UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

POSTGRADUATE COMMITTEE

DRAFT Minute of the Meeting held on 1 November 2017

Present: Prof C Kee (Convener), Dr G Alvarez, Dr E Bain, Dr M Ehrenschwendtner, Dr N Beacham, Mrs A Johnston, Dr D MacCallum, Dr A McKinnon, Mr K Olivier, Ms S Paterson, Ms K Paterson-Hunter, Prof E Pavlovskaia, Dr S Woodin, with Dr C Calder, Mrs Y Gordon (Clerk), Mr M Fullerton in attendance

Apologies: Dr M Bodig, Dr A Bryzgel, Prof J Masthoff, Dr D Muirhead, Prof J Nelson, D Sutherland, Mr R William

MINUTES OF MEETINGS

(copy filed as PGC/011117/001)

1.1 The minute of the meeting held on 30 August 2017 was approved, subject to some typographical corrections.

Action: Clerk
Clerk's Note: The minute has been updated as required.

LEARNING ANALYTICS POLICY

2.1 Professor Hannaford was invited to speak regarding the draft proposal to develop a learning analytics policy. It was explained that the intention of the policy was to, through the use of a range of student-specific data, not only optimise the student experience by improving how the University teaches and supports students, but also incentivise students to pursue further education with the University.

2.2 It was noted that the application of such data could be considered daunting by some, necessitating the introduction of a clear framework for its use.

2.3 As learning analytics is a relatively new and therefore rapidly changing field, it was felt to be important that the University establish a structure for expansion and achieve balance in a policy strong enough to allow ethical and transparent development while not being so rigid as to prevent moving forward.

2.4 It was noted that the policy had been based on a high level review of similar practices at other institutions, the aim of which was to achieve a compromise between the varying of the other policies.

2.5 It was stressed that the policy was not about how data is used for routine operational matters, which students are unable to opt out from due to the University's obligation to report to external bodies, such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

2.6 It was pointed out that under 'Principle 4' of the policy, the Vice Principal for Learning and Teaching was referred to as 'he'. It was agreed that this was incorrect and would be amended to a gender neutral term for future versions.

2.7 There followed a discussion regarding the transparency inferred under 'Principle 6' of the policy. While it was felt that the University was not as transparent as it could be, such as in the matter of a student's GPA, it was pointed out that discussions at the time of the introduction of the current classification system had concluded that it would not be possible, technologically, to easily publish further information on a running basis. It was considered appropriate, in light of the current focus on transparency, that the subject be revisited in the future.

2.8 Concern was raised regarding the issue of students being unable to opt out of the data used by learning analytics. It was pointed out that, while there would be some aspects which students would not be able to opt out of, this was because it was necessary to ensure a complete picture when calculating reliable averages, such as those relating to access to the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), participation in assessment, and use of library facilities. It was explained that the proposed system would support an intervention feature, with built-in triggers for personal tutors, which students would be able to opt out of.

2.9 There followed a discussion regarding the data which would and would not be used under the policy, as part of which it was suggested that students were already familiar with the culture of information sharing.

2.10 It was asked at what point students would be asked to give consent for receiving feedback from the new system, While it was agreed that the ability to identify if resources are being used efficiently would be valuable, reminders relating to low engagement with library facilities, for example, may not be something which all students are interested in receiving. In response, it was confirmed that the matter of consent would be covered by existing processes.

2.11 Concern was raised regarding the potential labelling of students as a result of targeted interventions, the worry being that unfavourable labels, where students are being categorised as underperforming, can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. It was pointed out that this was one reason why the policy's focus was optimising students' chances of success – while it was originally about retention, this was deemed to have too many negative connotations.

2.12 It was explained that the kinds of personalised feedback being proposed were intended for students at both extremes of engagement. Those performing well could potentially be targets with non-academic interventions, introducing them to possible co-curricular activities with the aim of enhancing employability.

2.13 It was pointed out that the VLE was already being used to achieve similar results as put forward in the proposal, to which it was confirmed that the VLE would be core to a lot of what was being proposed, however student data was not currently being used according to a framework of transparency. In addition, while it was noted that some parts of the University were already using VLE to monitor engagement, the practice was not particularly widespread and could be enhanced further.

2.14 It was noted that Trent Nottingham University had established a basic model for measuring engagement through which it was determined that students who engaged with VLE early in their studies were more likely to succeed academically. While Trent Nottingham originally adopted the system to improve their poor retention rate, which saw a double-digit improvement, its implementation also had a noteworthy impact on the number of students receiving higher classifications.

2.15 Further to a question regarding the access to student-specific information by staff other than personal tutors, it was clarified that this has still to be considered.

2.16 There followed a discussion regarding the added benefits of an analytics-led system over the current use of data through VLE and its effect on staff workloads. It was noted that the automation of existing processes would eliminate failure points and provide clearer information to both staff and students. It was emphasised that the technology involved was being proposed as an aid, not as a substitute, and it was hoped that the introduction of regular feedback would assist in matters such as attendance monitoring.

2.17 Members were asked to direct any further comments to Professor Hannaford.

Action: All Members

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

3.1 Members were asked to discuss the draft paper prepared by the Vice Principal for Learning and Teaching regarding the undergraduate student experience, specifically considering an equivalent postgraduate paper. As it was agreed that many of the metrics used to measure the undergraduate student experience would not necessarily translate well, the Committee were tasked with identifying what evidence would be reported on.

