Introduction/Background

1 As part of the last review of its own effectiveness (2012), Senate decided that it should submit an annual report to Council on the main items of business it had considered the previous year. This is the sixth such report, covering the academic year 2015-16.

Senate Business 2015-16

2 China Culture Investment Group (CCIG)

2.1 At its first meeting of the year in October, Senate considered a proposed project with the China Culture Investment Group (CCIG) to develop new education and training provision in the creative industries aimed at Chinese and other international students. It noted that the initiative would be based on programmes offered by the Department of Theatre, Film & Television (TFTV), with the intention of recruiting up to three hundred students a year to programmes delivered in bespoke facilities on Campus East. Senate was reassured that all the new programmes would be taught by University staff and all academic issues, including entry standards and quality assurance, would be managed by the University.

3 National Student Survey 2015 [Oct 2015]

3.1 Senate considered a report from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching & Learning) on the 2015 National Student Survey, noting in particular:

- good progress made towards the departmental targets agreed by Senate the previous year, with these remaining unchanged for the current year;
- improved scores for all dimensions, with a 2% increase in overall satisfaction (to 88%) and a notably high score for teaching on my course (91% satisfaction, ranking 8th in the sector);
- confirmation of student satisfaction in the open comments section of the survey, which provided strong affirmation of the work of individual members of teaching staff;
- relatively poorer scores for personal development and assessment and feedback, which would therefore be the focus of current year activities;
use of data presented in Tableau to identify the correlation between different sections of the survey (especially as these related to the overall satisfaction score);

- the importance of clearly defined assessment criteria and associated equity issues;

- roll-out of the institutional pedagogy and a ‘partnership agreement’ with students, which would address some of the issues raised in respect of personal development;

- revised process for reporting and discussing the survey outcome with individual departments.

3.2 During discussion the following points were noted:

(a) The SU President commented that students would respond positively to clearer communication and clarification of expectations.

(b) Issues around student understanding of what actually constituted feedback would be highlighted and clarified as part of the York Pedagogy implementation.

(c) At management level there was linkage between the NSS outcome and the results of other surveys (e.g. in respect of the provision of learning resources).

4 Destination of Leavers from Higher Education [Oct 2015]

4.1 Senate considered a report on the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education in 2014, noting that compared to the previous year’s figures, the unemployment rate had decreased from 8.3% to 6.4%, with a 5% increase in professional employment (44% to 49%). The decline in graduates continuing with further study mirrored the national picture and would be subject to further analysis. Noting the University’s overall rank for employability in the Sunday Times league table (40th), attention was drawn to the institutional target of achieving 80% of graduates in professional work or further study by the 2016/17 graduating cohort.

4.2 The following specific points were noted:

(a) The data only provided information on graduates’ activities six months after graduation, not on the motivation for these activities (e.g. earning money in order to travel). Graduates who were travelling at the time of the survey were excluded from the data as they were not considered available for work.
(b) As regards student engagement with employability, there had been an increase among first years (e.g. attendance at careers fairs) and regular monitoring was undertaken by both year group and department.

c) Graduate entrepreneurs setting up their own businesses were categorised as having achieved a positive destination. Data was also available from the survey regarding the University’s contribution to supporting the development of graduate entrepreneurs.

5 Student Employability Strategy [Oct 2015]

5.1 Senate considered the aims and objectives of the new Student Employability Strategy, with the following points being noted in discussion:

(a) The support provided through Careers Liaison Officers in academic departments was variable and further consideration would be given to developing and raising the profile of this role, possibly at a faculty level.

(b) Although resourcing in this area was an issue for academic departments, it was suggested that it was not appropriate for employability matters to be considered as part of the annual medium-term planning (MTP) cycle. In response the Deputy Vice-Chancellor commented that employability data was considered as an element of the longer-term strategic planning meetings with departments, and that efforts were being made to tie these meetings more closely to the MTP process so that departments were more empowered to take appropriate actions in this area.

(c) It was suggested that the wording of objective 3(a) regarding students being “unprepared for life after graduation” might be re-drafted for greater clarity.

(d) It was agreed that reference to the development of transferable skills as part of the York Pedagogy might usefully be included in strategic aim [3].

(e) Acknowledgement of students’ changing perspectives and career plans over the course of their time at university was built into the standard practice of careers services and was also recognised in the structure of the York Award.

