Standing Committee on Assessment: Minutes 25 April 2014

University Teaching Committee

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ASSESSMENT

Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on Friday 25 April 2014 at 2.00 pm in HG17, Heslington Hall

Present: Dr. Steve King, Computer Science (Chair)  
Dr. Geoff Cubitt, History (Deputy Chair)  
Mr. John Bone, Economics  
Prof Stevi Jackson, CWS  
Dr. Philip Quinlan, Psychology  
Dr. Dominic Watt, Language and Linguistic Science  
Dan Whitmore, YUSU  
Xiaoyin Yang, GSA

In Attendance: Kate Dodd, Academic Registrar  
Jim Irving, Director: Registry Services  
Cecilia Lowe, Leader: Learning Enhancement  
Dr. Jennifer Wotherspoon, AR: Student Progress  
Gillian Wright, Registry Services

Apologies: Dr. Sandra Pauletto, Theatre Film and Television  
Dr. Oliver Craig, Archaeology  
Kathryn Lucas, Special Cases Administrator  
Peter Quinn, Director Student Support Services

13-14/63 Minutes
The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2014.

13-14/64 Matters arising from the minutes

i. 13-14/50 Pass Marks for Taught Postgraduate Programmes
The Committee noted that UTC had approved the proposal to formalise a pass mark for taught postgraduate programmes

ii. 13-14/51 Merits and Distinctions for PGTs with Failed Modules
The Committee noted that UTC had approved the proposal to allow students to achieve a merit on postgraduate awards with up to 20 credits of material failed at first attempt.

iii. 13-14/52 QAA Quality Code Chapter B6
The Committee noted that UTC has agreed that the APL policy belongs in Teaching Committee’s remit, and that SCA need not review it.
Chair’s Oral Report

The Chair reported the following developments:

i. Industrial Action

The UCU have delayed their planned assessment boycott until after a ballot of members on a UCEA offer of a 2% pay increase for the 2014-15 financial year. The University has contingency plans in place in the event that the boycott goes ahead.

ii. Committee Membership

The Chair and the PVC Teaching and Learning are in discussions about the membership of the Committee. The Chair’s term of office is scheduled to come to an end this summer, but he is being proposed to continue. The Chair also reported that current academic membership of the Committee sits at 8, which is meant to be divided between the three academic clusters. Given that this can never represent an even distribution, the Chair is investigating the possibility of increasing academic membership to 9, which would represent a more even spread across the disciplines.

Report from Students

The GSA had nothing to report

The Students’ Union reported that they are planning a survey, set to include several focus groups, on students’ experiences of closed examinations. This is to be done in conjunction with a push to include Timetabling of both teaching and examinations as an item on Boards of Studies’ agendum in order to collect departmental views.

Annual Programme Review: Assessment Issues

The Committee considered a summary of the assessment issues raised by departments in their Annual Programme Reviews, along with responses proposed by the Chair. The Committee noted that several departments had expressed concern about the roles of external examiners and the timing of boards in the light of modularisation, and further noted that the proposal being considered later in the meeting would, the Committee hoped, address many of these concerns.

The Committee also noted that several departments were unhappy about the algorithmic degree classification calculations; with some departments expressing concern at the loss of the discretion over borderline students, and others expressing concern that the specific algorithms we were using to calculate the borderline classifications might be unfair to some students. The Committee discussed these concerns in some detail, including a detailed discussion of a particular case which was perceived to be unfair by the Psychology department. The Committee agreed, however, that the University was right to be committed to a transparent and equitable system,
and that there was no evidence that the system being used currently was manifestly unfair.

The Committee considered concerns from Biology and Physics indicating there was information they would find valuable which was not currently included on board reports, and agreed to ask the Assessment Team Manager to discuss their specific needs and see if better reports could be provided.

(Action: Gillian Wright)

The Committee considered the Environment Department’s concerns about mitigating circumstances on individual components and agreed that students should be entitled to sit damaged components as if for the first time without having also to be reassessed on undamaged components. The 2014-15 Guide will be revised to make this requirement clearer.

(Action: JW)

The Committee also considered concerns from the Mathematics department that the NMS requirement that no modules be failed without having been either passed at reassessment or meeting our compensation criteria is not fit for purpose for Maths and related disciplines. The Department cited QAA subject benchmark statements indicating that some allowance should be made for areas of the discipline that an otherwise successful student might not be able to come to terms with. The Committee agreed that it would welcome a specific proposal in this regard, but that it would need to come from the department, and consideration would need to be given to other disciplines for which such an exception might be appropriate, and to what the impact might be on joint degrees. The Chair was asked to liaise with the department about the nature of such a proposal.

