

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE (SSEC)

Minute of the Meeting held on 7 March 2023

Present: Erin Ferguson, Lucy Leiper, Akua Serwaa Agyeman, Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan, Jemma Murdoch, Lesley Muirhead, Lyn Batchelor, John Cavanagh, Jason Bohan, Russell Moffat, Charlotta Hillerdal, Helen Pierce, Alison Jenkinson, Wendy Lowe, Melanie Viney, Derryck Shewan, Maria Cascio, Hugo Taylor, Duncan Stuart, Steve Tucker, Jaye Carr, Melanie Viney, Tim Baker, Morag Beedie, Katrina Foy, Kelsey Pierce, Kirstin Annand, Jena Stuart, Mary Prior.

Apologies: Jackie Tuckwell, Martin Mills, Graeme Kirkpatrick, Nick Edwards, Heather Branigan, Martin Barker, Bekah Walker, Fiona Ritchie, Julie Timms, Carolyn Porter, Iain Grant

Welcome and chair's update

1.1 Jason Bohan (JB) welcomed everyone to the meeting and offered apologies for the late change to online only, due to a room booking mix-up. JB introduced Jemma Murdoch (JM) who will be assisting with the chair's update in the absence of Nick Edwards. JB confirmed he has taken on a lot of work from Abbe Brown, but highlighted the pastoral review and the monitoring group as the two main pieces of work. With the pastoral review, JB noted his role is to revise the current situation and plan for what happens next. Similarly, there have been a lot of conversations around the work of the monitoring group, with a business case presented to the digital strategy group about proposed IT updates. That meeting went ahead and was positively received but further information is required. Other items of focus for JB have been discussions with schools around provisions and extension requests, which will be discussed later in the agenda.

JM reported on student support-related matters, with an update later on the code of conduct. There is also a review of the Support for Study policy underway, with a draft due to SSEC before the summer. JM confirmed her new role as Deputy Head of Student Support Services will include the wider groups within support services as well as the Student Advice & Support Team. One of the key areas of focus will be our widening access work, to ensure students have key contacts and information, while the Corporate Parenting Plan is due to be revised as it is now out of date.

Approval of the minute of the SSEC held on 05 December 2022

(copy filed as SSEC/070322/002)

2.1 No comments or amendments were received from members of the Committee. The minutes of the SSEC meeting held on 05 December 2022 were approved.

Aberdeen Student Experience Survey

- 3.1 Duncan Stuart (DS) introduced the paper, with thanks to Morag Beedie for providing the paper. The main purpose of bringing the paper to the committee relates to section 5, which focussed on providing a timescale for schools and directorates to provide their feedback. The current proposal is to request this feedback by the end of April, but in future years there will be a month and the end of the year and the beginning of the new year in order to close the loop on feedback, so a 31st January deadline.

Tim Baker (TB) asked if there are other breakdowns of results available, such as by gender or protected characteristics, within each school. TB also asked about action plans and if these can be combined with existing action plans such as NSS, to avoid duplication.

DS said he would let TB know if a further breakdown is possible. On action plans, they are looking for schools to identify areas where the feedback can allow schools to make changes, but also areas where changes cannot be made, to help students understand why the University needs to have certain policies or procedures in place.

Lyn Batchelor (LB) pointed out that the Qatar campus results aren't broken down by schools within the campus, with 4 schools currently but 7 schools next year. DS noted that the questions are bespoke for the Qatar campus, similar to online students and other sub-sets of data.

Post-meeting update: Services will provide an action plan, while schools will be asked to incorporate this work into existing NSS action plans.

Race Equality Charter Survey

- 4.1 Maria Cascio (MC) presented the paper on the Race Equality Charter Survey and noted the item was part of a wider consultation across various committees and networks at the University. MC began by explaining that in 2019, the University signed up to the Race Equality Charter and it sits alongside Athena Swan. The object is to identify barriers faced in the context of race and the aim was to launch an anti-racism strategy, which was launched in October 2022. Currently an application is being worked on for a bronze award. In March 2022, the survey went out and had a 40% response rate from staff and 4% from students. Although this was a disappointing response rate for students, it was benchmarked across other universities and was found to be around the average response rate. MC indicated the group and looking for reasons behind the low response rate. As the survey will be circulated again in a few years' time, it is seen as important to address the reasons behind the low response rate.

