UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

Minute of the Meeting held on 22 March 2017

Present: Professor K Shennan (Convener), Dr M Beaton, Dr P Bishop, Mr L Fuller, Dr M Hole, Dr J Lamb, Professor D Lurie, Dr W Harrison, Dr A Oelsner with Ms K Christie, Dr D Comber, Ms E Hay (Clerk) and Mr M Fullerton in attendance

Apologies: Mr C Anucha, Dr D Auchie, Dr E Bain, Professor J Geddes, Dr M Pinard

MINUTES OF MEETINGS
(copy filed as QAC/220317/001)

1.1 The minute of the meeting on 22 February 2017 was approved, subject to some typographical corrections and Dr Mhairi Beaton being noted as absent.

Action: Clerk

Clerk’s Note: The minute has been updated as required.

MATTERS ARISING

2.1 Exams Officer Training (Minute 2.5 refers): The Committee noted that training sessions for exams officers had been scheduled to take place on the 19 and 26 April.

2.2 Mindfulness (Minute 2.6 refers): The Committee noted that the Convener was due to meet with the Programme Director shortly to further discuss the programme.

Action: Convener

2.3 List of Annual Programme Review (APR) Disciplines (Minute 4.4 refers): The Committee noted that the exercise to identify lists of expected APR submissions was ongoing.

Action: Clerk/Members

2.4 External Examiners’ Annual Report Word Limit (Minute 5.2 refers): The Convener confirmed that, due to a lack of IT resource, it would not be possible to enforce a word limit and longer submissions would be accepted for the time being.

2.5 University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Annual Report Response (Minute 6.3 refers): The Committee noted that a response to UHI was being prepared.

Action: Convener

2.6 Members were briefed on an upcoming change to clerking responsibilities for the Committee, with the role of Clerk due to transfer from Miss Emma Hay to Mr Nicholas Edwards.

INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW (ITR)

(i) CLSM Graduate School

3.1 The Committee noted that the College of Life Sciences and Medicine (CLSM) Graduate School’s response to the final report of its ITR, which took place in February 2016, was still outstanding. The Convener confirmed that she remained in discussion with the former Head of the CLSM Graduate School regarding the report.

Action: Convener
3.2 The Committee noted the School of Psychology’s response to recommendations within the final report of its ITR, which took place in October 2016.

3.3 Members discussed the School of Psychology’s ITR, which was felt to have proven very beneficial for the School, the final report including many commendations, in particular praising the collegiate nature of the School’s students and staff.

3.4 The Committee noted that the one year follow up report from the department of Chemistry remained outstanding.

Action: Clerk

3.5 The Committee noted that the School of Medicine and Dentistry’s version of the Academic Quality Handbook (AQH), amended to incorporate aspects of GMC and GDC regulations, remained outstanding. Professor Patey informed the Clerk that she was currently updating their AQH and would send the updated version in due course. It was pointed out that a copy of the version for the current academic year would be sufficient for the Committee’s purposes and the School should be asked to provide that.

Action: Clerk

3.6 The Committee considered proposed revisions to ITR which aimed to streamline the process, reduce the burden on Schools, and increase the focus on enhancement by building on newly established annual course (ACR) and annual programme (APR) quality assurance monitoring processes, while meeting the Scottish Funding Council’s (SFC) conditions. Further to this, it was suggested that an ITR currently requires Schools to produce an unnecessary amount of paperwork.

3.7 The Convener observed that much of the QA metrics component of the existing ITR process has since been incorporated into quarterly School Planning meetings between Schools and senior management.

3.8 It was proposed that the University adopt a more enhancement-driven process which better avoided duplication of effort. To this end, it was highlighted that an effort to centralise all School-related submissions within the Committee’s SharePoint website was currently ongoing. There followed a brief discussion regarding the efficiency of a SharePoint-based solution, as a result of which it was requested that IT Services be contacted to discuss required functionality.

