

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

**STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE (SSEC)**

Minute of the Meeting held on Monday 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2023.

*Present:* Erin Ferguson, Lucy Leiper, Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan, Lesley Muirhead, Lyn Batchelor, John Cavanagh, Jason Bohan, Wendy Lowe, Melanie Viney, Hugo Taylor, Duncan Stuart, Steve Tucker, Melanie Viney, Tim Baker, Kelsey Pierce, Jena Stuart, Jackie Tuckwell, Graeme Kirkpatrick, Nick Edwards, Martin Barker, Natalie Kinchin-Williams, Rhiannon Ledwell, Stevie Kearney

*Apologies:* Jemma Murdoch, Charlotta Hillerdal, Helen Pierce, Mary Prior, Martin Mills, Heather Branigan, Julie Timms, Iain Grant, Anne-Michelle Slater, Susan Halfpenny, Katrina Foy.

### **Welcome and chair's update**

**1.1** Nick Edwards (NE) welcomed those attending the meeting online and in person. NE introduced the agenda and noted that item 7 of the agenda had been removed, as this will not be progressed via the SSEC.

### **Approval of the minute of the SSEC held on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023**

*(copy filed as SSEC/210823/002)*

**2.1** No comments or amendments were received from members of the Committee. The minutes of the SSEC meeting held on 03/05/23 were approved.

**2.2** NE updated on actions from previous meeting. TFG updates are on the agenda for this meeting, with one update due in September, while the update on the Aberdeen 2040 goals will also feature in the September meeting. Stevie Kearney (SK) had an action to look at room booking for future SSEC meetings, which is now complete.

### **Pastoral Support Review TFG - update**

**3.1** JB introduced the paper, which is an update on progress and a request for any thoughts or comments as to whether the work is on the right track. The two main actions JB inherited when he took on the role within SSEC were to look at the website, which was very complex, with staff and student pages interlinked and hard to navigate. Following a review, the website is now more user-friendly. Additionally, JB had an action to address the delivery of pastoral support for Postgraduate Taught (PGT) programmes.

The old website is still online but the paper provides a link to the new website, for comparison and comments. The old staff and student pages will be removed and replaced by one pastoral support

website, which summarises how it is delivered across UG and PG programmes, while there is also a password-protected staff page full of useful resources.

JB offered his thanks to Karen Scaife and members of the TFG who provided useful insight.

On the PGT pastoral support review, it wasn't possible to extend personal tutor support to PGT students, so JB spoke with schools about current support to find out what is working well and what can be improved. It was felt a lot of work was happening, but it needed to feel more cohesive. Key ideas included ensuring there are named contacts for students rather than an individual or a generic departmental contact, and also ensuring a proactive communications strategy with students as key stakeholders able to provide their input.

Martin Barker (MB) asked if it was only for PGT students, or if PGR students are included. Lucy Leiper (LL) said PGR support was already well-structured but she is due to provide content for the website which is specific to PGR students. The PRES results will indicate if any further action is required in this area.

Graeme Kirkpatrick (GK) said it was good to see focus on the PGT group as the Student Union advice service is almost at breaking point due to the number of requests for academic support coming from PGT students, particularly international students. GK said it was disappointing the University couldn't find the resource to implement the personal tutor system for PGTs to give them the same level of support as UG students, but recognise the restraints in terms of resources. He noted that it should still be the aim of the University to find the resources required to offer a personal tutor to PGT students as he felt this was a big gap in provision. GK highlighted the link between students arriving late and subsequently requiring academic support and asked why all schools were not implementing the induction processes and catch-up opportunities for late arrivals.

JB noted some schools were more active in this area than others and the paper seeks to address this issue. JB then invited any of the school representative to comment on the discussion.

Erin Ferguson (EF) said the Law School has recently introduced a mini-induction in week 3, which seems to be working well but it's too early to form a proper assessment. The Law School is also looking at the possibility of having someone responsible for checking in with any late arrivals during their first few weeks to ensure they are catching up and on-track.

