

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SENATUS ACADEMICUS

MINUTES OF THE ADDITIONAL MEETING HELD ON 24 MAY 2023

Present: Adetayo Adeyemi Waheed Afzal, Kaitlin Agius, Akosua Akwaboaa Akyem-Pepra, Sumeet Aphale, Euan Bain, Simon Bains, William Barlow, William Barras, Harminder Battu, Nigel Beacham, Siladitya Bhattacharya, Jason Bohan, George Boyne, Alex Brasier, Isla Callander, Marion Campbell, Alessandra Cecolin, Delma Childers, Chris Collins, Matthew Collinson, David Cornwell, Rebecca Crozier, Irene Couzigou, Chantal den Daas, Andrew Dilley, Lauren Dorward, Pete Edwards, Marie-Luise Ehrenschwendtner, Greg Gordon, Isla Graham, Ian Greener, Malcolm Harvey, Peter Henderson, Richard Hepworth-Young, Jonathan Hicks, William Jackson, Gareth Jones, Dragan Jovcic, Kirsty Kiezebrink, Julia Kotzur, Lesley Lancaster, Karl Leydecker, Beth Lord, Catriona MacDonald, Gary MacFarlane, Michelle MacLeod, Alan MacPherson, Ben Marsden, Kathryn Martin, Javier Martin-Torres, Nicola McIlraith, David McGloin, David McLernon, Heather Morgan, Thomas Muinzer, David Muirhead, Mintu Nath, Sam Newington, Graeme Paton, Ekaterina Pavlovskaja, Bettina Platt, Amudha Poobalan, Tavis Potts, Brice Rea, Joost Rommers, Joachim Schaper, Hossa Skandary-MacPherson, Ann-Michelle Slater, Tracey Slaven, Alan Speight, Mary Stephen, Lorna Stewart, Fiona Stoddard, Ruth Taylor, Bert Timmermans, Steve Tucker, Neil Vargesson, Sai SS Viswanathan, Jennifer Walklate, Adelyn Wilson, Ursula Witte, Ilia Xypolia.

Apologies: Rasha Abu Eid, Julia Allan, Scott Allan, Lesley Anderson, Joanne Anderson, Martin Barker, Daniel Berg, Karin Friedrich, Aravinda Meera Guntupall, Alison Jenkinson, Amanda Lee, Colin Lumsden, Alasdair MacKenzie, Sam Martin, Andrew McKinnon, Pietro Marini, Samantha Miller, Graeme Nixon, Colin North, Adelaja Shantini Paranjothy, Nir Oren, Tom Rist, Justin Rochford, Thereza Raquel Sales de Aguiar, Karen Scott, Charlaine Simpson, Diane Skåtun, Valerie Speirs, Dawn Thompson, Haina Zhang.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

- 87.1 The Principal opened the meeting, welcoming members of Senate to the additional meeting to consider proposals aimed at mitigating the impact of the marking and assessment boycott on the relatively small percentage of students who would be affected by it. He noted that these students are being treated unfavourably by the marking and assessment boycott. He acknowledged the legal right of union members to engage in industrial action in whatever form they deem to be most appropriate.
- 87.2 Senate approved the single item agenda and the meeting proceeded.

INTRODUCTION BY THE PRINCIPAL

- 88.1 The Principal noted that there were several reasons why the sector more widely, and the University, found themselves in the current predicament. Some of these reasons were long-term and others more recent.
- 88.2 The long-term situation has arisen from the structural underfunding of the sector and the need to find money to subsidise research; the need to cross-subsidise undergraduate education with

the revenue per undergraduate student having been frozen for around 13 years. He noted that it was hardly surprising that the sector finds itself under financial challenge.

- 88.3 The Principal proposed a *position*, that he hoped Senate would feel able to endorse, that Senate calls on the UK and Scottish Governments to provide sustainable funding for Higher Education so that the sector is more easily able to address the cost-of-living pressures being faced by colleagues. Senate confirmed this was a position it felt comfortable endorsing.
- 88.4 The Principal noted that, in addition to the long-term pressures, the marking and assessment boycott had been determined by members of the University and Colleges Union (UCU) as the appropriate action to be pursued at the current point. Unfortunately, the terms of reference which were agreed at ACAS between the national union negotiators, the five sector trade unions and UCEA on behalf of universities, cannot currently be taken forward. This is work on pay gaps, precarity, workload pressures and the pay spine. The Principal noted his deep regret that this work was not able to be taken forward at the current time. In addition, he outlined a further position that he was seeking support for: that all relevant parties, including UCEA and UCU, return to national negotiations on precarity and pay gaps, workload pressures and the pay spine.
- 88.5 Jo Hicks, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture noted that the motion he had given notice of called for pay also to be included in the list and suggested that this be added to the Principal's position. The Principal noted his wish to come to the motion as a separate item, and so Senate confirmed its support for the position suggested on work on pay gaps, precarity, workload pressures and the pay spine.

