UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

Minute of the Meeting held on 21 April 2016

Present: Professor K Shennan (Convener), Dr E Bain, Dr P Bishop, Dr M-I Ehrenschwendtner, Mr L Fuller, Dr W Harrison, Dr S Lawrie, Professor D Lurie with Ms K Christie, Dr M Pryor and Ms E Hay (Clerk) in attendance

Apologies: Dr M Beaton, Ms G Clarke, Dr M Hole

MINUTE OF THE MEETING HELD ON 15 FEBRUARY 2016
(copy filed as QAC/210416/001)

1.1 Members of the Committee approved the minute of the meeting held on 15 February 2016 subject to one or two minor typographical revisions.

Action: Clerk

Clerk’s Note: The minute of the meeting held on 15 February has now been appropriately revised and saved.

MATTERS ARISING

2.1 Members of the Committee acknowledged that individual responses had now been sent, on behalf of the Committee, to all undergraduate and taught postgraduate External Examiners reports. The Committee discussed the value of a revised External Examiners report form, allowing for Head of School and Committee responses to be detailed on the same form for ease of recording and issuing a response to an Examiner. The Convener informed the Committee that the Vice Principal (Teaching and Learning) was aware of the limitations of the current system.

Action: Clerk

Clerk’s Note: Sarah James and Matt Fullerton, who undertake the administration of External Examiners Reports have been contacted regarding the update of the report form and confirmed this action will be taken forward for 2015/16 reports.

INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW (ITR)

3.1 The Committee acknowledged the response to the ITR report as provided by the School of Geosciences (copy filed QAC/210416/002a). The Committee wished to express their thanks to the school for the response returned. Members of the Committee acknowledged the reflective nature of the response and were encouraged by the intention of the school to take issues raised by the ITR panel away for further discussion. The Committee look forward to the one year follow up report.

Action: Clerk

Clerk’s Note: A draft response to the School of Geosciences has been sent following approval from Professor Shennan.
3.2 The Committee noted with concern the failure of the College of Life Sciences and Medicine Graduate School to submit their response to the ITR Report. Members of the Committee agreed that Professor Connolly, Head of the Graduate School, should again be contacted in this regard.

Action: Convener

REGULATORY CHANGES

(copy filed as QAC/210416/003)

4.1 The Committee noted the Omnibus Resolution, detailing proposed Undergraduate and Postgraduate regulatory changes for academic year 2016/17. The Committee specifically discussed four key changes proposed to the General Regulations for First Degrees as follows below.

(i) The Committee considered the proposed addition of regulation 2.3 to prevent students transferring degree programme (be this within or outwith their named area of study) after one-sixth of teaching for an academic year has commenced. The Committee were concerned that this was a regulation to support the MyCurriculum system and its workload implications. Members of the Committee noted concern that this proposed change would prevent a student from transferring (if such a transfer was approved in academic terms). The Committee further noted that the scenario of a student registered for courses corresponding to the wrong degree programme (i.e. the courses a student was undertaking could be changed at the start of the 2HS but the programme could not) would be likely to occur and frequently.

(ii) The Committee considered the proposed addition of a note to regulation 3 regarding requirements for graduation, students are not required to complete zero credit rated professional skills courses (in Academic Writing and/or Professional Development) in order to graduate. The Committee were not in favour of this addition, however, acknowledged that the wider issue of Professional Development courses would be considered at the forthcoming Undergraduate Committee meeting.

(iii) The Committee considered the proposed amendment of regulation 4.3 to reflect that students will not normally register for more than 75 credit points in either half session. Members of the Committee supported this change but noted concern if this was to be implemented at levels 3 and 4 there could be a knock on effect on a student’s GPA/degree classification.

(iv) The Committee considered the proposed amendment of regulation 6 to reflect that, in exceptional circumstances, a Head of School may waive the requirements of entry to a course prescribed for the degree programme on which a candidate is registered. Waiving of pre-requisites for non-compulsory courses, however, would not be permitted. While in agreement with the fact that a Head of School may waive requirements of entry, the Committee noted concerned that this be restricted to non-compulsory courses. The Committee were not content to approve the stipulation that no student (even with Head of School permission) could register for a non-compulsory course.