John Cavanagh (JC) said he felt the Personal Tutor was a pastoral role and not an academic one, so there are two separate issues being confused in the discussion. JB noted the two roles are very much interlinked and it's not possible to separate the pastoral support from the academic support in many cases. GK said it is a signposting role which is vital for PGTs and the Student Union sees a lot of PGT students who struggle with orientation in the first term, which they tend not to see with UG students, as they have a personal tutor.

Tim Baker (TB) said his school do offer a week 3 re-induction but it doesn't work as students do not attend. He said he agreed there was a need for more support but said it can be difficult to engage with any late arrivals, but suggested a type of personal tutor for those who arrive late during the weeks they are missing. TB said the biggest problem is students not attending classes and not realising they need to attend classes, which then causes a lot of subsequent issues.

JC said most late arrivals contact their programme coordinator as their first point of contact upon arrival.

NE added that each school has a named contact within the Student Advice & Support Team, who is there to work with the school on any student support issues on school policy, but not for individual student cases, which should still go centrally to the Student Advice & Support Team. Lesley Muirhead (LM) shared the contact list with the group via Teams.

Duncan Stuart (DS) said there is a comprehensive range of communications which goes out to students prior to enrolment and during their initial weeks and this information will cover all the key areas they need information on, but does not work if the students do not read the information. He suggested it would be useful to speak with those who feel they have not had sufficient information to identify the key problems they have faced and why.

MB said having programme coordinators responsible for new PGT students seemed to be the alternative to personal tutors, but if they have a large number of student to support, then the service cannot be proactive and will struggle to meet students' needs, due to the staff to student ratios, which are much higher than for personal tutors at UG.

Rhiannon Ledwell (RL) noted that certain schools also have much higher numbers of appeals than others, which has an impact on resources and support available.

JB said some schools hadn't been clear about who the contact people are, as some said they had noted it at induction, but it hadn't been re-emphasised since then.

NE concluded by saying the TGF will be wound up but will now become a Senior Pastoral Support & Guidance Forum as a formal group that reports into SSEC. JB said it was long-running TFG and it needed to come to an end, but the new forum will pull all this work together and develop this work going forwards to improve the PGT experience.

**ACTION – JB to provide information on the composition of the Senior Pastoral Support & Guidance Forum**

## **Student Absence Policy**

**4.1** JB introduced the agenda item and the background, which is that the Student Absence Policy and associated policies and procedures require some adaptation, due to Old Aberdeen Medical Practice no longer offering letters to students for absences including classes, exams and other assessments. As such, the Absence Policy needs to be flexible to cover instances where a student is unable to obtain a medical letter through no fault of their own.

The main changes to the policy are around an expansion of acceptable forms of evidence and discussion around allowing students more scope for self-certifying.

Initially, the discussion focussed on the idea of offering students more trust when it comes to reporting absences, with JC expressing potential concern about the potential for abuse of this system, while RL noted that policies can't be written on the assumption that students will not tell the truth about absences or extension requests.

LM noted that from a Student Support Services perspective, a move away from the insistence on medical evidence was seen as a positive development. Also, it will be beneficial to allow the schools to have more discretion, rather than referring students to the Student Support team to have the same conversation they already had with their school, to then get a letter of support as evidence.

On the issues around students declaring themselves fit to sit if they attempt an exam, Melanie Viney (MV) cited instances where this is insufficient as a student could become unwell during the exam, While RL said some students may be encountering a period of poor mental health and are not aware they are not well enough to sit the assessment.

JC from the School of Engineering noted that students cannot be expected to read the policies and felt sometimes school staff did not fully-understand the policies. NE added that often students would only look up a policy if they were absent, so that left a potential gap where students may sit any assessments when unwell, as they are unaware of the policies and procedures.

On the discussion around what constitutes “good cause”, JB suggested it would possibly make more sense to have a list of circumstances which do not constitute good cause, rather than trying to create an exhaustive list of circumstances which do meet the criteria.

