

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

REPORT FROM THE STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE**05th DECEMBER 2022****1. Approval of Minutes of meeting held on 22 September 2022****1.1:** Minutes approved**1.2:** No outstanding actions**2. Update on SSEC Co-Chair**

2.1: Abbe Brown (AB) introduced Jason Bohan (JB), the new Dean for Student Support and Experience and Co-Chair of the Student Support & Experience Committee, who will formally commence his role in January. JB thanked AB for the invite and said it was great to meet everyone in the committee and looked forward to starting the role.

3. Engagement with External Surveys

3.1: AB introduced the paper submitted by the Head of Student Experience, around the proposed reinstatement of external surveys for Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students. The paper marks out a proposal for discussion, around using the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) but not the International Student Barometer (ISB) due to overlap. The committee was also asked to discuss cost and scope. AB opened the discussion to the committee.

Lucy Leiper (LL) asked about Postgraduate Research (PGR) surveys and crossover with the Postgraduate Taught surveys and Graeme Kirkpatrick (GK) noted from the paper that PGR was included in the proposal and so AB recommended the paper goes to the PGR committee as well for discussion.

Alison Jenkinson (AJ) asked if it would be possible to separate out data on home-based and international students and there was further discussion and agreement among the Committee that extrapolation of data would be very useful if possible. John Cavanagh (JC) enquired of the value for PGR students as well as PGT, with LL adding there was considerable value in identifying trends and support needs despite the more individualised nature of a research degree.

AB confirmed the committee was supportive of the proposal outlined in point 8 of the paper and supportive of the request for further budget and to extend the survey to PGR students.

4. NSS Action Plans

4.1: Further to previous discussions at the SSEC, AB introduced the agenda item, looking at responses to the 2022 NNS Survey as a matter for discussion. NE added that Professional Services have been collating final comments and actions and will look to present these at the next SSEC meeting.

On the Institutional Action Plans, AB asked if there were any points for discussion on the eight action points for implementation and the TESTA pilots running across schools. Martin Mills (MM) felt their pilot generally went okay in the School of Social Sciences but he felt it also dis-embeds assessment and feedback from the wider context so it needs a rethink as it doesn't cover learning outcomes. MM suggested a more integrated approach would be of more use and noted that while feedback was seen to be an issue, comparatively few students look at their own feedback electronically. AB agreed a more integrated approach was best and it was being taken into account in the process.

In discussion, GK said students always ask for more feedback and to receive it quicker but the was particularly an issue for PGT students, who often have to acclimatise quickly to a new institution or after a gap from studies, or for those who arrive late for the start of their course.

JC added that we often don't understand what the students' understanding of timely feedback is, as it may differ from our own institutions and school targets. AB said she would feed that back.

Further to this, Martin Barker (MB) suggested colleagues would like to get better feedback out to students and get more engagement, but perhaps colleagues aren't aware of the support available and expertise on hand which could be better used. Also, there may be resistance from staff due to workload implications or a perceived intrusion into what may be considered good quality feedback already, so it would be good to share best practice across the institution and for colleagues to realise this is an area for improvement. AB said it was very important to share best practice across the institution and to ensure this is embedded in the process, rather than feeling like additional workload.

On assessment and feedback, JB said within the School of Psychology, students often don't know how to access their feedback, so the school created a video instructing the students on how to access this information. Also, JB said that publishing a feedback calendar on each course page was a simple and effective way to keep students informed of when marks are due back, which has helped to manage expectations and provide clarity.

AB suggested it would be useful to have updates on School NSS Action Plans every 3 months. Looking ahead to NSS 2023, AB added it was a balance between encouraging student feedback without students also feeling harassed. A 50% response rate is required if the University is to get any data. The NSS Steering Group next meets in March.

5. Continuation and Classification Activity Update

5.1: Based on long-running work of the SSEC, and data sets discussed at Senate in May, AB introduced the paper. It focusses on the difference in continuation decisions, classifications, and overall outcomes, especially with particular groups such as mature students and widening access students. AB noted there is a big debate about whether any student groups should be treated differently, but said certain groups are having a different experience, according to the data, therefore it warrants further exploration.

There is a plan in place which AB has called the Magnet Plan, as it draws together many departments and groups within the University. School-based action plans on continuation and classification are underway and will continue to be developed, while there is now a continuation and classification group which meets quarterly, which has been greatly aided by

drawing together the vast amount of previous work in these areas. AB noted that continuation work had long been embedded in strategies but there was now an increased focus on classification, where widening access students are not achieving the same degree classifications as other student groups. The item was opened to the Committee for discussion.

Helen Pierce (HP) asked what happens next with the action plan which they have been filling out and AB said it goes up on the SSEC MS Team for schools to share ideas and best practice, plus there are meetings as a community of practice to look at any challenges. HP added it was great to share plans as they don't want to feel like they were reinventing the wheel. AB added that it is related to NSS action plans, so it's important to identify any overlap and ensure there are two pieces of work which are related but complimenting each other rather than replicating work.

After a discussion around a range of widening access issues, AB concluded agenda point 6 by noting the discussion will form part of the report from SSEC which goes to UEC in the New Year.

