

21 September 2023

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE (SSEC)

Minute of the Meeting held on Thursday 21st of September, 2023

Present: Nick Edwards, Jason Bohan, Susan Halfpenny, Lesley Muirhead, Jemma Murdoch, Rhiannon Ledwell, Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan, Graeme Kirkpatrick, Sally Middleton, Duncan Stuart, Jenna Stuart, Lucy Leiper, Tim Baker, Katrina Foy, Erin Ferguson, Wendy Lowe, Madge Jackson, Iain Grant, John Cavanagh, Kelsey Pierce, Natalie Kinchin-Williams, Martin Barker.

Apologies: Jacqui Tuckwell, Steve Tucker, Martin Mills, Lindsay Tibbetts, Melanie Viney, Mary Pryor, Julie Timms, Charlotta Hillerdal, Lyn Batchelor.

1. Welcome and chair's update

1.1 Jason Bohan (JB) welcomed everyone to the first SSEC meeting of the academic year and noted it was great to have students back on campus again. JB then updated on the Pastoral Review TFG, which has completed its work and has now become the Pastoral Support Group, covering all students, and had its first meeting last week. These meetings will always be prior to each SSEC meeting and will feed into this committee. The minutes are added to the papers for this meeting for info.

JB then updated on the PRES and PTES, which are the postgraduate surveys, which will be on the agenda for the next meeting.

No updates from Nick Edwards (NE).

2. Approval of the minute of the SSEC held on 21 August 2023

(copy filed as SSEC/210923/002)

2.1 No comments or amendments were received from members of the Committee. The minutes of the SSEC meeting held on 21/09/23 were approved.

3. Review of Action Table from meeting held on 21st August 2023

3.1 1 'Provide information on the composition of the Senior Pastoral Support & Guidance Forum' – the minutes from the last meeting have been circulated so members can see who is part of the group.

2 'Discuss how the absence policy changes are to be implemented with regards to PGR students' – the absence policy passed on 20/09/23 at Senate did not include PGR students and JB and Lucy Leiper (LL) have decided to wait until the new Dean is in place and this discussion will be picked up at the PGR committee.

3 'Duncan Stuart (DS) to share Aberdeen Student Experience Questions with SSV for discussion with the Student Union' – this has been completed.

4 'JB to check if there was student representation on the Pastoral Support and let Graeme Kirkpatrick know the outcome' – this has been completed and representation on the group has been confirmed.

5 'NE to check on the status of students on the Qatar campus for the purposes of the non-continuation data' – NE confirmed student on the Qatar campus are not included in the data and he will follow-up with Lyn Batchelor to discuss this matter.

6 'Find out if non-continuing student data can be broken down by widening access categories' – this matter is still with Planning so there is no update at this time.

ACTION: Leave action 6 on the list for the next meeting (SK)

4. Approval of revised SSEC Remit and Composition document

- 4.1 As the first meeting of the academic year, the group was asked to review the remit and composition document. Sally Middleton (SM) noted there would no longer be a Dean for Widening Access, Articulation and Outreach, but the title of the replacement Dean position has not yet been decided. JB added that SM has been added to the committee as the Widening Access representative.

The updated document was approved by the committee.

5. Updates to Provisions/"reasonable adjustments"

- 5.1 Jemma Murdoch (JM) introduced the paper on updates to provisions and reasonable adjustments. JM said the paper has been developed through extensive collaboration and had come about as a result of feedback from those managing disability provisions from the school side, especially post-Covid. Initially, the discussion was primarily around the availability of exam rooms, especially for those with a provision requiring an individual room. The scope of the review was then widened out to assess study-related provisions for disabled students. The review was based on the inclusion strand of the Aberdeen 2040 strategy and providing support for students from widening access backgrounds or with other protected characteristics, rather than looking solely at disability.

Within Student Support, temporary provisions have been used in some cases such as temporary impairments or other circumstances where studies have been impacted. The paper looks to formalise these processes and contains a range of recommendations for discussion. Discussions are ongoing with Registry, Estates and IT around exam adjustments, as it is generally difficult to estimate the numbers of students requiring adjustments due to students

seeking help at different points of the year. However, it is estimated that more exams will take place online compared to pre-Covid numbers.

The main recommendations of the paper relate to the application of the adjustments and widening that out to formalise support for other groups aside from disability. Also, recommendations to do with the terminology around provisions and that it would be more suitable now to term it as a 'reasonable adjustment' or an 'inclusion adjustment', which would be more in line with the Equality Act. Another key recommendation is around the terminology relating to the School Disability Coordinators and widening that out to include Inclusion, which sits well alongside the Aberdeen 2040 strategy.

