

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

Report for consideration by University Teaching Committee

Review of Combined Degrees

1 INTRODUCTION

The review has been undertaken in response to feedback from a number of sources including the QAA institutional audit, some open comments in the NSS, feedback from departmental visits, annual programme review reports, and external examiners' reports. UTC received an initial report (Summary Appendix 1) in June 2009 following consultations with academic staff involved with combined programmes in departments and students on combined programmes. A small working group was established by UTC to review combined degrees and to advise particularly on opportunities for inter-disciplinary teaching, identity of combined programmes, governance and quality assurance matters, the supervision of students on combined programmes, development of cohort identity, and organisation and administrative arrangements for combined programmes. (Membership and terms of reference are given at Appendix 2.)

Progress to date

Work on the implementation of the new undergraduate modular scheme and other initiatives have resulted in the following arrangements for combined programmes:

- Guidance on curriculum design
(<http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/aso/teach/modular/frameworkfinal.pdf>)
- The adoption of a single system of degree classification commencing in 2010-11
- UTC/ Standing Committee on Assessment (SCA) have been mindful of the particular characteristics of combined degrees in advising departments (UTCM08/ 129)
- Arrangements in hand to ensure the university prospectus has a central reference to combined programmes and to a new web page listing all combined programmes
- Departments asked to consult with their partner departments in relation to communications and the organisation and timing of events for students, in particular to ensure appropriate arrangements for the induction of students on combined programmes

2 MODUS OPERANDI

Information provided to the working group included feedback from the initial survey, student feedback (YUSU and NSS), a QAA report of evidence arising from QAA institutional visits, and feedback from informal enquiries of other universities. (A list is contained at Appendix 3.) The working group met four times, considered papers on

supervision and governance, and examples of good practice in relation to inter-disciplinary curricula and teaching. It was briefed by Cathy Colless (Student Administrative Systems) on the use of e-Vision in relation to managing student progression information and by Bill McIntosh re the development of the CMS and opportunities for departments in relation to communications relating to combined programmes. The chairs of both UTC working groups (Supervision and Combined Programmes) met to discuss the groups' work on supervision.

3 CONTEXT

In particular the Working Group was mindful that at present:

- York supports a considerable number of combined programmes which recruit successfully, produce good results, and are generally appreciated by students
- there are numbers of academic staff across the university who are actively committed to particular combined programmes and whose goodwill and expertise constitutes an invaluable resource
- the University supports some excellent interdisciplinary programmes at graduate level, but could do more to promote the identity of such programmes at undergraduate level in line with the University's commitment to interdisciplinarity
- combined degree students and staff who teach them can feel that they have little collective identity; students can feel that their particular needs are not adequately addressed by either of their parent departments
- Combined Board Executive Committees sometimes lack clear roles or responsibilities and some consequently rarely meet or function very effectively
- joint supervision of combined degree students can work well, but does not provide students with the individual oversight that single supervision facilitates. Students experiencing difficulties may go unnoticed because neither supervisor is aware of their overall performance or circumstances. Especially for smaller departments with numbers of combined programmes, joint supervision can place a strain on staff resources
- modularisation has resulted in numbers of degree combinations, that attract few students, being dropped, but this represents an opportunity to enhance the programmes that remain and promote their distinctive identities

4 RATIONALE

Mindful that across the University there are individual staff members who are sympathetic to and supportive of the needs of combined degrees and combined degree

students, the Working Group seeks to build upon this commitment by cultivating a small body of academic staff within each department, known and identifiable to students, with particular involvement in a combined degree programme. The Working Group also seeks to enhance the distinctive identity of combined programmes by encouraging joint teaching and interdisciplinary content. Here contact and dialogue between these staff across combining departments is seen as fundamental to the development of jointly taught modules and of interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship. The Combined Board Executive Committee, which already exists under University Ordinances and Regulations (1.4), provides an appropriate forum to encourage such regular contact. It is imagined that in this way knowledge of the workings and structures of each combining departments will come to be better known and understood by committee members from the other combining department. By clarifying the role and work of these committees, by requiring them to meet termly (rather than annually as is the current requirement) and by involving student representatives in the business of the committee, the Working Group intends to enhance the governance of combined degree programmes and allow students and staff a greater sense of ownership of those programmes.

