UNIVERSITY OF YORK

University Teaching Committee

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ASSESSMENT

Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on Friday 4 December 2015 at 2.00 pm in HG19, Heslington Hall

Present: 
Dr. Steve King, Computer Science (Chair)
Dr. Philip Quinlan, Psychology
Dr. Keith Allen, Philosophy
Prof Tom Stoneham, York Graduate Research School
Dr. Dominic Watt, Language & Linguistics
Mr 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
Pete Quinn, Director: Student Support Services
Gillian Wright, Assessment Manager
Kathryn Lucas, Special Cases Administrator

Apologies: 
Kate Dodd, Academic Registrar
Prof Stevi Jackson, Women’s Studies
Mr. John Bone, Economics

15-16/31 Minutes
The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 30 October 2015, with the addition of Prof Stevi Jackson to the list of those present.

15-16/32 Matters arising from the minutes

i. 15-16/15 Review of Mitigating Circumstances
A simplified draft of the guidance was being produced for students and, when complete, this would be circulated to departments, Mitigating Circumstances Committees, supervisors, administrators, Assistant Heads of
Colleges and support services. The student guidance would be produced in cooperation with YUSU/GSA.

(ACTION: JW)

ii. 15-16/19 Summary of Undergraduate External Examiners Reports 2014/15
It was clarified that while there are a number of outstanding issues arising from the external examiners reports, which will be discussed in more detail at February’s Committee meeting, the current policy will apply throughout the remainder of 2015/16.

It was agreed that the two strands to the external examiner’s role – to interact with the department and also to provide meaningful report of external oversight for the University – should be reiterated on the pro forma issued to external examiners.

(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
The paper considered by the Committee in October was submitted to UTC in November 2015. Since the paper’s publication, the Maths and Physics departments had collated additional data comprising lists of non-graduating or late graduating students. After discussion at UTC, the study has been widened to consider progression in addition to graduation, as this is potentially a wider issue than just award rules. The Chair will work with colleagues in Registry Services to produce a revised report for SCA/UTC.

(ACTION: SK/JW)

iv. 15-16/23 Required formatives
MCL and SK had met to discuss the Maths proposals, but not yet articulated the principles which might inform future discussion on proposals for Required Formatives.

(ACTION: SK)

15-16/33 Chair’s Oral Report
The Chair reported that, following the publication of the recent Green Paper on Higher Education, there are several items which the institution is considering and which are likely to be brought to the Committee for consultation. One of the key points is Grade Point Average (GPA). The
Green Paper reports that the honours degree classification is not fit for purpose and institutions should run GPA alongside existing classifications. While not a prerequisite for complying with the higher levels of TEF, institutions will be asked to indicate if they have adopted a GPA system.

The Chair and the Assessment Manager attended a Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG) annual seminar recently, following publication of a report on the HEA’s 2013/4 pilot study into GPA. A number of institutions presented their experiences and differences in approach, and it was noted that each had devised their own ways of using a GPA scale. The HEA pilot produced a 0 - 4.25 scale but allows a great deal of flexibility in how institutions assign grades to the scale.

The Green Paper and the HEA pilot throw up a number of interesting questions for the Committee and UTC to consider in due course.

15-16/34  Report from Students
The Students’ Union reported that a number of students in the Sciences had expressed frustration that there is no clear policy regarding paper submission of open assessments, unlike for electronic hand in. The student representatives will prepare a report to present to the Committee in February.

(ACTION: TR)

The Graduate Students Association reported concerns from a small number of students who had received conflicting information from different bodies across the university as to how to resolve particular issues, most of which were to do with LOA applications and immigration status. These were not matters related to assessment (so outside the remit of SCA), but it was agreed that a mechanism to enable any similar concerns in the future to be raised in an appropriate forum should be identified.

(ACTION: PQ)

GSA also reported concerns that, following an unsuccessful first stage appeal, ten days is considered insufficient to prepare a second stage appeal submission especially over vacations. It was noted that SCC are already reviewing this and advice will be given on a case-by-case basis.

15-16/35  International Pathway College (IPC): Assessment and Progression Rules
Following discussion in October (15-16/18), the Committee considered a revised set of proposed assessment rules for Foundation Certificate and Pre-
Masters in the IPC, with revised points for consideration clearly flagged. The revisions clarified the issues raised in relation to reassessment; namely that only failed modules can be reassessed, that the “overall mark” does not include English language components and that repeat study would only be permitted as for existing students, following consideration by SCC of evidence of exceptional circumstances.

Since the first draft of proposed IPC award structure was circulated, more detailed advice had been received from UKVI which established that a three-term pre-Masters programme would not be compliant with current UKVI rules (and these rules are not expected to change in the foreseeable future). The Pre-masters programme had therefore been redesigned to comprise two terms with a pre-sessional English element, and the revised assessment rules were compliant with this structure.

The Committee Agreed to recommend the assessment and progression rules to UTC. On approval, the Assessment team would then begin coding the rules.

