Senate

BOARD FOR GRADUATE SCHOOLS

Minutes of the meeting of the Board for Graduate Schools held on 19 June 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, Ms A. Takshe, Professor M. Taylor, Mr A.W. Underwood, Miss J. Winter

In attendance: Ms T.M. Driffield (Scholarships Officer), Mrs R.A. Goerisch (Assistant Registrar), Dr H.R Lawrence (Graduate Training Officer), Mrs R.J. Royds (Manager, Student Administrative Services), Mr P. Simison (Graduate Schools Office)

Apologies: Dr B.J. Keely, Dr G.D. Low, Professor M.A. Maynard, Professor T.A. Sheldon, Dr C. A. Thompson, Dr G. Tsoulas, Dr R. Wooffitt, Dr R.J. Partridge

07/52 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 February 2007 were approved.

07/53 Pilot of audio-recording of oral examinations

Arising out of M07/2, the Board received a report from Mrs Goerisch on the pilot scheme for the audio-recording of MPhil/PhD oral examinations.

Four departments had agreed to take part. Health Sciences had recorded six examinations, Biology four. Philosophy had two examinations in prospect. History had yet to take part.

It was noted that, as part of the pilot scheme, Philosophy asked students to consent to the examination being recorded. The Board agreed that any refusals to give consent should be recorded.

Comments from students and internal examiners had been overwhelmingly positive. No
external examiner had commented directly, though one internal examiner had reported that
the external had found the recording intrusive.

The Board noted that it would be for the Standing Committee on Assessment to decide when
and how the audio-recording of oral examinations should be carried forward.

07/54 Supervisor training and development

Arising out of M07/32, the Board received a report on supervisor development and training by
a group chaired by Professor Sparrow.

The group proposed a combination of generic central briefings for all new staff on University
procedures and departmental provision of continued professional development for all
members of academic staff engaged in supervision.

In answer to a query, it was explained that the proposed central briefings would not overlap
with the YCAP programme. The YCAP programme was for staff new to the profession rather
than for all new staff, and was concerned with the more theoretical aspects of supervision.

The Board approved the group’s two proposals, and suggested that the central briefings
should be taken forward by Dr Lawrence through YCAP and the induction process, while the
proposed departmental provision could form an element of departments’ annual ‘away days’. The implementation of the proposals should be discussed with Miss O’Sullivan.

It was agreed that the question whether training should be compulsory or not should be
decided by the Board in the light of the results of the Postgraduate Research Experience
Survey.

With regard to the other issues raised by the group, the Board agreed:

- that the Chair should ask the Director of Human Resources to arrange for research
  student supervision to be built into performance review forms;
- that the Chair should discuss with the Vice-Chancellor the possibility of a Vice-
  Chancellor’s award for supervision;
- that compulsory attendance at training could be imposed through performance review;
  provision should be marketed by departments;
- that the training needs of individual supervisors should be identified through
  performance review.

07/55 Guidance on MA/MSc programmes by research
Arising out of M07/28, the Board received the comments of the Teaching Committee on the draft guidance on MA/MSc programmes by research.

The Board agreed:

- to incorporate in the guidelines the words: “In a masters by research a student will complete a substantial piece of research, including original work, and be assessed solely on the basis of that research by two individually appointed examiners, one of whom should be external to the University.”
- to add that assessment should normally be on the basis of a dissertation, but that with the approval of the Board the assessment of a programme might also be on the basis of other materials;
- that reference should be made to the possibility of the Board’s considering requests from departments to retain a pool of external examiners for a programme, as previously agreed (M7/6);
- that departments should specify the length of the dissertation for a programme;
- that, as previously agreed, the degree of MA/MSc by research might not be awarded with distinction.

The Board did not agree that MA/MSc programmes by research should be credit-weighted since, like MPhil/PhD degrees, assessment was based wholly on the research dissertation or equivalent. It also agreed that APL arrangements should not apply to MA/MSc programmes by research, but that every candidate should complete the normal registration period. The Board confirmed that the registration period should be one year (full-time) or two years (part-time).

07/56 QAA institutional audit

The Board considered a draft of the Institutional Briefing Paper which was being prepared for the QAA institutional audit. It was noted:

(a) that the Board had already responded to the final report of the QAA’s special review of research degree programmes, and had dealt with the issues arising;

(b) that a review of the code of practice on research degree programmes would take place at the Board’s meeting in October 2007, following a survey of implementation by departments. Departments would also be asked if they had any general comments on the code of practice;

(c) that feedback from students was collected by departments. A summary of important issues arising from it was to be submitted annually to the Board; this would form part of the review to be held in October 2007;
(d) that the Graduate Students’ Association no longer wished to have a standing item on the agenda; it remained open to the GSA to propose items for the agenda for any meeting.

