

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
STUDENT SUPPORT COMMITTEE (SSC)

MINUTE OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING HELD ON 7 APRIL 2022

Present: Abbe Brown (Chair), Nick Edwards, Tim Baker, Martin Barker, Lyn Batchelor, Heather Branigan, John Cavanagh, Ivana Drdakova, Bryony Garfold, Alison Jenkinson, Lucy Leiper, Emma Richards, Duncan Stuart and Steve Tucker, with Graeme Kirkpatrick, Carolyn Porter, Jacqui Tuckwell, Melanie Viney, Lesley Muirhead (Clerk) and Liam Dyker (Minutes) in attendance.

Apologies: Oghenamega Erivona, Grainne Ferrigan, Katrina Foy, Iain Grant, Charlotta Hillerdal, Ondrej Kucerak, Wendy Lowe, Heidi Mehrkens, Martin Mills, Russell Moffatt, Jemma Murdoch, Mary Pryor, Fiona Ritchie, Julie Timms, Bekah Walker and Zeray Yihdego.

WELCOME AND CHAIRS' UPDATE

- 1.1 The Chair introduced the meeting and detailed the rationale for the extraordinary meeting of the Committee. The Committee were advised that any comments detailed in the meeting will be fed into further discussions at the University Education Committee on 13 April and Senate in due course – although likely not in May. Colleagues at the meeting and those who could not make it are encouraged to share any further comments that they have (including from their Schools) before UEC and these will be shared.
- 1.2 The Chair further updated on a recent meeting with Digital and Information Services exploring provisional budget lines for the work arising from the relevant Task and Finish Groups, as part of their 3 year planning process. It was recognised that there are likely to be digital implications of this work, although the detail is still to be explored.

UPDATE ON PASTORAL REVIEW TASK AND FINISH GROUP

- 2.1 The Committee heard a summary of the paper, noting some changes that will be made in light of feedback from other Groups. It was noted that the direction of travel was to have a document that is user friendly.
- 2.2 Discussion ensued regarding the appropriateness of a functional live dashboard system which would help to track students. It was noted that a joined up approach across Schools and relevant departments would be gained. The implications for confidentiality and data protections were noted, as were any delivery timescales. It was noted the impact this might have on mitigating some of the workloads of staff. The prior attempts to implement a Learning Analytics system in the University were discussed, noting that these had rather stalled. They had faced some resistance on various grounds and also took place at a time when there was less engagement in other institutions at the time of those discussions. However, it was acknowledged that the sector has moved on since then. It was highlighted that the recommendation was to open the discussion rather than to recommend that the University implements a new dashboard system, recognising the varied views of colleagues across the institution. The Committee were advised that some thought would be given on how to present this in the final paper, the importance of the recommendations being a package, up to a point, and also the preliminary nature of this particular recommendation.
- 2.3 The Committee cited training as an area which was crucially important to pastoral support, ensuring that all Personal Tutors are appropriately trained. The relation between personal tutoring and immigration and visa matters was duly noted. Similarly, it was suggested training also focus on the boundaries in which the personal tutor will work.

- 2.4 Members were supportive of the addition of Postgraduate Taught students to the pastoral support system, noting smaller personal tutor groups are now in place in some areas and this is working well.
- 2.5 Some members queried the implementation of the strategic vision and whether there would be operational plans which sat underneath. Responding, it was suggested that the document has been restructured to make the recommendations and vision and that discussion will follow as to implementation in due course, particularly in the light of responses to the recommendations.
- 2.6 Discussion ensued regarding the eligibility of staff to carry out pastoral support duties, noting comments from previous discussions. The Committee highlighted not wanting to exclude research staff who have previously provided valuable PT support. As well as the recommendation that this be a matter for the Head of School to handle, as at present, we could add "usually". The Committee noted that recommendation 1 in referring to other roles and regard being had to other roles, there should be a specific reference to examples, such as GoAbroad leads.
- 2.7 Members discussed the matching of students to particular Schools, disciplines or tutors. The Committee were advised the recommendation was that some students with particular characteristics (e.g. disability) may be matched with a personal tutor with experience in this area if the student wished (noting also the possibility of intersectionality) and if there was this expertise in the School. This would come below the primary base for matching which would be by discipline if possible. Some different views were shared about the link between the discipline match and any cap on numbers of tutees per tutor. It was acknowledged that there may be some issues with pastoral support for specific students provided by a particular personal tutor, and a route will be available to them to discuss out-with their discipline or School, if required, however for UG and PGT it was felt that a match within School and if possible discipline would be the focus.
- 2.8 In summarising, it was felt there was broad support from the Committee on the proposals and that the comments from the meeting will be fed into discussions at the University Education Committee and Senate meetings. It was advised the outcome of those discussions will be fed back to the Task and Finish Group and Student Support Committees in due course.

