University Teaching Committee

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ASSESSMENT

Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on Friday 5 February 2016 at 2.00pm in HG17, Heslington Hall.

1. Attendance and apologies for absence:

Present: Dr. Steve King, Computer Science (Chair)
Dr. Philip Quinlan, Psychology
Prof. Stevi Jackson, Women’s Studies
Dr. Dominic Watt, Language and Linguistic Science
Dr. Keith Allen, Philosophy
Dr. Patrick Gallimore, York Law School
Dr. Louise Jones, Biology
Thomas Ron, YUSU
Rasha Ibrahim, GSA

In Attendance: Jim Irving, Director: Registry Services
Dr. Jennifer Wotherspoon, Ass. Registrar: Student Progress
Cecilia Lowe, Head of Learning Enhancement
Kathryn Lucas, Special Cases Administrator
Stephen Gow, Academic Integrity Coordinator (minutes)

Apologies: Pete Quinn, Director: Student Support Services
Kate Dodd, Academic Registrar
Ms. Gillian Wright, Assessment Manager
Mr. John Bone, Economics
Tom Stoneham, YGRS

The chair reported that he had received a note from Mr John Bone, Economics, saying that he was sadly unable to continue as a member of the committee, because he had taken on a number of additional departmental duties. The chair thanked Mr Bone for his valuable service as a member of SCA over several years, particularly his recent work on the revision of the Mitigating Circumstances Policy.

15-16/44 Minutes
The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 4 December 2015.

15-16/45 Matters Arising
i. 15-16/15: Review of Mitigating Circumstances
A simplified draft of the guidance has been circulated.

ii. 15-16/19: Summary of UG External Examiners Reports
The action to reiterate both strands of the external examiner’s role – to interact with the department and also to provide meaningful report of external oversight for the University – on the pro forma and reissue to external examiners was carried forward.

(ACTION: JW)

The action on re-writing the External Examiner section of the Guide to Assessment was carried forward.  

(ACTION: SK)

iii. 15-16/20 Consideration of Compensation and Condonement for Finalist Students
This is now an issue affecting progression in addition to awards. The matter has been raised with John Robinson who has suggested a need to make changes based upon data analysis. Discussions are ongoing with Tribal to establish if they can assist with a data modelling exercise.

(ACTION: JI)

iv. 15-16/23 Required Formatives
The action to define the principles which might inform future discussion on proposals for Required Formatives was carried forward.

(ACTION: SK)

v. 15-16/34 Paper submission policy
The action to produce a proposal summarising policy regarding paper submissions for open assignments was carried forward.

(ACTION: TR)

vi. 15-16/36 Changes to the Policy on Mitigating Circumstances
Special Cases Committee considered the changes to the policy on mitigating circumstances. A further draft is currently out for consultation and will be sent to UTC before going forward for approval to Senate in July. The Committee will consider the amended draft via email consultation. The major change in ethos in the new policy is the shift from circumstances which prevent students from doing their best work to considering only exceptional circumstances (those which go beyond the normal ups and downs of life).

vii. 15-16/37 Summary of UG and PGT Academic Misconduct Cases from 2014/5
The action for the Chair to meet with Management to identify the steps they are taking to tackle the issues was carried forward, with a meeting scheduled w/c 8 February.

(ACTION: SK)

A need for clarification of the term “probationary” was acknowledged. Consultation with departments on this matter will take place. It was proposed that departments should be required to opt-out rather than opt-in.

(ACTION: SK/JW)
The action to circulate a revised report containing the earlier proposed changes was carried forward.

(ACTION: JW)

viii. 15-16/38 Appointing External Examiners for Research Degrees
The Chair agreed to follow up with the Dean of YRGS on whether the Guidance on appointing External Examiners had been circulated.

(ACTION: SK)

15-16/46 Chair’s oral report
The Chair reported that the proposed assessment and progression rules for IPC had been approved by UTC.

15-16/47 Reports from Students
There was nothing to report from the Students’ Union.

The Graduate Students Association reported that, following discussion with Professor Stoneham, a check box has been added to the External Examiner nomination form to indicate that the student had been consulted about possible conflicts of interest.

15-16/48 Progression Policy for Research Students
The Committee considered a policy put forward by the York Graduate Research School Board. The main proposed benefits would be improved quality assurance of research degrees, removal of the existing conflict of interest of the research supervisor making the progression decision, and an opportunity to give research students an earlier indicator of their progress with the chance to address any issues.

It was unclear whether this policy had already been approved by Senate. It was noted that there were a number of versions of the policy in circulation, making it difficult to keep track of changes and that some form of version control would be useful.

A number of concerns regarding the implications of the progression policy was raised as follows:

- The impact on small research centres and the potential strain on relationships with their parent department.
- Problems relating to differing start points for students.
- Interference with data collection for researchers, given that the length of time students spend in the field is important and already limited. It was suggested that this should be discussed with RSAT.

(ACTION: SJ)

- Concerns that the progression panels may have an impact on who can be chosen as an internal examiner if they have evaluated the work previously, and whether specialist knowledge on the topic will be required.
- Differences between departmental application of the policy. It was agreed there must be Faculty level discussions with YGRSB as to how the policy will be
implemented across departments. There also needs to be consideration given for EngD students.

• Concerns that students who are already struggling will be delayed further if they have to resubmit documents to the progression panel.