Action: Clerk

3.9 Members of the Committee were asked to consider whether or not future ITR panels should be convened by the QAC member with responsibility for the School in question. After some discussion, it was agreed that a different member should convene, as the fresh perspective they could bring would prove valuable. In addition, each member would act as a point of contact for the School they represent on the Committee, to provide guidance throughout the process.
3.10 Members were asked to consider the proposed Reflective Analysis (RA), intended to replace the current Self Evaluation Document (SED) and better identify the most important themes on which to base discussion with a School. Members agreed that analysis of this kind was essential to improving the ITR process.

3.11 It was suggested that suitable example RAs be provided to Schools prior to preparing for an ITR. While it was agreed that a draft RA would not be required, the Convener confirmed that Schools would be offered training and suggested that they seek advice from the Clerk to QAC and make use of their QAC representatives more fully for guidance on their submission. It was noted that meetings with Schools about to be reviewed used to take place, however limited resource has resulted in this practice stopping once Schools had already been through the process at least once.

3.12 Members discussed the important role of ITR in investigating broader issues spanning multiple years, which would not necessarily be the focus of exercises carried out on an annual basis, such as course and programme review.

3.13 Members discussed the need for School submissions to address a standardised rubric. While some members expressed the view that encouraging formulaic responses should be avoided, thereby freeing Schools to highlight what matters most to them, others suggested that Schools would be drawn to focusing too heavily on positive aspects without structured guidance. It was pointed out that Schools failing to declare issues would be queried by their ITR panel.

3.14 Members were asked to consider how best to support Schools preparing their RA. While it was agreed that it would not be necessary for a progress report or draft copy to be submitted, Schools would be encouraged to seek guidance from their respective QAC member.

3.15 The implementation of curriculum maps as part of the new ITR process was discussed. While some members suggested that these be incorporated into SENAS instead, it was pointed out that subsequent amendments to courses would not always consider an impact on benchmark statements, thus invalidating a map, and might be better placed as part of an annual review. It was noted that maps were already produced by some disciplines for accreditation purposes. If helpful to the School, it was suggested that ITR requirements be aligned with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) accreditation documentation.

3.16 Members were asked to consider proposed changes to the manner in which meetings with students and staff were organised during an ITR. It was suggested that, while the meetings usually proved very useful, their focus was often too narrow. There followed a discussion regarding the implementation of more interactive elements, the range of students and staff met by panels, and the need for discussion to focus on improvements. It was agreed that, where possible, the same School staff should not be met more than once.

3.17 While it was agreed that meetings with both groups should remain separate, it was also felt that panels should meet with students earlier in the process so that comments raised could form the basis for discussions with staff. The Committee felt that more time with students would prove beneficial, while acknowledging that class attendance and other commitments could potentially make this difficult to address.
3.18 It was proposed that the viewing of teaching environments be incorporated as a standard element of ITR going forward. While it was generally felt to be a worthwhile exercise - allowing sight of challenges and how they are addressed - it was pointed out that many teaching environments are not so significant, particularly those used by non-scientific disciplines, and that focusing on them may prove a waste of the panel’s attention. It was agreed that the subject specialist could be key to identifying the need to view teaching environments.

3.19 Members discussed the importance of a detailed action plan. While some members felt that sessions should be held specifically geared towards the action plan, others suggested that discussion was too easily focused on what should already be evident from submitted documentation.

EXTERNAL EXAMINING

4.1 Members were asked to report to the Committee on the remaining responses to external examiners’ annual reports.

4.2 The member responsible for responding to the School of Engineering’s external examiners noted a lack of involvement by the Head of School in the responses provided.

4.3 The Convener was asked if it was within the Committee’s remit to request that Schools revise or improve the detail within a provided response. The Convener clarified that, in the interest of timing, this would be better addressed by the Committee’s response to the external examiner.

4.4 The member responsible for the School of Natural and Computing Sciences confirmed that feedback received from external examiners had been largely positive, particularly in regard to courses and programmes offered by Chemistry.

