

**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
UNDERGRADUATE COMMITTEE**

Minute of Meeting Held on 5 May 2020

Present: Abbe Brown (Chair), Euan Bain, Jason Bohan, Justin Borg-Barthet, Stuart Durkin, Archie Graham, Ewan Grant, William Harrison, Gerry Hough, Natalie Kinchin-Williams, David McCausland, Gordon McEwen Tim Mighall, Michelle Pinard, Shona Potts with Pat Rowand (Clerk) and Craig Stewart in attendance.

Apologies: Tracy Innes

1. Minute of Meeting Held on 6 February 2020

1.1 The minute of the meeting held 6 February 2020 was confirmed as an accurate record.

2. Matters Arising

2.1 Minute 2.4 With regard to the concerns which had been raised in respect of Course Coordinators being unaware of changes made to room bookings, sometimes at very short notice, Abbe reported that she had discussed the matter with the Central Timetabling Team. They had advised that plans were already underway to inform Course Co-ordinators directly in the event of a room change, rather than the information being provided at School level and fed down.

2.2 Minute 2.5 Abbe had sought clarity on the definition of 'business critical', as requested by the Committee. Whilst a broadly open definition was felt to be helpful, the Central Timetabling Team had confirmed that room changes for accessibility reasons fell within the definition of business critical. Committee members were asked to make it known through the Clerk to the Committee should there continue to be instances where Course Coordinators were unaware of room changes and the reasons for the change. Members were reminded that issues of this nature also fell within the remit of the Learning and Teaching Spaces Committee.

2.3 Minute 3.2 Abbe reported that the review of the institution's Committee structure had been put on hold meantime. This meant that both the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Committees would continue to meet and feed their views into the UCTL.

2.4 Minute 3.4 The Committee's views with regard to the importance of ensuring that the workload associated with Committee work is estimated and fed into School workload models has been raised with Ruth Taylor. The variation in practice across the institution, and staff members' uncertainty on the matter would be brought to the attention of the Workload Committee which had been established as a result of the industrial action.

2.5 Minute 4.5 Members were advised that feedback from the Undergraduate Committee had informed the late submission of work policy, with some, though not all, of the changes suggested by the Committee taken on board in preparing what would have been put to Senate (that meeting was cancelled because of COVID). Given the ongoing COVID situation this project was currently on hold.

2.6 Minute 6.4 Concerns had been raised at the last meeting in regard to the fact that the ethics review of undergraduate dissertations, and in some cases postgraduation dissertations, now fell under the remit of Schools rather than the Ethics Committee. Training could be developed by CAD if needed and it was noted that colleagues were now feeling better informed about the situation. The view was that no further action was necessary at the Committee for now.

3. Status of Meetings

- 3.1** Members were reminded that the meeting originally scheduled for March 2020 had been cancelled and had been replaced by today's meeting. The UCTL had met in the interim and was due to meet again on 8 and 22 June 2020, providing further opportunities for the outcome of the Undergraduate Committee's discussions to be fed into the UCTL.

4. Open Discussion on University Response to COVID-19

4.1 Action Taken to Date

Papers had been submitted for review by the Committee which summarised the University's immediate response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The Committee welcomed the opportunity to have sight of the papers covering:

Approaches to Assessment at Levels 1 and 2
Assessment at Levels 3, 4 and 5: No Detriment Procedures
Assessment and Graduation Dates in 2020 and early 2021
School of Medicine Approach

and noted each measure taken, observing that these actions were already in effect.

- 4.2** As the University has many channels for communication, the importance of ensuring that all colleagues were kept as up to date as possible was stressed. It was confirmed that the documents presented to the Committee were publicly available and could be openly shared widely amongst colleagues.

- 4.3** The Committee's attention was drawn to section 3, of the paper on approaches to assessment at levels 1 and 2 - the section headed "Students with Mitigating Circumstances" – which covered the process to be followed for students who would be expected to make up a shortfall of credits during the May exam diet. Members were not confident that all Schools were aware of the stated deadline of 24 April 2020 for providing students with information on the alternative resit assessment arrangements and/or had received the reports from Registry listing the students who fell into this category (ref point 3.4). It was also pointed out that some Schools were still in the process of establishing exactly what alternative assessment arrangements would be and it was felt that it would be irresponsible to provide students with information on plans which might change in the light of experience. Whilst acknowledging that a degree of flexibility was required in response to an evolving situation, Abbe undertook to ascertain if any further guidance had been given centrally which could aid clarity.

