Minutes of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Assessment held on Friday 30 October 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
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
Gillian Wright, Assessment Manager
Kathryn Lucas, Special Cases Administrator
Mike Bentley, Chair of SCC (for 1st item, Matters Arising)

Apologies: Mr. John Bone, Economics
Dr Louise Jones, Biology
Pete Quinn, Director: Student Support Services

15-16/14 Minutes
The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2015.

15-16/15 Matters arising from the minutes
i. 15-16/2 Review of Mitigating Circumstances
The Committee considered the revised draft of the guidance on applying the existing Mitigating Circumstances policy for the remainder of 2015/16. In 2013/4 there were 3,000 claims for mitigating circumstances, 90% of which
were upheld. The initial rough cut of 2014/5 figures indicate a higher number still. The eventual objective is to revise the policy in consultation with students and departments, before presenting it to UTC and finally Senate by the end of the summer term in order to implement in 2016/17.

The original intention was to produce a single guidance document which could be referred to in all circumstances by staff and students, to give departments the confidence to be able to say no and clarity to students in what is likely to be accepted as evidence. It was agreed that the focus should be at departmental level rather than trying to re-educate students part-way through the academic year. It was suggested the paragraph order should be changed to make the document clearer and that an additional sentence is required in section 23.1.1 making the point it does not apply to learning during the module. It was agreed that there should be a link to the guidance in the staff bulletin, as one current problem is that staff encourage students to apply for mitigating circumstances rather than to engage with the problem. It was also agreed that the message for students should come from YUSU, and that it is critical that the message to students makes clear that this is about enforcing the existing policy, not changing it.

If students are likely to be submitting claims at this stage for January, they need to be engaging with the Open Door team now; leaving it until January will be too late. The message needs to go out that a letter from an agency such as Open Door stating that the student has reported a problem does not in itself constitute evidence. In addition, there should not be an assumption that the existence of satisfactory evidence is a guarantee of a successful claim: the evidence needs to be relevant and it needs to be supportive of an exceptional circumstance.

A more succinct version of the guidance will be produced and circulated to departments, Mitigating Circumstances Committees, supervisors, administrators, Assistant Heads of Colleges and support services, and a link added to the website.

(ACTION: JW)

15-16/16 Chair’s Oral Report
The Chair reported that a prototype ‘hub’ designed to give student feedback on formative and summative assessment has been developed as part of the VLE project.

15-16/17 Report from Students
The Graduate Students Association reported statistics suggesting that 50% (18 out of 35) of Academic Misconduct cases brought to GSA originated from Education. Eight of those were related to dissertations.

The Secretary advised that in 2013/4 there were 37 reported cases in total, of which seven were in Education. In 2014/5 there was a total of 82 reported cases, 37 (42%) from Education. Detailed figures would be circulated at a later meeting. It was noted there was a possibility that cases were now being over-reported where previously under-reported due to the recent policy change, rather than an actual increase.

It was agreed that it would be useful to carry out some diagnostic work to identify causes, trends and issues, to be fed back to departments. The Committee has an overview and are therefore best placed to advise as to how student support can be increased. An initial discussion will take place with the Education department.

(ACTION: SK)

GSA also reported that the Computer Science department has started to run workshops for PGR students explaining the student journey including milestones, timescales, roles of assessor and supervisor etc. which have been well received. Next year this information should be included in student handbooks.

The Students’ Union reported that there are a record number of student representatives this year, including many who have expressed an interest in assessment issues.

15-16/18 International Pathway College (IPC): Assessment and Progression Rules
The Committee considered a draft set of proposed assessment rules for Foundation Certificate and Pre-Masters in the IPC. This draft had been presented to UTC in June 2015 as part of the initial programme approval, but was now being offered for detailed SCA consideration. The rules set out a dual level mechanism, whereby students can achieve an award with a certain performance, but need a higher level to guarantee progression to York. The proposal also includes the removal of some of the standard limits such as the amount of compensation and reassessment allowed. It was noted that the progression requirement to pass the Academic Integrity Tutorial has led to a proposal to develop a cut-down version so that IPC students won’t be required to repeat an identical tutorial the following year.

