**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN**
**UNDERGRADUATE COMMITTEE**

**Minute of Meeting Held on 6 February 2020**

**Present:**      Abbe Brown (Chair), Euan Bain, Justin Borg-Barthet, Stuart Durkin, Ewan Grant, Fiona Gyoeri (Student Representative), Bill Harrison, Gerry Hough, Tracey Innes, Tim Mighall, Michelle Pinard, Shona Potts with Pat Rowand (Clerk) and Craig Stewart in attendance.

**Apologies:**      Jason Bohan, Archie Graham, Natalie Kinchin-Williams, David McCausland, Gordon McEwan, Joy Perkins and Ruth Taylor

**1.      Minute of Meeting Held on 5 November 2019**

**1.1**      Acceptance of the minute of the meeting held on 5 November 2019 as an accurate record of proceedings was proposed by Tim Mighall and seconded by Michelle Pinard.

**2.      Matters Arising**

**2.1      Minute 2.2**  The Centre for Academic Development had confirmed that training could be provided on designing surveys and the associated ethics. Online ethics training was available but it was unclear if this provision was directed at staff or students. It was noted that as needs became clearer we could get in touch again with CAD.

**2.2      Minute 3.4**  The difficulty in finding the most suitable meeting pattern to maximise attendance was acknowledged. Varying the day of the week the meeting falls on had been trialled but still caused clashes with teaching commitments.

**2.3**      Whilst it was suggested the use of Skype/teleconferencing could help maximise attendance it was acknowledged that this would not address the problem of a core University committee taking place when teaching was ongoing. The consensus view of the Committee was that Wednesday afternoons would be the most suitable time on which to schedule future meetings of the Committee - although it was noted that School Meetings often took place on Wednesday afternoons. This issue will be monitored and colleagues are encouraged to send a deputy if needed.

**2.4      Minute 5.2**  Abbe reported that the Committee's concerns over seemingly random timetable changes had been raised with Ruth Taylor. In response to the request for examples of the timetabling problems experienced, members cited instances where staff were unaware of timetable changes and had only found out about them from students. The fact that the primary source of information regarding timetable changes was MyTimetable was highlighted. Members voiced concerns regarding the expectation that staff check MyTimetable on a regular basis for timetable changes, particularly as this was felt to be a retrograde step: previously messages had been sent to Course Coordinators advising of room/timetable changes. Whereas students could log onto the system and see their timetable for the week, teaching staff did not have a similar facility and would have to look up each course on which they taught separately. This was deemed to be time consuming and not user friendly. The Committee were of the view that the desirable solution was the use of automated messages notifying teaching staff of a change in room. Abbe undertook to investigate the viability of staff receiving automated messages.

**Action:** *Abbe Brown*

**2.5**   Committee members sought clarification of the definition of 'business critical' in the context of timetable changes, there being a concern over the way in which the term was being used. It was agreed that the Learning and Teaching Spaces Group should be asked to provide a definition of the term. Members were also asked to provide Abbe with suggestions as to what should be deemed as business critical and to inform her of any issues which they had had with regard to requests for timetabling changes which were not deemed business critical. This would help inform Abbe's discussion with the Learning and Teaching Spaces Group.

**Action:** *Abbe Brown/All*

**2.6**   It was also noted that the Learning and Teaching Spaces Group was addressing the unauthorised removal of resources from teaching spaces.

**3.   Committee Remit and Role Descriptor**

**3.1**   The remit and composition of the Committee was confirmed – it had been discussed at the previous meeting but the Committee had not been quorate.

**3.2**   Abbe drew to the Committee's attention the possibility of changes to the institution's Committee structure due to the appointment of new Deans and the associated discontinuation of the roles of the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Deans.

**3.3**   The Directors of Teaching impressed upon Abbe that they had found the Undergraduate Committee a constructive forum for discussion and were of the view that it was essential that an alternative mechanism be put place if the Committee were to be discontinued.