(f) The Employability Strategy Group would re-visit the question of whether the University might usefully participate in the national Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) project.
(g) The SU President welcomed the references to peer-to-peer processes, mentoring/buddying systems and the role of supervisors in supporting the employability agenda.

(h) In the context of the totality of academic staff workload, it was agreed that adequate resourcing for employability activity would be considered as part of the planning process.

6 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey [Oct 2015]

6.1 Senate considered a report on the biennial Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2015, noting the University’s improved results for most questions and performance generally above the Russell Group average.

6.2 The following areas had been identified for further attention arising from the survey outcome:

- overall satisfaction scores
- guidance/direction of research
- opportunities to discuss research with other students
- opportunities to develop contacts/networking
- personal training plans (an area of increasing focus by research councils)
- training for teaching

6.3 The following points were noted in discussion:

(a) Personal training plans were intended to cover two broad areas: project-specific skills and generic research skills (e.g. communication, impact, writing grant applications etc).

(b) The concept of the Early Career Researchers’ Forum allowed research students to gain advice and guidance from a wider group beyond their personal supervisor and to benefit from interaction with others at a more comparable stage of career development.

(c) Some students might require greater assurance regarding the anonymity of their response, and if provided this would increase the current response rate (49%, 986 students).

(d) As regards the possibility of analysis across and within research groups (rather than departments), this could be explored further, including with the HEA.
(e) The relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with specialist library resources in particular departments probably arose from some students’ conception of a “research library”, which provided messages for expectation management at induction.


7.1 Senate considered the new Learning and Teaching Strategy 2015-2020, noting that it had been subject to intensive prior consultation with academic departments.

7.2 The following comments were noted:

(a) There was general support for the introduction of a ‘student compact’ (now called ‘partnership agreement’), a development which was becoming more prevalent across the sector. A suggestion that the compact should include the quality assurance of seminar delivery by postgraduates who teach (PGWTs) would be taken up during consultation on the agreement.

(b) It was suggested that the wording in the Preface relating to “outstanding individuals” might be amended so as not to imply that only a small number of colleagues were outstanding. The same generally inclusive tone and sense of collective/shared ownership was also suggested in the Principles section of the document, notwithstanding the emphasis on programme leadership in the York Pedagogy.

(c) Options for growing distance-learning provision, a University Strategy commitment, were currently being assessed.

(d) It was suggested that the stated commitment to closing the gap of social advantage needed also to cover students with specific support needs (e.g. in relation to disability).

8 Institutional Pedagogy [Oct 2015]

8.1 Senate considered a report on implementation of the institutional pedagogy, noting the University Strategy commitment for all University programmes to have adopted the pedagogy by 2017-18. It was noted that particular emphasis was being placed on programme design and the development of new learning outcomes for each programme.

8.2 During discussion of the report the following points were noted:
(a) With the pedagogy’s strong focus on student work, the provision of feedback would be central to the ProPEL (Programmes to Propel Effective Learning) project and the partnership agreement with students.

(b) In response to a concern that establishing a central role for programme leaders might create authoritarian and un-collegial hierarchies in relation to other staff tasked with delivering programme content, it was noted that various strategies would be employed to counter such a risk, including developing a course for programme leaders that emphasised how to engage colleagues in co-design and collaborative delivery.

(c) The Pro-Vice-Chancellor confirmed that the Chairs of Combined Boards would be able to act as the programme leaders for combined programmes. As a general point about the relationship between the new programme leaders and other senior departmental managers (e.g. chairs of boards of studies and departmental teaching committees), this matter would be the subject of further consultation with departments during the current academic year.

9 Research Performance Expectations [Oct 2015]

9.1 Senate considered the updated University Statement on Research Performance Expectations, noting that it had been updated to accord with the format of the Statement on Teaching Performance Expectations approved the previous year. It was also noted that, as a consequence of disciplinary differences in research activity, departments would be required to produce their own Research Performance Expectations that would be appended to the generic institutional Statement.

9.2 During discussion the following points were noted:

(a) It was suggested that the reference to workload models in the section on research environment should include reference to the sort of ‘citizenship’ (formerly: administrative) activities recognised in promotions criteria.

(b) It was suggested that the listed indicators of research activity and quality should also include work undertaken in an industrial/commercial context that might not be ‘REF-able’.

(c) It was suggested that reference to ‘PhD Students’ should be replaced by ‘Research Students’ (to capture MSc by Research etc).