15-16/36 Changes to the Policy on Mitigating Circumstances
The Committee considered a preliminary draft, with the emphasis on the shift from “mitigating” circumstances to “exceptional” circumstances. The paper would be similarly discussed at SCC in early December. The policy aims to separate out what constitutes an exceptional circumstance from the evidence required and clarifies that such circumstances apply to assessment, not teaching. Its additional purpose is to support the transition from school to university, since it is noted that the institution is out of line with the sector and York students are seen as lacking in resilience by employers. It is hoped that students will make use the Student Support services more regularly rather than only at times of crisis.

Work is underway with Unity Health to accommodate (via an online portal) situations where the student is infectious or housebound. Regular dialogue is also taking place with the Advice and Support Centre to ensure no critical issues are overlooked.

It was suggested that in the section relating to evidence, the second sentence could be changed to “The evidence must give direct confirmation of the circumstances, and must provide evidence that can form the basis of a decision as to the effect of those circumstances on the assessment(s) concerned.” Additionally, in the table below after “and the impact”, the words “on the student from which a decision can be made as to the validity of the application” could be added.
The paper will be subject to consultation with Mitigating Circumstances Committees, Chairs of Boards of Studies, YUSU, the GSA and UTC. Once the policy has been approved by UTC, briefings to students will begin, which will include a reminder of the ability to self-referral to Student Services.

There were a number of additional points raised, including the need for a section covering conditional decisions where a progression board is scheduled before the student can provide the evidence; further consideration given to the definition of “close bereavement”; mitigation in academic misconduct cases and the impact on the global student body of major events such as earthquakes and terrorism. The Chair confirmed that these would all be considered as the policy is further revised.

(ACTION: SK)

15-16/37 Summary of UG and PGT Academic Misconduct Cases from 2014/5

The Committee considered the summary of UG and PGT academic misconduct cases from 2014/5. It was noted that this was the first year operating under the new system so comparisons with previous years were not valid.

The types and outcomes of cases were broadly in line across both UGs and PGTs with a general trend being one of increase, but without meaningful comparator data it was unclear whether this was a genuine rise in cases or over-reporting. There were peaks in particular departments – Sociology for UGs, Education within PGTs. The Chair reported that the latter department has already introduced new measures and activities for the current academic year to build in added support earlier in the programme, before first assessments take place. Education have also noted the desirability of reporting the outcome of a case to the marker who originally made the report, in order for markers to ‘calibrate’ their concerns. Given their number of cases, they have, with approval, a process where an investigation proceeds if two out of three StAMP members agree there is a case to answer. The department is keen to get feedback following the January CAP to assess how much effect their efforts have had.

It was noted that Stephen Gow from ASO has provided excellent support in the pedagogical referral process in many departments.

The difference in number of cases between Education and Management was raised, given their similar profiles of overseas cohorts. It was acknowledged that the Management School has a very good pedagogical approach and work
closely with CELT at the pre-sessional stage, but it was not certain whether the difference was a matter of under-reporting. The Chair agreed to meet with Management to identify the steps they are taking to tackle the issues.

(ACTION: SK)

The question of treating all first year modules as “probationary” was raised. It was proposed that this could be incorporated into the StAMP feedback process, and that it would be useful to know how many probationary modules were currently in use and by which departments.

(ACTION: JW)

In terms of the report, it was suggested that the following changes be made:

- Substantiated cases as emphasis, rather than reported
- Differentiation between cases with problems but no full investigation and No Case to Answer
- Data displayed as bar chart rather than pie chart, to include any departments with no cases
- Normalisation by departmental size, rather than absolute numbers
- An indication as to the stage at which the misconduct took place

A revised report incorporating these suggestions will be circulated.

(ACTION: JW)

15-16/38 Appointing External Examiners for Research Degrees

The Committee considered the draft guidance prepared by the Dean of the Graduate Research School on sifting nominations for PhD external examiners, which was agreed to be useful in general terms although some questions and concerns were raised particularly around how a working relationship could be perceived, the lack of any reference to timescales for collaboration and to the comparative experience of the internal and external examiners. It was accepted that the guidance should include recommendations relating to time frames and experience. However the underlying purpose of the guidance was to enshrine the principles of the function of the external examiner and their role in upholding academic standards. It was important to avoid implementing any rules which would fail to work effectively across the whole institution, which are notably different from the rules for internal staff or which insult the integrity of the externals. A question was raised about whether PhD students should expect to be involved in discussions on, or at least consulted about, the identity of their external examiner; there were different departmental norms.

It was agreed that a revision of the draft guidance would be produced, and that, in the mean time, research should be undertaken across departments on
the issue of RS involvement in External Examiner nomination, before a policy is formalized (probably via the Policy on Research Degrees).

It was reiterated that, if SCA members or the RSAT feel there is too close a relationship with a proposed External, there is always the option to refer back to the department and question whether a less closely involved external can be found.

(ACTION: TS)

15-16/39 Date of the next meeting
The Committee noted the date of the next meeting as Friday 5 February 2016 at 2.00 pm in Room HG19, Heslington Hall.
Reserved Business

*15-16/40 Reserved Minutes
The Committee approved the reserved minutes of the meeting held on 30 October 2015.

*15-16/41 Special examination arrangements
The Committee received recommendations for special examination arrangements approved on behalf of the Committee since its last meeting.

*15-16/42 Appointment of external examiners
The Committee received notification of appointment of external examiners approved on behalf of the Committee since its last meeting.

*15-16/43 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.