UNIVERSITY OF YORK

Senate

BOARD FOR GRADUATE SCHOOLS

Minutes of the meeting of the Board for Graduate Schools held on 20 June 2006.

Present: The Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Professor A.H. Fitter (Chair)
The Chair of the Teaching Committee, Professor T.A. Sheldon
The Chair of the Standing Committee on Assessment, Dr C.J. Fewster
The Provost of Wentworth Graduate College, Dr C. Thompson
Professor A.G. Burr
Mr C. Chen
Dr B.J. Keely
Dr G.D. Low
Professor M. Maynard
Professor M. Taylor
Dr G. Tsoulas
Miss J. Winter
Dr R. Wooffitt

In attendance: Dr K.V. Clegg (Director, Graduate Training Unit)
Mr P. Simison (Assistant Registrar)

Apologies: Dr D. Efird
Professor J.C. Sparrow
Dr R. Partridge

06/17 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2006 were approved and signed.

06/18 Review of committee structure and future of Board for Graduate Schools

Arising out of M06/9, the Chair explained that he had raised the review of the committee structure and the future of the Board for Graduate Schools at the last meeting as change then appeared imminent and he had wished to ensure that the matter could be discussed at the Board. However, there were issues arising from the review still to resolve, and he could assure members that the Board would continue in existence for 2006/07 at least.
Proposal to amend options open to PhD examiners

Arising out of M05/71, the Board reconsidered the proposal to amend the options open to PhD examiners, in the light of comments received from departments.

It was noted that, under the present Regulation 2.5(m), a candidate whose PhD thesis was adjudged by the examiners to be unsatisfactory, and to be capable of meriting an MPhil only after major revisions, had nevertheless to be given the opportunity to revise and resubmit for the PhD, since the option of recommending that a candidate be referred for an MPhil only was not available. On the other hand, a candidate whose PhD thesis was adjudged by the examiners to be unsatisfactory, but to merit an MPhil, might be awarded the MPhil without being given the opportunity to revise and resubmit for the PhD.

It was therefore proposed that Regulation 2.5(m) should be amended to provide examiners with the option of recommending that a PhD thesis should be referred for resubmission for the degree of MPhil only. Departments had universally approved this proposed amendment, and the Board agreed to approve it.

The Board agreed that the options open to MPhil examiners under Regulation 2.4(n) should be amended in line with the amendment to Regulation 2.5(m).

The Board had also considered whether the Regulation should be amended to allow the option of awarding an unsuccessful PhD or MPhil candidate an MA or MSc by research, in departments where such courses existed. Departments had predominantly favoured the removal of options to award MA or MSc degrees. In discussion at the Board, it was argued that such an option was permissible where candidates had attained the required level. On the other hand, it was argued that since MA/MSc degrees by research existed only in some departments, the option would result in inequity. The Board therefore agreed that no such option should be allowed. It was noted that PhD candidates could transfer to MA or MSc registration before submission and examination for the PhD.

It was agreed that no change should be made to Regulation 2.6 (PhD by publications).
The amendments to Regulations 2.5(m) and 2.4(n) are set out in Appendix 1.

06/20 Procedure on academic misconduct by research students

The Board approved the procedure for dealing with academic misconduct by research students, which had been amended as agreed in M06/2.

The procedure is attached as Appendix 2.

06/21 QAA special review of research degree programmes

Arising out of M05/84, the Board received the draft report of the QAA’s special review of research degree programmes and the University’s comments.

It was noted that the review team’s judgement had been that the University’s arrangements to secure and enhance the quality of its research degree programme provision were appropriate and satisfactory overall and in every particular.

06/22 Report on allocation of ORS awards

Arising out of M06/7, the Board received the report on the outcome of the ORS awards competition for 2006.

It was noted that 39 nominations had been received. Eight awards had been made from ORS funding, and a further 4 equivalent awards out of funding made available under the University’s graduate awards scheme.

It was reported that departments would be required to adhere to a uniform format in submitting nominations in 2007.

06/23 Report on graduate recruitment 2005
The report on graduate recruitment in 2005 was received.
It was noted that this report would normally have come to an earlier meeting.
Attention was drawn to Tables 1, 2 and 3, which showed applicants, offers, acceptances and entrants for taught and research programmes by department, with conversion rates.

It was reported that applications for 2006 were down compared to 2005, both at York and nationally.

06/24 Changes in administration of ESRC studentships

The announcement by the ESRC of important changes in the administration of studentships was received. It was noted that the changes included the quota and competition studentship allocations previously announced, the devolution to institutions of responsibility for decisions on eligibility, and the introduction of bulk studentship payments to institutions.

