APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 21 OCTOBER 2015

1.1 The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2015. The Committee agreed that the minutes were representative of discussions held.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

2.1 The Committee identified no specific issues arising relating to Health and Safety.

GREEN PAPER CONSULTATION

3.1 The Committee was asked to provide comments to inform the University’s response to the current UK Government consultation on the Green Paper ‘Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice’.

3.2 The Convener stressed the importance of the document and its potential impact on Scottish institutions due to the implications of the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and publically available metrics, as well as potentially resulting effects on a wide range of other areas including student intake, fees, external examining, and degree classifications.

3.3 The Committee noted that, at the time of the meeting, the University had received no direction from the Scottish Government in relation to the Green Paper. Despite this, it was agreed that it was important for Scottish institutions to be represented at an upcoming technical consultation.

3.4 It was remarked that a great deal of effort was needed across the sector to raise awareness of the potential risk the proposed changes presented to the identity of the Scottish higher education system. In addition, were the changes to go ahead and the University become involved by necessity, the prospect of adhering to the current Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) alongside new processes would present additional work as a result of the current differences between both systems.

3.5 Members of the Committee noted with concern the possible changes to the procedure for appointing external examiners, suggesting that this could discourage both current and future candidates from the role. Further to this, it was suggested that the standardising of
recruitment could make it impossible to appoint examiners from outside the UK, thereby impacting the University's international status.

3.6 It was suggested that the lack of official direction on the matter could present an opportunity for the sector as a whole to respond by highlighting concerns to the Scottish Government in the hope that ELIR could be adapted to incorporate TEF. It was observed that the timescale for such a response could be limited given the upcoming parliamentary elections.

3.7 The Convener agreed that the sector would want the Scottish Government to discuss the implications of the Green Paper with the rest of the UK, particularly with authorities in Wales and Northern Island, with whom a cross-UK agreement could be reached to voice mutual concerns more strongly. This was seen as being especially valuable as it had been felt that previous efforts by Universities Scotland (US) had failed to carry enough weight; the US response having counted as a single response despite representing nineteen institutions.

3.8 There followed a discussion on metrics which considered the implications for the Careers Service, that the proposed system could mask potential for further earning, as well as the concern that TEF’s reliance on metrics such as scores in the National Student Survey (NSS), would not in fact offer a clear indication of teaching excellence. It was also pointed out that, as the international marketplace favours rankings, simple metrics would only yield simple results.

3.9 The Convener asked members of the Committee for their thoughts on ways that might more accurately demonstrate teaching excellence, particularly in terms of learning gain. Members raised the concern that learning gain was difficult to measure, given that a weak student performing well could be down to either good teaching or easy assessment.

3.10 It was pointed out that a pan-European initiative for assessing learning gain had been carried out previously at great cost but its proposals were ultimately rejected by the European Union. Additionally, the suggestion of topic-independent standardised psychometric tests had failed to yield positive results in the United States. Members raised the concern that such tests could be considered little more than glorified IQ tests, measuring innate ability rather than an improvement through learning.

3.11 There followed a discussion on critical thinking skills in which it was proposed that the University's current Graduate Attributes framework could be used as the basis for new tests, should their implementation be considered worthwhile. Furthermore, their usefulness to employers was considered at length, with the Committee noting that contrasting views in the media along with differing feedback from employers made the appeal of such indicators difficult to gauge. The Committee agreed that student engagement remained a primary concern in ensuring that students are well-equipped by the time they leave university.

3.12 Members of the Committee were cautious about establishing metrics and advocated a lighter touch to restrict costs in order to justify quality against expense. It would be better, it was felt, not to waste time and money on further measuring the University's current excellence when the same resources could be spent on improvements.

3.13 Members of the Committee remarked that a clearer distinction between excellence and satisfaction would be necessary to inform the University's response to the Green Paper's proposals, which prompted a discussion regarding the difference between each, particularly in the context of student feedback. It was agreed that the NSS, while not perfect, did offer
direct indicators of teaching excellence but needed a greater turnout to produce robust statistics. To this end, it was suggested that the NSS be made a mandatory requirement for all graduating students, to which the concern was raised that such a measure could negatively impact satisfaction.

3.14 Members of the Committee reiterated their support for the ELIR approach of improving over measuring. While agreeing, the Convener made clear that cross-UK implications and the resulting recruitment issues would mean that universities across Scotland could be massively disadvantaged without participating in TEF. While the concern was raised that Scotland's nineteen institutions would be outnumbered in any debate on the matter, it was felt that they were united as a sector, substantially more coherent and with a powerful spread of activity in comparison to other institutions in the UK, not all of which would be in support of the Green Paper.

3.15 Further to the discussion regarding support for the argument against the Green Paper's proposals, it was agreed that Scotland's MPs may also be able to assist in Westminster. It was suggested there was a danger that the matter could be misleadingly seen as an 'English-only' issue, thereby sidelining Scottish input; this would be especially concerning due to the danger that an English league table might be perceived internationally as representing the whole of the UK.

3.16 The Convener agreed that the UCTL would return to this topic at future meetings as the conversation surrounding the Green Paper was expected to evolve quickly.

INTRODUCTION OF ONLINE ‘PROFESSIONAL SKILLS COURSES’ FOR ALL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

(copy filed as UCTL/140116/003)

4.1 The Committee were asked to consider the proposal for the introduction of online professional skills courses for all undergraduate students. Members were given an overview of the different elements of the courses, which included aspects of health and safety as well as equality and diversity.