NE suggested point 1.5 was worth looking at again, as the wording appears to suggest the implementation of a ‘fit to sit policy’, but said he was not sure this document was the right place for such a statement and was wary of anything which made it sound like a formal ‘fit to sit’ policy was in place.

MB emphasised that the policies in place need consistency, clarity and objectivity.

JB summarised the discussion as being broadly positive, with some concern around the phrasing of ‘fit to sit’ which may need amending.

**ACTION: JB and LL to discuss how the policy changes are to be implemented with regards to PGR students.**

## **NSS Initial Report**

**5.1** JB noted the NSS seems quite different this year, with changes in questions and reporting processes. JB will be visiting schools to follow up on school-specific feedback. He noted in England, a number of universities are reporting an overall score, based on all categories. The devolved nations tend to focus more on the student satisfaction score. Overall, we had many strong top 10 areas, but it’s not as easy to compare to previous years due to changes.

NE said it is always easier to digest once the numbers have been broken down by category to give more detail. NE asked for any comments from the committee.

No comments from group.

## **Survey Season proposal**

**6.1** DS introduced the agenda item and paper, noting the focus of the surveys is generally on all student surveys, or those which go to large student of students. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of learning and teaching questions were added to the Aberdeen Student Experience Survey.

Some questions will be added to next survey, on areas like immigration and equality, diversity and inclusion. The survey is already seen to be lengthy, so the size will be reduced where possible. The teaching and learning question will now be removed, but there is a proposal to have learning and teaching as a stand-alone survey, which will run at the same time as other academic surveys, in the first two to three months of the year.

LL said the proposals sound sensible and now the Research School has PRES, those questions related to research students can be removed, although this will need to be approved at the next research committee meeting.

MB queried if there was a danger of survey fatigue, with so many surveys going out. DS noted there is work underway in certain specific areas, such as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, which is being taken forwards by Claire Maysoya, with LM in Student Advice & Support. NE confirmed there has been discussion about capturing data which is more specific to certain groups, such as disabled students and their experience. Conversations are ongoing about how best to gather this feedback.

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan (SSV) added the Student Union is aware of the potential for survey fatigue and has discussed this previously. On the questions to be added to the Aberdeen Student Experience Survey, SSV asked if these can be shared for info and feedback. DS agreed to share the questions.

**ACTION – DS to share Aberdeen Student Experience Questions with SSV for discussion with the Student Union.**

TB asked if the survey results can be disaggregated for PG students, to separate out the challenges faced by those who are new to the country when commencing their studies. JB said it was an externally-run survey but this should be possible.

On completion rates, JC said it made a big difference to response rates if time can be put aside in class for the completion of important surveys and recommended this approach where possible.

DS concluded by noting the general rule is to ensure we only ask questions where the responses are areas we can act on or do something tangible with the data, to ensure there are no unnecessary questions included.

## **Widening Access and Vulnerable Groups update**

**7.1** NE advised this item was removed from the agenda and will be progressed separately from the SSEC.

## **Reflection on final report of SSEC Task and Finish Group**

**8.1** NE introduced the paper on the new code of practice on student discipline, which is mainly for information. This has now been updated on the University website and has been reconfirmed through the E-Registration system. Also, on the website, there is a guide for students on the policy to break the information down and be more manageable, especially for those wishing to make a report based on areas the code covers. There will be more work on this in terms of publicity and the TFG has now finished, but the code will be reviewed on a two-yearly basis. NE also offered his thanks for all those who contributed to the significant work involved.

## **Student Monitoring and Engagement TFG**

**9.1** NE noted this is the final TFG of the three previously running as part of the SSEC's work, with the other two now completed.

JB offered his thanks to everyone involved in the Monitoring and Engagement TFG as it's been a very large piece of work, ongoing since 2021. The main update is on the old IT systems in place which added significantly to staff workload. The TFC drew up a list of recommended updates and the list was then revised based on feedback. The list now includes 10 updates which have now been approved, so the TFG will remain in place to oversee this work.

