University Teaching Committee

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ASSESSMENT

Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on Friday 25 September 2015 at 2.00 pm in HG17, Heslington Hall

Present: Dr. Steve King, Computer Science (Chair)  
Mr. John Bone, Economics  
Dr. Philip Quinlan, Psychology  
Dr. Keith Allen, Philosophy  
Dr. Louise Jones, Biology  
Prof Tom Stoneham, York Graduate Research School  
Dr. Dominic Watt, Language & Linguistics  
Mr Patrick Gallimore, York Law School  
Thomas Ron, YUSU  
Rasha Saleh El-Din, GSA

In Attendance: Jim Irving, Director: Registry Services  
Pete Quinn, Director: Student Support Services  
Dr. Jennifer Wotherspoon, Ass. Registrar: Student Progress  
Cecilia Lowe, Head of Learning Enhancement

Apologies: Kathryn Lucas, Special Cases Administrator  
Ms. Gillian Wright, Assessment Manager

15-16/1 Minutes  
The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 15 May 2015.

15-16/2 Matters arising from the minutes

i. 14-15/83 Review of Mitigating Circumstances  
A draft revision of the Mitigating Circumstances guidance was tabled. It was hoped that the guidance could be published now on the web, with the intention to revise the Mitigating Circumstances for 2016-17.

The experience of Mitigating Circumstances committees is that they are overwhelmed, with a not inconsiderable number of cases that should not be presented. Evidence from employers suggests that York
graduates are perceived as less resilient than their peers. There are additional concerns that the Open Door Team is not being used effectively because of the structure of the MC system.

The stated aim has been to draft a system that is tougher than currently, but which is more sympathetic in the appropriate cases. To effect this will require a cultural change amongst staff, which may prove a challenge, and staff education will be needed to support this. The desired culture will be one which accepts that these kinds of circumstances need to be exceptional. A move to replace the terminology of mitigation with “exceptional circumstances” was suggested to reflect this.

It was queried whether exam stress should be a mitigating circumstance in itself. Contrary to the viewpoint of some departments, the Committee confirmed the view that exam stress does not constitute sufficient grounds to be a mitigating circumstance.

The question was raised of whether students have been consulted, particularly disabled students. It was confirmed that students with disabilities should not be using MCs any more than anyone else since by doing so, they are drawn away from the support services they should otherwise have used. This includes students with long term mental health problems, who should be using the ODT and Disability Services rather than the MC system, except where there is an acute episode.

It was reiterated that retrospective reported evidence is not evidence at all. Online consultations are now available from Unity Health, which should help students to get contemporaneous evidence of an issue. Letters from professionals should be considered as an indication of impact, not as the only information in making a decision.

A broader question was raised relating to extension requests for research students, where they have encountered problems in the middle of their degree. As a general rule, the intention is to try to drive down the number of extension requests. It was acknowledged that although the MC policy doesn't apply to research students, it is used as a model.

It was suggested that a sense of direction should be sought and the guidance document revisited at October’s meeting. It was important that a sensible template is developed for the doctors to complete.
15-16/3 Chair’s Oral Report
The Chair reported the following developments:

i. Compensation, Condonation & Reassessment Review
A review has taken place of Russell Group policies on compensation, condonation and reassessment (CCR). It is intended that a paper will be circulated by email by 9 October and put before UTC on 12 November.
(Action: JW/SK)

ii. International Pathway College
Assessment rules for IPC programmes will be discussed at October’s meeting.

iii. Grade Point Averages
In May 2015, the HEA released a report on the 2013-4 GPA pilot project. The major recommendation was that HEIs should start to implement a dual scheme of GPAs alongside traditional degree classifications. There has been no recent action on this but it is possible that it will be picked up in due course.
(Action: SK to circulate link to HEA report)

iv. Reorganisation of Student & Academic Services
As part of the restructure of S&AS, Jen Wotherspoon will step down as secretary of SCA in spring 2016 but will remain in attendance. Secretarial functions will be taken over by ASO.

15-16/4 Report from Students
There was nothing to report from the Graduate Students Association.

The Students’ Union reported that students are interested in CCR and feel students should be consulted on the plan. The aims for the year are to see an improvement in assessment and feedback scores. It was felt that students should be better informed of what is expected of them in assessments. Exam paper errors and the availability of support from academics during the resit period are of interest, while the difficulties experienced in contacting paper setters are a concern.

15-16/5 Terms of Reference
The Committee agreed to recommend the Terms of Reference to University Teaching Committee with the following changes:

- The reference to “including higher doctorates” to be amended,
clarifying the exact remit of SCA.

- New academic members to include Dr Keith Allen, Dr Louise Jones and Mr Patrick Gallimore; Dr Dominic Watt’s membership to continue for another year and Mr John Bone’s for a further three years
- The Academic Registrar and Director of Registry Services to attend alternately
- When making recommendations to UTC, the Graduate Research School Board should be included – ToR 1, 2, 4, 11, 12, 14
- Reference should be made to “Faculties” in place of academic subject clusters.

It was noted that the Committee has no budget and therefore does not have the capacity to commission significant projects.

15-16/6 Annual Timeline
The Committee agreed to the proposed timeline with minor alterations:

- An annual review of closed exam paper errors to be added to September
- The deadline for changes to the Guide to Assessment to be set in May (Action: JW)

15-16/7 Annual Priorities
The Committee approved the proposed list of priorities with the addition of the aforementioned review of exam paper errors.

The items for work in the coming year are as follows:

- e-assignment project (continued from 2014-15)
- Review of the mitigating circumstances policy (continued from 2014-15)
- Group work and peer marking (continued from 2014-15)
- Student engagement and attendance policies (continued from 2014-15)
- Review of the new Academic Misconduct policy
- Review of closed exam paper ‘errors’
- Review of the 6-week rule: benchmarking and possible revision
- Consideration of the impact on students of Ramadan falling during the summer Common Assessment Period
- Consideration of the impact of changes to the Disabled Students’ Allowance; Pete Quinn and Steve King are members of a DSA working group
- Required formative work
- Support during the resit period and defining what is a reasonable
• Review of the re-structure of exam boards, as implemented in 2014-5

15-16/8  Taught Postgraduate Resit Week
The Committee approved a proposal from the Exams Office to case to support a formal PG Resit Week in week 10 of Summer Term. This was because it was only used by one department, and used significant resources in a very busy period.

15-16/9  Exam paper errors
The Committee considered a report listing the closed exam paper ‘errors’ in 2014/5. In this context, an ‘error’ meant an issue found during an exam (usually raised by students), where the outcome was that it was deemed necessary to circulate extra information (correction/clarification) to all students taking the exam.

The Committee noted that, although the report contained some repetition, the underlying number of different errors was unacceptably high. The exam setting process needed to be considered in order to identify what improvements can be made. It was suggested that as numeric-based exams are the source of many queries, there should be additional checking in those subjects. It was further suggested that, for the 2015/6 report, the number of papers set in each subject should be recorded so that a sense of scale can be gained.

It was queried whether it was appropriate for this topic to be discussed under unreserved business, and it was agreed to redact the paper setter column.

15-16/10  Date of the next meeting
The Committee noted the date of the next meeting as Friday 30 October 2015 at 2.00 pm in Room HG19, Heslington Hall.
Reserved Business

*15-16/11  Reserved Minutes
The Committee approved the reserved minutes of the meeting held on 15 May 2015.

*15-16/12  Special examination arrangements
The Committee received recommendations for special examination arrangements approved on behalf of the Committee since its last meeting.

*15-16/13  Appointment of external examiners
The Committee received notification of appointment of external examiners approved on behalf of the Committee since its last meeting.