Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on Friday 27 February 2009 at 2.15 pm in HG17, Heslington Hall

Present: Dr David Efird (Chair), Philosophy
Dr Simon Eveson, Mathematics
Dr Anne Duhme-Klair, Chemistry
Dr Pat Ansell, BfGS and Health Sciences
Dr Colin Runciman, Computer Science
Dr Linda Perriton, Management
Mr John Brown, Social Policy and Social Work
Rachel Hope, GSA representative
Richard Mitchell, GSA representative
Charlie Leyland, SU representative

In attendance: Ms Sue Hardman, Academic Registrar
Ms Rosemary Royds, Student Administrative Services
Mrs Rosemary Goerisch, Student Progress: SAS
Mr Philip Simison, Student Progress Administrator

The Chair acknowledged that this was Ms Sue Hardman’s last meeting prior to her retirement at the end of March. On behalf of the Committee he thanked her for all her efforts for and on behalf of the SCA over many years and wished her well in her retirement.

09/24 Apologies for absence
Apologies were received from Dr Amanda Rees, Sociology.

CATEGORY I BUSINESS

09/25 Minutes
The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 9 January 2009.

09/26 Matters arising from the minutes
a. Student Guide to Assessment (M08/65 iii)
The Chair reported that the Guide has been written and that the SU have been invited to comment on the content and tone prior to it being circulated to members for further comment.

b. Statistical analysis of classification of degrees 2007/8 –
John Busby, Assistant Registrar: Planning, presented this item. He apologised for the delay in providing the report.

The data show that the York average percentage of good degrees awarded in 2007/8 has remained approximately static since 2006/7, at 72.3% and 72.6% respectively, excluding integrated masters and 74.0% respectively, including integrated masters, compared with 73.1% in 2005/6). As in previous years the range of percentages is large with 97% of those graduating with a Bachelors award in English gaining a good degree, compared to only 15% in Chemistry (which rises to 51% on inclusion of the MChem).

The pattern of results overall is very similar to that seen in 2006/7 with 9 departments out of 22 having above average percentage of good degrees awarded (excluding HYMS). As noted in 2006/7, the separation of students on integrated Masters cohorts has a significant effect on those Departments (Chemistry, Computer Science, Electronics, Mathematics, and Physics). Inclusion of integrated Masters students increases significantly the proportion of good degrees awarded. The two departments awarding the highest proportion of good degrees remain consistently English and History, with Music, History of Art, Politics and Psychology dropping in and out of this group – this is in line with national trends.

Reviewing the percentage of good degrees by Department against average total tariff score per FTE shows a general correlation between average tariff on entry and degree class; however English, History, Music and Archaeology can be seen as outliers, as can Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry.

The Committee noted that comparator data does not provide a direct comparison to York data due to the use of HESA standardised subjects in the national data, which do not map directly to York departments. The national subject areas awarding the highest proportion of first class degrees in 2006/7 were Mathematical sciences (28%), Engineering and Technology (19%) closely followed by the Physical sciences (18%); at York in 2007/8 it was English (44%), Mathematics (36%) and Computer Science (32%).

The national subject areas awarding the most thirds were Computer Science (13%), Business and administrative studies (11%) and
Mathematical sciences (10%); at York it was Chemistry (19%), Health Sciences (19%), Electronics (16%) and Physics (11%), Computer Science (10%), Mathematics (9%). Therefore, there appears to be some tendency at York to award a greater proportion of thirds in the sciences, engineering and mathematics and this is partially reflected in the national picture; national trends in the award of firsts are reflected also only partially in York classification patterns.

Overall the average proportion of good degrees awarded at York does not appear to be out of line with comparator institutions.

These data support similar conclusions to the 2007 analysis:
1. There is significant variability in both average entry scores and the percentage of good degrees awarded by Departments at York, with a small number of Departments (primarily English and History) consistently awarding the highest proportion of good degrees.

2. The proportion of good degrees awarded at York has increased over time, but is still in line with the average of our comparator group and has not increased significantly between 2006/7 and 2007/8.