**ACTION – JB to check if there was student representation on the TGF and let GK know the outcome.**

## **Full-Time Undergraduate Non-Continuation Internal Data 2021/22**

**10.1** JB introduced the paper, which is based on all students and run internally. Non-continuing rates are up from 3.2% in the previous year to 5.1% in 2021/22. JB indicated this may be in part due to monitoring procedures. As the data is broken down by school, it's a very useful report for identifying trends, and also trends across cohorts. There is also some data relating to disability, ethnicity and gender. The data will be used by schools to develop their action plans, especially for those school performing less well in this area.

Lyn Batchelor (LB) asked if UK-domiciled included those on visa and living in the UK, so just excludes global online and those studying outside the UK? JB said he was unsure but would find out.

SSV said UK-domiciled includes those with Infinite Leave to Remain, but not those on a Student Route visa (previously known as Tier 4 visas). LB asked if student on the Qatar campus are classed as 'rest of the world' but NE said he would need to check on this for clarity. LB noted the Qatar students are classes as part of their school in Aberdeen.

**ACTION – NE to check on the status of student on the Qatar campus for the purposes of the non-continuation data.**

GK said the non-continuation rates within the School of Engineering are high and consistent with how the school scores across other metrics such as the NSS. JB said the school was unusual in that non-continuation rates were high in Year 3 as well as Year 1.

JC said within Engineering there has been a bigger drop-out rate at the start of Year 3 as the engineering discipline becomes more specific rather than general. The course also gets a lot harder at level 3. Also, on a non school-specific point with regards to non-continuation rates. there could be an after-effect from teacher-awarded A-Level grades as these could have been overstated.

MB noted that the paper focuses on who is not continuing but less on why they are not continuing. GK said this is because it can be very difficult to get this information from students when they leave, as they have disengaged and there is no advantage to the student to explain their reasons for leaving. The information on the form is often incomplete but NE said the boxes on the form are largely set in accordance with the data required by HESA.

On the reasons for non-continuation, LB pointed out charts 14 and 15 in the paper, which indicate academic failure was one of the least cited reasons, which health and wellbeing was the most cited reason.

JB said that although there are significant gaps in the data, the figures show the midway point of the first term if Year 1 is when students are most likely to drop-out, so interventions and communications can be directed prior to this time.

LM added that the form asks if non-continuing students have engaged with anyone at the University about their circumstances and asked if anything is done with this data. Kelsey Pierce (KP) said the Registry Team do not contact students directly in this situation but the data is passed back to the schools. This is done for UG and PGR, but not for PGTs.

SSV asked if the data is broken down by widening access categories and JB said he would look into this query.

**ACTION – JB to find out if non-continuing student data can be broken down by widening access categories.**

TB asked if we can get more detail on those with disabilities and LM said this data was included in the HESA categories so it should be possible to be obtained. NE added that disability may not be the reason for non-continuation, so there were limits to what the data can tell us.

## **Reflection on Aberdeen 2040 Updates on Operational Plan**

**11.1** This will be discussed at the next SSEC meeting in September, with a presentation from Iain Grant.

### **AOCB**

**11.1**

There was no other business to be discussed.

## **Date of Next Meeting**

**14.1**

The next meeting of the Student Support & Experience Committee will take place on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> September at 10:05am. This will be via MS Teams.

### Actions arising from meeting

<b>Action</b>	<b>Who</b>
Provide information for the committee on the composition of the Senior Pastoral Support & Guidance Forum	JB
JB and LL to discuss how the Absence Policy changes are to be implemented with regards to PGR students.	JB and LL
Share the Aberdeen Student Experience Questions with SSV for discussion with the Student Union.	DS
Check if there was student representation on the Monitoring and Engagement TGF and let GK know the outcome.	JB
Check on the status of student on the Qatar campus for the purposes of the non-continuation data	NE
Find out if non-continuing student data can be broken down by widening access categories.	JB