Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on Friday 6 December 2013 at 2.00 pm in HG17, Heslington Hall

Present:  
Dr. Steve King, Computer Science (Chair)  
Mr. John Bone, Economics  
Dr. Geoff Cubitt, History  
Dr. Dominic Watt, Language and Linguistic Science  
Dr. Sandra Pauletto, Theatre Film and Television  
Dr. Philip Quinlan, Psychology  
Dan Whitmore, YUSU  
Xiaoyin Yang, GSA

In Attendance:  
Cecilia Lowe, Leader: Learning Enhancement  
Kate Dodd, Academic Registrar  
Zoe Devlin, Executive Assistant to the Academic Registrar  
Kathryn Lucas, Special Cases Administrator  
Dr. Jennifer Wotherspoon, AR: Student Progress  
Bernie White, Registry Services

Apologies:  
Jim Irving, Director: Registry Services  
Dr. Oliver Craig, Archaeology  
Prof Stevi Jackson, CWS

13-14/32   Minutes  
The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 6 December 2013.

13-14/33   Matters arising from the minutes

i. 13-14/10 Review of the Common Assessment Period 2012-13  
The Committee noted that UTC had expressed concerns at the number of errors on papers reported in the CAP and actioned the Exams Office to inform Chairs of Boards of Examiners and Heads of Departments of all late papers and paper queries in future to allow for departmental oversight.  

(Action: Exams Office)

ii. Guidance on Proofreading  
The Committee noted that the Chair of Teaching Committee had approved the Guidance by Chair’s action, and that the Guidance was now to be advertised to departments and students
iii. 13-14/22.iii  Report from Students (GSA)
The Assistant Registrar reported that concerns about new online supervision meeting records disappearing were caused by a known problem with characters including the ampersand symbol (&), wherein any record including such symbols would not be acknowledged by E:vision and so would disappear. The Student Systems team has reported the problem to the SITS software provider, and has placed a warning on the reporting page not to use the symbols involved.

iv. 13-14/24 Undergraduate External Examiners Reports
The Assistant Registrar agreed to bring a longitudinal view of External Examiner reports with evidence of long term patterns to a future meeting.

v. 13-14/26 Proposed Updating of University Contingency Plans for Assessment and Examination
The Committee noted that work was ongoing on the University Contingency Plan for Assessment and Examination. The Committee agreed with the principles put forward by the Chair, and noted that he was continuing ongoing conversations with the Contingency Working Group about both the current industrial action and strategic planning for other eventualities.

(Action: SK)

13-14/34 Chair’s Oral Report
The Chair reported the following developments:

i. QAA Quality Code Section B6
The QAA has published a new section of the Quality Code with regards to Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning. The section is expected to be applied at all institutions from August 2014, and so a proposal for compliance will be considered at the next meeting.

ii. Appointment of a Deputy Chair
The Chair reported that the University has appointed Geoff Cubitt as Deputy Chair of the SCA. The Chair reported that he would remain the public face of the Committee, and would remain Chair, but that due to an increased teaching load and having been appointed as the lead on an institutional project, it was agreed that additional resource was required to underpin the work of the committee.

13-14/35 Report from Students
The Graduate Students’ Association reported that Ruth Bolton’s appointment
was due to end on 06/12/13 and that she would be replaced by Graeme Osborn. The Chair welcomed this appointment and asked the GSA to thank Ruth Walton.

The Student Union reported the following:

i. CAP Report
The Union had received complaints about the scheduling of exams during evenings and weekends during the January CAP, as well as exams scheduled early in the week. The Assistant Registrar expressed sympathy for the students’ concerns, but confirmed that all University requirements had been met in the creation of the timetable, and that there was no way to avoid these inconveniences whilst exams remained contained to a one week Common Assessment Period.

ii. Annual BoS Report
The Students’ Union was producing an annual BoS report due out in Spring 2014, reporting on academic quality, assessment, teaching, student experience etc. It would be brought to SCA for information.

