

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ASSESSMENT

Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on 11 June 2010.

- Present: Dr David Efird (Chair), Philosophy
Dr Pat Ansell, Health Sciences
Dr Anne Duhme-Klair, Chemistry
Dr David Halliday, Electronics
Dr Linda Perriton, School of Management
Dr Jim Watt, English & Centre for 18th Century Studies
Ms Charlie Leyland, SU representative
Mr Kieran Alden, GSA representative
- In attendance: Mr Ben Humphrys, Students' Union
Mrs Nadia Fenn and Miss Kathryn Lucas, Special Cases Committee
Ms Cecilia Lowe, Project Leader, Learning Enhancement
Ms Rosemary Royds, Manager, Registry Services
Mr Philip Simison, Registry Services
- Apologies: Dr John Brown, Social Policy and Social Work
Dr Amanda Rees, Sociology

09-10/174 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2010 were **approved**

CATEGORY I BUSINESS

09-10/175 Classifying joint degrees

Arising out of M09-10/105(iii), the Committee approved the revised version of the template on which departments were to be asked to provide information on the classification of combined degree programmes. The approved version would be recommended to the Teaching Committee.

Action: RG

09-10/176 Presence of responsible persons in examinations

Arising out of M09-10/140(iv), the Committee received a proposal from Ms Leyland (Academic Affairs Officer, Students' Union) that there should be present in the examination room, at least for the first hour of the examination, a person who could take full responsibility for answering queries on, or addressing errors in, each examination paper; and that that person should be the person responsible for the examination, usually the module leader or paper setter, or another person designated by them to act in their place. The Committee approved this proposal. It was agreed that the implications of such a responsible person not in fact attending would need to be explored.

09-10/177 Thesis advisory panel members as internal examiners

Arising out of M09-10/165, the Committee further considered the circumstances in which it might be permissible for members of thesis advisory panels to serve as internal examiners.

The Chair reported that, after further reflection, he had concluded that it was not possible to define a thesis advisory panel member's involvement in terms of a candidate's year of study, since the year in which the text of a particular chapter might be finalised varied widely for each candidate. He therefore proposed that it should be permissible for a member of the thesis advisory panel to serve as internal examiner, *providing that member had not advised on the final drafting of the thesis or dissertation.*

The Committee approved this proposal, and agreed that this form of words should be used in Section 7(g) of the code of practice on research degree programmes.

It was also agreed that the examiner appointment form should include the question whether the proposed internal examiner was or had been a member of the candidate's thesis advisory panel; and, if so, whether he/she had advised on the final drafting of the thesis or dissertation.

It was agreed that the incidence of thesis advisory panel members serving as internal examiners should be monitored over 2010/11.

In reply to a question, the Committee agreed that the internal examiner should in no circumstances take part in a mock oral examination with the candidate.

Action: RG, PS

09-10/178 Report from the Teaching Committee

The Committee noted a report from the meeting of the Teaching Committee held on 15 March 2010 on its consideration of items reported to it by the Committee.

09-10/179 Chair's oral report

The Committee received an oral report from the Chair.

(a) New modular scheme: briefings on assessment regulations

The Chair and Rosemary Goerisch had conducted these briefings, which had been well received.

(b) Mitigating circumstances policy: report from Senate

The proposed mitigating circumstances policy had now been approved by Senate. The Chair and Rosemary Goerisch would conduct briefings.

(c) Analysis of degree classifications: report from Senate

Senate had approved the establishment of a working party, to be chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, to explore more thoroughly the degree outcomes of students and their variation across departments.

(d) Format of Category II reports

The Committee received illustrations of reports of Category II business in a new format generated from the student record system. The new format was approved.

09-10/180 Oral report from student representatives

Matters raised by the student representatives included:

- (a) Course representatives in Politics were running a feedback campaign. The Students' Union would like the issue of feedback to be a priority in 2010/11.
- (b) There needed to be planning to resolve issues when errors occurred which affected assessment.

09-10/181 Review of annual priorities for 2009/10

The Committee reviewed progress in achieving its annual priorities for 2009/10.

Procedures concerning oral examinations, and for the determination of combined degree classifications, together with a review of invigilation procedures, had been completed. Support of the implementation of the new modular scheme had continued, exemplified by the recent briefings on the assessment regulations. The review of academic misconduct policies and procedures had also continued, and was on the agenda for this meeting. Work on the development of guidance on group or peer-assessed work also continued: a small working group had been established to look at group-working assessment criteria, and draft guidance on proof-reading was on the agenda for this meeting.