Members felt that clarification would be helpful regarding how many people would make up these panels; what the procedure would be for extraordinary or unexpected academic circumstances, given that no such provision currently exists within the Mitigating Circumstances policy for research students; requests for extensions; and the implementation plan, particularly whether this will be implemented for students starting in 2016/17. These comments and issues needed to be passed to RSAT/YGRS Board.  

(ACTION JW)

15-16/49    Extensions as a Reasonable Adjustment for Students with Disabilities

The Committee approved in principle a proposal to allow extensions as a reasonable adjustment for students with disabilities. The intention was to clarify the distinction between such extensions and those made under the Mitigating Circumstances Policy. The proposal was that extensions as adjustments for students with disabilities should be removed from the Mitigating Circumstances policy and for Chairs of Boards of Examiners to approve such extensions instead, although it was acknowledged this may be inappropriate for some programmes. It was emphasised that this should not be considered a “blank cheque” for students take or leave at will and it was essential that any such extensions are rigorously recorded.

Concerns were raised over Disability Officers potentially being placed in the situation of making medical judgements, about students being the judge of the time they need for extensions and of departments applying the policy inconsistently with the particular inherent impact on joint honours students. The Students’ Union was broadly supportive of the policy, notwithstanding the latter caveat. It was suggested that an SSP might be able to put a limit on the number of extensions allowed.

Since such adjustments were already appearing in SSPs, it was agreed that that change should be made immediately. However, some work to clarify the circumstances in which extensions can be granted was required.

(ACTION JW)

15-16/50    Summary of Paper Queries in the January CAP

The Committee considered a report of 67 paper queries arising from closed assessments in the January CAP. The thoroughness of the reporting was commended.

Given the impact that problems with assessments can have on student satisfaction and the NSS, the following recommendations were made:

• Change future reporting to record the overall number of exams affected rather than the number of individual incidents
• The senior invigilator to ask the paper setter whether to inform other venues of the issue, taking into account the possibility that other venues may have students who have been granted extra time
• A follow-up with departments to take place to raise any issues with the set-up of the venue
• An evening contact number to be made available for paper setters, as evening papers comprised the majority of cases
• Sharing good practice across departments for checking papers.

It was noted that an open assessment module was included in the report. Module codes will be checked for accuracy.

(Action: JW)

15-16/51 Wording for External Examiners Approval Emails
The Committee approved the proposal for a standard wording for External Examiners to give result list approvals for taught programmes by email. It was suggested that use of a table should be avoided in order to reduce the likelihood of formatting problems across email exchanges.

15-16/52 Themes emerging from the External Examiners Reports on UG programmes
Following initial discussion at the October 2015 meeting, two issues arising from UG EE reports were considered.
Role and Process for Exam Boards: It was acknowledged that the section of the Guide to Assessment which covers Examiners for Taught Programmes needs to be rewritten and that the structure of the exam board needs to be reviewed to reflect the agreed changes in Exam Board meetings. There also needs to be clarity about when calculations of stage averages can be made and when the External Examiner can see them. This requires further consideration in order to ensure that the right information is available at the right time for the External Examiners and that they are provided with access to the right reports. [See action under 15-16/45 (i)]

Exam timetable: Serious concern was expressed about the January assessment period, with too many exams in a short period of time. There is a very real possibility that the system will break in the near future. It was explained that the problem isn’t the number of rooms but the efficiency of room sizes, which also carries a cost implication. Registry Services are in the process of trying to engage a third party to evaluate this problem and produce recommendations. The timetabling issue will be raised with the PVC for Learning, Teaching & Students.

(Action: SK)

6-week feedback rule: It was noted that the issue of the six week turnaround for marking and feedback had been absorbed into the work of the Student Partnership Working Group.
15-16/53  **Script Access session principles**
The Committee considered the principles in the Guide to Assessment (11.4.1) on script access sessions, and considered particularly the ban on photography. A number of concerns were raised regarding the question of students being allowed to makes digital copies of their scripts:

- Problem of mixed paper viewing sessions (i.e. secure and non-secure papers).
- Problem of students publishing papers and looking for a second opinion or comparing answers.
- The comments of the examiner are the intellectual property of the examiner, not the student.

As an alternative way of making these sessions more helpful to students, the committee considered the idea of students being allowed to make notes about their scripts in a coloured pen. If allowed, then exams themselves would need to be restricted to black or blue ink and an amendment made to the Guide to Assessment accordingly. A revised proposal (for 2016-7 exams) would be brought to a future meeting.

(ACTION SK)

15-16/54  **Grade Conversions for Institutions in the Netherlands**
An error in the grade conversion tables for students studying at institutions in the Netherlands had been highlighted by the Centre for Global Programmes. The Committee agreed to immediate implementation of a corrected table to address the problem in order to avoid disadvantaging students studying abroad in 2015-6, with further amendment for 2016/17.

15-16/55  **Date of the next meeting**
The Committee noted the date of the next meeting as Friday **15 April 2016** at 2.00pm in Room HG17, Heslington Hall.
Reserved Business

*15-16/56  Reserved Minutes
The Committee approved the reserved minutes of the meeting held on 4 December 2015.

*15-16/57  Special examination arrangements
The Committee received recommendations for special examination arrangements approved on behalf of the Committee since its last meeting.

*15-16/58  Appointment of external examiners
The Committee received notification of appointment of external examiners approved on behalf of the Committee since its last meeting.

*15-16/59  Examiners reports and result lists
The Committee received notification of recommendations for the award of degrees approved on behalf of the Committee since its last meeting.