UNIVERSITY OF YORK

University Teaching Committee

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ASSESSMENT

Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on Friday 7 February 2014 at 2.00 pm in HG17, Heslington Hall

Present: Dr. Steve King, Computer Science (Chair)
Mr. John Bone, Economics
Dr. Oliver Craig, Archaeology
Prof Stevi Jackson, CWS
Dr. Sandra Pauletto, Theatre Film and Television
Dr. Philip Quinlan, Psychology
Dr. Dominic Watt, Language and Linguistic Science
Dan Whitmore, YUSU
Xiaoyin Yang, GSA

In Attendance: Jim Irving, Director: Registry Services
Cecilia Lowe, Leader: Learning Enhancement
Kathryn Lucas, Special Cases Administrator
Dr. Jennifer Wotherspoon, AR: Student Progress
Gillian Wright, Registry Services

Apologies: Dr. Geoff Cubitt, History
Kate Dodd, Academic Registrar
Peter Quinn, Director Student Support Services

13-14/46 Minutes
The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 6 December 2013.

13-14/47 Matters arising from the minutes

i. BoEs
Geoff Cubitt is working on a paper on External Examiners and Boards of Examiners, to be brought to the next meeting.

(Action : GC)

13-14/48 Chair’s Oral Report
The Chair reported the following developments:

i. Industrial Action
The UCU have now participated in two out of three planned hour long strikes, and plan a further full day of action. There has been no perceptible impact on assessment yet, but the Committee notes that further action may
potentially pose a direct threat to marking timelines. The University’s plan is focussed on minimising the impact on students.

ii. UTC review of Annual Programme Reviews
The UTC have received a summary of APR documents from departments which include several actions and issues to be considered by UTC, including, but not limited to:

a. Relaxing rules about reassessment limits
b. Revisiting algorithmic degree classifications
c. Student with lower GPAs (Award marks?) receiving higher degree classifications
d. Allowing MSc Distinctions with failed modules
e. The widening of ‘borders’ in UG degree classifications
f. Improving the format of board reports
g. The appropriate use of external examiners under NMS
h. Problems with the examinations timetable

iii. INTO Foundation College

As has been reported in the University Press, the University is negotiating the possibility of developing a partnership for a foundation college. It is not yet clear what, if any, role the SCA would be required to play.

13-14/49 Report from Students
The GSA reported that Graeme Osborn has now taken up his post as Representation and Welfare Officer, and reports an increase in student cases the GSA is handling from 3 in January 2013 to 8 in January 2014.

The Students’ Union had nothing specific to report, but noted that this was, in itself, exceptional given that the January CAP had just finished.

13-14/50 Pass Marks for Taught Postgraduate Programmes
The Committee noted that though pass marks for modules at postgraduate level were firmly set at 50, and there was an explicit requirement that students achieve 50% overall in order to progress to ISM, it was not explicit in the Guide to Assessment that a 50% average would also be required to be awarded a PGT degree.

In order to correct this, the Committee agreed to propose to UTC the following addition to the guide at the beginning of Section P4:

“In order to be awarded a Postgraduate Award, a student must achieve at least 50% in one of two ways:

- As a credit weighted mean of all first attempt taught module marks
and any ISM
- Where a student does not achieve at least 50% as the credit weighted mean of all first attempts, the credit-weighted mean of all best attempts will be used, and this mean will be capped at 50%.”

(Action: Secretary to propose to UTC)

13-14/51 Merits and Distinctions for PGTs with Failed Modules
The Committee considered a proposal to loosen the restrictions on PGT Merits and Distinctions, which are currently not possible for a student who fails any module during their postgraduate study. The Committee noted that this issue had been raised by several external examiners as well as departments. It was also noted that there were some instances where students with very high award marks were denied distinctions because of failed modules.

The Committee noted that the rule as it stood could potentially discourage students from making adventurous module choices or continuing to pursue excellence following even a marginal failure, particularly in light of how important a distinction was becoming in the award of PhD funding. It was also noted that distinctions differed from degree classifications in that they were meant to represent exceptional attainment at an already high level of learning, and that it was not unreasonable to expect a student to have met the minimum pass standard on everything at first attempt.

The Committee considered various options, including allowing a small amount of failure to be carried in either a distinction or a merit, and allowing normal reassessment and compensation opportunities for merits, but maintaining the ‘no fail’ requirement for distinctions. The Committee ultimately agreed to propose to UTC that the criteria for Merit be relaxed to allow for up to 20 credits of material failed at first attempt. No change is proposed to the Distinction criteria.