The Chair invited proposals for priorities in 2010/11. With regard to the proposal that feedback on student performance should be a priority, it was agreed that the Teaching Committee should be asked if it wished the Standing Committee to be involved in this area, perhaps through membership of a working group which might also involve the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. Other proposed priorities were group assessment; alternative assessment formats; and possible actions following errors in the assessment process.

09-10/182 Guidance on proof-reading students' assessed work

The committee received draft guidance, prepared by Cecilia Lowe, on proof-reading students' assessed work.

The guidance gave approval to the checking of work in terms of presentation and expression, but disallowed correction of the content, or revision or re-writing of sections of the work. Proof-readers were required to work on a hard copy of the work, and to indicate all corrections and advice on that hard copy. Students were required to

keep the proof-read hard copy of the work, until their degree had been conferred, for submission to their department, if requested. Students were also required to acknowledge the use of proof-readers using a sample form.

The Committee agreed that the footnote on page 1 of the guidance, which excluded other University of York students from acting as proof-readers, should be deleted.

The Committee also agreed that, since proof-reading did in fact take place, it was necessary to have guidance on what were the acceptable limits. It was agreed that the guidance might be clearer about what was not acceptable.

Finally, it was agreed that the separate issue of training in academic writing was one that might be addressed by the Learning Enhancement team.

09-10/183 Use of translation software in assessments

The Committee received a proposal from the Chair regarding the use of translation software in assessments. It was proposed that the use of translation software for the purposes of assessed work should not be permitted, and should be penalised.

The Committee was not persuaded that the use of translation software in itself constituted academic misconduct. Some members felt that it might be regarded as differing only in degree from the use of a dictionary. The Committee concluded that there was no need at present for a policy, but that the University should be alert to the possibility of translation software being used as a means of disguising plagiarism.

09-10/184 Attendance of external examiners at Boards of Examiners

The Committee received a paper from the Chair regarding the attendance of external examiners at Boards of Examiners, together with a report by the Academic Registrar on practice at other institutions.

The Chair noted that the Teaching Committee had decided that it was unreasonable to require external examiners to attend more than the final meeting of the Board of Examiners. Moreover, under the new modular scheme, the calculation of a student's eligibility for an exit

award following failure to progress would not require the exercise of academic judgement. In addition, the University had already made it possible for external examiners to approve results lists where students failed mid-programme without the need to be physically present at a Board of Examiners. Building on these principles, he proposed that, where the award of a qualification (i.e., an exit award) was an automatic consequence of a failure, an external examiner should be able to approve such an award without the need to be physically present at, or otherwise participate in, a Board of Examiners.

The Committee approved this proposal, and recommended it to Teaching Committee for adoption for the new modular scheme undergraduate programmes from October 2010, and for inclusion in the *Guide to Assessment* for 2010/11.

09-10/185 Guidance on marginal fails for independent study modules

The Committee received draft guidance for academic staff on the criteria for what would constitute a marginal fail in an independent study module under the new modular scheme.

The Committee approved the draft guidance, wishing only to add that it should be made clear that work that had significant shortcomings should be failed.

It was agreed to recommend that the guidance should be implemented for new modular scheme programmes from October 2010, and should be included in the *Guide to Assessment* for 2010/11.

09-10/186 The Guide to Assessment 2010/11

The Committee received a paper from the Chair asking for its views on the format of the *Guide to Assessment* for 2010/11.

The Committee decided:

- (a) that there should be one volume covering all programmes, rather than two separate volumes covering current programmes and new modular programmes;
- (b) that the contents should be ordered according to proposal 1, but that the section *Undergraduate Modular Scheme – Rules of Assessment and Award* should move higher each year.

It was also suggested that the Guide should be called *Guide to Assessment, Standards, Marking and Feedback*, that it should be spiral bound (so that it would lie flat when opened), and that it should contain an index.

09-10/187 Academic Misconduct Working Party

At its discussion of the proposals from the Academic Misconduct Working Party regarding changes to the University's academic misconduct policies and procedures, the Teaching Committee had agreed to invite the Standing Committee to develop Option A in those proposals, assuming that resources were secured to create a post of Academic Conduct Officer.

On behalf of the Working Party, Linda Perriton gave a presentation on how the proposal might be taken forward in a more constrained financial climate..

She explained that the proposals she would be presenting at the meeting were limited to undergraduate students at present, and to the treatment of plagiarism. There was general agreement among Chairs of Boards of Examiners that students at Stage 1 should be treated differently from those at Stages 2 and 3.