In order to enhance the experience of combined degree students, the Working Party seeks to outline clear roles and responsibilities for those involved in the delivery of programmes, the delivery of information to students and prospective students, and the academic guidance and supervision of students. In particular, the Working Party seeks to clarify and strengthen the role of chairs in providing leadership and assuring the effective delivery of the programme. The Working Party, whilst recognising that there is no consensus on the question of supervision and that current arrangements can work well, feels that joint supervision neither encourages nor readily allows supervisors to gain a clear overview of a student's progress or circumstances. (To facilitate such single supervision, it is imperative that electronic recording of tutorial reports etc. be introduced. This is also advocated by the Working Party on Supervision.) A new role of Programme Advisor will help ensure students are correctly advised on the workings and requirements of the combined programme, module choices etc., and, where necessary, allow students to access advice regarding the combining department other than that of the supervisor and modules taught by that department.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Academic Departments

The draft recommendations are:

- a) The Combined Board Executive Committee (CBEC): The CBEC is the committee that normally conducts the business of Combined Board of Studies (see University Ordinances and Regulations 1.4). It also provides a forum for academics committed to the combined degree to meet, to get to know one another, to discuss the intellectual vibrancy of the programmes, to understand better respective departmental cultures etc. The CBEC should normally meet at least once a term. The terms of reference of the CBEC should include a brief review of the programme, examining its effectiveness and coherence, and a review of feedback from the NSS and such other evidence relating to the students' experience of the degree programme as is available to the CBEC or as members may feel it is appropriate to obtain. The minutes of such meetings should be passed promptly to the Board of Studies of the combining departments. Student representatives from the combined programmes (normally one for each year of the programme) should be invited to all unstarred business of the executive committee meetings and should be given the opportunity of raising agenda items.
- b) Heads of Departments should ensure that the CBEC are fully staffed according to University Ordinances and Regulations 1.4, viz. 'not less than four nor more than nine academic staff members of the Combined Board'. Exceptionally, where the degree combination attracts very few students, the minimum number may be varied. Members should be drawn from a pool of staff committed to the pertinent combined degree programme who will normally be supervisors (see 3b) below) and should normally include the programme advisors (see 2b) below). Other members should normally be supervisors for combined degree students (see 2b) below).
- c) Chairs of the CBEC should normally rotate between contributing departments subject to the agreement of the respective Heads of Department so as to ensure appropriate persons are appointed and appropriate allowance given under departmental workload models. (University Ordinances and Regulations 1.9 indicates that this should occur at least every four years.)

[Note: the above recommendations assume that the Combined Board of Studies does not normally meet and that matters relating to the combined degree are devolved to an executive. Where programmes have dedicated administrative support and academic frameworks (as for PEP, SPS and Biochemistry) the above recommendations need not apply so long as the Combined Board of Studies adheres to the spirit of recommendation 1 a).]

1. Programme administration:

a) Responsibilities of Chairs of Combined Board of Studies / CBEC :

- To ensure that the CBEC meets regularly (see 1c above)
- Chairs should organise an induction meeting for each new intake of combined degree students on their programme at which staff associated with the combined programme are introduced and their roles explained (see 2 c) below)
- Chairs should ensure that accurate and appropriate information is provided by partner departments to combined students before arrival, at induction, and at other points through the programme
- Chairs should be active in liaising with Heads of Departments and chairs of parent Boards of Studies etc. to help improve the experience of students whose degree programmes are shared between the parent departments
- Chairs should undertake all other duties that fall to chairs under University Ordinances and Regulations and should be available to students who wish to raise serious concerns or grievances relating to the combined degree programme.

b) A Programme Advisor (or, in the case of larger programmes, advisors) must be appointed in each partner department in respect of each programme.