4.5 The quality of responses from the School of Divinity, History and Philosophy was praised, however a high volume of common teaching at Levels 3 and 4, particularly in History, prompted the concern that courses were not being differentiated enough. While the difference appeared to consist most often of an increased word limit for written assessment, it was suggested that this was not substantial enough.

4.6 The member responsible for responding to the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture’s external examiners considered the School’s feedback to be reasonable. It was noted that the Head of School had responded to concerns regarding staffing issues, which they said were being addressed. The School was praised for its ‘feed forward’ practice, which involved collating the most common feedback from previous years and providing it to students for their information prior to assessment.

4.7 The member responsible for the School of Law remarked on both the inconsistent lengths of the School’s responses and the large number of external examiners appointed to the School. Concerns raised by the external examiners related to the classification of final degrees, possibly caused by poor communication with the School and which the Convener suggested would be exasperated by the current practice of referring to both the Common Assessment Scale and the Common Grading Scale. In addition, it was noted that there had been instances of delay in materials being sent to external examiners prior to examination boards.
4.8 In considering responses provided by the School of Biological Sciences, the member responsible highlighted the quality of feedback as an issue which the School confirmed was being addressed.

4.9 Regarding responses from the School of Geosciences, the member responsible stated that feedback from external examiners had been largely complimentary, except in two particular instances. It was noted that an external examiner had threatened to boycott the process as a result of under resourcing. In another instance, an external examiner considered the situation ‘woeful’ and warned that the academic quality of the programme in question was at risk of being compromised by staff shortages. The Convener confirmed that, while resourcing of the affected programmes was for the School to address, the Committee would need to monitor the situation going forward.

4.10 Members were made aware that responses from the Committee would, in future, be signed by the appropriate QAC representative, rather than the Convener. Further to this, the Convener reminded members to be aware of criticisms from external examiners where Schools had failed to provide an appropriate response and to remember when composing responses from the Committee that they should be addressing the external examiners directly.

RESIT EXAMINATIONS

5.1 The Committee was asked to consider the proposal in response to feedback from external examiners criticising the current process as overly harsh that, from the 2017/18 academic year onwards, resits be capped at D3 and used in calculating a degree classification. Viewing it to be a sensible approach, the Committee agreed to the proposal. The Convener requested that the proposal be brought to the attention of the Undergraduate Committee for their discussion.

Action: Clerk

5.2 While the concern was raised that students would be encouraged under the new process to play the system, it was suggested that the implementation of a cap for resits should go some way to discouraging this.

5.3 The Committee was asked to consider the proposal that students who fail be automatically entered into the next available resit diet. It was suggested that there would be no guarantee of students attending resits, particularly without having made the conscious decision to apply.

5.4 The Committee was asked to consider the proposal to dispense with the first resit fee and to only apply a fee for subsequent resits. The Convener confirmed that the current fee structure produced around £60,000 for the University, while holding the resits cost over £300,000. The Committee considered that the resit fee did act as a potential deterrent for students ‘choosing’ to take a second opportunity to pass courses.

Action: Clerk

5.5 The Committee was asked to discuss proposed alternatives to resit exams, including means by which students could resit off-campus. While it was considered to be a matter for individual Schools to decide, concern was raised that other students might be dissatisfied by those allowed to resit through a more preferable medium. While it was suggested that the proposed alternatives could prove useful in resolving occasional issues involving visa restrictions and exceptional circumstances, the Convener requested that the matter be brought to the attention of the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Committees for further discussion.

Action: Clerk
ONE YEAR HONOURS DEGREES

6.1 The Committee recognised the decision was taken by the Senate to move to a situation where all degrees were classified on the basis of 50:50 between years 3 and 4 (and 5 where appropriate) of honours programmes. Members were made aware that this practice had not yet been adopted by Medical Sciences (and others) and agreed that the matter should be raised at the University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL) and expedited.

Action: Clerk

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

7.1 Members noted that the next meeting of the Committee will be held on Thursday 4 May 2017 at 2.00 pm in Committee Room 2, University Office.