Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on Friday 7 October 2011 at 2.15 pm in HG17- Dawson Room, Heslington Hall

Present: Dr. Linda Perriton (Chair), Management 
Dr. Geoff Cubitt, History 
Prof. Victoria Gould, Mathematics 
Dr. David Halliday, Electronics 
Dr. Adrian Lee, Centre for Lifelong Learning 
Dr. Peter O’Brien, Chemistry 
Dr. Jim Watt, English 
Beatrice Akua-Sakyiwah, GSA Research Student Representative 
Graeme Osborne, YUSU Representative 

In Attendance: Dr. Steve King, Computer Science (incoming chair) 
Rosemary Royds, Directory, Registry Services 
Dr. Jennifer Winter, Assistant Registrar: Student Progress 

Apologies: Kate Dodd, Academic Registrar 
Karin Dianconu, GSA Taught Student Representative 

CATEGORY I BUSINESS

11-12/1 The committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 10 June 2011

11-12/2 Matters arising from the minutes

i. M10-11/51 The use of plagiarism detection software packages (SafeAssign® and Turnitin®)

The committee noted that UTC and Senate had approved the recommendation for the amendments to the University Regulations, which have been put in place for the 2011-2012 publication of the Ordinances and Regulations.

ii. M10-11/40/46b Templates for the classification of combined degrees
The committee received an update from Rosemary Royds and Geoff Cubitt on the outcome of meetings with Philosophy.

RR and GC visited the department of philosophy who agreed to progress the situation with templates from shared programmes by using existing templates to populate the remainder of their templates. The templates have now been populated and are being sent to philosophy for approval. The committee requested that the templates come back to SCA for approval.

iii. M10-11/81  Review of the policy on the late submission of assessments

The committee noted that VG contacted Dr Lisa O'Malley (Social Policy and Social Work). After some discussion Dr O'Malley was convinced that penalties attached to pieces of work that formed only a part of a module assessment were no more severe than those attached to pieces of work forming the whole of the assessment.

11-12/3  Chair’s Oral Report

The committee received an oral report from the Chair:

The committee noted that the chair had made presentations on the work of the SCA at the induction of new external examiners, new CBoS and PGCAP. The central message was that the SCA are here to advise on and enable the implementation of university regulations.

Student’s Report

Both Graeme Osborne and Beatrice Akua-Sakyiwah reported that they are getting to terms with their new roles well, and that they are excited by the upcoming work of the SCA. No specific issues were raised.

11-12/4  Terms of Reference

The committee reviewed the terms of reference for the committee and agreed to recommend the following changes to UTC:

a) Change from 6 members to 7
b) Updated membership list
c) Removal of Secretary, Special Cases Committee & Project Leader, Learning Enhancement Team
d) Truncation of reporting structure: “The standing committee on assessment is a sub-committee of University Teaching Committee, but also reports directly to Senate on students’ achievement of University Awards”. (Remove: and makes recommendation to Planning and Policy & Resources Committees concerning levels of remuneration for External Examiners as this is now included in the Exams Office budget).

e) ToR 1: Remove “(subject to approval of teaching committee)” as this is inherent in sub-committee status

f) ToR 8: Clarify SCA role in relation to ‘sit as if for the first time’ for Category 1 students

g) ToR 9: Remove “through Teaching Committee”, as the SCA reports the results of examinations directly to Senate. The reporting of distribution of degree results continues to be directed to senate through teaching committee.

11-12/5       Timeline

The committee approved the proposed timeline of routine Committee business scheduled for each meeting throughout the year subject to the following revisions:

a) Removal of ‘Review completed templates for the classification of combined degrees’ which the committee felt that it had completed in the 2010-2011 year

b) Change of date of November meeting to November 11 rather than the 19th which was listed in error

The committee agreed to consider adding other items of business throughout the year, potentially including:

c) the receipt of a report from the Academic Misconduct Working Party

d) the receipt of a report from the Review of Special Arrangements in Examinations.

e) the development of a policy on e-assessment

f) the development of a policy on peer-assessment and groupwork

11-12/6       Committee Priorities in 2011/12

The committee approved the Committee’s proposed annual priorities for 2011-12 subject to the modification of the priority on e-assessment to include only summative assessment.

11-12/7       Academic Misconduct Annual Report 2011/12

The committee received an annual report on undergraduate and taught postgraduate cases of academic misconduct, and noted the following:
a) The lack of drop in numbers since 2008  
b) The potentially significant difference in the number of reports from various departments

GO questioned the numbers of students who had been accompanied by the SU to hearing, as the YUSU Education and Welfare Support Officer reports having attended as many as 15 academic misconduct hearings. JW clarified that the statistics were based on departmental case summaries and that accompaniment may have been underreported.

The committee notes that the academic integrity tutorial will be available in mandarin from beginning of term. The secretary is to liaise with admissions to inform VLE module coordinators that the tutorial is available in mandarin.

(Action JW)

The committee expressed some concern about increased numbers in some departments, but noted that this might be the result of better reporting rather than a higher incidence of academic misconduct. The committee also notes that numbers are too low to provide evidence of meaningful trends within individual departments.

The committee requested more information in future annual academic misconduct reports, particularly as relates to cases where penalties were imposed. Whilst maintaining the anonymity of the report, the committee requests that the report include the penalty applied in each case. It was agreed that this information would be included for the 2011-2012 report.

(Action JW)

The committee further noted the ongoing work of the Academic Misconduct Working Party, and acknowledged that despite a concerted effort as evidenced by the academic integrity module and increased pedagogical use of Turnitin, academic misconduct was proving a stubborn foe.

