

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE (SSEC)

Minute of the Meeting held on 11th September 2024

Present: Jason Bohan, Stephen Fettes, Zeray Yihdego, Peter Henderson, Heidi Mehrkens, Lyn Batchelor, Natalie Kinchin-Williams, James McIntosh, Sally Middleton, Madge Jackson, Ingrid Stanyer, Lesley Muirhead, Jemma Murdoch, Steve Tucker, Susan Halfpenny, Wendy Lowe, Graeme Kirkpatrick, John Cavanagh, Miles Rothoerl, Karim Hurtig, Sara Misuri, Stevie Kearney

Apologies: Nick Edwards, Duncan Stewart, Bekah Walker, Martin Barker, Charlotta Hillerdal, Tim Baker, Martin Mills, Jenna Stuart, Mary Prior, Rhiannon Thompson, Kelsey Pierce, Melanie Viney, Kirstin Annand, Iain Grant,

1) Welcome and chair's update

- 1.1 Jason Bohan (JB) chaired the meeting and welcomed those in attendance.

2) Approval of the minute of the SSEC held on 15th August 2024

- 2.1 No comments or amendments were received from members of the Committee. The minutes of the SSEC meeting held on 15/08/2024 were approved.

3) Actions from previous meeting

- 3.1 JB has shared to guidance on the Extension Policy for staff and students and has received feedback and made some amendments.
- 3.2 JB confirmed the Extension Policy is now published on the website.
- 3.3 The request for a discussion around support for international students will be included in the agenda point on PGT students, and Graeme Kirkpatrick (GK) agreed that was a useful route into the discussion but asked if it can be included as an agenda point in a future meeting.
- 3.4 JB asked Stevie Kearney (SK) for an update on the use of Decision Time for future meetings and SK has a training session planned with Liam Dyker from Academic Services, and Sara Misuri (SM), who will be taking on the Clerk role from January 2025 onwards. Decision Time likely to be implemented for all meetings from January 2025 onwards, to coincide with the change of committee clerk.

4) Review of SSEC Remit and Composition

- 4.1 The Remit and Composition is reviewed at the first meeting of each academic year.

- 4.2 GK asked that rather than naming specific AUSA Vice Presidents, the remit is changed to say that two AUSA Officers will be in attendance in order to select those best-placed to sit on the committee. JB agreed this was a good idea and can be implemented.
- 4.3 GK also noted that there is not a forum within the University for discussion of the wider student experience, across a range of areas such as wellbeing, housing, finances and more. Upon discussion with University senior management, GK reported he was told SSEC was the forum for such discussions, but feels in practice this is not the case. GK suggested reinforcing the wording of the remit section to make it clearer and to ensure the SSEC is the place for discussions about the wider student experience beyond academic issues and student support. JB agreed this was an area for further discussion and asked that it be taken forwards initially as a meeting between the SSEC chairs and AUSA.

Action: SK to organise a meeting between SSEC Chairs and AUSA for further discussion on the wording of the remit section of the document.

Action: SK to change Steve Tucker's title to Scottish Tertiary Enhancement Programme Lead.

Action: SK to include PTES and PRES in the survey section of the remit

- 4.4 Discussion around the role of personal tutors for PGT students, where JB clarified the Programme Coordinator fills this role and Senate had previously rejected the idea of implementing Personal Tutors for PGT students, but this committee can pass on any feedback.
- 4.5 Ingrid Stanyer (IG) noted within the School of Education, many tutors have 30 PGDE students to support and up to 80 personal tutees from the UG cohorts, so it would be interesting to see how that is mapped and workloads are analysed, to see how colleagues are coping with the workload. JB noted it was a valid discussion but not a matter for the remit discussion, but this matter has been raised in other committees.

5. Update on Monitoring Processes

- 5.1 This agenda item refers to the new Student Report and Request Tool, which replaces the previous Absence Reporting Tool. This was discussed at the last meeting and now facilities extension requests. The tool could potentially be used to monitoring emails, to make the procedure easier for students to navigate. JB is looking for feedback from schools, and this was enthusiastically received by those within individual schools. James McIntosh (JM) was asked to look at how this would work from the technical side.

JM introduced the item and talked the committee through how the new system will work. This will be done in 2 phases, firstly via a visual uplift of the system, but also via the back end to ensure the tool is easy to use for all admin staff dealing with requests.

Students will be able to access information through the tool, including absences, extension requests, extenuating circumstances and monitoring emails. Guidance will be provided to students, and they can access a revised forms, with new categories added. Students can identify courses impacted and any specific assessments, with a section to

identify inclusion adjustments and a free text section to provide more evidence, with a section to upload supporting evidence.

On absence reporting, work has been done to change the way it functions for admin staff to search by type of request and filter results. Admin teams can now search by student ID, while they can identify the application history, to draw it into one place. Previous interactions will be easily visible, while level of study can also be identified easily. New filters are being looked at for year of study, UG or PG, any outstanding requests and to export history data.