3. There is an association between average tariff score and percentage of good degrees by Department at York; however certain Departments are outliers to this.

4. There is evidence of subject effects in the sciences, engineering and mathematics, where awards of lower classifications are more common. This is partly, but not wholly, reflective of the national picture.

The Committee thanked Mr Busby for his report. He recommended that in future subject areas be reviewed by JACS codes rather than by department as this would make the data easier to compare.

c. Fitness to practise (M08/92, 09/03d)
Following the Committee’s recent approval of changes to the academic misconduct guidelines in respect of fitness to practise, the wording of the relevant sections to the guide, with minor amendments to sections 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 2.3 was approved.
d. Use of viva voce in taught programmes (M09/07)
   The Chair reported that departments were currently being
   surveyed on their current practices in this regard and that the
   results would be considered at the next meeting.

e. Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (M09/09)
   The GTU have agreed to provide training for the conducting of a
   viva voce examination for research students prior to their
   examinations if Student Progress provided them with the students’
   contact details.  
   
   Action: PS

f. Using previous students essays as feedback (M09/11)
   A revised version of the proposal is outstanding.  
   Action: AR

g. Regulation 2.1(i) (M09/12)
   On 9 January 2009, the Committee considered a proposal from the
   Chair, that this Regulation be extended to those who have been full-
   time members of academic staff. The Committee approved the
   proposal and decided that it applied to staff who had been
   employed at the University within five years of the date of
   submission of their soft bound thesis. The Committee noted that
   regulation 2.1(i) is no longer fit for purpose in that it does not
   include all those employed by the University who may register for
   a higher degree.  A reworded version of the regulation was
   considered and approved.

   Members considered the proposal that an additional internal
   member of staff should be present at research students’ oral
   examinations when either/both internal and external examiners
   were inexperienced. They would act as a chair/moderator.  The
   Chair agreed to raise the issue with BiGS.  
   Action: DE

h. Illegible Examinations Scripts (M09/15, 06/72)
   The Committee noted that illegible examination scripts are
   becoming an increasing problem.  In June 2006 the Committee
   advised a department that a student’s illegible script could be
   transcribed; the onus being on the department to resource the
   transcription.  The Committee considered a proposal that students
   with illegible scripts should incur a financial penalty for
   transcription.  It was decided that this was not appropriate because
   it is the responsibility of all students to write legibly. It was further
   decided that if three examiners are unable to read an examination
   script it would be awarded a mark of zero.
It was agreed that before making this recommendation to Teaching Committee, departments will be consulted and their views considered at the next meeting.  

**Action:** RG

It was noted that students must be informed of examiners’ expectations and that timed, formative, hand written assessments prior to the formal examination process would help identify students with hand writing problems.

**Action:** RG to update Guide if proposal approved by UTC

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**09/27**  
**Oral report from the Chair**  
The Chair reported that the Exam Board Quoracy paper had been forwarded to Senate. The agreed changes necessitate an amendment to Ordinance 2.3 and that this will be done in due course.  

**Action:** RG

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**09/28**  
**Students’ Appeals and Complaints**  
The Committee received the annual report on Students’ Appeals and Complaints. The Committee noted that 38% of undergraduate appeals came from Health Sciences students, the main reason being a failure to declare their mitigating circumstances at the appropriate time. This is a reduction from nearly half of last year’s appeals but it is still a significant proportion. The Academic Registrar reported that a meeting was held with the department in June 2008 to discuss ways in which students could be informed of the mitigating circumstances process and submit their claims when required to do so. A number of measures were agreed. The results of these changes will not impact on the number of appeals until 2009/10.

It was noted that there was a 100% increase on postgraduate appeals in the last year, from 7 to 14, but that no trends were obvious.

The Committee discussed reviewing a summary of the report rather than the report in its entirety and decided that only by looking at the full report would areas for concern be identified. It was further noted that, to date, no case taken to the OIA had been upheld.

The Committee decided to refer the issue of not submitting mitigating circumstances at the appropriate time to the Mitigating Circumstances working party.  