It was proposed that a student at Stage 1 who was found to have plagiarised should be given a formal written warning and required to attend workshops on good academic practice and to correct the plagiarised work. The mark for the work in question should be subject to the following guidelines: where the inclusion of unattributed material was characteristic of the general approach to the work, the mark should not be able to exceed 40; where the work contained systemic errors in referencing or bibliographic accuracy, the mark should not be able to exceed 60; where the work contained one or two minor referencing errors, the mark should undergo an identifiable reduction but should not be otherwise restricted.

Dr Perriton emphasised that the warning system at Stage 1 must be quick and easy to operate. It raised a number of issues. Should it apply only to summative, or also to formative assessments? Should there be a standard template for notification? How should retraining be organised? What volume of students to be retrained should be planned

for?

For students at Stages 2 and 3, three possible penalty systems were suggested:

- (a) a piece of work that suggested that the inclusion of unattributed material was characteristic of the general approach to the work should receive a mark of zero. The student should be required to attend workshops on good academic practice. If the module was failed, the student might resit the assessment in the normal resit period.
- (b) the mark should be restricted in accordance with the guidelines set out above.
- (c) the student should be penalised in accordance with some (unspecified) variant of the current system.

Dr Perriton commented that, under (a) above, there was no guidance regarding partial rather than complete non-attribution, and questioned whether that might lead to variable departmental practice regarding such less marked misconduct. Should (b) above be adopted, a consideration was whether there should be a penalty (termination) for repeated offences.

She commented that she was confident that plagiarism was not always identified, and was more widespread than official figures suggested. Moreover, it was often difficult to distinguish between plagiarism and poor referencing. She gave examples to illustrate the range between plagiarism and poor referencing.

Finally, Dr Perriton outlined a proposed simplification of the investigation procedure. Where academic misconduct was identified by a marker, the student would be informed by the Chair of the Board of Examiners, sent the evidence of the offence, and notified of the penalty. The student would be required to meet the supervisor to discuss the finding and the penalty. The student could appeal and request a hearing with the Chair of the Board of Examiners and at most two other members of academic staff; this should be by exception. If dissatisfied with the outcome, the student could appeal to the Special Cases Committee.

In the course of discussion, the following points were made:

- (a) departments had to take responsibility for training students in correct academic writing during Stage 1;
- (b) the current system embodied important principles of fairness and consistency which should be preserved in some modified form of the current system;
- (c) the current system gave only an illusory appearance of fairness and consistency: its unwieldiness made it difficult for students to understand and burdensome for departments to operate, with the result that in many instances it was not invoked at all or, if invoked, resulted in a precise but often small penalty after a large amount of departmental effort. Effectively, the current system did little to encourage academic integrity.
- (d) there was a difficulty in that in science departments the first piece of extended writing undertaken by students was the independent study module in the final year.

With regard to the onerousness of the current system of investigation, the Committee agreed unanimously that the requirement, when plagiarism was identified, to check all previous work should be removed with effect from October 2010. It was hoped that, with the introduction of a new system (probably in 2011/12), and with the removal of this requirement, departments would be encouraged to identify and address all occurrences of plagiarism, rather than tempted to disregard them.

One final suggestion was that the new procedure might at Stage 2 and 3 contain a combination of zero marks and capped marks, reflecting the seriousness of the offence.

It was agreed to ask Dr Perriton and Cecilia Lowe further to develop the proposal, taking into account the Committee's comments.

09-10/188 Proposals on the future of the Board for Graduate Schools

The Committee received the proposals on the future role of the Board for Graduate Schools. These involved the disbanding of the Board after September 2010, and the allocation of most of its responsibilities to the Teaching Committee, the Research Committee, the Special Cases Committee and the Standing Committee on Assessment. The policy

implications of academic misconduct cases would lie with the Standing Committee, which would also take over responsibility for appointing assessors for candidates for higher doctorates. In place of the Board, there would be an advisory group on research students, which would be able to make recommendations to the relevant executive committees.

The Committee approved the proposals without comment.

CATEGORY II BUSINESS

09-10/189 Next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would be on Friday 8 October 2010 at 2.15pm in room G17, Heslington Hall.

09-10/190 Departing members

On behalf of members, the Chair thanked Amanda Rees, Anne Duhme-Klair and Charlie Leyland, whose period of office was coming to an end, for their service to the Committee. He looked forward to welcoming Ben Humphrys as a full member in 2010/11. He also thanked Nadia Fenn (Special Cases Committee), and welcomed her replacement, Kathryn Lucas.