All schools have been consulted on how the new system links to the MyTimetable system. Testing is ongoing but expected to be completed soon and info for schools will be provided via MS Teams.

For the Qatar students, plans are in place to launch it for Doha students and just needs to be signed off via Information Governance.

Lyn Batchelor (LB) said the developments are really welcome and will help a lot due to current limited staffing levels.

JB noted it had been a significant amount of work and looks really positive.

Karim Hurtig (KH) said the developments look really useful for students and the walk-through was very helpful. KM asked about the phrasing around monitoring, C6s and C7s, to see if this can be updated to a more student-friendly approach. Students should ideally know why they have received a monitoring email. JB agreed this would be a good development, and a student guide is being produced to be shared soon for sharing on the website. Communications are due to go out to students to keep them updated on the changes.

Websites changes are also happening and any input on what to call the C6/C7 titles would be helpful. John Cavanagh said students often don't understand the C6/C7 titles and often worry they have been removed from their degree, so it causes a lot of panic. JC also said some more signposting for support would be helpful when dealing with monitoring issues. JB said the system was designed to make interaction with support services easier and not to replace any existing support services. Anything which helps promote engagement is welcome and it would be useful to provide a different email for those who have repeated issues with monitoring. JB said the new history of monitoring system on the tool allows teams to identify students of concern.

KM said the emails often are written in a way that frightens students rather than supports them, with capital letters used, so this could be revised. Sara Misuri (SM) suggested a video would be a good way to explain the system to students and help promote engagement, especially for visual learners, linking to Student Support.

JB said this would be good to include in the ToolKit and in the C6/7 email as a hyperlink. KM agreed this would be useful.

Wendy Lowe (WL) asked how this new system would work with extenuating circumstances committees and JB said the export function allows information to be taken to committees easily.

JC said it would be useful to see the history as a Personal Tutor, and JB said PTs would be included in the C6/7 emails. GK said there is a different approach required for students with large numbers of C6/7s and JB suggested the admin teams currently email Student Support if there is a particular concern.

WL asked about the set up in the Medical School and they have Regents rather than Personal Tutors, but wondered how this works for them, as possibly not University of Aberdeen students. JB noted that Medical School students don't use the Student Hub, so there is a separate piece of work for their students. This conversation is currently ongoing.

JM asked for any further queries to be sent along, if he can be of any help.

6. Class Rep system update

- 6.1 Miles Rothoerl (MR) introduced the agenda item on the Class Rep system. Scott Carle (SC) is also present as he works on the class rep system. This year the Students' Association (SA) is expanding the class rep system, and school admins have received information on recruitment and have been provided to schools. Blackboard is being used for training support this year, with a separate system for the medical School.

In person training sessions are taking place in the coming weeks, with online resources provided. The SA has introduced a reward scheme this year for class reps, through a loyalty card, to encourage engagement. A class rep conference is being arranged for the end of term one. The newsletter will also be updated more regularly, while regular coffee and chat sessions are being arranged too.

The broader issues are that the system isn't working as best as it could. Reforming the system has been a priority for previous SA presidents and is an ongoing issue, with varied feedback from schools. The systems vary between schools so it would be good to have a more standardised system. Feedback loops to schools are primarily through retrospective measures like the National Student Survey and it would be good to be more proactive in identifying issues.

Current work includes a review of SA democratic structures and involving more feedback from students to identify what they want from the class rep system. This will inform more radical change and will involve schools in any changes to the process.

JB noted it was a valuable system and the training developments are really welcome. Incentives are also a positive development. MR will record a video for schools on how to use the system.

Heidi Mehrkens said this is a great tool for recruitment of class reps and these are roles the schools are trying to promote, so the incentives are a good development. MR confirmed information will be sent out to all schools on how this will work, but is likely to include discounts at SA outlets.

Ingrid Stanyer (IS) said it was an exciting development, but an issue is the chain of information, but it goes to the PGDE admin team and there isn't much follow-up information, so it would be good to get more updates, and it would be good to have more

information as Senior Personal Tutor. MR said the information will be shared. SC said they can review the information going out to each school, but information on the website is student-focussed, but can provide more info for staff. The big win has been to have the information on Blackboard, which should help close the communication loop. IS is going to chat to the admin team to get more information.

JC asked if the convenors meet centrally, but MR said the differences in systems between school make this difficult but a more unified system will help with this area. JC said he only knows who the class reps are by asking the class, so a more regular meetings which are less ad-hoc would be good. MR said in most schools the Course Coordinator recruits the class reps, but this varies between schools, so a unified system would be helpful here. SC confirmed that a consistent approach helps as soon are done by year group and some are done by degree programme. JC felt the more interaction with course coordinators the better.

SM asked if a class rep teams channel might help, with sub-channels for school. SC said this has been used before but post return to campus after Covid this isn't used as much. Susan Halfpenny (SH) said it would be useful to link library and digital services more with the class rep system.