13-14/36 External Examiners, Board of Examiners and Boards of Studies
The Committee considered a proposal for changes to the structures and schedules of Boards of Examiners end of year meetings in light of the changes brought on by modularisation. The Committee discussed the importance of making the best use of External Examiners, maximising their expertise, allowing them to conduct proper scrutiny of exam results and working against any perception of rubber-stamping. The Committee noted that other institutions had implemented similar systems, and that they often included the convening of programme or module boards which were separate from award boards.

The Committee noted the high levels of variability between the roles of External Examiners in various departments; some departments use Externals primarily as a check on the appropriateness of marks and participate in extensive rescaling, whereas others look to examiners primarily to check the quality of the programme, and rarely change marks after the primary marking processes are completed.

The Committee agreed that it was important for Externals to be involved in visiting departments and delivering feedback and was broadly sympathetic with the principles of dual boards suggested in the Chair’s proposal.

The Chair agreed to return with a revised proposal for the next meeting.

(Action: SK)

13-14/37 Report on Undergraduate Degree Classifications
The Committee received a report on degree classifications, noting that it was the first report on the NMS.

13-14/38 Proposed additions to the Policy on Research Degrees

The Committee considered a proposal to clarify the Policy on Research degrees with regards to the review of External Examiners Reports; the possibility of waiving vivas; bringing additional material to vivas; and unavoidable changes to examiners.

i. The Committee determined that an overall review of External Examiners reports on PhD examinations would not be a useful exercise, as the examiners in these cases are reporting on the candidate and their work, rather than on a programme of study or on assessment standards. As such, no change is necessary.

ii. The Committee agreed that there are very few circumstances wherein they would authorise the exemption of a student from the viva. The viva was seen as an indispensable part of the research degree, an expectation and a means of identifying cheating and as such, should not be waived unless it is absolutely unavoidable. The Committee agreed to recommend to UTC that the phrase “where the thesis has met the requirements for the degree, but the candidate is permanently unable to present themselves for viva examination for medical or compassionate reasons”

iii. The Committee agreed that variability in the material allowed into vivas, as well as the extent to which examiners would engage with additional material brought to the viva could result in inequities to the students involved. The Committee agreed to propose the following be added to the PoRD: “Students should bring a copy of their thesis to the viva examination, and this may be annotated, but no additional material may be brought to the examination. No new material should be presented for examination at viva.”

iv. The Committee agreed that it would be beneficial to clarify the nature of the second viva where an examiner needed to be replaced between the first and second examination of a referred thesis. It recommends the following addition to the PoRD to UTC: “Where an examiner must be replaced between and initial examination and a re-examination of the same thesis (for example due to a substantial change in the health or employment circumstances of an examiner), the second examination will normally have the same status as any other re-examination under the regulations. The new examiner should have access to the original examiners’ reports in order to inform their assessment, but the primary measure of success should be the academic judgement of the examiners as to whether the standards of the award have been met, rather than whether the corrections outlined by the original examiner have been made. Exceptionally, where the examiners agree that the change of examiner may have resulted in conflicting views about the nature of
appropriate corrections, they may recommend a further referral of the thesis to the Standing Committee on Assessment.”

13-14/39  Reconciliation of differences between markers
In response to concerns raised by UG External Examiners, the Committee considered whether there needed to be a University level policy dictating the size of discrepancy between first and second marks which would trigger formal reconciliation procedures, and whether a single procedure might be appropriate. The Committee determined, however, that the current guidance in the Guide to Assessment was sufficient, and that a single too heavy handed in the context of variations between disciplinary marking practices.

13-14/40  Date of the next meeting
The Chair thanked the Student Representatives and wished everybody a good Christmas vacation. The Committee noted the date of the next meeting as Friday 7 February 2014 at 2.00 pm in Room HG17- Dawson Room, Heslington Hall.