6. Timelines for Guaranteeing Provisions for Assessments

6.1: AB introduced the agenda item, looking at the procedures for provisions and adjustments to be put in place in time for student assessments. Lesley Muirhead (LM) noted the issues originally came around with regards to in-course assessments, but was equally applicable for exams, especially given the time of year. For in-course assessments, the School of Medicine asked for 4 weeks' notice for provisions to be implemented in time for the assessments.

The group discussed a range of related issues, with GK saying that students required as much flexibility as possible as current cohorts are unlike any previous cohorts and many will not have sat any exams in a long time, if at all. Many students will not know they require provisions and may only realise very close to their assessment or exam, which will cause problems for Student Support, School Disability Coordinators, and teaching colleagues.

JB noted that it was better to focus on the communication lines between Student Support and individual schools, rather than working to a set deadline, as he felt this could be simplified. Jemma Murdoch (JM) added that the Business Improvement Team are looking at the system and Student Records to see where improvements can be made. Lesley Muirhead (LM) added that the Student Support drop-in service had been able to implement provisions for students at short notice during the current term.

Overall, the Committee felt that strict timelines around dates for provisions to be implemented would likely be too restrictive and wouldn't provide the flexibility students need when accessing support. Discussions with several schools and Student Support are ongoing.

7. C6 Processes and Disability Provisions

7.1: The committee was asked to discuss the processes around C6s for those with a disability provision for an allowance for poor attendance during times of ill-health. Specifically, this related to whether this would permit them to miss any more classes than a student without this provision, or if it means they just do not need to provide medical evidence for any absences. AB added that when discussed with School Disability Coordinators, there was no

clear and consistent view on how this particular provision is applied and students were also confused after receiving a C6 when they thought the provision would mean the C6 would not be issued.

LM said that from a Student Support point of view, the provision is as it is described in the Provisions Guide, so is there to ensure a student does not have to continue to provide medical evidence for absences where it relates to an ongoing health condition. It is at the school's discretion as to how much of the learning can be missed.

AB asked for any other views, as if it can be resolved at the meeting that would be ideal, but if it is more complex, then the issue needs to go for wider discussions.

Wendy Lowe cited school-specific issues which may require a different approach, such as clinical placements for School of Medicine students, which are regulated externally by the GMC, so their requirements override any provisions put in by the University.

TB added that consistency across schools which have joint honours is very important as it proves very unhelpful and when provisions and processes are interpreted differently depending on which school is delivering the courses.

JC said the caveat of "where possible" is useful as it means the school would have more scope to decide if the implementation of the provision would hinder the student's ability to meet the learning outcomes, for example, where a clinical placement requires attendance, as opposed to lectures which could feasibly be studied from home if a student has serious mobility problems.

There was agreement in the group that different approaches within different schools was an issue, but there was no clear solution. LM added she felt the key thing to consider is what are the core competences and learning outcomes being assessed and is attendance required to demonstrate these. LM asked if disabled students could demonstrate this via a different method, as a reasonable adjustment?

On flexibility, Charlotta Hillerdal (CH) said flexibility is essential as students with ongoing health issues cannot choose not to be ill, so it would be good to look at instances where students could make up for missed time, for example, a short written assignment in place of a missed seminar.

Overall, AB said CH's point sums up where the discussion is at, with no clear outcome on this issue and a lot to balance. Student Support's document is clear in that all the provision means is no requirement for additional evidence. There are many cases where a student has very valid reasons for missing a class and currently the C6 process is there to try and get them back on track. It is one for further discussion and AB will go back to Emma Tough and to the Task and Finish Group.

8. Reflection on SSEC Task and Finish Groups (TFGs)

8.1: AB updated on the Pastoral Review TFG, of which AB is the outgoing Chair, to be replaced by JB. The group met on 25 October to discuss the paper which went to UEC on 01 October and also the lengthy report when went to Senate for an academic review. This received support, but also concern over workload and resourcing. The next phrase is to continue to enhance resources but to update existing IT capabilities and to try and enhance PGT support.

8.2: On the Monitoring TFG, AB noted positive feedback from Senate to make it a more supportive system, but again with concern about workload and resourcing. AB is meeting with Registry colleagues next week to look at how we can make updates and change terminology around C6/C7 systems and communications. JB will lead this work from January.

8.3: Nick Edwards (NE) updated on the Code of Practice, which was approved by the University Court in late November and will now progress to the Business Committee of the General Council in March 2023, with a view to final approval in April. Communications will be prepared and there will be a final meeting of the TFG before winding it up, with the Code of Practice due to be in place on 01 August 2023.

9. AOCB

9.1: NE concluded the meeting by expressing his thanks on behalf of all those involved in the SSEC for AB's work as Dean for Student Support and Co-Chair over the last three years and for all the great work and significant changes she was able to implement during her time in the post.

10. Further information

10.1: Further information may be obtained from Abbe Brown, outgoing Co-Chair, (abbe.brown@abdn.ac.uk), Nick Edwards, Co-Chair, (n.edwards@abdn.ac.uk), Jason Bohan, incoming Co-Chair (jason.bohan@abdn.ac.uk) or Stevie Kearney, Clerk, (steven.kearney@abdn.ac.uk).