02/42 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 June 2002 were approved.

02/43 Membership of the Board

It was reported (agendum 3) that the following student members had been appointed to serve for 2002/03: Miss Anne Hollings (research); Miss Clare Shobbrook (taught course); and Ms Ya Li (Overseas Students’ Association).

02/44 Approval of recommendations regarding individual students

It was reported (agendum 4) that Professor Hitch, Dr Lee and Professor Sparrow (in addition to the Chair) had agreed to approve on behalf of the Board recommendations regarding individual students. The Board approved this arrangement.

02/45 PhD by publications

Arising out of M02/29, the Board received a revised proposal for the introduction of a PhD by publications (agendum 5a).

With regard to paragraph 7 and work accepted for publication but not yet published in printed form, the Board agreed that it should be permissible for such work to be submitted for the PhD degree provided there was evidence satisfactory to the examiners in the form of either a letter from the editor of the journal concerned firmly accepting the work for
publication without further revision or publication by the journal concerned on its website in advance of publication in printed form.

With regard to paragraph 11, it was noted that the work submitted might fail to satisfy the examiners either because the published work was insufficient in quantity or because the summary chapter or critical review did not meet the required standard. While in the latter case the period of up to one year which was allowed for revision and resubmission under the existing regulation for the PhD degree was sufficient, in the former case a longer period might be required for the publication of additional work; it was agreed therefore that in the former case the examiners should be free to propose the length of the period that should be allowed for resubmission. It was agreed that, if the published work was in an interdisciplinary area, the two examiners could be from different disciplines. Finally, it was agreed that the words following “it should be seen through to publication” at the end of paragraph 11 should be omitted.

The Board agreed that an amended version of the proposal together with draft guidelines for examiners should be considered at its next meeting and then submitted to the Senate for approval. It was agreed that the Board should consider a draft regulation on the PhD by publications at a subsequent meeting.

02/46 HEFCs report on improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes

The Board received the report of a review commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Councils entitled “Improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes” (agendum 5b(ii)). The report presented a framework of standards for research degree programmes, and recommended that the Funding Councils should adopt the framework and define threshold standards as the basis of conditional funding for research degree programmes. Comments were invited.

The Board had the following comments. (Numbers relate to the standards proposed in the report.)

2A: RDPs to be in units with a minimum RAE rating of 3a.
The Board was opposed to this, on the grounds that a department which had an RAE rating below 3a might nevertheless contain or recruit staff who exceeded that rating, and that the imposition of this standard would make it more difficult for such a department to improve its rating. It was also pointed out that the research councils did not limit funding to departments with RAE ratings of 3a or above.

2B: Units to provide effective interactions with a minimum of 5 research active staff and at least 10 students.
It was noted that this standard would exclude a department such as Philosophy at York, or departments which were seeking to increase numbers. It was felt that it failed to reflect the research environment in humanities departments where students pursued research individually rather than in groups.

3A: Institutional minimum level of academic entry standard (2.1 or masters).
The Board felt that a 2.2 had hitherto always been recognised as a sufficient qualification for graduate study. It also raised the question whether a 2.2 at MEng level was equivalent to a 2.1 at BSc level, and of how to evaluate overseas qualifications in terms of UK degree classifications.
4 and 5: Provide a supervisory team of at least two research active academics, with progress meetings at least every 3 months, and a review panel of at least 3 research active and relevant academics, the majority of whom are independent of the supervisory team. The final examination to be by a panel of at least two examiners independent of the above arrangements.

The Board noted that this seemed to require the formal involvement of perhaps six members of staff for each research student, which was not the current practice at York or - as far as was known - elsewhere in the UK. It was felt that this proposal was not concerned with improving standards, but with improving merely consistency of organisation. It was noted that the report made no reference to frequency or adequacy of supervision.

6A: Provide training programmes to develop a range of skills...including skills for employment, and to provide mechanisms to assess formally the development of these skills.

