

UNDERGRADUATE COMMITTEE
(14 October 2011)

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNDERGRADUATE COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 14 October 2011

Present: Dr J Morrison, Ms J Bjorkqvist, Dr S Davies, Dr A Jenkinson, Professor J King, Dr D McCausland, Dr G McEwan, Dr Masthoff, Professor R Patey, Dr J Perkins, Dr L Philips, Dr R Wells, with Miss Alyson Hogg (Clerk) in attendance.

Apologies: Mrs L Clark, Dr P Davidson, Professor P McGeorge, Dr A Macdonald, Dr G Mackintosh, Dr J Mcdonald, Dr R Vij

MINUTES

1. The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 13 May 2011.

(copy filed as UGC/141011/001)

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR

- 2.0 The Committee received a paper proposing changes to the structure of the academic year, including the feasibility of examinations before Christmas and reducing the late-registration period.

(copy filed as UGC/141011/002)

- 2.1 The Committee noted the key features of the proposed model, including moving the first half-session examination diet to before Christmas, bringing forward the start date of the autumn semester and maintaining the August resit examination diet.

- 2.2 In discussing the paper, the Committee noted the significant advantages and disadvantages to be expected if the proposed model was to be approved. The Committee acknowledged that the proposed model would not extend the period of time; instead it would simply makes changes to the University's existing model.

- 2.3 The Committee noted that several of the University's competitors operate 10-week terms and agreed that the main problem was the 12-week terms which currently operate at the University of Aberdeen. However, the Committee further noted that the retention of a 12-week teaching semester was desirable, across several areas. It was agreed that certain areas would find it difficult to condense the teaching into a shorter time period.

- 2.4 In discussing the proposal, opinion appeared to be divided amongst the Committee in regards to exams before or after Christmas. Some members of the Committee agreed that it was poor practice educationally to have exams after Christmas, whereas others agreed that some students i.e. international students, benefited from having exams after Christmas as the break between teaching and examinations provided essential revision time.

- 2.5 One member of the Committee suggested that we simply tweak the current model and proposed that exams should remain *after* Christmas but instead start slightly earlier i.e. start the first week back following the Christmas break.

- 2.6 Members of the Committee agreed that any change to the current model would have to be pretty significant/radical to make a real difference. The Committee further agreed that change should only be made if it was to be of benefit to both staff and students.
- 2.7 The Committee once again discussed the possibility of a 10-week term and agreed that this appeared to be the most favourable option; however the Committee further agreed that this would have to be looked at radically. Members also suggested that the University may wish to consider a variation of this and suggested moving to two 5-week terms in each half-session.
- 2.8 It was evident that the Committee were mostly in favour of a 10-week term but agreed that any substantial change such as this would have to be carefully considered. The Committee agreed that significant time would need to be given to staff to allow them to prepare adequately for any proposed change to the existing model.

EXAMINATIONS HELD OFF-CAMPUS

- 3.0 The Committee received a brief paper asking that consideration be given to whether there should be a change in University policy regarding requests from students to sit examinations outwith Aberdeen.
(copy filed as UGC/141011/003)
- 3.1 The Committee noted that increasingly the University is receiving requests from overseas students who are being required to sit resit examinations, and wish to sit these examinations in their home countries. In regards to this, concerns were raised by the Committee about the volume of students this could affect.
- 3.2 In considering the above, the Committee noted that many other institutions routinely permit students to sit resit exams overseas and it appears to be working well. However, the Committee agreed that this would not be appropriate for clinical exams and that this must be made explicit if any change to policy is made.
- 3.3 Following lengthy discussion, the Committee agreed that no change to University policy should be made, however the Committee suggested that further clarification/definition of exceptional circumstances should be provided. It was agreed that this would help clarify the situation for both staff and students.
- 3.4 Clerk's Note: Following the meeting it was agreed that this paper would come back to a future meeting of the Undergraduate Committee for discussion.

MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES

- 4.0 The Committee received a paper outlining a proposal to adopt a standard form to be used for all circumstances which may have affected students' studies.
(copy filed as UGC/141011/004)
- 4.1 The Committee noted that the proposal had come out of the review of academic appeals and complaints and it had been suggested that it would be beneficial to improve consistency across all Schools in the reporting mechanism for students reporting personal circumstances which have affected their studies.
- 4.2 The Committee noted the different approaches taken by other institutions with electronic forms being a common approach with most being submitted centrally, often using student portals or equivalent.
- 4.3 In considering the proposal, the Committee agreed that a clear institutional statement regarding reporting requirements was essential and would ensure that all students were aware of the relevant processes. The Committee also agreed that although the proposal was a good idea in practice, any

change to the reporting mechanism would need to be publicised well in advance and communicated to all students.

