UNIVERSITY OF YORK

Senate

BOARD FOR GRADUATE SCHOOLS

Minutes of the meeting of the Board for Graduate Schools held on 21 June 2005.

Present: The Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Professor A.H. Fitter (Chair)
The Chair of the Standing Committee on Assessment, Dr T.J. Crawford
The Provost of Wentworth Graduate College, Dr P.M. Lee
Dr D. Efird
Professor C.A. Godfrey
Professor E.R. Hancock
Dr G.D. Low
Dr J.E. Nuechterlein
Professor J.C. Sparrow
Professor M. Taylor
Dr G. Tsoulas

In attendance: Dr F.M.K. Campbell (Graduate Recruitment Officer)
Dr E. Loughlin (Graduate Training Officer)
Mr R.J. Partridge (Director, Student Skills Development)
Mr P. Simison (Assistant Registrar)

Apologies: Miss C. Bell
Dr K.V. Clegg
Mr O. Lisagor
Ms C. Rees
Professor T.A. Sheldon
Miss J. Winter
Dr R. Wooffitt

05/36 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 March 2005 were approved.

05/37 Draft University code of practice on research degree programmes

Arising out of M04/77, the Board received the draft University code of practice on research degree programmes (agendum 3a).

This had been prepared in response to the revised QAA code of practice on research degree programmes introduced in September 2004, and supplemented the University’s policy on research degree programmes approved in July 2004. Senate would be asked to approve the new code of practice at its meeting in July. The code of practice would then come into force from October 2005, and would supersede the existing policy.
The Board agreed to ask a group of its members - comprising the Chair, Professor Godfrey and Professor Taylor, together with Dr Clegg and Mr Simison - to meet early in July to finalise the code of practice for approval by the Senate.

It was agreed to circulate the draft to departmental graduate chairs with a request for comments by 4 July, so that these could be considered by the group.

Members of the Board made a number of comments, which were incorporated into the draft (Appendix 1). It was agreed that members of the Board should submit any further comments by 4 July for consideration by the group. It was agreed that the group should look particularly at sections 2 and 9 of the draft, which were currently too detailed and descriptive.

It was noted that it would be open to the Board to develop the code of practice and to recommend modifications over the course of time.

05/38 Appointment of independent chairs for research degree oral examinations

Also arising out of M04/77, the Board received for information the results of a survey of universities concerning the appointment of independent chairs for research degree oral examinations (agendum 3b).

It was noted that, of 14 the universities which had responded, six had adopted the procedure of appointing an independent chair (for example, the head of the candidate’s department or a member of the Research Degrees Committee), four were considering doing so, and four had no plans to do so.

The Board agreed to adhere to its proposal to require an audio-recording to be made of the oral examination, on condition that the recording would only be used in the case of an appeal by the candidate based on the conduct of the examination, or pending the outcome of a subsequent complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. It was recognised that some questions of implementation would need to be resolved (e.g., regarding the provision of equipment, and how recordings should be made available to appellants).

05/39 Outcome of ORS award competition 2005

The Board received the report on the outcome of the ORS award competition in 2005 (agendum 3c).

It was noted that seven out of the University’s sixteen nominations (the maximum permitted) had been approved, i.e., 44%, compared with the national average of 59%. Although this success rate was low compared to some comparator institutions (Exeter 91%, Cambridge 88%, Oxford 86%, Nottingham 84%, Essex 83%, Surrey 83%, Bristol 82%, Edinburgh 80%), others had fared not much better, or worse (Durham 25%, Lancaster 57%, Leeds 59%, Newcastle 53%, Sheffield 54%, LSE 50%, KCL 46%).
It was reported that it had just been announced that from September 2005 institutions would be invited to make the final selection of award holders themselves, within the limits of a ring-fenced grant provided for this purpose. This new arrangement would come into effect from the beginning of the academic year 2005/06, when institutions would be responsible for selecting their ORS award holders for 2006/07. Selection would be made according to guidelines agreed by the funding bodies, with a view to maintaining the high standards of the scheme and its worldwide reputation for excellence. These guidelines would be provided by the funding bodies for the academic institutions by 31 August 2005.

The Board agreed to enquire what funding formula would be used, and expressed the hope that this would be based on institutions’ quotas for nominations, rather than on their success rate.

05/40 Committee on Research Skills Training

The Board approved the minutes of the meeting of the Committee on Research Skills Training held on 29 April 2005 (supplementary agendum).

It was noted that the Committee had agreed (M05/11) that from October 2005 an administration fee should be charged to research students who reserved places on Graduate Training Unit courses but failed to attend, unless genuine reasons were given.

05/41 Postgraduate research funding

The Board received for information a report from the Higher Education Policy Unit on postgraduate research funding (agendum 4).