**3.4**   Members put forward the view that there would be merit in the workload associated with their involvement in Committee work being estimated and fed into the school workload models. Abbe acknowledged this point and undertook to raise as appropriate.

**Action:** *Abbe Brown*

**4.   Late Submission of Work Policy**

**4.1**   The Committee was invited to consider and approve the Penalties for Late Submission of Work paper in which recommendations were made regarding the penalties to be applied for unauthorised late submission of course work. It was noted that the policy would apply from Academic Year 2020-21 onwards.

**4.2**   Following discussion the Committee approved Proposal 1 of the paper in principle. However, the Committee was not persuaded of the merits of the proposal to cap penalties for work which would be awarded a Pass but for the deduction for late submission. The Committee was especially concerned that this would result in privileging students awarded grades between D3 and B3, particularly when compared to students who receive a grade of E1 or lower. Given that many courses have more than one form of assessment, it was believed that the late submission proposal would have an uneven impact on students' overall attainment.

**4.3**   The Committee therefore agreed that clarification should be sought from the Dean for Quality Assurance in order to enable members to consider the rationale for the provision. Upon circulation of this clarification, the Committee would consider by email discussion whether this addressed their concerns. Should the Committee then consider that it does not do so, the Committee would respectfully suggest that this point be removed from the Draft Policy.

**4.5** The Committee approved the proposal that weekends and holidays were not considered in the count of number of days late subject to:

(i)     the removal of a specific reference to Monday and to Tuesday, as the Qatar campus recognises a different weekend which does not end on Sunday, and

(ii)    the removal of the requirement that all summative deadlines were to be on a particular day as this would pose an unworkable burden on professional staff and course organisers aiming to spread assessment deadlines as much as possible across the course. It was also noted that for some assessments, such as the review of lab books, it would not be practical for them all to be submitted and reviewed on the same day.

[Clerk's Note:   The Dean for Quality Assurance's responses to the points raised by the Committee was circulated by email, indicating that Abbe will raise the points raised by the Undergraduate Committee when the paper is discussed at the 18 March 2020 meeting of Senate. Some of these points are incorporated in a new draft for discussion at UCTL on 26 February 2020.]

**5.     Personal Tutor System**

**5.1**    Abbe reported that, as Dean for Student Support, one of her roles was to explore support for all students on all levels and all campuses. Consideration was therefore being given to clarifying the role of the Personal Tutor and consultations and focus groups were planned to explore this further.

**5.2**    The question of reminding Personal Tutors that they can discuss academic matters, and how to support them in doing that, would be one of the options included in the consultation process. It was observed that some staff perceived the Personal Tutor role to be a pastoral role and felt that there were beneficial elements of the academic support role which may have been lost with the move to Personal Tutors. It was noted that this would include an element of discussion of degree management and to deliver this effectively could require compulsory attendance from students at the start of the year. Methods by which this could come about were being explored. Abbe invited Committee members to contact her by email with their thoughts on this.

**Action:** *All*

**5.3**    The review of the Personal Tutor system would include clarification of the system's role in a student mental health context and the policies and procedures surrounding this. It was recognised that many Personal Tutors had concerns about how to proceed when encountering students experiencing mental health difficulties. A flowchart had been distributed to help signpost further help for students and more would be provided. It was recommended that the Student Mental Health charter be used to inform the review of the Personal Tutor system.

**5.4**    It was confirmed that an initial refreshment of the Personal Tutor system was intended in the interests of enhancement and formalisation in a wider University context. Personal Tutors would not be expected to have an exhaustive knowledge of all areas and would be provided with guidance so students could be directed correctly.