3.2 It was suggested that measuring the postgraduate student experience may require more than traditional metrics, such as understanding classification spread – variables like gender balance in achievement should also be considered as it is repeatedly the kind of information which external factors are asking institutions to report on.

3.3 There followed a brief discussion regarding the availability of benchmarks for comparative analysis with other institutions. It was explained that benchmarking would be possible up to the current year, after which there would be a hiatus before the introduction of a new national survey.

3.4 It was suggested that some of the data required for a study of the postgraduate student experience could be acquired through Alumni Relations, however there may be issues in its use, particularly in light of upcoming data protection legislation.

3.5	There followed a brief discussion regarding the importance of measuring widening participation in the context of the postgraduate student experience. While it was pointed out that this might not be a particularly relevant metric, due to a large number of students originating from overseas, it was suggested that it perhaps shouldn't be immediately dismissed given its importance at undergraduate level.

3.6	It was suggested that added educational value could be investigated, judging improvement to a student's qualifications and overall academic ability, particularly in instances where previous education has been of a lower standard, such as with some overseas students.

3.7	Employability was considered a valuable means of measuring the postgraduate student experience. It was noted that the Careers Service currently collects data regarding student employment after graduations by phone, which requires a massive effort. It was pointed out that this data is not always the most reliable as an institution may not report on students who have not moved on to gainful employment since graduating.

3.8	There followed a discussion regarding the need for a postgraduate student experience survey. It was suggested that surveying at an institutional level might offer very little while adding to existing survey fatigue among students. It was pointed out that existed a student survey working group whose job it was to reduce survey fatigue. In addition, it was noted that the University's current postgraduate data benchmarks particularly badly against the rest of the UK sector. When it was suggested that apparent poor performance may be the result of weak response rates, it was clarified that the University's response rates were currently on par with the rest of the sector.

3.9	Members were asked if they would volunteer to join a new subcommittee which would be responsible for investigating potential means of surveying the postgraduate student experience. Dr Calder, Dr MacCallum, Dr McKinnon, Professor Pavlovskaia, and Mr Stuart agreed to join.

Action: Clerk

TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE PROGRESSION

4.1	Members were asked to approve a recommendation to amend the wording regarding the rules for progression through a taught postgraduate programme.

4.2	It was noted that the change was intended to clarify the current policy's flexibility, particularly in the case of students starting their studies in January.

4.3	There followed a brief discussion on the use of the term 'examiners' in the regulation, as part of which it was clarified that this was standard wording, used to avoid being too prescriptive.

4.4	The Committee approved the amendment.

CONSULTATION ON THE REVIEW OF THE UK QUALITY CODE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

5.1	It was stressed how important it was for the Committee to report back regarding the consultation on the review of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which would inform how the University was expected to conduct itself as an institution.

5.2	It was noted that previous feedback by other institutions and stakeholders had indicated that the current iteration of the Quality Code was in need of greater flexibility in order to recognise the differences between systems belonging to each nation in the UK.

5.3	Members were asked to consider the details of the consultation and comment on the proposed expectations and associated core practices set out on page 5 of the document in the context of the questions posed on page 6 in order to inform the institutional response. It was agreed that links to the current Quality Code would be circulated for information.

Action: Clerk
Clerk's Note: Links to the current Quality Code were circulated to members.

5.4	It was agreed that members should direct their comments to Mrs Gordon by Wednesday 8 November 2017.

Action: All Members

DISCIPLINE (PLAGIARISM)

6.1   In considering the Code of Practice on Student Discipline (Academic), the process of reporting students' first strikes to Registry was discussed, as part of which it was pointed out that while a first strike should not necessarily bring with it full penalties, awareness that the strike has happened is crucial, as it means a second offence can be identified.

6.2   It was suggested that the current Code did not allow enough flexibility in the event that it is felt plagiarism has come about as a result of misunderstanding on the student's part. It was agreed that this would fed back to Registry for when the policy is next considered.

Action: Clerk

6.3   There followed a brief discussion regarding the processing of formal appeals which have been submitted outwith the normal timescale. It was explained that in instances where an appeal is considered 'out of time', any mitigating circumstances contributing to its lateness are considered and, where appropriate, the appeal may be allowed to proceed as normal.

6.4   While considering appeals processes, members were asked to feed back any thoughts to Mrs Gordon.

Action: All Members

SECTOR UPDATES

7.1   Members noted the sector update regarding contract cheating and the use of third-party services and essay mills.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

8.1   It was noted that the University's Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) was approaching, with the relevant dates having been confirmed. It was agreed that the dates would be circulated for members' information.

Action: Clerk

8.2   It was noted that Senators recently received agendas from the Undergraduate Committee, the Postgraduate Committee, and the University Committee on Teaching and Learning. This had been carried out to ensure that it was clear which papers had been considered and to emphasise that the committee process exists.

8.3   It was noted that a Postgraduate Open Day would be taking place later in the month. The event was considered very important to recruitment for many Schools. Those involved were thanked for their contributions.

DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

9.1   Members noted that the next meeting of the Committee will be held on Monday 8 January 2018 at 2.00 pm in Committee Room 2, University Office.