07/57 Policy on extensions of submission deadline

The Board received a paper from Professor Sparrow on the application of Regulations and guidelines on the approval of extensions of submission deadline for MPhil/PhD students. The Board had applied the Regulations and guidelines more stringently over recent years, with the object of preventing inequity arising from allowing some students a longer period to submit their theses without the mitigating circumstances permitted under the Regulations. There had nevertheless arisen cases where, following approval of a final extension, recommendations for further extensions had been submitted without permissible mitigating circumstances; where retrospective recommendations for extensions had been made to allow a thesis to be submitted; or where theses had been submitted late without an extension having been approved.

Professor Sparrow proposed that the Board should now consider whether the guidelines were appropriate or needed amendment; make clear to departments how the guidelines would be applied; determine what should happen if a thesis were submitted after a deadline; and agree what action might be taken if a department failed to manage its PhD students with regard to meeting deadlines.

The Board approved a number of proposals as follows:

(a) that, if an extension of longer than six months is requested, and unless there was medical evidence to support such an extension, an initial extension of no more than six months might be approved against a timetable of progress to be made within that period; any further extension would be dependent on that progress having been achieved;

(b) that students on masters degree programmes (taught or by research) should also be subject to the guideline limiting to two years the total period of extension, except with the approval of the full Board for Graduate Schools;

(c) that extensions of the revision period for an MPhil/PhD thesis following referral should be allowed only on medical or compassionate grounds, for a maximum of six months in the first instance, and for a maximum of twelve months in total subject to progress having been made;

(d) that retrospective recommendations for extensions should not be approved, unless the delay was due to serious ill-health of which the University had received notification as soon as practicable;

(e) that theses should not normally be accepted for examination after a final deadline had
expired, except with the permission of a meeting of the Board (or by the Chair);

(f) that extensions should only be approved in the circumstances specified in the Regulations; where a recommendation was made on grounds not so specified, a final extension of up to a maximum of one month might be approved in order to obviate appeals on the grounds of inadequate supervision.

It was agreed that any action to be taken if a department failed to manage its PhD students with regard to meeting deadlines should be decided by a meeting of the Board (or by the Chair) on a case by case basis.

The Board also agreed that departments should be informed of the guidelines under which extensions would be considered. The Graduate Schools Office should continue to monitor, through SITS, adherence to submission deadlines, but departments needed to accept responsibility for the management of deadlines. Guidance for students, as well as for departments, should be provided on the web. Students should also be made aware, when notified that an extension had been approved, of the consequences of not meeting that extended deadline.

07/58 Proposal to regard continuation year as registered study

The Board received a proposal from the Graduate Students’ Association that MPhil/PhD students should be considered to be registered students during the continuation year following the end of their full-time or part-time registration.

The main purpose of the proposal was to enable full-time students to remain eligible for exemption from Council Tax during this year. It was argued that the majority of full-time students availed themselves of the continuation year, and suffered hardship as a result of becoming liable for Council Tax. The proposal was that the registration period for the PhD should be set at four years (full-time) or seven years (part-time), with a minimum period of three years (full-time) or six years (part-time). A number of institutions made arrangements more favourable than York in this respect. The proposal would also alleviate visa problems.

In the course of discussion, a number of points were made, including:

(a) Problems arising from Council Tax and visa regulations required separate solutions, and solutions other than changing the University Regulations on registration periods;

(b) There was a distinction between a student who was registered full-time for a programme of supervised study at the University and a fourth-year candidate who happened to be working full-time on completing a thesis.
(c) There was already a mechanism whereby fourth-year students were registered as full-time
if tuition fees for that year were paid by a research council or other funding body. There would
be an issue if students not paying tuition fees were likewise regarded as being in full-time
registration.

The Board agreed to explore, through the Student Support Office, whether the local Council
Tax authority would exempt a student from Council Tax if the University provided a signed
declaration from the student (supported by signed verification from the supervisor) that the
student was resident in York (or elsewhere in the United Kingdom) and would be studying for
more than 24 weeks (i.e., would not submit the thesis within 24 weeks) and for more than 21
hours per week.

07/59 Changes to HESA and HEFCE reporting regime

The Board received from Mrs Royds a report on changes to the HESA and HEFCE reporting
regime.