Action: Abbe Brown

4.4 Future Plans

The Committee discussed the University's future plans in response to the COVID-19 crisis. It was noted that at an institutional level a number of Task and Finish Groups (short life working groups) had been established focussing on:

- Return to Campus
- Session Preparation (linking in with recruitment)
- Digital Infrastructure
- Blended Learning

4.5 Abbe reported on the work the Blended Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group (TFG), chaired by Ruth Taylor. Membership of the TFG was wide-ranging and included students and staff from all Schools. A number of separate workstreams had been established, including:

- Student support
- Communications
- EDIA
- Employability
- Expectations for delivery, assessment
- International Experience
- Timetabling
- Lab-based Delivery and Fieldwork
- Scope and Scale (previously Minimum Expectations)

4.6 The intention was that two representatives from Senate would sit on each of the high level TFGs and could potentially be involved in some of the workstreams. Abbe was leading the Student Support workstream.

4.7 Papers from the Blended Learning TFG would be shared with the UCTL. The importance of ensuring that the membership and objectives of the TFGs and workstreams as well as outcomes were transparent and readily accessible to all colleagues was stressed. Abbe confirmed that this was the intention as progress got underway.

4.8 Schools had been loosely grouped together and assigned a Project Manager, as detailed in the table below. The Project Manager's role was light touch, providing help according to each School's needs, including assistance with securing resources. Colleagues from CAD were also working with Schools providing guidance to help Schools make their decisions:

School	Project Manager	CAD
Biological Sciences	Lauren Gane	Andy Yule
DHP	Lauren Gane	Andy Yule
Geosciences	Lauren Gane	Andy Yule
Business School	Pamela McLean	Sara Preston
Engineering	Pamela McLean	Sara Preston
Law	Pamela McLean	Sara Preston
Education	Natalie Kinchin-Williams	Catherine Ogilvie
MMSN	Natalie Kinchin-Williams	Catherine Ogilvie plus Medi-Cal
Social Sciences	Natalie Kinchin-Williams	Catherine Ogilvie
Language Centre	Natalie Kinchin-Williams	Catherine Ogilvie
LLMVC	Ross Currie	Gavin Innes
NCS	Ross Currie	Gavin Innes
Psychology	Ross Currie	Gavin Innes

4.9 Assurance was sought that workstream membership was fair and impartial, with some perception existing that 'known faces' were selected. It was explained that members were selected by the respective workstream leaders, based on skills and experience and it was confirmed that there was representation from within Schools across the BLITFG as a whole.

- 4.10** It was noted that the intention was that information on the work of the Blended Learning Implementation TFG, including minutes and outcomes, was to be shared via a webpage, the link to which was provided, viz:

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/governance/university-committee-on-teaching-and-learning-643.php>

- 4.11** With respect to the Committee, members were asked if they would find the use of Microsoft Teams helpful as a means of disseminating information and encouraging debate. It was agreed that whilst it was an accessible and useful point of contact, conversations needed to be signposted effectively in order to facilitate engagement.

- 4.12** Clear mechanisms for the Committee, beyond simply reporting, for feeding into the UCTL were deemed to be vital. School Directors of Learning and Teaching reported feeling increasingly sidelined and expressed the view that there should be more academic representation - from Directors of Learning and Teaching - on the UCTL. Going forward it was suggested that there would be merit in creating a combined Postgraduate and Undergraduate Committee/Group. Abbe undertook pass these suggestions on to the Vice-Principal for Education.

Action: Abbe Brown

- 4.13** Building on 4.12, it was suggested that a similar “bottom up” approach be taken to the Blended Learning TFG. It was confirmed that Schools would very much be at the heart of decision making as to how blended learning would be delivered in their school, with central support from areas such as CAD and the library being provided. Colleagues were asked to let Abbe know if this proved not to be the case.

Action: All

- 4.14** Members shared with Committee the composition of their respective School Blended Learning TFGs. A variety of different approaches are being taken, depending upon the size of the School and the number of disciplines within it. A need for best practice to be identified across the institution was raised. It was recommended that that School TFGs draw their membership broadly across the School in order to establish trust and transparency. It was acknowledged that the challenges faced varied across Schools, particularly those with multiple disciplines. Amongst the points raised was the fact that discipline leads could provide valuable insight on workload implications and joint degrees. Student, administrative and technical representation could also help ensure the logistical feasibility of plans, although it was acknowledged that involving students at this juncture may not be practicable. Student and other support could be sought once Schools had reached the phase where plans were ready to be implemented.

- 4.15** Members of the committee sought guidance on the purchase of IT equipment and software. It was explained that all requests for purchases should be submitted via the Servicedesk. Requests would be considered on a case by case basis and would be checked to see if the purchase was essential or if existing suitable alternatives were available. Members were reminded that IT Services had a duty to ensure that any purchases were safe and secure. Representatives from the Engineering and Business Schools wished to highlight that it was crucial that their staff had access to visualisers. As a point of awareness, the importance of both students and staff having access to reliable broadband was noted, although it was recognised that this was outwith the control of the University.

