

## UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

## UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

**REPORT FROM THE STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE****03<sup>rd</sup> May 2023****1. Approval of Minutes of meeting held on 07 March 2023****1.1:** Minutes approved**1.2:** No outstanding actions**2. Welcome and Chair's Update**

Nick Edwards (NE) welcomed members to the meeting and began by reminding the group that Student Support Services will be open as usual over the summer, and also they can be contacted for any issues around the cost of living, where students require financial support or advice. Jason Bohan (JB) said a meeting took place with the School Disability Coordinators to discuss revising provisions and there will be further updates on this matter at future meetings. JB also updated on discussions around developing an extension policy and this is an ongoing discussion with the Registry Team to decide where it would sit, as it would be a large piece of work, plus the absence reporting procedures would likely be included in the review.

**3. Withdrawals Report 2022/23 First Semester**

JB introduced the paper, which summaries student withdrawals for the first semester and this data is broken down by several categories, including by month, to identify key trends. The majority of the withdrawals tend to be for health or personal reasons but there is not currently enough data available to know how schools can be supported to intervene and the committee held a discussion with varying opinions on the withdrawal form's value, as many students tick one box and do not include any additional information. Protected characteristic data will be included in the next report, which is due in three months' time. The group agreed any additional data would be very useful to inform action plans and aid retention.

**4. Student Engagement Post-Pandemic**

NE introduced the item as a discussion and follow-up on general issues raised at the previous SSEC meeting on levels of student engagement post-pandemic and also any specific issues which the group wished to discuss. JB added that the item was on the agenda partly as a follow-up from the discussion about withdrawals, but also to get more information from schools on trends they have identified around whether students are generally happy in their studies.

Tim Baker (TB) noted attendance and non-engagement seemed to be a particular issue in Year 2 students at the moment in his school and Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan (SV) noted the many factors affecting students, such as the cost of living, students adjusting to being on campus after several years of remote learning, support for disabilities and hidden disabilities. It was also noted that friendship networks in class and in student accommodation do not seem to be as strong for current students compared to previous cohorts. International students also

face an increasing number of unpredictable or volatile circumstances. JB suggested reviewing opportunities for community events and ensuring all activities were inclusive would be useful, while it would be worth seeing how the Buddy Scheme can be supported and expanded.

## **5. Assessment Period and Exam Arrangements**

JB noted the agenda item was included as a discussion point to allow schools to feedback on any issues around the current assessment period. On the marking boycott, JB noted is a concerning situation and causing anxiety for students. The situation is being monitored very closely but the impact on students is not clear at the moment.

Discussions have been had with schools, Registry, Estates and others around exam arrangements, particularly where provisions mean some students need a separate room or access to computing facilities. Many schools have reported not having enough rooms to meet all the requirements, while there have been issues with not having printing facilities in the rooms where a student is using a computer. These issues were discussed prior to this exam diet and will be reviewed once the assessment period has concluded. The aim is to minimise disruption for students and schools.

JB also mentioned that Old Aberdeen medical practice is now refusing to write medical notes for students due to the workload involved. Jemma Murdoch (JM) is in communication with them and this will have an impact not only on absence reporting and assessments, but for disability provisions as well. Conversations have been had with the Directors of Education in each school and we will need to be more flexible by accepting other forms of evidence where possible. Going forwards, this issue is likely to mean the University will need to review its policies around medical evidence for absences, assessments and provisions. This has been discussed with Registry and will be developed over the summer.

## **6. Risk Register**

NE introduced the University's Risk Register, with no immediate concerns after mitigation for areas relevant to this committee. The issue of AI producing coursework for students was raised and JB confirmed this was being looked at as a priority and was likely to appear on the Risk Register in the future.

## **7. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy**

Janine Chalmers (JCh), Head of Organisational Development, joined the meeting as a guest and introduced a review of existing policies, starting with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy. The review group was made up of staff and students and overall it was found it matched well with best practice across the sector. There were some areas for enhancement, such as the addition of more comprehensive support documents at the end and also some additional appendices to cover definitions, as this is an area which is evolving quickly and needs to be kept up to date. The committee praised the document and, in particular, the resources section in the Appendices, which were felt to be very useful.

## **8. Religion and Belief Policy**

JCh introduced a 2<sup>nd</sup> policy which has been updated, which is the Religion and Belief Policy. Much of the review has been around the tone of the policy and was partly a result of academic

colleagues raising concerns about students not engaging with their studies during times of religious festivals and this led to the creation of the policy in 2014.

The previous version lacked a definition of religion and belief, which has now been included, and the revised version has more information on freedom of speech and more support included. JCh also noted the University has adopted the Young Academy of Scotland's Charter for Responsible Debate, so this information has been added to the document.

#### **9. Postgraduate Survey**

JB introduced the item and informed the committee there are surveys for postgraduate research students and postgraduate taught students and the Student Experience team have been ensuring students are aware of the surveys and the benefits of filling these out. Similar to the NSS, there will be a report produced afterwards which will then go to relevant committees and will inform individual school action plans. The postgraduate research survey is currently open and has had a 12% response rate so far, but still has a few weeks to run. The postgraduate Taught survey will open slightly later, from the 26<sup>th</sup> of May to the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. Results will be discussed at future SSEC meetings, hopefully by September.

#### **10. Reflection on SSEC Task and Finish Groups (TFGs)**

NE said the Code of Practice on Student Discipline has been approved at Court and will come into effect from August the 1<sup>st</sup>. It will be added to the webpages on Student Discipline over the next few weeks alongside the existing code, which is still in place until July 31<sup>st</sup>. The TFG will have one more meeting and then report back to committee at the beginning of the new academic year.

JB informed the committee that more work is being done on the business case for developing IT systems to improve the Monitoring process. Within the Pastoral Review TFG, JB said a small group is working to simplify the webpage structure and the proposals will be discussed at the forthcoming Senior Personal Tutor Forum to ensure wider consultation.

#### **11. AOCB**

Committee Clerk, Stevie Kearney (SK), informed the committee the calendar invites for SSEC meetings for the 2023/24 academic year will be sent out this week to allow members to plan ahead.

#### **12. Further information**

**10.1:** Further information may be obtained from Nick Edwards, Co-Chair, ([n.edwards@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:n.edwards@abdn.ac.uk)), Jason Bohan, Co-Chair ([jason.bohan@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:jason.bohan@abdn.ac.uk)) or Stevie Kearney, Clerk, ([steven.kearney@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:steven.kearney@abdn.ac.uk)).