The Board felt that this was inconsistent with the development of national training programmes. It also felt that it was not possible to assess transferable skills training, and noted that the Research Councils required only the assessment of research training.

6D: Minimum level of activities defined and monitored to promote breadth and depth of knowledge and experience by means of attendance at internal and external seminars, conferences, discussion forums, twice annual 'presentations', teaching and demonstrating experience.

The Board felt that this was too prescriptive, and that research students should be encouraged rather than obliged to take part in such activities. It was pointed out that some research students were not competent to undertake teaching.

In conclusion, the Board agreed that the Chair and the Secretary should formulate a response to the report on the lines outlined above, copies of which should be sent for information to institutions in the 94 and White Rose groups, and to the Board’s next meeting.

02/47 Draft policy on research degree programmes

Arising out of M02/18, the Board received sections of a draft policy on research degree programmes (agendum 5a).

It was noted that the policy was intended to comply with the QAA code of practice on research degree programmes. The Board felt that the QAA code of practice was superior to the proposals in the HEFCs report, and agreed to enquire about the relationship between the two.

The Board made a number of detailed comments on the draft policy, as follows.

Applications and admissions

This should make it clear that it referred to formal applications for research degree programmes. It should include a paragraph on use of references, a separate reference to equal opportunities, and should refer to tuition and other fees. It should state that departments were encouraged to engage in dialogue by telephone or email with overseas applicants unable to attend for interview; that departmental interview guidelines should be approved by the University; that decisions to admit students (rather than ‘admissions decisions’) would normally involve two members of academic staff; and that the
University would not accept candidates who in its judgement were not capable of pursuing a research programme successfully.

Equal opportunities
This should include a reference to monitoring.

Facilities
This should refer to access to departmental seminar or meeting rooms where available, and to computing provision which was adequate to the programme of study.

Research and professional training
It was agreed that this section should be broadened, in consultation with Dr Marshall, and should include reference to personal training.

Supervision
This should state that a record should be kept of formal supervisory meetings, and that the record might be drawn up by the student.

Thesis advisory panels
This should make it clear that alternate meetings of the thesis advisory panel might be ‘minor’ meetings at which adherence to the research agenda was monitored.

Upgrading
This should state that students would normally be registered for the degree of MPhil in the first instance; and that upgrading to PhD should normally be considered (at least) by the end of the first year, and recommended by the end of the second year.

It was agreed that a section on student representation should be added.

In conclusion, it was agreed that each section should begin with a broad general statement, followed by a series of detailed points. It was agreed that a complete draft policy should be submitted to the next meeting.

02/48 Academic appeals and complaints

The Board received, for its comments, the draft procedures and regulations on appeals and complaints prepared by the Working Party on Academic Appeals and Complaints (agendum 6).

With regard to the complaints procedure, it was noted that the provision, under the ‘informal complaints procedure’, that a complainant should approach the Head of Department/Service concerned before lodging a ‘formal’ complaint with the Registrar, did not mean that the investigation by the Head of Department/Service should not be of a formal nature.

02/49 UK GRAD Programme and White Rose Research Training Centre

The Board received the paper (agendum 7) outlining new arrangements whereby from January 2003 the Research Councils’ Graduate Programme, renamed the UK GRAD Programme, had been contracted to the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) and would be delivered by a number of named regional partners, including the White Rose University Consortium and its Research Training Centre. In addition, the Centre
would continue to deliver the White Rose Interpersonal Skills School, a course equivalent to a national Graduate School for research students from Leeds, Sheffield and York.

Dr Hutchinson, the Graduate Student Training Officer, reported that Mr Mike Rawlings had approached the University to offer the equivalent of the UK GRAD programme in-house at York, the costs to be shared between the Research Councils and the University. He suggested that this might be a more effective way of delivering this training to York students.

It was agreed that the Chair should meet to discuss the matter with Dr Hutchinson, Ms Rees and Mr Martin Doxey, the Chief Executive of the White Rose Consortium.

02/50 Next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was to be held on Tuesday 21 January 2003 at 2.15pm.