06/25 AHRC review of postgraduate funding mechanisms

Professor Taylor gave a report on a briefing he had attended on 16 June 2006 on an AHRC review of its funding mechanisms.

The AHRC was investigating alternative ways of disbursing financial support for postgraduate students. It was likely that the AHRC would adopt a system similar to that operated by other research councils, i.e., devolving the bulk of studentships for allocation by institutions. The mechanism might involve quotas, block grants, doctoral training accounts, or collaborative or consortium inter-university schemes. The means of determining allocations to institutions might be metrics-based (including RAE, research income and submission rates) or involve programme accreditation.

Those attending the meeting had welcomed increased transparency, but feared that the proposed system would mean less independent peer review, a possible diminution in quality, and the AHRC determining the terms of graduate study and training for all humanities research students.

Professor Taylor’s report is attached as Appendix 3.

06/26 Proposed change of submission deadline for MSc in Electronics by research

The Board received a proposal from the Graduate Schools Board in Electronics that candidates for the MSc in Electronics by research should be granted a further three months beyond the end of the twelve-month registration period in which to submit their dissertations, under Regulation 2.2(a)(ii).

The department pointed out that only a minority of MSc by research students submitted within twelve months, though the majority submitted within fifteen months. Reducing the scope of projects was unlikely to be viewed favourably by external examiners.

The Board approved the proposal on the following conditions:

(a) that the further three months should be allowed only where required, and that the Department should ensure that staff and students were aware that the MSc by research was a twelve-month programme and that students should work towards submission within twelve months;

(b) that in all circumstances research activity would be complete within twelve months, and that the scope and planning of research projects would take this into account;

(c) that no extensions of submission deadline beyond fifteen months would be granted by the Board for Graduate Schools except on medical, compassionate, domestic or financial grounds. Failure to complete the research or the dissertation within that period would not in itself be grounds for an extension.

The Board also agreed:

(a) to ask the Department of Electronics what measures it intended to take to ensure that submission was normally within twelve months;
to ask the Departments of Chemistry and Computer Science, where a
further three months for submission for the MSc by research had been
approved previously, for information on the number of students
submitting within twelve months, fifteen months or a longer period
over the last few years.

06/27 Proposal to pilot an on-line PhD programme in Social Policy and Social
Work

The Board received a proposal from the Department of Social Policy and
Social Work to pilot an on-line PhD programme.

The proposal arose from the success of the on-line masters programme in
Public Policy and Management. A number of students who were about to
complete that programme had expressed a wish to proceed to on-line PhD
study. It was proposed that the on-line PhD programme should be piloted
only with students who successfully completed the masters programme in
2006. Tuition fees would be at the standard rate. The Department intended to
develop an on-line module in research methods; in the meantime, entrants
would need to satisfy the Department that they had already successfully
completed research methods training or had made plans to undertake
appropriate research methods training at a local institution. Supervision
would take place by electronic means. In addition, each student would have a
pastoral adviser who would hold six-monthly consultations with the student
at which the student’s general well-being and progress would be reviewed.
Students would also be able to mix socially and academically with the
Department’s campus-based PhD students via Moodle, the Virtual Learning
Environment that currently supported the masters programme. The pilot
would be evaluated 18 months after the admission of the first applicants;
further applications would not be considered until the results of this
evaluation were known.

The Board, in considering the proposal, had a number of concerns, in
particular with regard to student contact with the University and access to
learning facilities. It was therefore agreed to ask the Department to submit a
revised proposal to a future meeting. The revised proposal should address
the following concerns:

(a) the possibility of making student visits to York a requirement of the
    programme;
(b) enabling students to make presentations to an audience in real time;
(c) enabling students to participate in conferences, including assistance
    with travel costs;
(d) access to library and other learning resources, given that not all were available electronically;
(e) arrangements for transferable skills training;
(f) creation of a student community, given that students would be pursuing individual research projects rather than – as with the masters programme – taking the same modules;
(g) quality assurance mechanisms
(h) the training of supervisors, not all of whom would have participated in the on-line masters programme;
(i) examination arrangements;
(j) verification of student identity.

The Board also felt that the proposed date for the evaluation of the pilot (18 months after student admission, to coincide with upgrading to PhD registration) was too early, considering most of the students would be part-time. Finally, it was agreed that the Department should seek information on the arrangements for on-line PhD programmes that might be offered by other institutions.

