UNIVERSITY OF YORK

TEACHING COMMITTEE

Policy on Combined Degree Programmes

1 Background

1.1 In 2009, a University Teaching Committee (UTC) working group carried out a review of combined degree programmes. It considered evidence from academic staff, student feedback (YUSU and NSS), a QAA report and feedback from informal enquiries of other universities. It liaised with a UTC working group on supervision, which was operating concurrently. The working group produced a report to UTC from which this policy is derived.

1.2 The University is committed to developing opportunities for interdisciplinary study (Learning and Teaching Strategy, Theme 3). The University notes that:

- York supports a number of combined degree programmes that recruit successfully, produce good results and are generally appreciated by students; and,
- there are academic staff across the university who are committed to particular combined degree programmes and whose goodwill and expertise are invaluable.

1.3 However, the University is also aware that the nature of combined degree programmes can make them vulnerable in a number of areas:

- combined degree students and staff who teach them can feel that they have little collective identity; students can feel that their particular needs are not adequately addressed by either of their parent departments;
- Combined Board Executive Committees sometimes lack clear roles or responsibilities and some consequently rarely meet or function very effectively;
- joint supervision of combined degree students can work well, but may not provide the individual oversight that single supervision facilitates. Students experiencing difficulties may go unnoticed because neither supervisor is aware of their overall performance or circumstances. Joint supervision can also place a strain on staff resources.

2 Scope of the policy

2.1 This policy applies to all combined programmes within the University. Where programmes have dedicated administrative support and academic frameworks (as for PEP and SPS) etc.
requirements below need not apply so long as the Board of Studies adheres to the spirit of section 3.

3 Administrative arrangements for combined degree programmes

3.1 The composition and operation of Combined Boards of Studies is covered by Ordinance 1 and especially Ordinance 1.4. It is assumed that for the majority of programmes, the Combined Board of Studies does not normally meet and that matters relating to the combined degree programme are devolved to the Combined Board Executive Committee (CBEC). The CBEC provides a forum for academics committed to the combined degree to meet, to get to know one another, to discuss the intellectual vibrancy of the programmes and to better understand their respective departmental cultures.

3.2 The CBEC should normally meet at least once a term. The terms of reference of the CBEC should include a brief review of the programme, examining its effectiveness and coherence, and a review of feedback from the NSS and such other evidence relating to the students’ experience of the degree programme as is available to the CBEC or as members may feel it is appropriate to obtain. The minutes of such meetings should be passed promptly to the Board of Studies of the partner departments. Student representatives from the combined degree programmes (normally one for each year of the programme) should be invited to all unstarred business of the executive committee meetings and should be given the opportunity of raising agenda items.

3.3 It is the responsibility of the Heads of the partner departments to ensure that the CBEC is fully staffed according to Ordinance 1.4: ‘not less than four nor more than nine academic staff members of the Combined Board’. Exceptionally, where the degree combination attracts very few students, the minimum number may be varied. Members should be drawn from a pool of staff committed to the pertinent combined degree programme and will normally include Supervisors and Programme Advisors (see Section 4).

3.4 Chairs of the CBEC should normally rotate between contributing departments subject to the agreement of the respective Heads of Department so as to ensure appropriate persons are appointed and appropriate allowance given under departmental workload models (see Ordinance 1.9).

3.5 Responsibilities of the Chairs of Combined Board of Studies / CBEC:

- to ensure that, where the CBEC is responsible for the business of combined degree programmes, it meets at least once a term;
- to organise an induction meeting for each new intake of combined degree students on their programme at which staff associated with the combined degree programme are introduced and their roles explained;
- to ensure that accurate and appropriate information is provided by partner departments to combined students before arrival, at induction, and at other points through the programme. This should include updating programme specifications each year;
• to liaise with Heads of Departments and chairs of parent Boards of Studies to help improve the experience of students whose degree programmes are shared between the partner departments;

• to undertake all other duties that fall to chairs under University Ordinances and Regulations and be available to students who wish to raise serious concerns or grievances relating to the combined degree programme.

3.6 Each department should have an identified administrator or administrative assistant associated with a particular combined degree.

3.7 As of July 2013, combined programmes may, with the approval of UTC and Senate, be governed by a single department’s Board of Studies if all parties agree that their interests can be represented sufficiently. Where this is the case, the Board of Studies will be expected to adhere to the spirit of section 3 and sections 4 and 5 will still apply. The arrangements for quality assurance (e.g., annual programme review and periodic review) will need to be agreed with the Academic Support Office and UTC.