MC explained the survey asked some specific questions relating to issues of race and ethnicity, but also more general questions around areas like course content and satisfaction, graduate skills and assessment and feedback. The results were split between those identifying as being white and those identifying as being from a minority ethnic group. The results showed no major issues for those identifying as white. For student from what was called 'racialised groups', they reported feeling less of a sense of belonging due to the lack of diversity in the overall student population. When asked if they had been the victims of racial discrimination,

that majority said no, but there were some responses who said yes, in the institution and in the local area. Around 40% said they did not know how to report a concern over a racialised incident. 15% said they did not feel an appropriate response would be given if they did make a disclose of racial discrimination.

MC summarised the findings of the paper in relation to employment and also summer schools. The report was then released in October 2022. The action plan will be released once the consultation stage has been completed. JB thanked MC for a thorough summary of the paper and opened the discussion to the floor.

Akua Serwaa Agyeman (ASA) said she was disheartened there wasn't more effort from students to fill out the survey, but offered the Student Union's help in increasing engagement in future. Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan (SSV) noted that lived experiences are difficult to put into a survey text box. SSV offered to work with MC to ensure the survey is clear in its aims and outcomes from a student point of view and is as accessible as possible. SSV also noted it can be difficult for students to think about graduate outcomes if they have more immediate concerns such as visa status or experiencing everyday racism. MC will follow up with ASA and SSV after the meeting.

MC said the survey will go out again in February or March 2024. Derryck Shewan (DS) asked if there could be race equality contact points within each school in the same way there is a student support contact and a school disability coordinator. MC confirmed that within schools there is a Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee (EDIC), but at the moment the report is at institutional level, but it will cascade to school level, with results provided by school. Each school also has a Race Equality Champion and they run a forum.

ACTION: JB concluded by asking for any thoughts on action plans to be emailed to MC.

Review of Provisions – Examinations

- 5.1 JB introduced the update on processes around provisions for exams, which he has been working on with NE and JM. An issue was highlighted that a number of schools have had challenges with accommodating exam arrangements, especially for students requiring single rooms for examinations. JB, NE and JM then organised a meeting with Directors of Education to gather more feedback. A meeting with School Disability Coordinators has been scheduled for later in March.

JM noted that many of the schools were unaware of the provision for an exam room for fewer than 30 people, but this was likely as it has less of an operational impact than those who need an individual examination room. The data indicates a similar number of students have the provision for a smaller room as those who require a room for one person. JM noted a rise in the numbers of students requiring provisions and recognised the additional resources required in implementing these accommodations, especially with regards to rooms for exams. This is part of a wider conversation which is ongoing, with a lot of work to be done in order to ensure students' needs are met. JM also said that working towards inclusive exam arrangements across the University will mean less pressure on schools to implement individual adjustments for students.

JB said the first step in this review process is to have the meeting with the School Disability Coordinators. He also noted that perhaps some schools had struggled initially moving back to

in-person exams post-lockdown but this was likely to improve. JB and JM will update the committee at the next meeting.

ACTION: JB, LM and JM to arrange meetings with the School Disability Coordinators.

NSS Updates

- 6.1 NSS survey for this year is underway at the moment. All school action plans from 2022 are on the SSEC Teams site and JB asked if there were any updates or comments on the implementation of the plans. There were no comments from the group. JB said once the results of the 2023 survey are released the data will be presented to the committee. Schools get weekly updates on completion rates and these are on track at the moment to meet the set targets.

Extension Policy

- 7.1 JB introduced the item and provided background context, which was that schools had reported an increase in the number of extension requests from students and so each school is trying to manage this issue as well as they can and ensuring fairness to all students. JB noted that the Student Support team get a lot of requests for extensions directed to them, while many student shad fed back that they found the process of applying for extensions to be quite challenging. The paper notes this feedback and also contains all the policies where extensions are mentioned. There isn't currently a University-wide policy on applying for extensions. The conversation was then opened to the committee for further comment.

Jaye Carr (JC) said a lot of academics within the Business School were unsure what length of extension was suitable and also they are seeing a lot of repeat requests from some students who have challenging circumstances but no provisions in place. JC said the lack of a unified policy was confusing for staff and students. Some academics are more willing to give extensions while others are not, so the lack of consistency causes issues for students.

Tim Baker said there are differences of opinion within his school with regards to the evidence requirement, with some academics unwilling to give extensions without evidence, while others are more flexible and prefer an individual approach to each request. TB also noted that it can often take longer to get marks returned when a significant number of students in the class have provisions in place and it's important to communicate this clearly to students so they know when to expect their marks.

