UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

Minutes of the meeting held on 3 March 2021


APPROVAL OF AGENDA

42.1 The Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members to an extraordinary meeting of the Senate. It was noted that the meeting had been called to discuss the comprehensive measures proposed to achieve fair and consistent assessment for students, with relation to the difficulties experienced during academic year 2020/21 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

42.2 Members of the Senate approved the single item agenda. 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 raise a question and to remain muted when not speaking. It was also highlighted that any comments made in the chat bar would not form part of the minute.

PROTECTION FROM DISADVANTAGE: COMPREHENSIVE MEASURES FOR FAIR AND CONSISTENT ASSESSMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

43.1 The Principal highlighted that the previous iteration of the No Detriment Procedures had included some inadvertent disparities which needed to be addressed. Members of the Senate had also raised some reservations regarding the appropriateness of the procedure. It was the
intention that this meeting would discuss the revised iteration of the procedure, with a vote to be taken at the next meeting of the Senate.

43.2 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education), introduced the paper and provided a summary of the intention of the procedure. She reiterated that the intention of this meeting was to gather further feedback to prepare a final draft of the procedure ahead of the next meeting of the Senate. She thanked Senators for their input to the consideration of earlier procedures and for the contributions received since then. She emphasised that the purpose of the procedure was to provide fair and consistent assessment for all students. Concerns had been raised previously regarding algorithms and IT procedures which were now addressed within the paper. In addition, students who attended programmes and courses with non-standard requirements were now explicitly attended to, as were students based at the Qatar campus.

43.3 Ruth Taylor drew Members’ attention to section 4.10 which provides a summary of the proposal. The main points to note here were:

- The procedure applies to all students. In response to feedback, specific reference was made to postgraduate taught students. Exceptions to this have been articulated within the paper.
- The phrase “general Covid-19 impact” used within the paper refers to impact on students with regards to their overall wellbeing, but particularly their ability to travel, their ability to engage with teaching and learning and impact on their living arrangements.
- It had been highlighted that students are not always aware of existing structures and processes which can provide support, and hence the document provides guidance to that end.
- Extensions will be addressed by individual Schools.
- A flexible approach to absence was introduced prior to the start of the academic year which removed the requirement for evidence of absence due to the medical impact of Covid-19, and this continues in the procedure under discussion.
- The procedure introduces a relaxation of assessment requirements (from 75% to 70%) for students who have received a GC or MC grade and are still able to fulfil all learning outcomes of the course. This considers a number of areas where a component of assessment may be worth 30% of the overall grade.
- Students who do not have the required number of credits for progression will be automatically considered by the Students’ Progress Committee. They will be able to submit evidence as required.
- Borderlines will be extended by 0.5 GPA for all students in Programme Year 3 and above. All students in the top half of the widened borderline will be automatically upgraded to the next grade point. All students in the bottom half of the borderline will be reviewed at Examiners’ Meetings. A template will be provided for doing so, but it is recognised that Schools may already have their own processes and are welcome to continue using them as appropriate.
- Students will not be required to pay for resit examinations. This is to support students who are experiencing financial pressures, but will be applicable to all.

43.4 Ruth Taylor proceeded to introduce Annex A. She highlighted that the FAQ section remained incomplete, as a finalised procedure must be in place prior to its creation. She welcomed feedback on the introductory section of the document, but no comments were made at this stage. The section entitled “Who does this apply to” was then considered, and it was highlighted that several professionally accredited programmes remained under discussion.
There were no comments made on this section. “General Covid-19 impact” was discussed, and it was highlighted that students were to be encouraged to contact the institution for support where required.

43.5 Ruth invited comments on the General Covid-19 impact section of the paper, and the following observations were made:

- Brice Rea, School of Geosciences, commented that there was an overall assumption of negative impact of Covid-19 on all students. All students were potentially eligible for a 0.5 GPA uplift under the procedure, but feedback from his School had been to query the evidence of this negative impact. He agreed that all students had been impacted, but not all impact had been negative. January Examiners’ Meetings within the School did not demonstrate any negative impact overall in comparison to previous years’ meetings, and one colleague had commented that final year students had possibly been positively impacted due to an increase in available reading time in comparison to previous students at the same stage in their studies. The Principal agreed that this was an important point and suggested that student feedback might be useful at this juncture to provide evidence of the impact of Covid-19. Ruth Taylor agreed, and highlighted that student feedback had frequently emphasised an overall impact on studies as well as on their general wellbeing. She acknowledged that the work done by staff regarding alternative assessment and blended learning had mitigated the impact somewhat, but also stressed that the pandemic was not a positive situation and has affected all students and staff.

- Ondrej Kucera, AUSA Vice-President for Education, responded to highlight that the policy was not designed solely to address impact evidenced by grades but also the general impact on daily life. Achieving similar grades to those achieved pre-pandemic required more effort and the ability to deal with increased stress. Students often had to go above and beyond their usual level of work to maintain previous achievements.

