

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

Paper for consideration by Teaching Committee at its meeting on 27 June 2011

Reviews of supervision and combined degrees: Update on Progress

1. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

During 2009-10 UTC working groups reviewed University policy on undergraduate student supervision and combined degrees. Both areas had variable student satisfaction, indicating a need for action to achieve the Learning and Teaching Strategy's ambition of 'a consistent culture of quality'. The two reviews were co-ordinated to recognise overlapping themes. The recommendations were approved by the UTC and Senate for full implementation in 2011/12.

Academic departments were asked to consider the new policies and prepare, as appropriate, during the current academic year for their implementation from 2011-12.

The following paper summarises themes arising from the departmental policies that have been submitted as requested. This summary will be communicated to departments by the Academic Support Office as soon as possible, together with specific comments/guidance on individual plans as appropriate.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

UTC members are asked to note the paper.

DATE 9 June 2011

AUTHOR'S NAME Nigel Dandy, Academic Support Office

Report contents & attachments: cover sheet (1 side), report (19 sides)

Reviews of supervision and combined degrees: Update on Progress

Background

During 2009-10 UTC working groups reviewed University policy on undergraduate student supervision and combined degrees. Both areas had variable student satisfaction, indicating a need for action to achieve the Learning and Teaching Strategy's ambition of 'a consistent culture of quality'. The two reviews were co-ordinated to recognise overlapping themes. The recommendations were approved by the UTC and Senate for full implementation in 2011/12. The revised policy can be viewed in full at:

<http://www.york.ac.uk/media/staffhome/learningandteaching/documents/monitoring-review/ugsupervision2011-2016.pdf>

The changes are intended to improve existing practice and clarify for both students and staff the framework of procedures and the roles of support services. This includes establishing the responsibilities of supervisors and the Careers Service in relation to PDP, and improving the management of combined programmes and support for these students. In some cases the policy sets out a principle, for departments to amplify at a local level. For example, the supervisor "schedules and urges supervisees to attend at least one individual meeting per term, and in addition is available for further meetings or events as appropriate, as set out in the Department's policy".

Academic departments were asked to consider the new policies and prepare, as appropriate, during the current academic year for their implementation from 2011-12.

Departments were asked to complete a pro-forma setting out their arrangements for supervision under the revised policy. This approach was adopted because (a) it was not anticipated that the actual departmental policy statements would be available until Summer 2011, and (b) supplementary information was requested, such as on how good supervisory practice would be discussed and disseminated. This exercise would also allow UTC to ascertain whether the intentions of the new policies were being met. Departments were informed that their arrangements would be approved by UTC during Summer 2011. Some departments have felt that this approach is unduly bureaucratic.

The commentary below summarises themes that have emerged from the submitted pro-formas. As a revised approach, rather than giving formal UTC scrutiny and approval, this summary will be communicated to departments by the Academic Support Office together with specific feedback/guidance on individual plans as appropriate.

Themes arising from departmental submissions

(a) Combined degrees

The new provisions include the establishment of a single supervisor for combined degree students supported by an advisor in the partner department. Departments with combined degrees have mostly confirmed that these new arrangements have been carefully considered and practical arrangements made to ensure that students receive effective and co-ordinated guidance.

One department (Language and Linguistics) has indicated that it is not clear how the new procedure can be implemented; a second department (Sociology) still refers to the

arrangements under the previous scheme. These points will be followed up with the departments concerned.

(b) Contact time

The new policy confirmed that there should be at least one individual meeting between student and supervisor each term. Departmental submissions confirm that this requirement is being met or exceeded.

English has reduced its regular meetings from two to one per term in the light of the revised policy. Other arrangements include: two meetings in the first term and one per term thereafter (e.g. History, Mathematics); two per term (e.g. History of Art, Physics, Biology), two per term with more in the foundation and first years (Electronics); three per term (Computer Science) and 4 or 5 times per year (Environment).

Departments also confirm that students can secure additional time with their supervisor on request and/or through the staff 'office hours' scheme. The latter typically entails one (e.g. Language and Linguistics, Philosophy) or two (e.g. Archaeology, History) hours per week.

Supervisory meetings are often cited as being 10 minutes in length although some departments make no specification.

(c) Supervisor training and support

A range of approaches is presented, which suggests that there may be scope to consider good practice across the institution, perhaps at a Forum workshop. Several departments referred to Learning and Teaching Forum events as an opportunity to share experiences, and one (Chemistry) explicitly suggested that a Forum workshop dedicated to effective approaches to supervision under the new policy would be welcomed.

Examples of approaches to supervisor training and support include: a full explanation of the role for new supervisors by the Chair of the Teaching Committee (e.g. Archaeology, History); inclusion in the remit of the staff mentoring scheme (Theatre, Film and Television); the provision of staff handbooks and online guidance (e.g. the 'supervision calendar' in Physics, also used to share good practice; a VLE support page in Sociology). One department (Language and Linguistics) states that reference to training support is voluntary.

A number of departments state that ongoing reflection on the effectiveness of supervision is included in Peer Support for Teaching.

The new policy aimed to clarify supervisors' responsibilities regarding pastoral support. One department (Economics) states that further guidance on this would be welcomed and calls for greater capacity in central services to advise students on referral.

(d) Responsibilities of the supervisee

The new policy established a clear statement of the responsibilities of supervisees as well as supervisors. Many of the submissions were written from the supervisor's perspective. Some encouragement may be needed to ensure that student handbooks present both dimensions explicitly.

(e) Change of supervisor

Departmental responses confirmed that arrangements are in place for students to request a change of supervisor. More explicit reference could be given to the availability of an alternate contact/co-ordinator for this process in the event that the member of staff is the current supervisor of the student in question.

(f) Careers / PDP support

This received comparatively little attention in the submissions, possibly reflecting the emerging developments of an online employability tutorial and Personal Employability Plans. It will be important to evaluate this aspect as part of the roll-out of these new initiatives. Most submissions describe the inclusion of PDP in supervisory arrangements although in one department (SPSW) it is described as voluntary. Some instances of already well-developed PDP/Careers support were presented, however, such as Chemistry's series of workshops throughout the degree programme, and the structured sequence of student/supervisor discussions in Electronics.

(g) YUSU Supervisor of the Year Awards

One department (English) referred to the positive impact of the YUSU awards on the profile of supervision.

(h) Overview

The submissions confirm that a number of departments have taken the opportunity to review their approach to supervision more widely in the light of the revised University policies. One submission (English) highlighted the positive involvement of students in the development and ongoing monitoring of its supervision policies. The submitted information also confirms that the practical means of giving effect to the principles set out in the policy continue to vary across departments, as anticipated. UTC will need to monitor, through the APR, periodic reviews and other means, whether the new policy has genuinely contributed to an improved and more consistent quality of the student experience.

There are numerous examples of good practice, such as in the training and support of supervisors. Consideration will be given to scheduling a Forum workshop on this subject in 2011-12, and to other means of dissemination to departments.

Four departments did not return a pro-forma and one returned the policy statement in isolation, meaning that the supplementary information on aspects such as sharing practice is not yet available. The departments concerned are being asked to provide the information without further delay.

Nigel Dandy
Academic Support Office
June 2011