The report concluded that the costs of research degree programmes were much greater than the revenues consequent on student registration.

The Chair commented, however, that the report failed to take into account marginal costs. A recent study at York had also shown that in some departments research students made a significant contribution to publications assessed in the Research Assessment Exercise.

Nevertheless, the report demonstrated that overseas research students did not attract greater income than research council funded students, and that it was therefore untrue that the universities recruited overseas research students solely for financial reasons.

It was agreed to circulate the report, for information, to heads of departments and graduate chairs.

05/42 Revised postgraduate studentship scheme

The Board considered a proposal for a revised postgraduate studentship scheme,
The scheme was intended to maximise the effectiveness of the amount of money available and to assist better recruitment to masters and PhD programmes across the University. The proposal also involved greater delegation of decision-making to departments.

It was noted that some departments had commented that it would be difficult for them to find the stipend for the proposed partner studentships (involving a University fee waiver and a stipend from an external source), and had suggested that departments should be allowed to offer one fee waiver regardless of whether a stipend was provided. It was agreed, however, that this would remove the incentive to find a stipend.

In this connection, it was agreed that unsuccessful bids for AHRC collaborative doctoral studentships (involving an external partner) could be submitted as candidates for a University partner studentship.

It was also noted, with regard to the proposed teaching scholarships, that departments might have difficulty assessing the suitability of candidates applying from outside the University. It was agreed that it would be possible for departments to apply for teaching scholarships covering only the second and third years of the PhD programme.

With regard to masters scholarships, it was reported that it was envisaged that these would be allocated to new courses which had run for no more than three years. They would not be allocated to new courses where there was no difficulty in recruiting students.

It was noted that the proposal to offer home fee waivers to unsuccessful nominees for ORS awards would need to be reconsidered following the announcement of new arrangements for ORS awards (see M05/39 above).

In conclusion, the Board agreed to approve the proposal, subject to modifications being made to help small departments or those whose ability to contribute to stipends was very limited. The Chair and Dr Campbell would meet to make such modifications in time for revised scheme to be advertised for 2006 entry.

05/43 Establishment of working party ‘Towards a York Graduate School’

The Board approved the proposed terms of reference and membership of a working party to investigate the possibility of setting up a graduate school at York (agendum 6).

05/44 WUN Virtual Learning Environment for research students

The Board received a report from the Chair on an initiative involving the six UK-based World University Network universities for the development of a
Virtual Learning Environment for research students (agendum 7). The proposal, which was led by the University of Sheffield, was to form the basis of a bid to the HEFCE’s Strategic Development Fund. Dr Graham Low had agreed to serve as York’s representative on the Academic Advisory Board which was to superintend the initiative.

05/45 PhD submission rates, 1998-2000 starters

The Board received information on the submission rates of full-time PhD students who had started in 1998, 1999 and 2000 (agendum 8).

It was noted that the figures gave a broadly accurate picture but should be treated with some caution.

Thirteen departments had submission rates of 70% or higher, while eleven departments fell below 70%.

It was agreed to circulate the figures to departments, and to ask those departments with a three-year submission rate below 70% to reflect and comment on the reasons.

It was also agreed that the Board should receive figures on part-time PhD submission rates, and completion rate data issued by the HEFCE.

05/46 Postgraduate students in undergraduate level modules

The Board received a proposal from the Standing Committee on Assessment (agendum 9a) that the maximum allowable H-level credits should be 10 for a postgraduate certificate, 20 for a postgraduate diploma, and 30 for a masters award, and further that postgraduate students attending H-level modules should be required to pass the assessment on the H-level criteria and mark scale but that no formal mark should contribute to the overall mark for their award. The Committee noted that this proposal, if adopted, would require that any masters awards with a diploma exit route would need to alter their regulations to ensure that no more than 20 credits could be taken at undergraduate level in these programmes, to ensure that students exiting at diploma level did not find themselves with too large a proportion of undergraduate-level modules within the diploma.

It was agreed to consult departmental graduate school boards about which of their programmes might be affected by the adoption of such a proposal, and to reach a decision at the meeting of the Board in October 2005, for implementation from October 2006.

05/47 Masters degrees by research with distinction

The Board received a recommendation from the Standing Committee on Assessment that it should advise on how distinctions for masters degrees by research were assessed and should provide the criteria used to make such
awards (agenda 9b).

It was noted that, when provision for the award of masters degrees with distinction had been introduced in 1991, the Graduate Studies Committee had expressly stated that it applied to masters degrees based wholly or partly on research as well as those based on taught courses.

The Board was of the view that research degrees (whether masters, MPhil or PhD) should not be awarded with distinction. It was agreed to consult departmental graduate school boards on whether provision for the award of masters degrees by research with distinction should be withdrawn.