**5.5**    It was suggested that the lack of student engagement with the Personal Tutor system might have been impacted by a lack of understanding on what the role is. If the aim was to build a rapport and establish links, it was suggested that, building on the points made above, a compulsory meeting at the start of each academic year could be established. Concerns were

noted about the manageability and proportionality of this for non-attending students. It was also recognised that many students will approach a trusted academic rather than a Personal Tutor. It would therefore be useful for an early student-Personal Tutor rapport to be established, although other relationships are always likely to evolve. The ideal would be to have a match for tutees within their Schools, but it was acknowledged that this could be challenging in the case of joint-degree students.

**5.6**    As no current system exists to discuss course selection, it was suggested that an early advisory meeting, pitched as degree maintenance, could help establish a link between Personal Tutors and tutees.

**5.7**    It was suggested that with robust guidance, all academic staff could fulfil the Personal Tutor role with some more experienced staff acting as 'super-tutors'. Some concern was expressed over the fact that some members of staff had strengths in other areas and would not be suited to the role of Personal Tutor. It was suggested that Heads of School could take this into consideration and balance workloads accordingly. It was also suggested that staff could have the opportunity to opt out of personal tutoring, as appropriate. Further, the role of Personal Tutor could be quite technical and demanding for new members of staff. All these positions are points which will be considered in the review going forward.

**5.8**    The importance of highlighting and recognising the credibility and value of the Personal Tutor role within the annual review process was stressed. Concerns remained that workloads would not be appropriately adjusted by Heads of School to allow for full engagement with the role.

**6.    AOCB**

**6.1    Engineering Students Performance in Programme Year 3**

An observation was made that programme year 3 students in Engineering had performed significantly less well in session 2018 – 2019 compared with previous years, and it appeared likely that the same would be true of students completing programme year 3 in academic year 2019-2020. The fact that these students were the first cohort who had been entirely taught in Scottish Schools via Curriculum for Excellence was highlighted as a possible contributory factor affecting the numeracy of the cohort.  The School had established a short-term focus group to look into this further. It was suggested that there would be merit in inviting secondary school teachers for input into discussions.

**6.2**    It was queried if this this pattern had been observed elsewhere in the University. Whilst a similar pattern had been observed amongst year 3 Chemistry students, the same pattern had not been observed elsewhere in the University – indeed performances seem to be improving in terms of literacy.

**6.3**    It was suggested that it might be the case that the style of teaching/learning at the University no longer suited students who had been taught via Currriculum for Excellence. Further Summer School or entry level support may be required.

**6.4    Ethics Approval Process**

The fact that the ethics approval procedure had been reorganised and was now focused upon the Graduate School was highlighted. This had resulted in responsibility for undergraduate project approval being devolved to Schools. There was concern that this was disadvantageous to undergraduate students. Abbe invited members to send on any concerns they may have in

regard to the reorganisation directly to her so that she could discuss the matter further with Ruth Taylor.

**Action:** *All, Abbe Brown*

**6.5  Degree Classification**

There was concern about the lack of communication regarding the changes to GPA and degree classifications. The overall communication was felt to be unsatisfactory for both staff and students and further centralised communication was felt to be necessary. Concerns were expressed over the likely negative impact upon the NSS, with students being particularly concerned their degree classification will be affected.

**6.6**  The need for information to be shared effectively was raised, including the justification for decisions. There appeared to be a widespread assumption that important information would be disseminated from the top-down and the lack of knowledge regarding the changes was seen to be indicative of a communication gap. It was noted that although there is a space for communication from university leaders, there is also a space for members of the Undergraduate Committee to contribute to information sharing in schools.

**6.7**  It was noted that the concerns around the rounding of marks were widespread and were in the process of being addressed.

**For Information**

**7.  Senate Digest**

**7.1**  The contents of the Senate Digest for the 9 December 2019 meeting of Senate were noted.

**8.  University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL)**

**8.1**  The agendas for the 12 June 2019 and the 18 September 2019 meetings of the UCTL were noted.

**9.  Date of Next Meeting**

**9.1**  It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would take place on Monday, 23 March 2020 in Committee Room 2, University Office