- 4.4 Following general discussion, the Committee further agreed that students would need to be made aware that any information submitted as part of their mitigating circumstances would be dealt with in the strictest confidence.
- 4.5 In considering the proposal, the Committee agreed that the proposed form was rather large and would perhaps be better split into two separate forms, one for extension requests and one for issues relating to exams. One member of the Committee suggested having one electronic form which, depending on the information input, would depend on the boxes provided for completion.
- 4.6 In summary, the Committee agreed the following:
- The form should be used for **all** absences, not solely for medical or other good cause
 - The form should be submitted electronically to Registry in the first instance and then on to the appropriate School Office(s)
 - The University should **not** develop a list of permissible/not permissible reasons for absence
 - The University should give consideration to changing the way in which reports of mitigating circumstances are handled by examiners.
- 4.7 In relation to the last point, the Committee agreed that there must be a coherent way in which reports of mitigating circumstances are handled by examiners.

RESIT EXAMINATION ATTEMPTS

- 5.0 The Committee received a paper outlining a proposal for consideration to be given to reducing the number of attempts available to students.
(copy filed as UGC/141011/005)
- 5.1 The Committee noted the proposal that students who fail at the first attempt would be permitted one resit only, to be undertaken at the August diet. The Committee further noted that students who fail at resit would be required to re-attend the course.
- 5.2 In discussing this, the Committee noted that the current regulations permit students a total of three opportunities of assessment within a two year period. However, in considering this, some members of the Committee were of the opinion that the number of attempts currently offered by the University was extremely generous, especially compared to the University's counterparts.
- 5.3 Following general discussion, the Students' Association informed the Committee that reducing the number of resit attempts could only be a good thing and that students, on the whole, were in support of this. Members agreed that the current number of attempts was unfair to students who passed the course first time round.
- 5.4 In discussing the proposal, the Committee noted the difficulty that this would cause some students in regards to their progression. The Committee agreed that such a change would have a potential impact on student progression as the current regulations permit students to progress between years carrying two 15 credit point courses.
- 5.5 In relation to this, members of the Committee from the School of Medical Sciences were extremely anxious at the proposal to amend the number of resit attempts. Concerns were raised regarding students who failed the resit in August, as this would mean that they would have to retake the course again the following year. Members were concerned that this would cause problems as Level 1 courses would not necessarily timetable. In addition to this, concerns were raised that students being unable

to progress to the next programme year carrying a fail could have an effect on University retention figures.

- 5.6 Having considered all comments, the Committee agreed that the number of resit opportunities should be reduced but agreed that the concerns of the School of Medical Sciences should be clearly noted.

INDUCTION UPDATE

- 6.0 The Convener requested an update from School Directors of Teaching regarding induction and the start of term.
- 6.1 Following general discussion, the Committee agreed that there was still room for improvement in certain areas including Cando and *MyAberdeen* formerly WebCT. From the feedback provided the Committee noted that this year, on the whole, Cando was successful for most areas, except Arts. Unfortunately Arts Advisers were not provided with the necessary training for Cando and therefore chose not to use it during Advising. However, the Committee noted that those areas that did use it had mostly positive comments to report.
- 6.2 The Committee further noted that the switchover from WebCT to *MyAberdeen* had proved to be a bit of an issue for both staff and students; although it was agreed that this could have been due to it being a new system and their unfamiliarity of it. However, the Committee agreed that it was not obvious who the appropriate contact was for *MyAberdeen*, should staff and students have any queries.
- 6.3 The Committee agreed that, on the whole, things appeared to be smoother than in previous years and that Advising and Registration (including induction) had been relatively successful.

NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS 2011

- 7.0 The Committee received a paper from Policy, Planning and Governance summarising the results of the National Student Survey (NSS), which the University took part in for the fifth time in 2011.
(copy filed as UGC/141011/006)
- 7.1 In discussing the findings, the Committee noted that the University had increased its response rate in 2011 to 66%, which is the highest response rate ever for the University.
- 7.2 The Committee noted that the overall satisfaction amongst students was relatively high within the survey, however once again there were low levels of student satisfaction in respect to assessment and feedback. In relation to this, the Committee were reminded of the new Enhancing Feedback website, which offers guidance and ideas for both staff and students on providing and working with feedback. The Committee noted that the website had been designed in response to outcomes from student-informed surveys, including NSS. The Committee further noted that it was hoped that this would constitute a significant resource to support students in making the most of the feedback they receive.
- 7.3 The Convener informed the Committee that the various Heads of School had been requested to provide detailed action plans to each of the College Director of Teaching and Learning. In response to this, the Committee agreed that the University must promote areas which have clearly been addressed, as a result of the survey, to ensure that students are able to see that their views are important and taken into consideration. The Committee agreed that the best way to disseminate this information would be for Heads of School to notify students, perhaps, via email.
- 7.4 Finally, the Committee noted that it was proposed to move to a system to allow students to make comments, such as those noted during the NSS, during the first three years of their studies, in the hope that issues can be addressed at an earlier juncture.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

8.0 The Committee noted that the next meeting would be held as follows:

Friday 9 December 2011 at 2.00pm in the Committee Room 2, University Office.