(Action: Secretary to propose to UTC)

13-14/52 QAA Quality Code Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning
The Committee considered the recently published Chapter of the UK Quality Code on Assessment and Recognition of Prior Learning to determine if any change to policy or procedure was required in order to be compliant, as required, by August 2014.

The Committee agreed that the University was already compliant with the
“Expectation” laid out by the Chapter, and that all of the indicators of good practice were being met. In order to make compliance more transparent, however, three actions were proposed:

i.  A guide to the powers and processes of the Boards of Examiners should be produced with explicit reference to:
   - The relative powers/ responsibilities of module/process boards and final boards (once the definitions of these powers have been determined by UTC in light of modularisation)
   - Recording the views of those unable to attend board meetings
   - How to deal with inquoracy
   - What can and can’t be dealt with by Chair’s action, and how to record Chair’s action decisions
   - Declaring and dealing with conflicts of interest
   (Action: JW)

ii. An explicit policy on programme transfers needs to be composed and approved to ensure parity and to formalise current practice.
   (Action: JW and KL)

iii. Regular review of the APL policy needs to be formally included in the University’s Committee business, and ownership of the policy needs to be clarified.
   (Action: UTC)

13-14/53 Proposal from the History Department to Relax the Moderation Guidelines
The Committee considered a proposal from the Department of History that the definition of ‘sampling’ in Appendix D of the Guide to Assessment be relaxed in light of the high number of papers receiving first class grades in large cohorts of students (resulting in a very high number of scripts that need moderation under these guidelines).

The Committee agreed to redefine a ‘sample’ for the purposes of moderation as follows:
“A sample must include at least 10 pieces of assessments, including:

• at least one exemplar of each class for which marks are given (nearest to the midpoint of the mark range for the class)
• all borderline candidates
• all failed candidates
• any individual candidates to whom the first marker has drawn particular attention”

13-14/54 University Receipt of Internal Examiner Lists

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The Committee noted that there is currently a requirement that all departments submit a list of all ‘internal examiners’ in order to satisfy the Guide to Assessment Section 17.3 and potentially Ordinance 6.4. These lists are generated by Human Resources, and have been known to exclude long serving members of academic staff, and to include administrative staff. The length of the lists also has the effect of masking exceptional individuals (those who are not members of teaching or academic staff on permanent or fixed term contracts), potentially resulting in inappropriate individuals being approved as examiners.

The Committee agreed in principle that lists would be more effective if they only included individuals who did not meet the standard criteria of ‘members of teaching or academic staff on permanent or fixed term contracts’, and also required departments to indicate who would be taking responsibility for ensuring the quality and appropriateness of their marking. The Chair and the Leader of Learning Enhancement agreed to attempt to draft an appropriate alternative to the current requirements to be brought to a future meeting.

(Action: SK and CL)

13-14/55 Request to Reconsider Conversion Tables for Study Abroad in Australia
The Committee considered a proposal from the Department of Politics to change the conversion tables for Politics for Australia. The Committee determined that, notwithstanding the apparently more generous conversion being used by Glasgow, there was no evidence that York’s conversion was out of line with the sector average.

The Committee consequently rejected the request, but agreed to ask that a brief explanation for the origins of the tables be included with each, in order to make it clear that they are based on the tables being used by competitor institutions, and have not been arbitrarily set.

13-14/56 Assessment Results and Feedback Release in E:Vision
The Committee received a report from the Student Systems Team, who have been investigating the E:vision failures during Week 10 of the Summer Term of 2012-13, when all UG results were meant to be released. The Committee noted that the load on the system was in large part caused by a feature that had been piloted in the Department of Politics to require students to view their feedback in order to receive their marks on assignments.

The Committee noted that though this forced engagement with feedback was
good practice, and was to be encouraged where possible, it could not be allowed to interfere with the release of progression and award results, and that consequently the functionality would need to be turned off during period of high demand on the system (including weeks 9-10 of Summer Term).

The Committee noted that the use of static data was being investigated as an alternative to live data, and encouraged the Systems Development Team to continue to seek best-practice solutions for feedback which did not pose a threat to systems integrity.

13-14/57  Date of the next meeting
The Committee noted the date of the next meeting as Friday 25 April 2014 at 2.00 pm in Room HG17- Dawson Room, Heslington Hall.