It was clarified that under point 12.g, the “average mark” does not include a
student’s English mark, and that as students of York the same policies relating to Leave of Absence and Mitigating Circumstances will apply.

It was explained that the progression criteria were set at levels intended to be compatible with A level entry criteria. In other institutions, the experience is that 70-75% of students in associated pathway colleges progress to the host institution.

The rules proposed that there should be no limit to the number of modules that can be reassessed on IPC programmes (unlike other NMS awards), and that the original mark would be used in the award mark calculation, not the reassessment mark. Clarification was required that in a reassessment situation, a student’s overall mark would be capped at the pass mark, and also that “reassessment” did not mean repeating the module. It was confirmed that any guidance would not be translated since the students need to be capable of understanding in English.

It was clarified that transcripts will be set out as they currently appear with both first attempt and reassessment marks displayed. It was agreed that further clarity was required on the meaning of “all modules” with regard to reassessment. It was suggested that there should be a limit on the amount of time allowed for a student to make a decision on whether to compensate a module (point 12.e).

It was agreed that points 12.c and 12.e required further review.

(ACTION: SK)

15-16/19 Summary of Undergraduate External Examiners Reports 2014/15
The Committee considered the summary report. It was clarified that the letter codes used throughout the report referred to:
A – no issues
B – issues raised at department level
C – issues raised at university level

It was noted that the importance of checking exam papers wasn’t picked up in the summary report but this appeared in several reports and would be raised at the forum for Chairs of Boards of Examiners on Thursday 5 November.

The issue of the exam timetable was raised again, whereupon it was acknowledged that there is no current possibility of changing the academic year, including reopening the topic of semesterisation, or holding a longer spring CAP. This is partly down to the complexity of timetable (for example
Natural Sciences) but also a question of timing and accommodation among other matters. The Pedagogy project provides an opportunity for departments to consider how much closed assessment they currently use. The Secretary outlined two projects ongoing within Registry Services: a hypothetical timetabling exercise to create “shadow timetables” for 2016/7 and 2017/8 and work in the Assessment team to monitor whether changes filtering through after departmental reviews as part of the Pedagogy project show an increase or decrease in closed assessment.

It was proposed that in order to have more control over the quality of service received, including reporting, external examiners should be appointed for a four year term of office, but that the appointment should be subject to annual renewal. Although it is included in the external examiner induction that there are two strands to the role – to interact with the department and also to provide meaningful report of external oversight for the University – it was suggested this should be reiterated on the pro forma issued to external examiners. It was accepted that there are deficiencies in the current information given in the Guide for external examiners; this is due to be rewritten in due course.

(ACTION: JW)

It was noted that some other institutions use an automated pro forma with reminder prompts making it clear it is university-level information required not merely department-level.

15-16/20 Consideration of Compensation and Condonement for finalist students
The Committee considered a paper discussing the evidence that might support a proposal to change the current compensation and condonement rules. The paper looked at results for students graduating in 2014-5, in particular looking at students who had not graduated with the rest of their cohort in July 2015, whether because of resits or sits as a result of Mitigating Circumstances. The paper had been prompted by comments from the Maths and Physics departments (and their external examiners) that suggested a view that their students were being particularly disadvantaged by the rules which insisted that a student not achieving at least a compensatable mark would need to take a resit in order to be awarded credit. The evidence did not support the view that good students are being disadvantaged by being forced to resit modules in their final year. A survey of Russell Group institutions showed that University of York rules are not out of line with this group.

The committee agreed to forward the paper to UTC, with a recommendation that the evidence did not support a change in the rules on compensation and

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condonement. In addition, UTC Chair had requested that the 14-page spreadsheet displaying Russell Group data be made available online.

