UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

Minutes of the meeting held on 25 August 2020


APPROVAL OF AGENDA

68.1 The Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members of the Senate. It was noted that this was an extraordinary meeting of the Senate to discuss a specific set of issues. The attention of members was drawn to the fact that the meeting would be recorded. Members were reminded to state their name before contributing to discussion, to use the chat function to state when they wished to ask a question and to remain muted when not speaking. Any voting required was be conducted via Microsoft Forms. The Principal confirmed that as this was an extraordinary meeting of Senate, regular standing items were not included on the agenda.

68.2 In lieu of an agenda item for the Principal’s Update, the Principal wished to thank all present for their ongoing work in preparing for the coming academic year, acknowledging that teaching and learning was already underway in the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition. The Principal observed that there was a growing understanding amongst students that the upcoming academic year would be different and that there was generally a wish for limited on-campus delivery where possible. It was noted that demand for study at the University and across higher education remained strong with no notable rise in deferrals or withdrawals. The Principal noted that an increase in A-Level clearing applications had resulted
in a rise in acceptances through clearing from 75 in 2019/20 to 130 in 2020/21. It was noted that was partially attributable to increased academic involvement and all involved were thanked for their efforts. Members of the Senate were advised that it was expected that the University would be operating with measures to address the impact of Covid-19 in the short to medium term, requiring a flexible approach to changing circumstances and adherence to Government requirements.

68.3 Members of the Senate approved the agenda and the meeting proceeded.

POLICY REVIEW UPDATE

69.1 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education), provided an update to the Senate on the education policy review. It was noted that a review of education policy had been undertaken to ensure that existing policies remained suitable in the context of blended learning delivery. Ruth informed the Senate that the all changes to policies had been considered and approved by the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Committees, the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC), the Blended Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group (BLITFG) and the University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL). Members of the Committee noted that nine policy areas had been identified as requiring update.

69.2 Members of the Senate were advised that policies had been reviewed thoroughly and it was not believed that further changes would be necessary, however, permission was sought to action further minor changes, should they arise, by way of circulation. Rachael Shanks, on behalf of the School of Education, suggested that seeking changes in this manner should be time-limited, especially considering potential unforeseen or unintended consequences of changes approved by circulation. Responding, Ruth confirmed that no substantive changes would be approved by circulation, assuring the Senate that substantive changes would always be reviewed by the University’s formal committee structure. The recommendations in the first part of the paper were approved by Senate and it was agreed that any requests for policy changes in response to blended-learning to follow by circulation would be time-limited to an academic year.

69.3 Beyond the policy updates made in response to blended-learning, Ruth informed the Senate of work underway involving the Deans of Education, Student Support and Academic Services to develop a rigorous, transparent and consistent approach of policy development to a planned timetable. Members of the Senate noted that this work would be developed through existing committee structures.

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

70.1 The attention of the Senate was turned to the specific policy areas identified as requiring update, in the context of blended learning. Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education), informed the Senate that amendments had been made to the Codes of Practice on Assessment (for both undergraduate and postgraduate taught students) for 2020/21 and 2021/22. It was acknowledged that the Senate-approved no detriment procedures had been absorbed into the 2020/21 codes. Transparency was sought from David Anderson, on behalf of the School of Social Science, on how student awards would be calculated, in light of feedback from external examiners. Responding, Ruth confirmed that the no detriment procedures applied to students graduating in 2020/21 and would remain in force and as publicised. Kath Shennan, Dean for Quality Enhancement and Assurance, added that not all External Examiner reports
for the 2019/20 academic year had been received and therefore not all feedback on no
detriment had been gathered. Members of the Senate were assured, however, that
comments received would be considered and responded to in the course of the normal review
of external examiners’ reports.

70.3 Further clarification was sought by Diane Skatun, on behalf of the School of Medicine, Medical
Sciences and Nutrition, regarding the wording of the no detriment procedures. It was
suggested that the current phrasing implied that students who fall under the no detriment
procedures would continue to be assessed under these procedures for the entire duration of
their studies. Kath confirmed that the no detriment procedures applied only to the period
between 17 March 2020 and the end of the 2019/20 academic year. Kath confirmed that the
wording of the Codes of Practice on Assessment would be taken under review to avoid
confusion. Neil Vargesson, on behalf of the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and
Nutrition, requested clarity regarding the calculation of degree outcomes for students
impacted by Covid-19 during level 3 of their studies. Kath agreed to review the Codes in this
regard. Subject to these clarifications being included, the Senate approved the
recommendations included in the paper on Assessment and Feedback.

STUDENT MONITORING

71.1 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education), in introducing the paper on monitoring student
engagement, explained that the procedure for declaring students at risk of losing their class
certificate (C6) or having lost their class certificate (C7) had been resumed after being paused
temporarily in response to the immediate impact of Covid-19. It was noted that steps had
been taken to improve the level of support provided to students in this position, including the
review of email communication to students in this position. Members of the Senate were
asked to approve changes to the language used in the guidance on monitoring, to replace
references to students being required to be on campus and to attend classes with
requirements to engage in designated learning activities.