11-12/8 Review of undergraduate External Examiners reports for 2010/11
The committee received a review of undergraduate External Examiners reports for 2010/11 and noted the following trends:

a) Lack of External Examiner contact with students
Some external examiners reported that interaction with students was significantly diminished with the elimination of vivas for borderline students on taught programmes. The SCA notes that some departments have implemented specific meetings between students and external examiners during the time that had formerly been made available for vivas and anecdotal evidence suggested this had resulted in external examiners having a better sense of the overall programme. Similarly, some external examiners note a diminishment of the role and responsibilities of the external examiner under the new modular scheme. The committee agrees that these points would be useful to highlight to UTC. The committee recommends that UTC consider whether extending the role of the external examiner to include more contact with students would be of value to the institution.

b) **Lack of marks very high or very low on the mark-scale**

The committee notes the continued concern on the part of some external examiners that there remains hesitancy on the part of some academics to award very high or very low marks. The committee further notes that this is a sector-wide problem, and that the risk of grade inflation caused by an unwillingness to use the bottom of the scale (mentioned by external examiners in 4 departments) was an equal problem to the lack of clarity as to what standard of work constituted a mark at the very top of the scale.

The committee noted the importance of feedback processes in the upper ranges: student who achieve marks in the 65-75 range needed advice on how to improve rather than just receiving praise for their achievement. If feedback was improved for good work then it would, it was hoped, also focus the examiner’s mind on articulating what was required to access marks in the 75-100 range. The committee agreed to draw the issue to the attention of the Academic Support Office and the Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.

(Action: JW)

c) **‘Draconian’ Late Penalties**

The committee notes the repeated concern about the penalties imposed for late work, but nonetheless maintains its position that the consistent application of penalties is the only way to ensure fairness to all students. This is particularly important to ensure fairness to the overwhelming majority of students whose work is not late. The committee does note that in order to ensure fairness, penalties must be applied with equal stringency in all departments.

d) **Other Issues raised in a smaller number of examiners reports**
i. Issue of intellectual stretch

The committee noted with some concern the external examiners comments that assessment seemed to provide a lack of intellectual stretch of some exam questions in some departments. The committee agreed that this should be looked at by the Academic Support Office in conjunction with the departments involved.

(Action: JW)

ii. Clarifying the role of the External Examiner to Taught Students

Student representatives suggested that some students who were having direct contact with external examiners during performance and presentation-related assessments did not understand the role of the external examiner, and that pressure on them during the assessment was consequently increased. The committee agreed to remind relevant departments, particularly Music and Theatre, Film, and Television, of the need to clarify the role of the external to students who are going to have direct contact with them.

(Action: JW)

iii. Discrepancies between module averages in a single department

The committee noted with concern the significantly lower module averages in the microeconomics and macroeconomics exam compared to other modules on the same programme for the same cohort. This was raised by an external examiner on a joint programme run out of the Environment department. These modules were seen to be substantially lowering student averages for joint students compared to their single-subject peers in the Environment department. It was agreed that this report, in particular, should be brought to the attention of the PVC for teaching and learning.

(Action: JW)

11-12/9 Proposal from the Education Department on Resits for Category II Masters students

The committee considered a proposal from the Education Department on the procedure for resits of closed examinations for Category II MA students who fail the taught component of their course.

The committee agreed that, in principle, summative closed exams run by departments outside of the centrally-run exam venues and times should be avoided wherever possible. Given the preference for centrally-run examinations, it was agreed that week 10 of summer term should be offered as a centrally timetabled
postgraduate resit week. Departments could also request examination slots in Summer Week 5-7, and 8-9 (if they become available at a later date) for postgraduate resit opportunities.

The committee notes that this is much earlier than the traditional resit week, but that students with resits were spending a large amount of time preparing for dissertations that, in the event that they failed the resit, the dissertation would never be submitted. This was felt to be a significant disadvantage to students.

It should be noted that the minimum gap between the notification of failure on an assessment and the resit of the same assessment must be at least five weeks. This resit period must not violate that existing standard. The exams office will advertise departments the availability of Week 10 for this purpose and encourage them to use it for resits.

The committee approves the education proposal.

(Action: JW)

11-12/10 Progression Requirements for PhD Students

The committee considered a proposal that the ‘confirmation of registration’ should be formally defined as a progression requirement for PhD students. The committee noted that though regulation 2.6a states that all PhD students must meet with any progression requirements, the code of practice on research degrees does not define ‘confirmation of registration’ as a progression requirement.

The committee recognises that there is a substantial difference between what is usually referred to as ‘the upgrade’ and other forms of assessment, and that defining success at this level could vary substantially between disciplines. However, it was agreed that if the confirmation is to be defined as a progression point (an examination, failure at which will result in termination of the degree with or without potential to transfer to another programme), it was important that students understand the nature of the contract with the university and that success criteria be clearly defined from the outset.

The committee requested a paper be brought to the next meeting which will outline a proposal to address the following issues:

a) The role of external examiners in the confirmation of registration process
b) The availability, and any relevant time restrictions, of resit opportunities for failed attempts at confirmation
c) The audio recording of confirmation meetings for use at potential appeals
d) The timing required in notifying students of the definition of success at confirmation

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e) Whether success will be defined centrally or within departments
f) The definition of a ‘substantial’ piece of written work
g) The availability of appeals to students who are unsuccessful
h) The role in research training (if any) in defining success

(Action: JW)

CATEGORY II BUSINESS

There was no category II business

11-12/11 Date of the next meeting

The committee noted the date of the next meeting as Friday 11 November 2011 at 2.15 pm in Room HG17- The Dawson Room, Heslington Hall.

jw/jw