06/28 PhD student statistics
The Board received the following PhD student statistics:
(a) submission rates, 1999-2001 starters (full-time students);
(b) pass, referral and fail rates in 2004/05;
(c) withdrawal rates in 2004/05.
It was agreed to write to departments with submission rates below 60% to ask what measures they intended to take to improve rates, and to report replies to the October meeting. It was also noted that submission rates would be on the agenda for the forum for chairs of graduate school boards to be held on 20 July.
It was also agreed to enquire if there were special reasons for a withdrawal rate of 45% (on small numbers) in one department.

06/29 Proposed amendments to Regulation 2.3 (Master of Social Work)
The Board approved the proposed amendments to Regulation 2.3 (Master of Social Work). It was noted that the amendments were necessitated by the change of name of the programme to Master of Arts in Social Work and by
the change of admissions route to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. The amended Regulation is attached as Appendix 4.

06/30 Report on Graduate Training Unit courses

The Board received a report on courses offered by the Graduate Training Unit in 2005/06.

It was noted that bookings had risen by 87% on the previous year; that there had been a 65% reduction in non-attendances; and that the number of late cancellations had fallen.

Courses were run again when the waiting list rose to five or more. In response to demand, 37 courses had been re-run, and 7 new courses added to the original programme. A member of the Board suggested that those who had been on a waiting list for over a specified number of weeks should be contacted by the GTU and advised of the position and of other options.

In this connection, it was noted that there needed to be a meeting of the Committee on Research Skills Training and a report to the Board for Graduate Schools on the use of Roberts money by the GTU and departments in 2005/06 in time for the University to report to the Research Councils by the November deadline.

06/31 Report on implementation of Graduate Professional Development

The Board received a report on the implementation of Graduate Professional Development (GPD).

GPD was the equivalent for graduate students of Personal Professional Development for undergraduate students. It was proposed to use an electronic package (“Skills Forge”) to enable students to develop an e-portfolio as evidence of their skills training and development throughout their registration period.

The scheme was to be piloted in five departments in June-September 2006. Additional members of staff who wished to explore the package over that period would be able to do so. Full implementation would take place in the autumn term 2006. This would be supported by web-based documentation supplemented, if necessary, by induction sessions.

06/32 Miscellaneous fees for 2006/07

The Board approved the miscellaneous fees proposed for 2006/07, which were in line with the academic salary award of 3.5% spread over the year.
It was agreed that the continuation fee for MPhil/PhD students should remain at £200 in 2006/07.

It was agreed that the staff registration fee should be reviewed before 2007/08, following recent changes to the procedure for granting staff tuition fee waivers.

06/33 Dates of meetings in 2006/07

It was noted (agendum 16) that meetings in 2006/07 were to be held on the following dates beginning at 2.15pm:

- Tuesday 17 October
- Tuesday 21 November
- Tuesday 23 January
- Tuesday 27 February
- Tuesday 19 June
Appendix 3

The AHRC is looking at alternative ways of disbursing its financial support for postgraduates, and in February set up a Working Group to review the current competition and investigate alternatives. At the moment a larger proportion of AHRC expenditure (39%) goes on pg funding than other Research Councils, yet fewer pgs are funded (approx. 1500 out of c. 6000 applicants). The AHRC would like a scheme which is more transparent, less bureaucratic, and fits more effectively with the strategic plans of universities (and which is easier to justify to the Treasury!).

The Working Group will report its recommendations to the AHRC at the end of this year, and changes to the system will be unveiled in March 2007, with full implementation for 2007-8. In other words, next year's open competition will be the last in the present form.

It is more than likely that the Working Group will recommend a system similar to that operated by other Research Councils, ie: devolving the bulk of pg studentships for allocation by the universities, and much of the discussion last week focused on different mechanisms for doing this: eg: i) quotas, ii) block grants, iii) doctoral training accounts, iv) collaborative or consortium inter-University schemes being the main options, with a variety of means of determining how many awards different institutions would receive eg: i) metrics-based including RAE, research income, completion rates; or ii) programme accreditation along the lines of the existing ESRC scheme).

Reaction to the proposals from the HEI humanities representatives present at the event was mixed. More transparency was welcomed, but many participants feared that the new system would mean less independent peer review and scrutiny and a possible diminution of quality, devolution to university managers not subject areas, and the AHRC (a minority funder of pgs) dictating the terms of graduate study and training for all pgs.

Most participants who aired their views called for retention of the present open, reponse-mode competition, but with more filtering done at the university level, and more studentships being made available.