The current provisions list has been in place for around 15 years and so a comprehensive review of these provisions has taken place. The list has been expanded to ensure more consistency and to reduce the need for free-text provisions, so schools have more clarity on the provision and the adjustment required. JM also noted that the two most widely-used provisions are ambiguous in their phrasing and this can result in inconsistencies in the ways these provisions are applied. JM asked for any comments or feedback from the committee.

Rhiannon Ledwell (RL) asked what training will be provided for teaching staff to be able to ensure the provisions are implemented. JM said if the new provisions are implemented then the provisions guide will be updated. This document outlines what each of the provisions are and how they are implemented. Following on from this update, the changes will be discussed with the School Disability Coordinators, who will in turn discuss with the relevant teams and colleagues within their school, for feedback on the implementation for the school's side. Once any changes have been agreed and confirmed, there will need to be clear communications to staff and students on what the provisions are and how they are to be applied.

John Cavanagh (JC) praised the changes and added that if there are to be fewer exams on campus, this will help with the challenges identified around finding private rooms for exams. JC asked if the provisions include adjustments for conditions like social anxiety, as often groupwork and presentations are core skills being assessed in many courses. JM said the key point is that any discussion with a student at the point that provisions are implemented will always include a clarification around the phrase 'reasonable adjustments', and what is reasonable on one degree programme/course may not be the same on another degree programme/course, depending on what is being assessed. Students will be encouraged to speak with their course coordinator to gain clarity on what is reasonable in that particular course, plus the team within Student Support are able to speak with teaching staff to discuss and set an expectation for each student, if necessary.

Susan Halfpenny (SH) from Library Services noted they can provide alternative formats, although this can be more restricted due to copyright law. Lesley Muirhead said it would be good to get a provision around that if possible, so she will reach out to the library coordinators for discussion.

ACTION: LM to speak with Library Coordinators about adding a provision for alternative formats.

JM said any further comments – especially on terminology and consistency – would be very useful going forwards, while the priority will be around how the changes are communicated to staff and students. The next step will be to meet with the School Disability Coordinators in

October while a meeting with IT is planned to discuss any additional reporting which can be offered to assist schools with the implementation of provisions.

JB asked JM to provide a bit more information on what is meant by extending provisions to wider groups of students, to ensure everyone is clear on what it means. JM said Student Support has always worked with students based on impact rather than circumstances, so temporary provisions can be implemented in cases such as gender-based violence, injury etc., where it's not classed as a disability, but the impact is significant. This could also mean protected characteristics such as student carers, as one example. There will still be a robust process in place where Student Support Advisers are using professional judgement and ensuring any adjustments are reasonable. Any temporary provisions would be implemented for a semester or an academic year, with a review date, and the provision will be removed if there is not a need for it to be on a student's record. JM said LM has also had discussions around Student Athletes, who have academic flexibility written into University policy, but it can be challenging to provide the flexibility they require due to operational needs. Using the provisions system will make it easier to provide the flexibility required.

Tim Baker (TB) asked if there was a better way to flag up any new additions to the list of those requiring provisions, rather than teaching staff receiving a list each week and having to identify any changes from the previous week. JM agreed and said there are ongoing concerns around the disability database and IT are aware, but it's not a short-term fix. The hope is the new extended list of provisions will help in the circumstances TB has outlined, but this requires discussion with School Disability Coordinators first.

6. Support for Study Policy – Initial Discussion

- 6.1 JM introduced the review of the Support for Study Policy, which was introduced in November 2016. It was introduced to provide support for students whose circumstances were causing concern or disruption to their studies, mainly due to ill-health. It has only really been used since 2020/21, and it has become a useful supportive function to assist students who have been unable to engage due to their health. As it has been used more regularly, some updates have been deemed necessary to come into line with the sector. The current policy has been looked at and the paper outlines the proposed enhancements. The key recommendations are around developing the informal stage where schools and departments can support students where there are early signs of disengagement or any other circumstances causing concern, seeking to provide preventative support rather than reactive support. There will then be two formal stages within the policy, the first of which will be the intervention stage, overseen by Student Support, via the Case Management Group. This will include a thorough risk assessment and an action plan, or in some cases referral to a review panel. The idea is to bring the policy into line with the new Code of Practice on Student Discipline (non-academic). Some students may originally come through the Code of Practice but then be moved to Support for Study if that is more appropriate. JM concluded by asking for any comments or feedback, while also offering the opportunity to be involved in a review group for this area of work.