- Lindsay Tibbetts, Business School, noted her support of the procedure, with specific reference to the increased grade borderlines. She agreed that students had to increase their effort to achieve their usual grades. She cited the example of students currently undertaking their dissertation, who would usually have ease of access to the University library as well as several methods of research (e.g. in-person questionnaires). The comparative lack of choice at present means that the protective measures proposed were commendable.

- Sarah Woodin, representing the School of Biological Sciences, noted that the first half-session results in her School were higher overall than in previous cohorts. Half of the courses offered by the School demonstrated an average increase in 0.5 grade points, and the Honours project cohort had achieved an average of more than 1 grade point higher than in previous years. She stated that this would likely go some way to address the increased stress on students and demonstrates that the support given to students to succeed in the blended learning environment has been appropriate. She suggested that an increase in the borderline would therefore potentially provide a “double uplift” for students. Staff within the School were also concerned that the policy wasn’t time sensitive: students might be eligible for uplift outwith periods of Covid-19.

- Janet Gauthier, School Convener for Psychology, commented that it was important to view the increased borderline as a beneficial process of degree adjustment, rather than an automatic entitlement. Students have had more time for study but have lacked opportunities for social interaction and support. Work may still be at a high standard but the effort to achieve this has notably increased. Individual course grades are important, alongside the degree classification, and she believed that students
would appreciate the introduction of this policy to show that their efforts during the pandemic have been recognised.

- Alex Brasier, School of Geosciences, commented that he was largely supportive of the revised proposal. Having examined the potential effect of the introduction of the procedure, there would be little effect on the degree outcomes of the current cohort in his School, and the Grade Spectrum was largely responsible for any existing uplift. He would urge Senators to examine the numbers within their own School. He also highlighted that the borderline has never been 0.5, but rather 0.99, and also that it would still ultimately be at the discretion of the Examiners’ Meeting to decide whether to uplift individual results. The Principal thanked Alex for his input.

- Robert Taylor, School of Law, reported that his School was broadly supportive but was concerned about classification inflation. He noted that the purpose of the procedure was to ensure that student grades and outcomes were protected, so he questioned whether the previous No Detriment procedure implemented in 2019/20 had led to notable classification inflation, and therefore whether concerns should also exist surrounding this procedure. Evidence regarding the resulting increase, or otherwise, would be appreciated.

- Frauke Jürgensen, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, noted that her School was supportive of the procedure. She agreed that there was little evidence to suggest a global negative impact on grades within her School and, like Alex Brasier, found that students who would be eligible for uplift under the new procedure were entitled to this due to the Grade Spectrum. She was therefore broadly supportive.

- Javier González Cuervos, Vice-Chair of AUSA Education Committee, wanted to highlight that students were very grateful for the efforts made by staff to support them over the past year. He also commented that the procedure under discussion was designed to help students who may otherwise not seek help, or those who are not doing as well this year as they might otherwise have anticipated.

- Dragan Jovcic, School of Engineering, commented that his School was largely negative or ambivalent towards the procedure. The School believed that much has already been done to support students and more can be done, for example surrounding the effective use and repair of laptops. He stated that the use of Grade Spectrum leads to increases in marks, and that there is no evidence that Covid-19 has led to a decrease in achievement within the School. There have been ongoing efforts to address grade inflation within the School, and therefore an increase in the borderline would likely be detrimental to the advances made thus far. However, the proposal to reduce the requirement to complete 75% of assessment to 70% is widely supported. He also commented that the proposal made in 4.10.8 surrounding the automatic consideration of students for progression was too vague, and it would be advisable to clarify the number of credits a student could be lacking to be considered for progression.

- Ekaterina Pavlovskiaia, School of Engineering, reported that the School had done some modelling surrounding the potential of uplift and the effect had been minimal. Those who would be upgraded would be eligible due to grade spectrum and therefore the potential for inflation was mitigated. She stressed that her School was keen to avoid grade inflation, but she did not expect this to be a significant issue.

43.6 Ruth Taylor responded to the comments made. She expressed an intention to investigate further the matter of time sensitivity raised by Sarah Woodin and noted she may contact Sarah to that end. She emphasised that the purpose of the procedure is the protection of students, and although some students may appear to be unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is
essential that we protect and support those who have struggled. She cited Dragan Jovcic’s example of laptop issues as one which demonstrates “general Covid-19 impact” accurately. She also emphasised that students must still attain all learning outcomes in order to progress, and that requirements for graduation have not changed. She also shared a comment made in the chat function by Hazel Hutchison, which highlighted that the impact of Covid-19 will be felt for some time to come. In terms of grade inflation, some modelling had been done and it was clear that a small number of grades had been raised following the No Detriment procedure, but the institution demonstrated results akin to the benchmark for the sector. Evidence would be published shortly.

The Principal commented that the University needed to ensure it acted in line with the sector as a whole in order to provide parity of experience to students.

