-term registration fees (including computing and library fees) should be better publicised, and should not fall due until three months had elapsed from the end of a student=s registration period (agendum 10).

The Board agreed that long-term registration fees should be better publicised in advance, and noted that to this end, reference to them had been included in the policy on research degree programmes; the policy also stated that departments should draw attention to these fees in their induction programmes. It was agreed that, as an immediate measure, departments should be asked to include reference to these fees in their handbooks for 2003/04.
The Board was of the view that the fees should continue to fall due as soon as the normal period of registration was exceeded, since the University immediately incurred costs in providing the services required. However, it was agreed to explore whether the Computing Service and the Library were prepared to accept payment for part of a year (e.g., six months). It was agreed to consider this further at the next meeting in the light of comments from the Computing Service and the Library.

03/54 Revised recommendations for a code of practice on graduate teaching assistants

The Board received revised recommendations from the GSA and the Graduate Student Training Officer for a code of practice on graduate teaching assistants (agendum 11).

The Board agreed that there was much to commend in these recommendations, particularly the recommendation that graduate teaching assistants should receive from their department a letter of appointment setting out clearly what was expected of them and the limits of their responsibilities. It was also agreed that there should be equity between departments with regard to rates of pay in return for duties performed.

The Board was not persuaded, however, that graduate teaching assistants should enjoy parity in terms of conditions with academic and academic-related staff. It was agreed to ask the Personnel Office for comments on this issue.

03/55 Proposal for introduction of deposits or application fees

The Board noted that the Department of Computer Science had proposed that applicants for its taught graduate courses who accepted offers of places should be required to pay a deposit to secure their place, while the Department of Economics had proposed that applicants for its taught graduate courses should be required to pay an application fee (agendum 12). In each case it was proposed that the deposit or application fee would be offset against the tuition fee when the candidate registered for the course.

The purpose of the deposit would be to achieve greater certainty over the number of prospective entrants. The purpose of the application fee would be to encourage applications only from those who had a serious intention of accepting a place on the course, if offered. It was understood that it was proposed that the deposit/application fee should be in the range £30-£50.

With regard to deposits, the Board felt that any scheme would need to be clearly publicised, and that the deadline for acceptance of the offer and payment of the deposit would need to allow the applicant time to consider offers from other institutions. It was suggested that a deposit should be payable only when an offer was made unconditional or, if payable on acceptance of a conditional offer, should be refundable if the conditions were not met. The administration of the scheme would need to rest entirely with the department, not with the Graduate Schools Office or Fees Office. On this basis, it was agreed to invite the Department of Computer Science to bring forward a firm proposal for consideration.
With regard to application fees, the Board was of the view that such fees raised issues concerning equality of access, and might undermine recruitment among both overseas and home/EU applicants. It would also be difficult to publicise the application fee, especially if it applied only to certain courses in a single department, without causing confusion among potential applicants. For these reasons, the Board decided that it did not favour the proposal.

03/56 Academic misconduct by taught postgraduate students

Dr Crawford, as Chair of the Standing Committee on Assessment, asked the Board to consider the procedures for dealing with cases of academic misconduct among taught postgraduate students.

He pointed out that the terms of reference of the Standing Committee on Assessment specified that that Committee (through its Chair) should provide advice and guidance to Boards of Studies and departmental graduate school boards on assessment-related issues, and particularly on the conduct of academic misconduct cases involving undergraduate, graduate and taught postgraduate students. In parallel with this, the terms of reference of the Board for Graduate Schools specified that the Board (through its Chair) should provide advice and guidance to Boards of Studies and departmental graduate school boards on the conduct of academic misconduct cases involving research students.

With regard to undergraduate students, the Special Cases Committee had responsibility, in cases of academic misconduct, for considering recommendations from Boards of Studies for further penalties, and for monitoring anonymous reports for consistency. Dr Crawford pointed out that, in parallel with this, the Board for Graduate Schools should have responsibility, in cases of academic misconduct involving graduate and postgraduate students (both taught and research), for considering recommendations from Boards of Studies for further penalties, and for monitoring anonymous reports for consistency. This was in line with the suggestion, made when the Graduate and Undergraduate Studies Committee was discontinued, that such responsibility should lie with whichever committee would consider an appeal from the student concerned (i.e., with the Special Cases Committee for undergraduate students and with the Board for Graduate Schools for all graduate and postgraduate students).

The Board agreed to recommend to the Senate that its terms of reference should be amended by the addition of the following:

“In cases of academic misconduct, to consider recommendations from Boards of Studies or departmental graduate school boards for further penalties, and to monitor anonymous reports for consistency.”

Dr Crawford also reported that the Standing Committee on Assessment had set up a working party which was reviewing the procedures for dealing with cases of
academic misconduct. It was likely that the working party would recommend that there should be separate procedures for dealing with cases involving undergraduate students and taught postgraduate students. In this connection, it was noted that it would be advantageous to establish a separate procedure for dealing with cases involving research students. The Board agreed to consider this, following the working party’s report.

03/57 Next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was to be held on Tuesday 14 October 2003 at 2.15pm.