**Action:** RG
Misconduct Cases Involving Large Numbers of Internal Examiners

The Committee received a proposal for capping the number of internal examiners on a sub-committee investigating academic misconduct. Currently there is no upper bound on the size of the investigating sub-committee. A recent case could have led to a committee of seven people, five of whom were internal examiners, and this was considered excessive.

The Committee approved the proposal that no more than three directly involved internal examiners should attend the investigating sub-committee. Where the number of internal examiners exceeded three, those not attending the investigatory meeting should submit written evidence and be available when necessary to clarify any points.

The Committee decided that while students were informed in advance of an investigatory meeting that alleged academic misconduct was the reason for the meeting, in certain circumstances they should not be given full details of the allegations prior to the meeting as this would hinder an investigation of, for example, collusion. There are other circumstances when students are given full details in advance - for example, a marked up copy of a plagiarised piece of work, which they are then invited to explain to the investigatory committee.

Action: RG update Guide

Teaching Committee’s Review of Effectiveness

The Committee received a, shortened relevant, version of this self-evaluation document and noted the issues.

Penalties for late submission of assessments (M08/64, 08/85)

The Committee received a proposal on the standardising of penalties for the late submission of assessment. At the Committee’s November meeting it was noted that a wide range of penalties are applied across and within departments for the late submission of assessments. The Committee agreed that a consistent and equitable approach should be taken and decided to recommend to University Teaching Committee that this matter be considered as part of the modularisation process. UTC supported the Committee’s assertion that there is a need for improved consistency in this regard and noted that the enhancement of University policy in this area would need to be taken forward by the SCA.

For the following reasons the Committee approved the proposal that
all assessment which contributes to progression and an award of the University, will receive a mark of zero if it is submitted after the published deadline. It will

- ensure clarity, equity, and consistency
- act as a deterrent
- be clear to all
- be simple to apply
- be applied to those who submit their work late and do not have valid mitigating circumstances for doing so
- help students to manage their workload, apply themselves and submit their work on time
- align the consequences of non-attendance at an examination with non-submission of an open assessment.

This penalty is clear, easy to apply as it requires no calculation and will ensure most students submit their work before the allotted deadline. Penalties for other assessments are to be determined by each department, who must ensure that there is equity for students on combined programmes of study.

The Committee decided that departments should be consulted on this decision prior to a recommendation to Teaching Committee.

Action: RG

The Committee decided that a mitigating circumstances claim must be considered by more than one academic member of staff and that this principle be referred to the working party on mitigating circumstances.

Action: RG

09/32 The Role of External Examiners – results lists
The Committee received a proposal that when signing results lists, external examiners are confirming the process not the results. The proposal was approved but excluded the confirming of starred firsts. A decision on the future of this award is still awaited. This change will take place from October 2009. Action: RG, Guide to be updated

09/33 The Role of External Examiners – Commenting on draft examination papers
The Committee received and agreed a proposal that internal examiners should review comments made by external examiners in respect of draft examination papers but are not obliged to act on those comments. Any comments deemed inappropriate will be discussed with the Chair
of Board of Examiners before being filed for reference.

**Action:** RG, Guide to be updated

**09/34**  **Notes of guidance on minor corrections for research degrees (M09/09)**

The Committee received and approved a proposal on the guidance of minor corrections for research degrees from the Student Progress administrator, but decided that the examples in part (b) limited minor corrections to minor editorial changes and should not be included.

**Action:** PS

**09/35**  **E-thesis**

The Committee received a proposal concerning the e-submission of research students’ theses and dissertations. It was agreed that research students should submit for examination a softbound copy of their thesis together with a copy on a portable data storage unit, to go to each examiner. Students would submit a softbound copy of the final version of the theses for deposit in the library, and upload a copy (normally in pdf format) to the library repository.

Members sought reassurance that all on-campus computers available for students to use could convert documents to a pdf format.

*Secretary’s Note: Computing Services have confirmed that all on-campus computers available to students can convert documents to a pdf format.*