(d) Given the role to be played by the Deans in moderating performance review reports, it was suggested that they might also be asked to consider
departmental Research Performance Expectations prior to their submission to URC for institutional sign-off. Similarly, it was suggested that the Deans could ensure equity across departments and faculties as regards interdisciplinary research collaborations. Likewise, it was suggested that the next review of the formal Capability Procedure should consider whether the Deans might play a moderating role in the process between HoDs and the HR Directorate.

(e) The wording of the document in some places suggested that the Chairs of departmental research committees acted as the line managers for academic researchers, which was not the case. This would be reviewed.

(f) In response to a query on gender-based analysis of the last REF outcome, it was reported that no gender differences had been identified in respect of the grading of research outputs, although URC had made certain observations on the promotion of aspiration among female researchers. Given the number of other protected characteristics in addition to gender that might be relevant in the research area, it was agreed that a generic reference to a positive approach to equity might usefully be inserted in the section on research environment.

(g) In response to a comment from the GSA President on the quality assurance of research supervision, it was noted that the Statement would facilitate identification of such issues. Specific concerns could also be raised directly via the Dean of the Graduate Research School.

(h) As a general point it was suggested that some of the language of the document might be finessed to be less intimidating and more enabling of best practice and collaborative working. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) agreed to re-consider the text of the document in the light of this comment.

(i) As regards the first response to triggers of poor performance and the escalation to involvement of the HoD at the first stage, it was suggested that this might depend on the size of the department in question (which could be indicated by addition of the wording “as appropriate”).

10 Government Green Paper [Jan 2016]

10.1 Senate members were thanked for their contribution to the University response to the government Green Paper. The institutional response had been circulated to all staff via email and identified a number of concerns in relation to the TEF proposal (especially its proposed linkage to fee levels and potential reputational damage to the sector), the conversion of grants to loans and cuts to the Student Opportunity Fund (both counter to widening participation) and the
use of metrics as imperfect proxy measures for teaching quality. Concern had also been expressed about the possible separation of responsibility for teaching and research funding into different agencies and the politicisation of grant distribution through the involvement of a new ministerial committee. The University had welcomed maintenance of the Haldane principle and dual-support funding for research, although here too concern had been expressed about the risk of funding decisions becoming subject to political interference.

11 Degree Apprenticeships [Jan 2016]

11.1 Senate noted that discussions had been held with BIS ministers on the development of degree apprenticeships. The University would play a dual role as both a contributor to the new Apprenticeship Levy (0.5% of the pay bill) and as a potential provider of apprenticeships (allowing some of the levy costs to be recouped). The government was evidently keen for Russell Group institutions to engage with this agenda and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (TLS) had been nominated to BIS as the institutional lead on this matter.

12 Special Cases Committee Annual Report [Jan 2016]

12.1 Senate considered the annual report for 2015-16 from the Special Cases Committee, noting the following:

- The Committee’s workload the previous year could be summarised in statistical terms roughly as follows: approximately 1,000 student cases; ⅔ from taught students, ⅓ from research students; ⅓ appeals, ⅓ leave of absence requests and ⅓ other special cases.

- The number of appeals appeared to have levelled off in 2014-15, with the number upheld remaining at a relatively consistent level in recent years.

- Swift and effective communication with Boards of Studies was essential to the smooth running of the process and it was important that departments heeded the professional advice from special cases administrators (e.g. in respect of the possibility of repeat study).

- Most research student cases related to requests for extensions occurring at the end of the period of study, a situation that might be addressed by earlier intervention (e.g. via leave of absence).

- The current year was the first year of operation of the new two-stage appeals process introduced to comply with OIA best practice guidance. The process would be reviewed at the end of the year.
12.2 During discussion the following points were noted:

(a) The previous target of processing appeals within six weeks had proved impossible in the context of rising workload and increased complexity of cases. This had now been replaced with the target recommended by the OIA of 90 days.

(b) Work was currently ongoing in collaboration with the Director of Registry Services to draft definitive guidance relating to the implications for visa requirements and accommodation of international students taking leave of absence.

(c) It was generally agreed that development of an online submission system would greatly ease the efficiency of the process at both departmental and central level.

(d) The SU President confirmed that the rise in number and complexity of special cases had also been experienced by the SU staff involved in the provision of advice and support to students.

13 International Committee [Jan 2016]

13.1 Senate approved a proposal to establish a new International Committee as a sub-committee of Senate.

13.2 During discussion the following points were noted:

(a) YUSU could nominate a representative of its choice to serve on the new committee, with one of its International Student Officers as the most likely appointee.