43.7 Ruth Taylor moved on to the Student Support section of the paper, and asked for input from Abbe Brown, Dean for Student Support. Abbe commented that she endorsed the point that the monitoring of grade inflation is important, but the protection of our students is even more important. It is vital to encourage students to seek support as appropriate, but not all students will and therefore this procedure is vital.

43.8 Ben Marsden, School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, commented that his School is broadly supportive of the procedure. With reference to grade inflation, there was little evidence of this within his School and indeed grades may have deflated somewhat. The suggestion that general Covid-19 impact is felt by all students was difficult to evidence, as many students within the School had improved their grades at the end of academic year 2019/20 and therefore had no need to be considered using the No Detriment procedure. A query was raised regarding students who will graduate in 2021/22, who will not be classified with the Grade Spectrum nor will they be eligible for the automatic uplift detailed within the procedure under discussion. It seemed, then, that there was much more support for those graduating this year than in 2021/22. Ruth Taylor noted his points and would reply to him directly.

43.9 Ruth Taylor asked Senators for comments on the widening of the borderline, the reduction in assessment requirement from 75% to 70%, and the corresponding automatic upgrade.

- Ekaterina Pavlovskaia, School of Engineering, commented that the widening of the borderline did not cause concern, but the examples given in the document on page 10 would likely lead to increased appeals due to their specificity. She believed it would be more helpful to provide general guidance and generic examples.

- Ondrej Kucerak, AUSA Vice-President for Education, raised concerns surrounding students who have been aiming for a First and subsequently achieve grades which are too low to be considered by the extended borderline range. He would like to see assurances that these students would also be supported. Additionally, he read a message which Taylan Campbell, School Convenor for Divinity, History and Philosophy, had posted in the chat bar. It urged members of Senate to bear in mind how challenging many students had found the Covid-19 pandemic. She stressed that students often do not contact the University when they are in difficult circumstances, so this procedure would seek to support them.

- Ruth Taylor responded regarding students whose grades plummet unexpectedly, noting that Schools are in touch frequently with their students and tend to be aware of situations such as this in advance. Ruth plans to ensure that a video is created to explain routes for help and noted that the existing student monitoring procedures
also go some way to mitigate this. Students who get in touch later can submit an appeal, provided it is submitted in a timely manner, and they may then be offered a resit if the appeal is upheld.

- Brice Rea, School of Geosciences, emphasised that his comments during the meeting were not based on an intention to disadvantage students, but rather to ensure that standards are maintained for purposes of employment and so on. His School broadly supported the widening of the borderline, but the automatic uplift caused concern. Additionally, he commented that Table 1 in Annex A was confusing. He also referred to Ruth Taylor’s comments regarding minor grade inflation following the No Detriment Procedure for 2019/20, believing that the proposed procedure for 2020/21 would lead to further inflation. He emphasised that the focus should be on the continuation and assurance of equity of degree value from years previous and in years to come.

- Daniel Vonnak, School Convener for Medicine and Dentistry, queried the processes in place for students whose grades decreased so significantly they fell outwith the borderline, but they did not contact the institution for support. Ruth Taylor responded that all communications to students would encourage early contact with the University as much as possible, but also welcomed further suggestions.

- Ian McEwan, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, commented that he was supportive of the widening of the borderline and the change in assessment requirements, but was not comfortable with the automatic upgrading of degree classification, particularly in terms of upgrade from an Upper Second Class to a First Class degree. Ruth Taylor responded that it was necessary to manage consistency across the University, but she would consider the automatic upgrade further following opinions raised.

- Igor Guz, School of Engineering, highlighted that a proportion of his School was in support of the procedure. He noted that referring to the average student achieving any given grade was inappropriate because averages take both the highest and lowest marks into account. He also highlighted that the policy was designed to support those who were unfairly disadvantaged. This would likely lead to some grade inflation, but he stressed that references to averages were unhelpful.

43.10 The Principal asked for input from members of Senate who wished to speak and had not yet done so, but no comments were made. Janet Gauthier, Convener for School of Psychology, emphasised how grateful students were for the efforts of all staff over the past year. While evidence of general Covid-19 might not be made obvious in terms of grades, she had received communication from numerous students regarding stresses experienced due to isolation, worry about global news and politics, restricted access to resources and so on. In addition, she cited the student petition which was signed following the rejection of the proposed No Detriment policy in January and stressed that the introduction of some form of protective measure was critical to all students. The Principal commented that he believed Janet had represented all students in her statement.

43.11 Ruth Taylor summarised that she intended to consider the feedback given, revise the document accordingly and then take it through the relevant committee structures in advance of the next meeting of the Senate. The Principal thanked the members of the Senate for their input, noting that some differences remained surrounding the execution of the procedure, but that the intention to protect and support students was unanimous. He noted that the procedure would be considered again at the next meeting of the University Senate on 17 March 2021.