(Action: SK)

13-14/68  External Examiners and Boards of Examiners under NMS

The Committee considered a proposal for the timing and management of Boards of Examiners in light of modularization. The proposal involved the introduction of internal scrutiny panels to determine if runs of module marks looked broadly appropriate, followed by Departmental Examination Boards (including attendance by and meaningful input from external examiners) at which marks would be confirmed, followed by much smaller ratification panels which could be held virtually and which would sign off the final results.

The Committee supported the proposal, and agreed to recommend it to Teaching Committee. Kate Dodd and Steve King agreed to consider any Regulatory changes which might be required to support the change should it be accepted by UTC.

(Action: KD and SK)
13-14/69  Annual Comparator Report on Undergraduate Outcomes
2012-2013
The Committee considered a follow up to the initial report of UG Outcomes considered in SCA.M13-14/37. The second report gave a comparison both with the other Russell Group institutions, and with the broader sector. The Committee noted that the University of York is broadly in line with its comparators, but that there was a large degree of variation between departments in terms of the relative number of ‘good degrees’ they awarded compared to other institutions for the same subjects.

The Committee agreed to ask ASO to include a question about this departmental data as part of their APR.

(Action: ASO to be asked to include data in APR)

13-14/70  Postgraduate External Examiner Reports 2012-13
The Committee received a summary of PGT External Examiner reports on the academic year 2012-13. The Committee noted that the broad themes which arose from these reports were the same as had been raised in the UG reports received earlier in the year and in the APR discussed earlier in the meeting. They agreed that the proposed changes to the BoE timings and structures would be likely to result in a clearer role for External Examiners, but that a degree of discomfort with the use of algorithms at borders was likely to continue. The committee agreed that greater action should be taken to ensure that External Examiners understand that nature of the role for which they have been appointed, and the ways in which we wish to use their very valuable expertise.

The Committee also noted, particularly, the report of Prof. Nicholas Perkins who raised major concerns about the quality of the degrees at York, and who will be receiving a personal response from the PVC Teaching, Learning and Information to reassure him of our commitment to the value of external examiners.

13-14/71  Dictionaries in Closed Examinations
The Committee considered the current guidance on English Language dictionaries in closed examinations in response to a request from the Economics department. The Committee noted that only Economics is currently providing dictionaries in closed exams, and that they are doing so at the expense of the department. The Committee agreed that the inclusion of a dictionary on the rubric should be approved on a case by case basis by the
SCA, rather than allowing a blanket approval for the whole department, and that any case would need to make explicit reference to the learning outcomes for the course. Rubrics for the 2013-14 CAP will not be affected by this increased attention to the current regulations.

(Action: JW to inform Economics CBoE)

13-14/72 Principles for the Scheduling of Closed Examinations
The Committee approved the inclusion of the principles being used in the scheduling of closed examinations in the Guide to Assessment for 2014-15, and recommended that the restrictions be advertised by both the Examinations office and YUSU in order to ensure that students were aware of what could be expected in the preparation of their examination timetable.

13-14/73 Date of the next meeting
The Committee noted the date of the next meeting as Friday 23 May 2014 at 2.00 pm in Room HG17- Dawson Room, Heslington Hall.
Reserved Business

*13-14/74  Reserved Minutes

The Committee approved the reserved minutes of the meeting of 7 February 2014.

*13-14/75  Chair’s Report

The Chair reported that an exam script had been lost during the January CAP due to a counting error. The Chair had reviewed the counting process, and it was not clear how the error could have been avoided. The Committee noted that this was a very rare occurrence, and that procedures were normally sufficient. In this case, the student is to be given a ‘pass’ mark on the module, so long as he passes the subsequent module which builds on the same learning outcomes. Should the student fail the subsequent module, he will need to resit both assessments. The student has also been given the option of resitting the assessment, should he choose to, in order to garner a mark which will appear on his transcript for employers or future HEIs.

*13-14/76  Requests for Extraordinary Individual Arrangements

The Committee considered a recommendation that student 109003722 receive 10 minute rest breaks/hour in closed exams as a reasonable adjustment for his asperger’s, dyspraxia and IBS. The Committee agreed that the time was appropriate, but approved 50% extra time, rather than ‘paper removed’ rest breaks.

The Committee also considered a request for student 107008882 that the student should receive a full 25% extra time on all open assessments, rather than 25% of a nominal 8 hour work day for each 24 hour period. The Committee agreed that students working on open exams were likely to work more than 8 hours per day, and so only two hours extra time was a disadvantage. They also believed that students were unlikely to work the full 24 hours, and that allowing an additional 25% of that would be indicating to students that that was what was expected. On this basis, the Committee agreed that the extra time in this student’s open examinations should be based on a 16 hour working day.

The Exams Office is asked to liaise with disability services to ensure that they are aware that this is an option, and to implement this more broadly from 2014-15.

(Action: Exams Office)