Action: Clerk

Clerk’s Note: This feedback was provided to the Convener and Clerk to the UCTL and the Omnibus Resolution discussed in detail at the meeting of the UCTL. A revised version was sent to the QAC for their consideration.
COURSE CAPPING

5.1 The Committee noted the spreadsheet detailing caps to courses for academic year 2016/17. The Committee acknowledged that the spreadsheet provided represented course caps likely approved through SENAS, however, that these had built up over a period of time and may not now be reasonable.

5.2 The Committee noted concern that there was not always obvious reasoning behind the caps listed. The Committee specifically noted concern regarding the caps for level 3 sixth century courses in recognition of the fact options for students in level 3 were often very limited. The Committee agreed that they were content to approve the spreadsheet, however, agreed that the caps perhaps be reviewed and discussed with Schools in an effort to determine rationale.

ANNUAL COURSE REVIEW (ACR)

6.1 The Committee noted the Annual Course Review (ACR) sampling carried out across 6 of the University’s Schools for the first half session of Academic Year 2015/16. Members of the Committee noted that, overall, the responses provided were well thought out and reflective. Members of the Committee agreed to return School specific feedback to the clerk for dissemination.

Clerk’s Note: Draft responses to the 6 Schools have been prepared and sent on approval from Professor Shennan.

POLICY AND PROCEDURES ON STUDENT APPEALS

7.1 Members of the Committee noted the Policy and Procedures on Student Appeals (copy filed as QAC/210416/006). Members of the Committee expressed concern as to variation of practice in appeal hearings. The clerk confirmed that the written policy was correct in this regard and that both case officers who administer the process and Conveners of panels would be reminded of appropriate appeal hearing procedure.

Clerk’s Note: Training updates have been provided to case officers who are asked to remind conveners of the appropriate process.

PHD EXAMINERS REPORTS

8.1 Members of the Committee discussed the process for the approval of PhD Examiners Reports, specifically in instances where the reports referred to re-submission. Members of the Committee noted concern that, in these instances, reports often provided little information or confirmation that all issues as raised previously had been addressed. Members of the Committee agreed that Robert Findlay, Head of the Postgraduate Team, should be contacted regarding potentially amending the process.

Clerk’s Note: Robert Findlay has been contacted regarding the clarification of, and potential amendment to, the process.

GRAMMAR AND SYNTAX
9.1 Following discussion at the University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL) regarding an external examiner's annual report in which concern was expressed regarding a perceived informal policy at the University not to penalise non-native English speaking students for poor use of language, the Committee discussed the possibility of introducing guidance for staff on the use of grammar and syntax by all students in pieces of assessed work.

9.2 Members of the Committee expressed concern over the perception of the external examiner, acknowledging that all students in all pieces of assessed work were expected to express themselves appropriately and that their submission be understandable. Members of the Committee agreed that whether or not marks may be affected by poor grammar or syntax could be dependent on the subject being studied.

9.3 Members of the Committee noted a proof reading service as provided by the University of Edinburgh’s Students’ Association and agreed that looking into such a provision for Aberdeen may be beneficial.

Action: Mr Fuller

ISSUES/PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE QAC

10.1 The Committee noted the request to identify issues/priorities to be discussed at future meetings of the Committee. Members of the Committee agreed to return any suggestions to the clerk by way of email.

Action: Committee

COURSE AND PROGRAMME PROPOSALS

11.1 A list of all Undergraduate and Postgraduate courses and programmes approved since the February meeting of the Quality Assurance Committee can be found here.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

12.1 The Committee noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held in academic year 2016/17, on a date yet to be finalised.

AOCB

13.1 Members of the Committee noted the tabled paper ‘Length of Study for Part Time PhDs’. Members of the Committee noted the issue as raised, agreeing that the proposal to raise fees to bring the annual part time fees in line with (a) exactly half the annual full time fees and (b) other institutions was sensible. The Committee agreed to approve the proposal.

Action: Clerk

Clerk’s Note: Robert Findlay has been informed of the Committee decision.

13.2 Members of the Committee noted the tabled paper ‘Update on Annual Programme Review Process’. The Committee noted the intention to submit the paper to the UCTL to obtain approval for continuing with the process following its pilot in academic year 2014/15. Members of the Committee agreed to return any comments on the document to the clerk by way of email.

Action: Clerk

Clerk’s Note: No further comments were received.