1. Approval of Minutes of meeting held on 03 May 2023
   1.1: Minutes approved
   1.2: No outstanding actions

2. Welcome and Chair’s Update
   Nick Edwards (NE) welcomed those attending the meeting online and in person. NE introduced the agenda.

3. Pastoral Support Review TFG – update
   Jason Bohan (JB) introduced the paper, which is an update on progress and a request for any thoughts or comments as to whether the work is on the right track. The two main actions JB inherited when he took on the role within SSEC were to look at the website, which was very complex, with staff and student pages interlinked and hard to navigate. Following a review, the website is now more user-friendly. Additionally, JB had an action to address the delivery of pastoral support for Postgraduate Taught (PGT) programmes.

   The old website is still online but the paper provides a link to the new website, for comparison and comments. The old staff and student pages will be removed and replaced by one pastoral support website, which summarises how it is delivered across UG and PG programmes, while there is also a password-protected staff page full of useful resources.

   On the PGT pastoral support review, it wasn’t possible to extend personal tutor support to PGT students, so JB spoke with schools about current support to find out what is working well and what can be improved. It was felt a lot of work was happening, but it needed to feel more cohesive. Key ideas included ensuring there are named contacts for students rather than an individual or a generic departmental contact, and also ensuring a proactive communications strategy with students as key stakeholders able to provide their input.

   The Student Union representatives expressed disappointment the University could not find the resource to allocate Personal Tutors to PGT students and noted the significant problems faced by international PGT students, especially those who arrive late.

   Several members of the committee noted that Programme Coordinators are not a like-for-like replacement for Personal Tutors, especially as the numbers are much higher. Duncan Stuart (DS) said all the information is sent to incoming PGT students through a comprehensive range of communications, but these rely on the incoming student reading the information they have been sent. Similarly, some schools have tried running a 2nd induction event around week 3, but reported that engagement was very low.
NE concluded by saying the TGF will be wound up but will now become a Senior Pastoral Support & Guidance Forum as a formal group that reports into SSEC. JB said it was long-running TFG and it needed to come to an end, but the new forum will pull all this work together and develop this work going forwards to improve the PGT experience.

4. Student Absence Policy

JB introduced the agenda item and the background, which is that the Student Absence Policy and associated policies and procedures require some adaptation, due to Old Aberdeen Medical Practice no longer offering letters to students for absences including classes, exams and other assessments. As such, the Absence Policy needs to be flexible to cover instances where a student is unable to obtain a medical letter through no fault of their own.

The main changes to the policy are around an expansion of acceptable forms of evidence and discussion around allowing students more scope for self-certifying.

Lesley Murdoch (LM) noted that from a Student Support Services perspective, a move away from the insistence on medical evidence was seen as a positive development. Also, it will be beneficial to allow the schools to have more discretion, rather than referring students to the Student Support team to have the same conversation they already had with their school, to then get a letter of support as evidence.

John Cavanagh from the School of Engineering noted that students cannot be expected to read the policies and felt sometimes school staff did not fully-understand the policies. NE added that often students would only look up a policy if they were absent, so that left a potential gap where students may sit any assessments when unwell, as they are unaware of the policies and procedures.

On the discussion around what constitutes “good cause”, JB suggested it would possibly make more sense to have a list of circumstances which do not constitute good cause, rather than trying to create an exhaustive list of circumstances which do meet the criteria.

NE suggested point 1.5 was worth looking at again, as the wording appears to suggest the implementation of a ‘fit to sit policy’, but said he was not sure this document was the right place for such a statement and was wary of anything which made it sound like a formal ‘fit to sit’ policy was in place. JB summarised the discussion as being broadly positive, with some concern around the phrasing of ‘fit to sit’ which may need amending.

5. NSS Initial Report

JB noted the NSS seems quite different this year, with changes in questions and reporting processes. JB will be visiting schools to follow up on school-specific feedback. NE said it is always easier to digest once the numbers have been broken down by category to give more detail.

6. Survey Season Proposal
DS introduced the agenda item and paper, noting the focus of the surveys is generally on all student surveys, or those which go to large student of students. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of learning and teaching questions were added to the Aberdeen Student Experience Survey. Some questions will be added to next survey, on areas like immigration and equality, diversity and inclusion. The survey is already seen to be lengthy, so the size will be reduced where possible. The teaching and learning question will now be removed, but there is a proposal to have learning and teaching as a stand-alone survey, which will run at the same time as other academic surveys, in the first two to three months of the year.

The potential for survey fatigue was discussed, with DS noting that all questions in all surveys are assessed to ensure there is a clear reason for asking the question and that we only gather data we can action. There were several questions about breaking down the results with more granular detail and these queries will be followed-up on as an action from this meeting.

7. Reflection on final report of SSEC Task and Finish Group

NE introduced the paper on the new code of practice on student discipline, which is mainly for information. This has now been updated on the University website and has been reconfirmed through the E-Registration system. Also, on the website, there is a guide for students on the policy to break the information down and be more manageable, especially for those wishing to make a report based on areas the code covers. There will be more work on this in terms of publicity and the TFG has now finished, but the code will be reviewed on a two-yearly basis.

8. Student Monitoring and Engagement TFG

JB offered his thanks to everyone involved in the Monitoring and Engagement TFG as it’s been a very large piece of work, ongoing since 2021. The main update is on the old IT systems in place which added significantly to staff workload. The TFC drew up a list of recommended updates and the list was then revised based on feedback. The list now includes 10 updates which have now been approved, so the TFG will remain in place to oversee this work.

9. Full-Time Undergraduate Non-Continuation Internal Data 2021/22

JB introduced the paper, which is based on all students and run internally. Non-continuing rates are up from 3.2% in the previous year to 5.1% in 2021/22. As the data is broken down by school, it’s a very useful report for identifying trends, and also trends across cohorts. There is also some data relating to disability, ethnicity and gender. The data will be used by schools to develop their action plans, especially for those school performing less well in this area.

Graeme Kirkpatrick from the Student Union said the non-continuation rates within the School of Engineering are high and consistent with how the school scores across other metrics such as the NSS. JB said the school was unusual in that non-continuation rates were high in Year 3 as well as Year 1. JC said within Engineering there has been a bigger drop-out rate at the
start of Year 3 as the engineering discipline becomes more specific rather than general. The course also gets a lot harder at level 3, but the issues are being addressed.

The committee then discussed the challenges of obtaining useable data on non-continuing students, as they often do not engage, and many leavers do not go into any detail on their reasons for non-continuation. Where useable data exists, there was a request for this to be broken down into areas such as disability and widening access categories, to identify trends.

10. AOCB

No other items for discussion.

11. Further information

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