The Board also considered whether candidates for masters degrees by research should be required to undergo an oral examination. It was noted that this was not currently required under the Regulations, and that it was common practice at other universities not to require an oral examination. Nevertheless, the Board questioned how, without an oral examination, the examiners could satisfy themselves that the dissertation was the candidate’s own work. It was suggested that the Regulations should at least make it possible for the examiners to require an oral examination if they wished. It was agreed to consult departmental graduate school boards on this matter also.

05/48 Academic misconduct recommendations

It was noted that the Standing Committee on Assessment had confirmed that hearing panels at both postgraduate and undergraduate level were investigative and that if it was believed that all appropriate evidence was not available to the panel then the hearing should be deferred until it was. It had noted that it was important that both the Special Cases Committee and the Board for Graduate Schools should follow comparable guidelines in the conduct of these hearings. The Committee had recommended that:

(a) a new section should be incorporated into the Guide to Assessment to alert appropriate departments to the need for students to maintain verifiable hard-copy records of progress on research projects (for example, a Lab Book) and to be able to make this available at any point to supervisors and internal or external examiners;

(b) in academic misconduct hearings, departments or investigating sub-committees must provide the chair of the panel with access to all documentation relevant to the hearing;

(c) departments should be fully represented a hearings and all evidence should be available to the panel. Hearings should be deferred if relevant information was not available to support their decision.

The Board welcomed these recommendations. It agreed, however, that the new section to be incorporated into the Guide to Assessment (recommendation (a)) should rather “alert departments to the need for students to maintain
appropriate, verifiable hard-copy records of progress on empirical research projects which a party other than the candidate can verify, and to be able to make this available at any point to supervisors and internal or external examiners”. It was agreed that similar wording should appear in the procedure for dealing with academic misconduct by research students, which was being drafted by the working party chaired by Dr Wooffitt.

05/49 Miscellaneous fees for 2005/06

The schedule of miscellaneous fees proposed for 2005/06 was approved (agendum 10).

It was agreed to give discretion to the Chair to raise the fees payable to external examiners in line with the median of fees paid by comparable institutions as set out in the recently received survey conducted by the University of London, and to raise examination fees payable by candidates commensurately.

05/50 EPSRC CTA committee

The Board approved the proposed membership and terms of reference of an EPSRC CTA (Collaborative Training Account) committee (agendum 11).

05/51 Report from conference ‘The Future of Postgraduate Education’

The report from a conference on ‘The Future of Postgraduate Education’ on 17 March 2005, attended by Dr Campbell and Dr Loughlin, was received and noted (agendum 12).

Among the points to emerge from the conference were the following:

(a) the importance of regarding overseas students as more than sources of income;

(b) the preference of postgraduate students (taught and research) to be treated as a group distinct from undergraduate students;

(c) positive views of graduate schools;

(d) views on the training of graduate students: it was agreed that these should be considered by the Committee on Research Skills Training.

In connection with (a) above, it was reported that funding had now been approved to support enhanced English language provision at the University.

05/52 Postgraduate recruitment and admissions web pages

The Board noted that a set of web pages had been established to provide staff with information and statistics on postgraduate recruitment and admissions (agendum 13).
05/53 Proposed amendment to Regulation 2

It was noted that a footnote to Regulation 2 (Regulations for degrees of MA, MSc, MPA, MSW, EngDip, MPhil, MRes and PhD) indicated that:

“Regulations 5.3 (Conduct of University examinations), 5.5 (Conferment of degrees), and 6.3 (Leave of absence) also apply to students registered for higher degrees or other postgraduate qualifications.”

In order better to clarify what is in fact current practice, the Board agreed (M05/53 refers) that this footnote should be amended to read:

“Regulations 5.2(b) and (c) (Regulations for University assessments), 5.3 (Conduct of University examinations), 5.4 (Academic misconduct), 5.5 (Conferment of degrees), 6.1 (Progress and programme transfers) and 6.3 (Leave of absence) also apply - in so far as their contents are not covered by other Regulations and procedures - to students registered for higher degrees or other graduate and postgraduate qualifications. For such students, the Board for Graduate Schools takes the place of the Special Cases Committee.”

05/54 Expiry of terms of service

The Chair thanked Professor Godfrey, Professor Hancock, Dr Lee and Dr Nuechterlein, who were leaving the Board on 31 July 2005, for their work on behalf of the Board. He also thanked the student members of the Board for 2004/05.

05/55 Dates of meetings in 2005/06

It was noted (agendum 16) that meetings in 2005/06 were to be held on the following dates beginning at 2.15pm:

- Tuesday 18 October
- Tuesday 22 November
- Thursday 26 January*
- Tuesday 28 February
- Tuesday 20 June

*change of date agreed after the meeting