HM added that she wasn't aware of the different systems across schools. And not wishing to interfere, HM tries to take less of a role to allow the class reps space to gather feedback and then discuss with the school. MR said the next stage is to speak to students and class reps to gather their feedback on how they wish to interact with schools, then they'll follow up with the relevant teams. MR also said weekly drop-in sessions happen on Thursdays but the team are happy to take feedback by email.

7. Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)

7.1 JB introduced the item with some additional information on the previous SSEC meeting discussion around the PTES survey, with the expanded report shared with committee members.

The sector report from Advance HE will provide more detail, which will be circulated when available. Last year was the first year the University of Aberdeen took part in the survey and it was a bit rushed in the way it was introduced, so this year is a more comprehensive report.

The data is very useful, but last year saw a 5 % response rate and this year it was included in the Survey Season communications, so response rates were 16% this year, but is still below the sector average. Results have been shared with schools and will be worked into action plans.

Headline results how 83% satisfaction scored which is just below the sector average at 84% and the overall NSS scores at 84%. There is variation between schools, but the response rate makes it hard to draw too many conclusions at this stage. It does give valuable data and will be useful going forwards, with additional questions to be added in.

Areas such as timetabling, dissertation support and independent learning scored well, while areas for improvement are around community and course organisation. JB said the most important area is the University sits in the third quartile in many measures. JB asked what the University needs to do to improve the PGT experience.

JC asked about specific issues and how it represents on Engineering, and JB said it follows trends seen in the NSS and assessment and feedback remains a key area for development.

GK asked for a breakdown by demographic as the Student Association has particular concerns about these groups and this is reflected in queries to their advice service. international students in general, but also BAME and students from the Global South. PGT not having Personal Tutors remains an issue they see recur a lot. GK acknowledged this is a workload issue but the SA sees this as a significant gap in provision. International students arriving at PGT level often need more support than a home-based UG students. The SA feels the focus should be on the international student experience.

LB noted that it would be good to disaggregate the Qatar students from the results due to cultural difference. JB will ask if it's possible to do this work in terms of providing results. Response rates can make this difficult. LB said that response rates can be an issue so it would be good to know the information, and that questions about gender can put some Qatar students off from completing the survey, so this may be an issue which needs handles sensitively. There has been negative feedback on gender questions previously with Qatar students. GK asked why these questions are being asked when we should know this information already. JB said the survey is provided by Advance HE and so they need to ask these questions, as they don't have access to our data.

JC suggested getting students to answer the survey should be worked into class time, to improve response rates.

JB aske GK for thoughts on how best to gather feedback from international students, based on the needs identified at their advice service. GK said there has been a significant increase in international students accessing the SA advice service, which often relates to academic misconduct, plagiarism, collusion, due to not understanding the academic regulations, often exacerbated by variations in approach by schools. Also, PGT regulations are much stricter than at early UG level, which disproportionately impacts PGT international students. The impact is significantly different for a home UG student, to an international PGT student, who often have families who have saved up significant amounts of money to afford the course and the student will have to leave the country if removed from their course.

GK asked for statistical information on the number of students impacted and the fundamental issue is there is nobody within the University whose job it is to ensure international students have the support they need. JB said it would be useful to have a follow up discussion to form a working group addressing these issues.

7.2 Action: JB to follow up with GK on international student experience and issues around plagiarism, academic regulations and academic support

JC said his course benefitted greatly by engaging with students and discussing academic misconduct in a supportive environment, and this had a really positive impact in terms of lowering the number of cases within the Engineering School.

Zeray Yihdego noted the role of AI in student assessments, as an increasing issue. Supporting international students is a frontline activity and so we can cut out unnecessary meetings, to free up time to provide the support required. More seminars would also be helpful, and we need to be competitive and attract international students.

SH said there could be more support in terms of digital literacy so it would be good to involve the libraries and information technology teams to provide support for international students.

8. Exam Planning Group

8.1 Item for information only. An exam planning group has been set up, which is an operational group represented across the University, those involved in setting up in-person exams. One specific issue was around computer-based exams, whether in person or exams. Some invigilator information didn't reflect the use of computers, while some clashes happened with online and in person exams. JB will bring information back to the group as and when relevant updates.

9. AOCB

9.1 KH replied to Sally Middleton's (SaM) comment in the chat noting international students face many challenges, due to challenges around adapting to language and culture. SaM noted that there is a need to try and increase home student uptake in PGT courses and to recognise the different challenges they face. SM added that there was no downplaying of the significant challenges faced by international PGT students, but added that home PGT students have different challenges and these need to be taken into account to provide a quality student experience.

JC discussed issues around widening access priorities for PGT students, and SaM added this was an area for development. GK added it was incredible that the University currently has no way of recording how many widening access students pass their courses. SaM said it was a priority but the current systems don't allow for this recording of data.

9.2 Action: SaM to meet with GK and JB to discuss widening access progression/achievement data recording

10) Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Student Support & Experience Committee will take place on Thursday 24th October at 10:05am. This will be via MS Teams and in person, in the University Court Room.