5. Approaches to Assessment

5.1 The Committee noted the contents of the paper outlining changes to assessment and term dates which had been approved at the University Committee on Teaching and Learning on 28 April 2020.

5.2 The timetable of advised assessment and graduation dates for the 2020/2021 session was summarised for the Committee. Members were advised that Schools would be able to decide how long they would teach for and when assessment(s) would take place – either at the end of teaching or throughout the twelve week period. Schools also had been given the flexibility to consider the forms that assessment might take, although it was recognised that for some disciplines there could be no alternative to an end of course exam. It was acknowledged that holding exams might prove challenging, and the need for some form of co-ordination between Schools in order to avoid, where possible, exam timetable clashes was stressed.

5.3 It was understood that discussions had taken place regarding the possibility of an August 2020 graduation opportunity which would allow students who had been granted extensions or who had finished their studies during the resit period an opportunity to graduate and receive their degree certificate prior to the November ceremony. Abbe undertook to get confirmation as to whether this plan was still in place.

Action: Abbe Brown

5.4 It was queried how the revised timetable impacted upon the deadline for the return of Postgraduate Taught marks for the October exam boards and the potential knock on effect for the November graduation ceremony. Abbe undertook to ascertain details of this timeline.

Action: Abbe Brown

5.5 Responding to a query in regard to plans for Freshers Week/Orientation, Abbe advised members that meetings of the Welcome Week Group, led by Student Experience and Student Support, had been taking place, with the focus on the change to blended work. The Student Experience task group and other colleagues were also looking at Freshers Week/Orientation from an induction point of view. There was awareness that the closure of schools in March might result in a possible knowledge gap given that pupils had not been able to finish their courses. It was accepted that there might therefore be a need to develop transitional materials covering some of the basics which would normally have been taught in schools.

5.6 In addition AUSA were speaking to both current and prospective students with a view to developing solutions in an effort to replicate, as far as possible within the current constraints, the social experience of the event.

6. Pastoral Care: Update

6.1 Abbe reported that work was ongoing in considering how the role of Personal Tutor could be adapted to take into account the impact of the changes to the timetable and teaching arrangements.

6.2 Concern was expressed over the possibility that the truncated first half-session coupled with alternative delivery and assessment arrangements might cause stress due to the resultant expected student workloads. The Committee was asked to remember that there was a need to be conscious of the demands which were being placed on students and the potential impact upon health and wellbeing.

6.3 Abbe advised that the frontline pastoral support group (SPTF) had met and identified four overarching elements of support at different levels. In addition, Student Support had developed supporting documents, giving guidance on who to ask in a number of common scenarios. Work was also ongoing in regard to the provision of light-touch training aimed at providing Personal Tutors with clarity on the role. Consideration was also being given as to how the role of Personal Tutor could be undertaken in a blended learning environment. Shona Potts expressed a particular interest in joining the Student Support workstream of BLITFG and Abbe agreed to take this forward.

Action: Abbe Brown

6.5 It was noted that further training could be provided regarding the awareness of personal or cultural issues. Information regarding this would be shared once available.

7. AOCB

7.1 Members voiced frustration at the poor quality of communication with students during the emergency period. The example of the No Detriment Policy was cited: the most important point from a student perspective was found at point 22 of the associated Frequently Asked Questions rather than being highlighted in the covering communication. The importance of ensuring that a strategy was developed to communicate plainly and clearly with students about the arrangements for the first half session was stressed. Abbe assured members that this was already in hand: the Communications workstream was actively considering this and had experienced Comms staff amongst its membership.

7.2 It was unknown at the time of the meeting which scenario would be adopted in response to the Covid-19 crisis and it was observed that it is likely a degree of flexibility and fluidity would be necessary. Whilst a sector-wide response would preferable, it seemed unlikely that this be forthcoming, however it was not possible to be definitive at this point.

For Information

8. Senate Digest

8.1 The contents of the [Senate Digest](#) for the 5 February 2020 meeting of Senate were noted.

9. University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL)

9.1 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Response to COVID-19

The Committee noted the contents of the above paper which had been considered by the UCTL at its meeting on 28 April 2020.

9.2 Future Meetings of the UCTL

Committee members' attention was drawn to the agenda for the 26 February 2020 meeting of the UCTL. Members noted that the UCTL would meet next on 21 May 2020 and 22 June 2020.

10. Date of Next Meeting

10.1 Members noted that the next meeting of the Committee was scheduled to take place on Monday, 8 June 2020 via Microsoft Teams.