71.2 Brice Rea, on behalf of the School of Geosciences, requested further clarification on what time
zone differences will mean for the definition of designated learning activities. Ruth confirmed
that staff will not be expected to run designated learning activities outside the usual window
of teaching hours. Ruth also further confirmed that designated learning activities could
include online asynchronous learning such as participation in discussion boards. Erroneous
text referring to lectures in sixth century courses being exempted was identified for removal
prior to publication.

71.3 Rachael Shanks, on behalf of the School of Education, asked if designated learning activities
would need to be identified for each course. Ruth confirmed that this was to be identified at
course level and students informed of them. She stated that this should be managed
consistently at School level. Ruth noted that this could be further raised for discussion with
School leads on the BLITFG to ascertain methods of implementing this consistently and to
identify any issues associated with it.

71.4 Colin North, on behalf of the School of Geosciences, highlighted that students currently
automatically lose access to MyAberdeen upon the trigger of a C7 until this is manually reset.
Ruth responded that it was being investigated as to whether this practice would continue.
Subject to the proposed amendments raised, the Senate approved the paper on student
monitoring.
APPEALS AND COMPLAINTS AND STUDENT DISCIPLINE (ACADEMIC)

72.1 Members of the Senate received the paper on appeals, complaints and student discipline, noting that each policy had been updated to align with how student services were to be delivered in the context of Covid-19. Members of the Committee noted recommendations included the expansion of the mediums through which meetings with students could be held, to include Microsoft Teams or telephone. A further recommendation was made regarding the definition of plagiarism to reflect the increased use of open book assessments.

72.3 Clarification was requested from Lindsay Tibbetts, on behalf of the Business School, on how open-book procedures and plagiarism in this regard would be communicated to students. Responding, Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education) confirmed that rigorous discussion on this matter was underway and the Principal added that communications would be made to students on all policy changes following confirmation of Senate approval.

STUDENT ABSENCE

73.1 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education) confirmed that changes to the student absence policy were proposed to ensure that absence procedures were clear for students and staff against the background of Covid-19. It was noted that proposed changes included the removal of the requirement for medical evidence where absences were caused directly by Covid-19 or not. Members of the Senate noted that these changes had been proposed to reflect the fact that it may not be possible for medical services to provide timely documentation for Covid-19 or non-Covid-19 concerns. It was clarified at the request of Colin North that amongst the aims of the policy was to avoid creating further difficulties for those with existing health issues, including mental health issues, and that parallel work was underway to ensure support was available for both students and staff. Abbe Brown, Dean for Student Support, confirmed Ruth’s response and added that students would still be required to notify the University of their absence, but that the policies surrounding providing evidence were to be relaxed.

73.2 Helen Martin, on behalf of the School of Education, noted concern that the lack of a requirement for evidence in case of absence due to Covid-19 risked interfering with track and trace measures. It was confirmed that the CPG was working to ensure that testing and reporting of absence as a consequence of Covid-19 was in place. Members of the Senate were reassured that the proposed updates to the student absence policy sought not to discourage reporting, but to ensure the removal of additional obstacles, such as the requirement for evidence. The Senate was content to accept these recommendations.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS: POLICIES AND PROCEDURES RELATING TO DISABLED STUDENTS

74.1 Abbe Brown, Dean for Student Support, introduced the item on policies and procedures relating to disabled students. Abbe explained to the Senate that the changes proposed were in the context of Covid-19. Members of the Senate were content to approve the proposed changes.

AOCB

75.1 The Principal informed members of the Senate that the Scottish Government had requested, from each Scottish University, plans for restarting campus activity for academic year 2020/21.
He noted that it was understood that the consideration of these would, in turn, inform further Government guidance.

75.2 Tom Rist, on behalf of the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture queried if a risk register and feasibility study had been conducted in relation to blended learning, and if so, when these would be made available. Karl Leydecker, Senior Vice-Principal, confirmed that a risk register was in place and under regular review by the Court and the SMT. Karl stated that this would be shared with Senate for those who had not had the opportunity to see it. Tom expressed concern that there was no apparent centralised plan or study on the feasibility and logistics of blended learning. The Principal highlighted that all plans and associated risks are continuously assessed as the situation develops.

75.3 David Anderson, on behalf of the School of Social Science, also noted concern that there had been no impact assessment of repeat-teaching and increased obligations for staff as a consequence of blended learning. It was proposed that this be considered fully at a future Senate meeting, before teaching begins. Karl noted that an open session for all staff was currently being planned to address the concerns of the University community and offer assurances on the viability and safety of blended learning. The Principal proposed that if there were any further questions Senate would like covered after the open session, a further meeting of Senate could be held. It was agreed by Senate that this was a reasonable plan of action.

75.4 The Principal thanked members of the Senate for their attendance and contribution and closed the meeting.