MARKING AND ASSESSMENT BOYCOTT ADDITIONAL MEASURES TO ENABLE GRADUATION

- 89.1 Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education) indicated she would introduce the paper from Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) and that the details would be handled by Steve Tucker, Dean for Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Chair of QAC.
- 89.2 Ruth highlighted that the aim of developing the exceptional additional measures for the few students likely to be affected by the marking and assessment boycott (MAB) was to ensure that as few students as possible were affected negatively by the MAB in terms of their degree classification, their future employability, and their overall well-being. Ruth noted that the paper described how the proposed exceptional additional measures would maintain academic standards and highlighted that School meetings were taking place to determine, as far as possible, the impact of the MAB on individual students. These meetings had begun. The dates listed in the paper were those internal dates by which Schools require all their marking to be concluded. Ruth noted that, if approved, the additional measures needed to be in place prior to most of the Examiners' Meetings taking place, with particular reference to the large number of joint degree programmes in existence.
- 89.3 Steve Tucker, Dean for Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Chair of the QAC outlined the minor policy amendments proposed to offer the award of a classified degree in time for graduation. Steve noted that the measures were discussed positively at a meeting of the QAC on 18 May at which staff and students had approved the proposals for further consideration by Senate.
- 89.4 Steve highlighted the first recommendation to relax exceptionally the requirements for double marking, with moderation continuing; the second recommendation related to extending the use of compensatory credit to cover completed assessments missing marks rather than just borderline fails; the third was a return to the 70% rule (rather than 75%) used as part of the Comprehensive Measures processes where an overall mark could be awarded for achieving 70% of assessment along with meeting the intended learning outcomes for a course. He noted the intention that these measures would go some way towards permitting marks to be returned for the small number of students impacted by the MAB.

- 89.5 Before beginning discussions of the proposals the Principal reminded Senate of its responsibilities including the requirement for 'ensuring that appropriate and effective arrangements are in place for student support (academic and non-academic)' and commented that these proposals are aimed at doing exactly that for students who are at risk of suffering disadvantage as a consequence of the MAB.
- 89.6 Thomas Muinzer, School of Law queried the context of compensatory credit being based on General Regulation 21 (a) with the paper detailing that 21(a) 'outlines where the award of compensatory credit may be used where a student has achieved at least 90 credits at level 4, has completed the assessment but has achieved a marginal fail grade of E1 to E3 inclusive, they shall be awarded the same amount of unnamed specific credit, not exceeding 30 credit points in total, at level 1.' Thomas queried the extent to which the regulation was relevant as it refers to awarded grades rather than missing grades.
- 89.7 In response, Ruth Taylor confirmed that the regulation did deal with different circumstances, the current regulations deal with students who have failed assessments while the proposal would apply to students who have submitted assessments, but the mark is not available. It is anticipated that most of these students would go on to pass the assessment. This would be a further opportunity to support those students whose work had not been marked by applying the same sort of approach as is used when awarding compensatory credit to other students.
- 89.8 Thomas confirmed that while this response answered the query, he was not clear exactly how the proposed provision maps on to the existing regulations but acknowledged that a degree of flexibility was being provided.
- 89.9 Ruth confirmed that it was the principle behind the existing regulations that was being used to award compensatory credit and that there was nowhere else in the regulations that offered a suitable framework. It was acknowledged that the existing regulations were for borderline fails but it was expected that most students impacted by the MAB in this way would in fact have passed the assessment.
- 89.10 Akua Agyeman, Vice-President for Education, AUSA, queried the timelines given for the return of marks and noted that some international PGT students would have less than a month to apply for post-study visas. She questioned whether these students would have the necessary confirmation that they had completed their studies and whether the Home Office would accept this and permit them to progress to the next stage of the visa process. She asked what arrangements were being made for students who found themselves in this category.
- 89.11 Responding, Ruth confirmed that the additional measures do not impact on the situation outlined by Akua for international students differently from what would normally be in place for students reaching graduation. The key factor for students in this category was that work was marked and, where it was not, the measures would support their situation. Ruth noted, additionally, that she had been in contact with Sai, the Vice-President for Welfare, and that they would be discussing further matters relating to resits more generally.
- 89.12 Sai Viswanathan, Vice-President for Welfare, AUSA noted that while students were generally supportive of the proposed measures, they would still welcome separate guidance targeted specifically at international students who may have visa issues because of the MAB.
- 89.13 Ruth indicated that she would be happy to have further discussions but reiterated that the additional measures should not impact negatively on international students and that perhaps what is needed, as part of future work, is a more general discussion about how resits are handled for international students.
- 89.14 Alessandra Cecolin, School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History, noted that a colleague from the School had phoned the Scottish Government and the Home Office and that neither had been able to confirm whether an unclassified degree, or one that was not fully marked following the proposed procedures, would qualify under visa requirements. The Citizens' Advice Bureau had then been consulted and they had confirmed that it was the University's duty to detail how these degrees would meet international visa requirements and

where this requirement was not met there was an online form to enable students to complain. Alessandra asked how the University was going to ensure that these degrees qualified? She also noted issues with accrediting bodies and cited the example of the Institute for Physics who would not accept these degrees. She noted that this was a further issue for all students, not just international students, particularly those intending to pursue postgraduate qualifications.