(ACTION: JW)

15-16/21 Sits as if for the first time ‘At Risk’
The Committee approved a proposal to change the process which currently requires students to take a Leave of Absence if they have successfully claimed mitigation for August assessments, even if they have ‘damaged’ passing marks. It was agreed that students should be allowed to progress and “sit as if for the first time” during the following academic year so long as they meet the progression criteria based on the existing ‘damaged’ attempt, up to a maximum of 40 credits.

15-16/22 Confirmation of Identity during Exams
The Committee approved a proposal for the Exams Office to confirm the identity of students who attend exams without their student ID card via a telephone call from the exam venue to the Exams Office, during which the student would be required to provide identifying information to be checked against SITS. It was recommended that a review of the new procedure should take place after one year. It was acknowledged that it would be necessary to employ an additional invigilator to avoid draining current resource.

15-16/23 Required Formatives: Core Competencies in Mathematics
The Committee considered a paper concerning the introduction of an unusual form of summative assessment to the Stage 1 Mathematics modules on Calculus and Core Algebra. This assessment was intended to test students on a wide range of core competencies in these areas, which students really needed to be confident about in order to have a good basis for later modules. The proposed assessment resulted in a pass/fail outcome, and was based on a computer-generated test of a large number of competencies. Students needed to obtain a relatively high mark to pass, but were to be allowed to re-take the test, on a newly-generated set of examples, on a number of occasions. UTC had asked SCA to consider this form of assessment, both in order to determine whether there were any concerns in this particular case and to draw out principles which could help similar future applications, particularly in similar formative assessments which were being discussed as a result of York Pedagogy changes.

In discussion, it was noted that making students take repeated assessments should not preclude reviewing the quality of the learning and teaching. It was agreed that the Chair and the Head of Learning Enhancement would meet to extract a set of basic principles from the proposal paper in order to
provide clarity within the Guide or elsewhere.  

(ACTION: SK/CL)

15-16/24 Criteria to approve the appointment of PhD Externals
The Committee discussed the principles on which decisions are based on whether or not to ratify a proposed PhD external examiner. The QAA Quality Code gives much less guidance on conflicts of interest for PhD examiners than it does for taught programme examiners. So it would be helpful to generate more detailed local guidance. Three main categories of issues that might arise were outlined:

1. “Avoid at all costs”: for example any collaboration with a student or any personal relationship with any person involved in the examination process.
2. “Little concern”: for example where a proposed external examiner has met a student at a conference and chatted informally with them.
3. “Avoid where possible”: for example there is some academic relationship with supervisor / internal examiner / department but which has no bearing on the student’s thesis.

It was noted that it is difficult to apply a single inter-disciplinary set of criteria across departments, and also that guidance needs to be given as to whether each student should be consulted about the choice of external examiner. Such consultation is permitted but not required. It was acknowledged that it would be helpful for students to have transparency and that there may be variation in disciplinary norms.

It was also advised that where departments do not give sufficient detail on the level of previous collaboration, the form should be sent back to the department for further information.

The Dean of the Graduate Research School agreed to draft some guidance for consideration by the committee.  

(ACTION: TS)

15-16/25 Review of NSLC Support Technicians University Certificate
At the request of UTC, the Committee considered a request arising from a re-validation visit for the National Science Learning Centre’s University Certificate in Science Education and Leadership (Science Technician). In particular, the Committee considered whether it was reasonable or desirable to allow classifications (Merit/ Distinction) for this award, rather than simply returning a mark. The Committee’ view was that such classifications were not appropriate for an award of this size, and that a transcript was sufficient for
an outstanding student to evidence their performance.

**15-16/26 Date of the next meeting**
The Committee noted the date of the next meeting as Friday **4 December 2015** at 2.00 pm in Room HG19, Heslington Hall.
Reserved Business

*15-16/27  Reserved Minutes
The Committee approved the reserved minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2015.

*15-16/28  Special examination arrangements
The Committee received recommendations for special examination arrangements approved on behalf of the Committee since its last meeting.

*15-16/29  Appointment of external examiners
The Committee received notification of appointment of external examiners approved on behalf of the Committee since its last meeting.

*15-16/30  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.