Graeme Kirkpatrick (GK) welcomed the development of the revised policy and said it would be useful to have an offline discussion to decide which members of the Student Union team would be best-placed to join the review group. LL agreed that being involved in the review

would be really useful to see how the policy operates for PGR students, and felt Rhiannon Thompson would likely be the school representative.

The next step is to discuss with the Student Support Management Team and the Student Support Team to look at the operational elements, then the draft policy will be presented at the next SSEC meeting.

Action – SK to add item to the agenda for the November SSEC meeting.

7. Aberdeen 2040 Presentation

- 7.1 Iain Grant (IG) delivered a presentation updating on the Aberdeen 2040 strategy. This item came out of a previous discussion within the committee, with members looking for an update on the strategy and the link to the work of the SSEC. IG introduced the strategy and provided the background information on the structure and the key themes, challenges and commitments.

IG outlined the phases of the plan so the committee is aware of the timelines involved, while highlighting the significant improvement in staff survey results in terms of recognition of a clear vision and commitments since the introduction of the strategy. IG also outlined all the KPIs, how they related to each area and how they are measured, giving examples which were considered most relevant to the committee's work, including wellbeing and widening access.

In October, there will be a communication to all staff and students, updating on progress in line with the Aberdeen 2040 strategy, with the plan of an update every 6 months.

GK asked about the student experience strand and the University's commitment to working with the Students' Union to deliver an outstanding student experience, and which KPIs related to this strand of work. IG said it would fall under the Education strand, which is overseen by Ruth Taylor. The KPIs are on overall student satisfaction, as taken from the NSS, then graduate outcomes, continuation and student achievement.

Action: IG and GK to schedule a follow-up discussion for a more detailed look at the KPIs and how the student experience is measured.

8. NSS Extended Report

- 8.1 JB confirmed the initial report was presented at the last SSEC meeting, while this meeting is the presentation of the extended report and a discussion around school action plans. JB said it was difficult to make sense of the results due to a large number of changes to questions and scope from previous years, meaning the ranking sections are more useful. Overall, Aberdeen was ranked 10th in the UK, which is a very encouraging result across the 25 main questions. The overall satisfaction question was just asked to the devolved nations this year and the University of Aberdeen finished second on that measure. Overall, JB said it was a very positive outcome.

GK said the Students' Union results were lower than they hoped and asked for the University's support to get the Students' Union results up in future years. He also noted the School of Engineering results were concerning, especially where international students were

concerned, so wanted to know if there were any reasons behind these results and what can be done to improve them.

John Cavanagh from the School of Engineering said it was an issue they were very aware of within the school and felt it is possibly due to the increased level in year 3, so they have looked at whether year 2 needs to be more challenging to prepare students properly. JC also felt the teacher self-assessment of marks in secondary school during covid was having a negative impact, and high drop-out rates have been an issue in Engineering departments across other universities. JC was unable to comment further at this stage but it is being looked at internally as a priority.

The second section is the demographic data and was introduced by JB, again with broadly positive results, set against the sector average. JM noted there was still a gap for disabled students, which is disappointing, but it's much less of a gap than the sector average and compared to most other institutions. JB noted this was a result of the excellent work undertaken by JM's team to provide the best-possible experience for disabled students.

NE said the professional services comments are being collated and will be released to heads of service in the next few weeks, with a lot of focus on how support is translated into the academic environment.

JM noted the results for mature students were extremely positive and this is a highlight of the report. GK noted the Students' Union faced challenges in managing change while dealing with extremely busy services on a daily basis and that the University's help in improving their NSS scores would be mutually beneficial and appreciated.

On the free text comments, the Planning team have arranged the comments into broad categories, where many of the positive and negative comments contradict each other. Some comments relate to the impact of strikes and the marking boycott. Natalie Kinchin-Williams (NKW) from Information Services said she very much appreciates the detail in reports and is looking forward to getting all the Professional Services comments through. All the feedback is already being reviewed and engagement is taking place with each of the schools. NE said the lack of details in the comments make them less useful than hoped, as it's hard to figure out the area they relate to, while almost all the comments have a contradictor in another comment.