4.2 There followed a brief discussion regarding a change in the courses’ credit point value, which had been amended to 0 since they were last considered by the Committee. Members raised the concern that students who did not engage with the courses would receive a NP mark in their transcripts but it was pointed out that the courses were similar to the Academic Writing courses which Arts students were already required to enrol on.

4.3 As the courses would be compulsory for all undergraduate students, it was suggested that they could provide a means of identifying non-engagement amongst students and thereby present potentially valuable information for retention purposes.

4.4 The Committee agreed to support the proposal, which would be presented at the next meeting of the Senate. It was agreed that a link would be provided with the papers for the Senate which would allow members to view further details of the courses.

[Clerk’s Note: Papers for the meeting of the Senate included direction to contact the Careers Service for further information.]
5.1 When considering the annual report from the Careers Service, the Committee’s attention was drawn to the conclusions section, highlighting similar statistics between the 2013-14 and 2014-15 reports. Notable trends included a decline in engagement from Engineering and fewer energy sector based presentations, presumed to be a result of the current industrial climate, as well as a suggestion from early numbers and anecdotal evidence pointing towards an increase in students entering postgraduate study.

5.2 The Committee were informed that the Careers Service currently has sixteen employees. It was also agreed that a link to the annual report would be circulated for wider dissemination.

MINUTES AND UPDATE REPORTS FROM SUB-COMMITTEES

6.1 The Committee noted the minutes as provided from the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC). Members of the Committee noted that, since the last meeting of the UCTL, there had been two meetings of the QAC, at which the consideration of submitted external examiner reports and annual reviews were the primary focus.

6.2 The Convener of the QAC proposed that the current process for the annual review of programmes and courses be permitted to continue, to which all members agreed. It was expected that resulting benefits would become apparent from the outcomes of future Internal Teaching Reviews at the University.

6.3 The Committee noted the minutes as provided from the Postgraduate Committee (PGC). The Convener of the PGC reported that there had been a great deal of discussion around the ongoing issue of mental health among postgraduate students as part of the last meeting, at which a representative from Student Support had been present. This matter was felt to be most concerning in relation to PhD students, and it was suggested that supervisors be given more training in order to increase their awareness, possibly as part of an annual refresher presentation.

6.4 Members of the Committee noted that Student Support were struggling to meet the demand for counselling sessions, resulting in significant waiting times. Also of concern were those students who were not coming forward for help. In addition, it was pointed that the issue of mental health was becoming a more common factor in appeal cases. It was suggested that the Mental Health Working Group be reconvened and its membership reviewed.

[Action: Clerk]

6.5 The Convener acknowledged that mental health had been identified as an important issue in discussions across other committees, extending to undergraduate students as well. It was requested that all such feedback be brought to the attention of the Student Experience Committee.

[Action: Clerk]

6.6 The Committee noted the minutes as provided from the Undergraduate Committee (UGC). Among topics addressed recently were the Green Paper as well as the use of Camtasia to record teaching, in conjunction with intellectual property rights.
6.7 The Convener acknowledged that copyright clearance was an increasingly significant issue as the format of teaching moved towards digital distribution. It was pointed out that other institutions employed opt-in recorded classes or a policy of pausing recordings in order to omit copyright material whenever possible.

6.8 There followed a discussion on the matter of intellectual property rights, the key points of which were student access to recordings, the implication of recording copyright material and where the responsibility lay in the event of legal action being taken against the University. The Committee noted that the Centre for Academic Development were in the process of establishing guidance for staff on the subject.

AOCB

7.1 The Convener brought to the attention of the Committee a comment which had been submitted as part of 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.

7.2 There followed a discussion on the matter, the key points of which were possible similarities to concessions already made for students with dyslexia, the complications presented by anonymous marking, and the need for some disciplines to be less lenient, particularly those in which the technical aspects of language used are key (i.e. English).

7.3 It was expressed that recurrent issues with the use of grammar or syntax should be raised with the student, otherwise penalties should only be imposed where errors impact the ability to mark their work. Members of the Committee agreed that guidance for staff on the matter would be useful and it was requested that this be considered by the QAC when responding to the external examiner.

[Action: QAC]

DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

8.1 Members noted the next meetings of the Committee, to be held on Wednesday 11 May 2016 in the Court Room.

POLICY AND PROCEDURES ON STUDENT APPEALS

(copy filed as UCTL/211015/012)

9.1 The Committee approved amendments to the Policy and Procedures on Student Appeals. These minor amendments were required to incorporate appeals arising from Fitness to Practise cases into the University’s appeals processes.

GRADUATION DATES

(copy filed as UCTL/140116/007)

10.1 The Committee approved the dates and allocations of students for the June 2016 Graduation ceremonies.
11.1 The Committee approved a recommendation to include further co-curricular activities on the graduation transcript. It was therefore agreed that internships and placements sourced and monitored by the Careers Service will be included on transcripts as ‘recognised activity’.

UCTL ANNUAL REPORT TO SENATE AND OMNIBUS RESOLUTION

12.1 The Committee was invited to note that the Annual Report to Senate and the changes to degree regulations would be circulated for consideration after the meeting. Due to the changed timing of the January meeting it had not been possible to complete these in sufficient time to be included for the meeting.