Changes to the level of reporting to HESA required from July 2008 would necessitate a return
analysed at the level of modules studied rather than, as hitherto, at the level of programme
completed. The requirement was to return a completion status for each module on which a
student was registered in 2007/8. It was therefore important that only those modules which a
student was actually committed to completing should be included on the student’s computer
record. To this end, it was proposed to establish an agreed point of registration on modules.
The Standing Committee on Assessment had recommended that, from October 2007,
undergraduate and postgraduate students’ module choices should be established and entered
on their SITS record by the end of Week 4 of the autumn and spring terms, and by the end of
Week 3 of the summer term.

07/60 Miscellaneous fees for 2007/8

The Board received a report from Mrs Royds on miscellaneous fees for 2007/8.

The Board agreed that, since approval of fees for external examiners and for examination and
re-examination had now become the responsibility of the Standing Committee on Assessment,
it no longer wished to receive a report on these fees.

It was noted that the continuation fee payable by MPhil/PhD students had been held at £200
since 2005/6, and agreed that this fee should rise to £210 in 2007/8.

It was noted that the registration fee payable by staff who received a tuition fee waiver had
been fixed at £200 for 2007/8.
The Board agreed that these fees should be set at the same level, namely £210, in 2008/9, since both were intended to meet the administrative costs to the University of students where standard tuition fees were not paid.

07/61 Report on staff tuition fee waivers made in 2006/7

The Board received the report on tuition fee waivers made to members of staff in 2006/7. It was agreed that the Board should receive this report annually. It was asked that the report should additionally indicate the criterion on which the tuition fee waiver had been approved.

07/62 Proposed amendments to Regulation 2.7 (Engineering Doctorate)

The Board approved amendments to Regulation 2.7 (Engineering Doctorate) which were intended to provide for initial MPhil registration, for downgrading to MPhil or MSc (by research), and for the award of (or referral for) an MPhil for an unsuccessful candidate.

07/63 Procedure for dealing with academic misconduct by research students

The Board approved a number of amendments to the procedure for dealing with academic misconduct by research students which had been agreed by the Standing Committee on Assessment at its meeting on 11 May 2007. These were intended to reflect changes in the Standing Committee’s terms of reference, which now included academic misconduct by research students; to allow alternative membership of the departmental investigating committee; to clarify the responsibility of the departmental investigating committee in notifying the candidate about the investigation; and to make clear that “termination” meant “termination of candidature”.

The Board also approved the following addition to Section 1.5 (Responsibilities of the department) agreed by the Standing Committee at its meeting on 15 June 2007:

“Departments should require students to maintain appropriate, verifiable records of progress on empirical research projects (for example, lab books) which a party other than the candidate can verify, and to be able to make these available at any point to supervisors and internal or external examiners. Such records should be retained by the student until the degree has been conferred. Departments are required to determine what constitutes verifiability in the context of their discipline.”

07/64 Amendment to code of practice on research degree programmes

The Board approved a proposal that the word “normally” should be removed from the following paragraph in the code of practice on research degree programmes:
“Upgrading to PhD registration should normally be considered within eighteen months (for full-time students) or within three years (for part-time students), in the expectation that students will be registered for the degree of PhD by the end of the second year of study (if full-time) or of the fourth year of study (if part-time).”

It had come to light that this paragraph had been interpreted as giving discretion to the department to delay upgrading beyond the end of the second year of full-time study.

07/65 Change of degree title

The Board approved a recommendation from the Board of Studies in Electronics that the degree title “MSc in Electronics (by research)” should be changed to “MSC in Electronic Engineering (by research)”.

07/66 Dates of meetings in 2007/8

It was noted that meetings in 2007/8 were to be held on the following dates beginning at 2.15pm:

- Tuesday 16 October
- Tuesday 20 November
- Tuesday 22 January
- Tuesday 26 February
- Tuesday 17 June

07/67 Dates for possible appeal hearings in 2007/8:

Members agreed to seek to keep free the following possible dates for appeal hearings in 2007/8:

- Tuesday 10 July
- Tuesday 23 October
- Tuesday 27 November
- Tuesday 15 January
- Tuesday 19 February
- Tuesday 18 March
- Tuesday 22 April
- Tuesday 20 May

07/68 Retiring members
The Chair expressed his thanks to retiring members for their service on the Board, and to Professor Sparrow, who was remaining on the Board but retiring as Deputy Chair.

Philip Simison
Student Progress Officer

PS/ June 2007