(b) Appropriate prior experience and expertise in the relevant geographical area would be factored into the recruitment of the three Associate Provosts, with further training opportunities to be provided as the roles developed.

(c) As regards appropriate international experience in the teaching area (e.g. collaborative degree programmes, distance learning etc), the intention would be to identify such expertise among the three faculty representatives on the new committee.
(d) The job title ‘Associate Provost’ had been agreed after much discussion as most likely to convey the relevant status and credibility in overseas territories.

14 EU Referendum [July 2016]

14.1 Senate acknowledged that the UK referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU) could generate a period of political and economic turmoil. Given the potential impact on all international students (not just those from the EU), a process of direct messaging to such students had begun, including confirmation that current EU students and those starting their studies in 2016 would continue to have access to loans from the Student Loans Company (as confirmed by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) and that participation in Erasmus exchange schemes would continue as planned. As regards continued access to EU research funding, there was already some initial anecdotal evidence of detrimental effects for, and potential bias against, UK researchers. A response to such developments would be submitted to the European Commission via the Russell Group. Some HEIs were also reporting withdrawal of job applications from overseas academics (e.g. from the US) in response to the uncertainty caused by the referendum outcome.

14.2 In terms of the University’s own response, Senate noted that the University Executive Board (UEB) had taken a series of actions, including modelling different financial scenarios, planning a PR campaign in mainland China, starting a telephone conversion process with offer holders, developing appropriate advice and guidance via the University website and mobilising political supporters in both houses of parliament and local/regional government. As part of the range of support being provided for EU nationals and other international staff, arrangements would be made for the reporting of any incidents of racial harassment or hate crimes.

15 Government White Paper [July 2016]

15.1 Senate considered a report on the government White Paper, Success as Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice. The following were noted as the three principal elements:

- opening up the market to new providers via relaxation of the requirements for granting degree-awarding powers and university status;
- introduction of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to drive up teaching standards and reward the institutions who achieved this (via inflation-linked fee increases);
15.2 During discussion the following comments were noted:

(a) Some aspects of the new, more unregulated market in higher education, together with other emerging initiatives (e.g. credit/course transfer between institutions), were similar to the US system.

(b) Although there were evident sector-wide risks from allowing new, unproven institutions to enter the market and moving control of such matters from the Privy Council to the OFS, there was no longer much headroom for lobbying against such developments as the required primary legislation passed through parliament.

(c) The Russell Group (RG) had adopted a clear position on the TEF, including expression of its concerns regarding the proposed use of proxy measures for teaching quality. Such concerns were, however, unlikely to have an effect on the government’s clear ideological commitment to further market deregulation.

(d) The purported intention of the TEF was to provide students as consumers with enhanced market information regarding the “offer” being made by different institutions (e.g. in respect of degree outcomes, employability etc.), a development which was now being followed closely by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). It remained unclear how this would affect the current culture of a partnership relationship between students and their chosen institutions.

16 Statistical Analysis of Degree Outcomes [July 2016]

16.1 Senate considered a statistical report on undergraduate/taught postgraduate outcomes, noting the following main findings:

- percentage of good undergraduate degrees awarded by York had dropped by 1.3% to 80.9% (2013-14: 82.2%);
- general upward trend among RG institutions continued (up 0.9% percentage points to 82.5%);
- considerable undergraduate variation at departmental level (from 59.8% to 98%);
- percentage of PGT students who achieved their course aim unchanged from 2013/14 (87.8%, 1% below the RG average);
considerable PGT variation at departmental level (from 66.7% to 95.9%).

16.2 Senate also considered a report on PhD submission rates, noting the following:

- further year of continuous improvement at institutional level to 81% of full-time research students submitting within 4 years (all three Faculties now over 75%);
- overseas students slightly behind Home/EU but showing strong improvement (63% to 77%);
- analysis by gender showing no consistent pattern over the period and rough parity in the most recent cohort.

17 Review of Faculty Structure [July 2016]

17.1 Senate considered a report on a review of the faculty structure undertaken by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the Registrar, noting the following:

- the useful comments received from Senate members during the review process;
- the further delegation of powers to Deans and new faculty sub-committees approved by UEB since original approval of the faculty structure in 2014;
- the decision not to take forward faculty-level promotion, rewards and nominations groups at the present time;
- no recommendations for further development at this stage, but a further review planned in two years.

17.2 During discussion the following comments were noted:

(a) Although there was no consensus among the comments received from Senate members, there were nevertheless a number of valid observations and insights which would be considered by the Deans.