UPDATE ON MONITORING, ABSENCE AND ENGAGEMENT TASK AND FINISH GROUP

- 3.1 The Committee heard an overview of the presentation on the work of the Monitoring, Absence and Engagement Task and Finish Group (TFG). It was noted that the monitoring system is at the heart of what we aim to achieve, particularly in relation to pastoral and academic support. It enables issues to be identified and support offered. It should not be seen as a punitive system and it is very important that this is stressed in any communication. It was highlighted that the TFG are suggesting high-level engagement requirements in order for engagement-related issues to be identified quickly. It was noted the TFG also discussed whether good cause should indeed be required and this is an area which will need much more detailed discussion as it is a concept which is very embedded in the University.
- 3.2 The Committee discussed the rationales for good cause: to encourage engagement, to require engagement with studies and there is also the key point in relation to visa-related matters. It was suggested that the Monitoring, Absence and Engagement process should be to support students for the outcome that is right for them, which may necessitate a suspension in study. It was further highlighted that the Support for Study Policy will be reviewed in the next academic year which would also connect with this activity.
- 3.3 Discussions ensued regarding the future of the monitoring process and the integration of academic and pastoral support services. It was noted that some staff would prefer to separate the two roles and there was a discussion about this, reflecting how this might seem at odds

with the proposals regarding academic and pastoral support through the personal tutor system. Responding, it was recognised that it is a question of workload, staff resource, the digital systems available and the reluctance of some staff to take forward any issue which may appear to be too complex. It was noted that this brought to light the real importance of the monitoring systems as they have, at present, real implications – this is not to be penal but makes them less open to (in some rare cases) be not engaged with, in contrast to the personal tutor system. It was further suggested that staff should be following up with students who receive a C6 or C7. Some do just now and the recommendation is that there would be more proactive approaches to this and details would be developed.

- 3.4 Further discussion ensued regarding the lifting of the C6 and C7 and who was eligible to remove the class certification. After discussion, it was agreed that the course coordinator is the most appropriate person owing to the fact they will be able to ascertain whether the student will be able to catch up. The link between this and the pastoral support needs to be made clear. The discussions related to good cause were noted and this will be continued. Some members suggested that students should not be prohibited from taking exams if they feel they are ready.
- 3.5 Some members queried whether good cause and medical cause should be required to be able to take a resit assessment as first attempt and whether this barrier could be removed to treat all resit assessments as a first attempt. It was noted this would be a matter for the Quality Assurance Committee rather than this Committee.
- 3.6 Members raised monitoring in relation to postgraduate research students and how this will impact on them. This is beyond the scope of this TFG and it was suggested this be reviewed in future to ensure that the process that is put in place for the taught students will also work for the research students with this to be considered by this Committee and PGR Policy Committee.
- 3.7 In relation to appeals, it was noted that it is proposed that these would be held within the School as opposed to being held centrally. Some members suggested that this might not suit quite so well for first years as they may be taking courses across Schools and may be more open to different experience and lack of consistency. It was noted cross-School collaboration could be a potential solution to this.
- 3.8 In summarising, it was noted the Committee expressed general support for the recommendations and proposed approach, and were thanked for their engagement in these discussions. It was noted that these comments will be fed into the University Education Committee discussions and the outcome will be fed back to the Committee.

MONITORING, DISABILITY AND TEACHING INTERSECTION

- 4.1 The Committee heard a summary of this item, noting the present intersections between monitoring, disability and teaching. It was noted this was included within the Accessibility and Inclusion in Education Framework, available on the University webpages and has already been shared in various fora. The Committee were encouraged to share this in their Schools.

REFLECTION ON THIS MEETINGS' DISCUSSION REGARDING EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING.

- 5.1 The Chair noted the discussions on engagement with disciplines, and students with caring and parental responsibilities and the wider reasons for not engaging with studies. No further reflections were made and it was considered that there had been appropriate engagement with this issue.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- 6.1 The Committee were thanked for their involvement in the update of the Code of Practice for Student Discipline (Non-Academic). It was advised that the updated version is available in the Teams site and any comments should be fed to Nick Edwards.