Action: NE to share free text comments on Professional Services at the next meeting

9. School Action Plans

- 9.1 Each year, schools are asked to produce an action plan, based on the main survey results, including NSS. This year, JB said schools are being asked to produce an Education Action Plan to review a wider range of data than previous plans. Schools will have access to Power BI dashboards as well for more detailed data analysis. Action plans will be developed within each school and then discussed at respective School Education Committee meetings. JB will be providing support for schools alongside fellow Deans, to help develop the plans.

Action Plans will be presented to the November SSEC meeting and the school representative on SSEC from each school will present their school's plan to the committee. This will be an opportunity to identify any support or shared resources. Meetings are scheduled with

Directors of Education as well, in a community of practice meeting setting. RT asked for student representation at the meetings through the School Convenor list, or to nominate a class rep for the role if a Convenor isn't appointed. SH asked if there could be an opportunity for the Library Services to highlight how they can assist in this area as well, through the range of services they offer to schools. A 'menu' of services on offer could be provided ahead of the school meetings. JB said it would be hugely helpful. SH suggested possibly a webpage would work best.

Action: SH to work towards a deadline of mid-November for providing information on Library Services which could support School Action Plans

10. Guidelines for Supporting Disabled PGR students

- 10.1 LL introduced the agenda item and noted the close work with Lesley Muirhead (LM) in developing the new guidelines, which has taken over a year. There is some crossover with the previous paper discussed on inclusive adjustments. The previous provisions were seen to not translate well to PGR students. The documents outline guidelines for staff and guidelines for students. They also outline how a disabled PGR student can reach out for support, which will take the form of a significant conversation between student, supervisor and disability adviser, as each student's requirements will be unique. The documents have taken longer than planned as there was significant student feedback as part of the process. LM noted the aim is to have the guidelines published for the start of the new PRG academic year in October, so any final thoughts or comments from the committee would be useful. LL also noted that for situations such as extensions, these cannot be approached in the same way as UG or PGT cases, due to the complexity and the regulations in place.

Tim Baker (TB) had 2 questions; the first around infrastructure for students who are deemed to require their own office, as there may not be enough offices available. His second query was around what checks and balances will be in place and what training is provided for Supervisors, for cases where they are not in agreement with the suggested adjustment or adjustments.

LL said the space issue was tricky as it will vary from school to school, so will most likely need to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. On checks and balances, LL said these procedures are an important part of the supervisor training they run regularly throughout the year, while masterclasses on supporting a disabled PGR student will be delivered regularly as well. Additionally, a check-box relating to provisions has been added to the PGR review paperwork, which will give an opportunity to ensure all relevant support is in place both through the Disability Team and at School level. LM added that space issues can be discussed with Estates as well, if a solution cannot be found within the School.

GK asked about financial support for international PGR students who are disabled but don't have access to public funds such as the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). LM noted that the report outlines the University has funds to ensure international students have the same experience as home-funded students who receive DSA support.

Following feedback from the Working Group, LM said the report would be published and communications will be issued to support the publication.

11. Update on Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group

11.1 DS updated on the work of the Mental Health and Wellbeing working group, where the most recent meeting reviewed the Remit and Composition. The remit remained largely the same and the composition is being reviewed to avoid any duplication of departments, but ensuring those on the group have an interest in the topic and are well-placed to report back to colleagues with any relevant developments and also gather any information from colleagues to bring to the group. The group reviewed the activities of the last year, of which there were many. DS suggested sharing this section of the paper with the SSEC members.

Action: DS to share activities section of MHWVG paper with SK to share with the committee.

There was also an extensive discussion around the Pets on Campus Policy, with lots of different points of view shared on the pros and cons. GK asked about students bringing in animals and DS said any requests can go to the Health & Safety team, but generally this would not be permitted within the policy except for service animals or events where animals are there for legitimate welfare reasons.

12. Senior Pastoral Support Group minutes

12.1 Item included for information only.

13. AOCB

13.1

JM and LM discussed the current situation around medical evidence and how this applies to provisions, where medical evidence is not available through a student's GP. This is posing some difficulties for disabled students with regards to implementing adjustments if their GP is not able to provide medical evidence. This also has an impact on DSA, where medical evidence is required. The Disability Team have asked GPs if they would be willing to fill out the form for DSA applications and they have said no, so there is currently a query in with the funding bodies to see if they would accept a subject access request instead. LM said there may need to be a discussion about what evidence is required internally to implement adjustments.

14. Date of Next Meeting

14.1

The next meeting of the Student Support & Experience Committee will take place on 27/11/23 at 11:05am. This will be in the University Court Room and via MS Teams.