4 Supervision and support of combined degree students

4.1 Joint supervision of combined programme students can work well but can also create risks where struggling students may not be identified and can add significantly to staff workload. Combined programme students should have a single Supervisor from one department and access to a Programme Advisor from the other. Each partner department should manage the allocation of supervisors and programme advisors to ensure an even distribution where possible.

Programme Advisors

4.2 A Programme Advisor (or, in the case of larger programmes, Advisors) must be appointed in each partner department in respect of each programme. Programme Advisors will need to be appointed by their Head of Department and recompensed for their time according to the department’s workload model. Programme advisors will normally be members of the CBEC. A Programme Advisor may also be the Chair of the CBEC.

4.3 It is the responsibility of the Programme Advisor to familiarise themselves as far as possible not only with the combined degree programme and the combined degree course regulations, but also with the teaching programmes and cultures of both departments. Programme Advisors must ensure that students on the combined programme are properly informed of the degree programme and of programme regulations and that students choose appropriate modules at the appropriate times. Programme Advisors from both departments will have an introductory meeting with students on the programme at the beginning of each academic session and at other key moments in the programme, e.g. in advance of module selection.
4.4 The Programme Advisor should liaise with the Supervisor in the other department to ensure that the student receives support in a cohesive manner. With this in mind, it is important that departments maintain up-to-date lists of Programme Advisors and Supervisors and their students and that these are shared with their partner departments as appropriate. In order to allow for effective communication, departments should inform the Academic Support Office (ASO) of changes to Programme Advisors. The ASO will maintain a list of Programme Advisors on the web (https://www.york.ac.uk/staff/teaching/almanac/).

Supervisors

4.5 The University’s Policy on Undergraduate Supervision 2011-2016 outlines expectations regarding the supervision of students on all undergraduate programmes. The University’s Attendance Management Policy for Sponsored International Students lays out specific requirements for sponsored taught students. In addition to those requirements, supervisors of students on combined degree programmes should meet the following expectations.

4.6 The supervision of students on combined degree programmes should rest with a single Supervisor. So far as possible, Supervisors should be drawn from a small pool of staff with a knowledge of and commitment to a particular combined degree programme and should normally be members of the CBEC. Students on combined degree programmes should be allocated pro rata to Supervisors between the partner departments.

4.7 The Supervisor should receive tutorial reports, warning notices, copies of medical notes and any other information relating to student progress from both partner departments so that s/he can gain an overview of a student’s progress and provide advice on their performance. The Supervisor will take the opportunity to advise students on module choices at key decision points. The Supervisor may offer advice on the combined programme, but where appropriate should refer students to the Programme Advisor.

General

4.8 The role and relationships of the Chair of CBEC, Supervisor, Programme Advisor and administrative support staff for combined programmes should be made clear to students at induction and in supporting literature, e.g. in handbooks, policies and procedures and within the department’s Supervision Policy. Induction arrangements for new students with partner departments and opportunities to establish an identity for the combined programme cohort through events and communications should be made clear to students at the beginning of the year.

5 Curriculum and identity

5.1 Departments should explore and encourage opportunities for joint teaching in their curriculum design. All combined degree programmes should normally offer students:
• the opportunity to take a ‘bridge module’ designed to bring the combining disciplines into dialogue and to explore interdisciplinarity where cohort size permits;
• the opportunity to take an independent research module, such as an extended essay or research project, that combines the two disciplines.

5.2 Information presented to prospective applicants and to current students should aim to provide a clear sense of the identity of the programme. Clear statements should be provided in publications about ‘what a combined programme offers’, and clear differentiation should be made in departments’ prospectus and web pages. Departmental information for combined programme students should be customised, e.g. separate handbooks (or sections of parent departmental handbooks providing that partner departments duplicate the same information) or web pages, encouraging where possible cohort identity. All programmes must be referred to as ‘combined’ rather than ‘joint’.

5.3 Proposals for new combined programmes should detail the advantages of interdisciplinarity within the pro-forma for submission to University Teaching Committee. Modifications to combined degree programmes should give consideration to the overall impact on the programme’s approach to interdisciplinarity. Where there is shared teaching, modifications to single subject programmes should take into account the impact upon combined degree programmes and consultation should take place between the Chair of the single subject Board of Studies and the Chair of the CBEC before approaching UTC for approval.