(b) Other than a similar review in two years, it was difficult to apply the principles of cost/benefit analysis to such evolving academic structures.

(c) Greater clarity regarding decision-making roles and responsibilities would emerge as the new structure bedded in.
18 Rules on Compensation [July 2016]

18.1 Senate considered a proposal for revision of the rules on compensation for undergraduate awards (namely that compensation be allowed to operate down to a mark of 10% in up to 40 credits in the award year).

18.2 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (TLS) outlined the principles of compensation by which higher marks in some modules could redress marks below the pass threshold in others. It was noted that in some disciplines, especially those involving mathematical techniques, it had been proposed that deeper application of compensation was appropriate and would prevent otherwise able students being obliged to take re-sits in some modules in their final year, thereby missing the opportunity to graduate in that year (with serious consequences for taking up employment etc). It was reported that this suggestion had been supported by external examiners in the affected disciplines. On the other hand, it was noted there were also a number of counter-arguments relating to the necessity of learning outcomes being achieved in all contributing modules and the important role of re-sits in bringing students up to the required level. Senate noted the modelling and testing of different assessment rules and scenarios that had been undertaken, which had confirmed that the effect on retention of the proposed change was minimal.

18.3 During discussion of the proposed change the following points were noted:

(a) As regards Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) accreditation for certain programmes, it was noted that such requirements had always allowed for a degree of variation in the modular scheme (e.g. in nursing/midwifery), and this would remain the case.

(b) Although some HEIs allowed students to graduate pending confirmation of re-sit results, this had not been proposed as a solution due to legal concerns about maintaining students’ registration on a programme from which they had nominally graduated.

(c) The proportion of students falling into the category under consideration was relatively small.

(d) Application of deeper compensation in progression years did not significantly affect the number of students failing to progress. When atypically large numbers of students fail, the normal QA processes address any potential issues relating to the curriculum, examination or teaching quality. The SCA would also be considering the possibility of repeat years which might help with the retention of students.
(e) Some concern was expressed at the volume of failure that could be carried by final-year students, and how this might appear on transcripts to interested parties outside the University as regards the integrity and standards of its degree programmes. A possible solution, which it had not been possible to model given resource constraints, might have been to consider allowing compensation down to 10% in only 20 credits.

(f) The drawbacks of the current situation on individual students were strongly emphasised, with their main focus understandably being on the overarching final classification of their degree. Student representatives supported this view, drawing attention to the fact that such failed modules tended to represent an anomalous performance by otherwise good students who would pass their degrees.

(g) It was suggested that the proposal might undermine the consistency of the modular scheme and the institutional pedagogy by allowing such variability in the final year. In response it was noted that one solution for certain programmes might be for departments to identify those modules for which compensation was not allowed.

(h) The reputational risk from potential negative media reporting of the proposed change was judged to be minimal, especially in the context of other HEIs arrangements for “condonement” (corresponding to compensation reaching down to 0, sometimes with the implication that failed credits were not counted in averages).

18.4 Following detailed discussion, and acknowledging the range of arguments on both sides, Senate approved the proposal that compensation be allowed to operate down to a mark of 10% in up to 40 credits in the award year, subject to review after two years (by which point sufficient result data would be available to judge the impact of the change).

19 Other Business

19.1 In addition to the specific items of business reported above, Senate also received reports in respect of the following during 2015/16:

- business from its sub-committees (the Teaching, Research, Planning, Special Cases and HYMS Joint Senate Committees) and from the three Faculty Boards;
➢ periodic review reports in respect of programmes in the departments of Sociology, Electronics, English, Computer Science and Social Policy & Social Work;
➢ establishment of a Board of Studies for the International Pathway College;
➢ revised Academic Probation Policy;
➢ changes to the Policy on Research Degrees;
➢ guidance on authorised absences for sponsored international students;
➢ committee appointments;
➢ register of collaborative programmes.

20 Reserved Business

20.1 During the course of the year Senate also received and/or approved reports on the following items of ‘reserved’ business:

➢ examination results of final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students;
➢ award of first-class honours degrees with distinction;
➢ award of Doctor of Letters (DLitt);
➢ senior appointments (including appointments or re-appointments of Heads of Department);
➢ academic promotions;
➢ new and honorary academic appointments;
➢ student suspensions/exclusions (x7).

August 2016

DR DAVID DUNCAN
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Secretary to the University Senate