Within Engineering, John Cavanagh (JCa) said all requests are assessed centrally in order to standardise the procedures. JCa felt that some of the confusion came in during lockdown, because evidence generally wasn't required for Covid infections and so now students are not used to having to provide evidence. Additionally, he pointed out that his school run a lot of team assignments and so extensions are not given for these, while he noted that extensions are often unhelpful for students in many cases as it has a knock-on effect for other assignments.

JB asked JCa if the centralised committee has had a positive impact on workload for the academic team, which JCa agreed with as course coordinators are not negotiating with

students over extensions, but instead just refer them to the committee, so it's fair on everyone. The main benefit has been much more consistency in approach and outcome.

Alison Jenkinson (AJ) said there has been a lot of flexibility given in recent years while teaching was online only so some students have got used to this level of flexibility and have had to adapt as we return to policies more in line with pre-pandemic times. AJ also said a lot more students are having to work extra hours in their jobs due to the cost of living crisis, so this is causing many people to request extensions where they are unable to meet their deadlines. AJ also wondered if there could be more information at orientation to help students manage their time properly and to set the expectations for how the extension request process works.

Lesley Muirhead (LM) wanted to make sure assignments are inclusive and students get the information they need as early as possible and submission dates are set for as late as possible. If that is not something which can be implemented, then there should be an agreement on the minimum length of extension, for example, one week. LM said a standard process for requesting extensions would be very useful and the absence reporting tool online could be used for this purpose. This would also mean just having to put in one request, rather than having to potentially put in multiple requests across different schools.

Following up on AJ's point about orientation, JCa said a study skills module at the beginning of each student's degree would be useful and this could include information on time management as well.

JC suggested perhaps updating the current zero credit course which students can do at the start of their studies. She said international postgraduate students often struggle as they are straight into their studies when they arrive, so they can miss some important information. Also, JC felt it was useful to get information on extension procedures to students at the start, rather than waiting until there is a problem.

JB suggested the next steps would be for him to speak with individual schools to get more feedback, then have a conversation with the Registry team as they are responsible for writing policy. With a large amount of policy work ongoing at the moment, so JB suggested the creation of a policy would be a longer-term aim.

ACTION: JB to discuss with schools and the registry team.

Steve Tucker (ST) suggested an interim measure, getting schools together for a session to share best practice around extensions and to create a set of guidelines. JM said students waste a lot of time trying to negotiate extensions across multiple schools with different procedures, which also makes the experience quite stressful.

AJ suggested perhaps an issue with using the absence reporting tool was that information can be slow to get through the system, with LM suggesting that if it's an issue, part of the remit of the review would be to look at ways to speed up the process. TB said that while there are benefits to a centralised system, courses with smaller numbers can benefit from a more involved approach from the course coordinator/tutor in order to respond to concerns raised by students, so this is a benefit of the current system.

Reflection on this meeting's discussion regarding equality, diversity, inclusion, health, safety and wellbeing.

- 8.1 The Committee felt these topics were widely covered and there were no additional comments.

Reflection on Aberdeen 2040 Updates on Operational Plan

- 9.1 The Committee felt the meeting was structured around the Operational Plan and there were no additional comments.

Reflection on SSEC Task and Finish Groups (TFGs)

- 10.1 JM updated on the Code of Practice on student discipline, which Nick Edwards has been working on. It will now go to the University Court in April, with a view to introducing the policy for the new academic year. Communications will go out to staff and students and there will be short summaries available so students aren't expected to read the full document.

JB updated on the Pastoral Review Group, in light of the recent discussion at Senate. It was suggested the web resources need updated to be more student-friendly and more coherently structured. There is also ongoing work with regards to personal tutors being allocated for postgraduate taught students, which was suggested at Senate but the feedback from individual school was that this could not be resourced, so there have been discussions around other support which can be put in place which the schools feel can be resourced.

JC said there is clearer communication required for postgraduate students as the system is set up to have a space for the personal tutor's name on their student record online and this appears blank for postgraduate students. Therefore, a number of students have raised this and didn't understand that they don't get a personal tutor. JB agreed this was confusing and said it is being looked at to see if there is a clearer way of communicating this information.

The monitoring absence and engagement group has been putting together a business case to update IT provisions, to remove barriers to the monitoring procedures. Additional information was requested and discussions have taken place with IT and Registry. There are some short-term aims for the next 12 months, while other aims are longer-term. JB will provide updates to the committee at future meetings.

AOCB

- 11.1 There was no other business to be discussed

Date of Next Meeting

- 12.1 The next meeting of the Student Support & Experience Committee will take place on 03 May 2023 at 11am. This will be via MS Teams.