- All students will have access to a Programme Advisor in the partner department other than that of their supervisor. (Students on combined degree programmes should be allocated pro rata to supervisors between the combining departments- see below)
- Programme advisors will make themselves available to give advice on the content of the combined programme, module choices, course regulations etc
- Programme advisors have a responsibility for ensuring that students on the combined degree are properly informed of the degree programme and of programme regulations and that students choose appropriate modules at the appropriate times. (Such persons will need to be appointed by their HoDs and recompensed according to the department's workload model. It is important that such persons familiarise themselves so far as possible not only with the combined degree programme and the combined degree course regulations, but also with the teaching programmes and cultures of both departments. A Programme Advisor may also be the Chair of the CBEC.)

- Programme advisors from both departments will have an introductory meeting with students on the programme at the beginning of each academic session and at other key moments in the programme, e.g. choosing of modules
 - Programme advisors will normally be members of the combined executive and will liaise with the supervisor in other department to ensure that the student receives support in a cohesive manner.
- c) The role of the supervisor, programme advisor, and office support for combined programmes should be made clear to students at induction and in supporting literature e.g. handbooks etc. (see 2a) above) and within the Department's Policy on Supervision as recommended by the Review of Undergraduate Supervision. Induction arrangements for new students with partner departments; and opportunities to establish an identity for the CP cohort at the beginning of the year through events and communications to students should be made clear.
 - d) In order to support the effectiveness of single supervision of combined degree students, departments are required to implement electronic provision of student marks through E-vision / student enquiry screen. Training and support must be provided to administrative staff as appropriate (see 6 a) below)
 - e) Each department should have an identified administrator or administrative assistant associated with a particular combined degree
 - f) Each department should manage the allocation of supervisors and programme advisors within the home and parent department to ensure an even distribution where possible

2. Supervision of students

The Departments' policies and procedures on supervision should make clear that;

- a) The supervision of students on combined degree programmes should rest with a single supervisor. So far as possible, supervisors are to be drawn from a small pool of staff with a knowledge of and commitment to a particular combined degree programme.
- b) Supervisors will normally be members of the CBEC.
- c) Students on combined degree programmes should be allocated pro rata to supervisors between the combining departments.
- d) The supervisor should receive directly tutorial reports, warning notices, and copies of medical notes etc. from both parent departments so that s/he

can gain an overview of a student's progress and provide advice on their performance etc. (see 2 d) above)

- e) The supervisor will take the opportunity to advise students on module choices at key decision points.
- f) The supervisor may offer advice on the combined programme, but where appropriate should refer students to the programme advisor. (See 2 b) above.)
- g) The roles and relationships between the Chair of CBEC, Supervisor and Programme Advisor are articulated

The Review of Undergraduate Supervision's proposed template for a Departmental Policy will assist with the above.

3. Curriculum and identity

- a) *Identity of programme.* Clear statements should be provided in 'University' publications about 'what a combined programme offers', and clear differentiation should be made in departments' prospectus and web pages. All programmes must be referred to as 'combined' rather than 'joint'.

- b) Departmental information for students to be customized for combined programme students e.g. separate handbooks (or sections of parent departmental handbooks so long as the same information is duplicated between both) or web pages, encouraging where possible cohort identity.

- c) Proposals for new (or modification to) combined programmes should detail the advantages of inter-disciplinarity within the pro-forma for submission to teaching committee.

- d) *Joint teaching and combined programmes.* Departments should explore and encourage opportunities for joint teaching. All combined degree programmes should normally offer students:
 - the opportunity to take a 'bridge module' designed to bring the combining disciplines into dialogue and to explore interdisciplinarity.

- the opportunity to take an independent research module, such as an extended essay or research project, that combines the two disciplines.

[Note: it is recognised a small number of combined degree programmes may not readily lend themselves to providing an interdisciplinary 'bridge module', for example because this is not justified by cohort size.]

4. Support from Central services:

- a) Guidance and support should be provided to departments to enable them to provide marks to supervisors via E-vision / student enquiry screen
- b) There should be dedicated sections in 'University' publications, e.g. prospectus and web pages, to provide information on availability of combined programmes and nature of these programmes.
- c) To assist in consistency in presentation from department to department, templates/guidance should be provided by the Communications Office, in consultation with the CMS project.
- d) FORUM should continue to assist departments in identifying good practice and supporting departments, e.g. workshops to explore innovation and efficiencies and good practice in joint teaching
- e) ASO should revise and make explicit CBEC approval in the pro-forma for new programmes