- 89.15 Ruth confirmed that one of the aims of the additional measures paper was to enable as many students as possible to graduate with their degrees, but it was acknowledged that there may be professional or statutory body requirements which may make that not possible with the additional measures. The way to address the issues raised by Alessandra is for all students' work to be marked and taken through Examiners' Meetings.
- 89.16 The Principal noted that, even with the additional measures, not all students would be protected from disadvantage.
- 89.17 Alex Brasier, School of Geosciences, raised questions regarding wording on pages 15 and 16 of the paper. He queried whether, in the context of appeals (pg15) where it was detailed that, for students appealing, GPA should be reviewed and that degree classification may be adjusted upward, stay the same or adjusted downwards but elsewhere in the document it was stated that degree class may only be changed in an upward direction. In addition, he asked that assurance be provided that current third year students would not be disadvantaged by their final GPA and degree class being pulled down as a result of the boycott. Alex further noted that on page 16 of the document where progression from programme year two to three is referred to as requiring 210 credits it should make it clear that this was the requirement for non-honours progression and not into an honours programme which requires 240 credits. He also sought clarity on the maximum credit shortfall which would be permitted for progression. He highlighted an example where a student could be waiting for marks for resits from courses failed last year and, together with fails from this year, might find themselves short of seven 15 credit courses and going in to level three might find themselves effectively doing levels two and three side by side. Hence, he noted that guidance from the Student Progression Committee should be available.
- 89.18 In response, to the query concerning appeals Ruth Taylor noted that a student who chose to appeal needed to be aware that a mark may go up or down and she would check and ensure that the document was consistent in this respect. She would also ensure wording was consistent around progression between years. Steve Tucker confirmed that a meeting of the Students' Progress Committee was being convened very shortly to discuss matters relating to progression, resits and the thresholds required.
- 89.19 Before confirming he was content with the responses, Alex noted that a student appealing needs to be able to demonstrate that they have been disadvantaged however if their mark goes down as a result of the appeal, how is it possible to argue they have been disadvantaged at the outset of the appeal. He queried whether a student could submit a request rather than an appeal i.e. do they require to demonstrate disadvantage to submit a request?
- 89.20 Ruth clarified that students have the option to accept the mark awarded based on the percentage of assessment available or they may opt to have the outstanding work marked, however it needed to be understood that marks may go up or down as a result of the completion of the marking. Ruth noted that the intention was not to undertake marking prior to a student deciding to appeal rather that it would happen if requested by the student.
- 89.21 Sam Newington, School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History, raised two issues from her School: some of the current student cohort have had their studies impacted detrimentally by Covid and she queried what the possible impact of the proposed policy would be to such students in terms of degree classification going forward; in addition she queried the possible impact on those students seeking to move on to postgraduate study.
- 89.22 Responding, Ruth noted that the measures were intended to prevent students suffering detriment arising from the action being taken. The measures were intended to be supportive

to students ensuring their ability to receive their degree classifications and exit the University at the time anticipated, and progress to further study or employment.

- 89.23 Brice Rae, School of Geosciences, noted he had received comments from several School members which he would endeavour to summarise. The School had expressed concern on the impact on degree standards; there were concerns about consistency of application in particular within joint degree programmes; a member of the School had indicated they thought the proposed policy would impact negatively on degree standards and felt it was inappropriate to compare the situation with Covid. Brice noted that, in section 5.1, the paper referred to proposals 'to appropriately enable the students to meet the requirements of their degree programme and receive a classified degree, where appropriate, ahead of graduations, whilst ensuring that quality assurance requirements are not negatively impacted.' Brice contended that if the University was able to set aside the standards which had been rigorously developed over time, and which form our quality assurance protocols and say that we are still maintaining our quality standards, either the University has overengineered everything and should continue with these relaxed standards once the action is over, or the University is relaxing its quality control with the introduction of this policy. Brice noted that, in addition to the inconsistency noted by Alex, he had identified other inconsistencies amongst the details in particular around the differences between courses with more than 75% of assessment compared to those with more than 70%. He noted the potential for multiple individuals to fall into a variety of traps and this was contrary to the part of the rationale for having moved to the Grade Point Average (GPA) being to ensure that students had consistency between degree programmes and schools. He noted that the 'devil would be in the detail' of any implementation. He further noted that if the document was comprehensive then there would be no need for anyone to have to contact mab@ as everything would be covered by the policy.
- 89.24 The Principal noted that the only solution to all the issues raised by Brice would be for the MAB not to take place, but the University recognised that it was taking place and therefore some compromises needed to be made.
- 89.25 Ruth reiterated that it was anticipated that the measures would be needed for a very small number of students, although it was too early to give numbers on this. She restated the aim, as expressed by the Principal, that the intention was to produce a level playing-field for students within groups who are having differing experiences as a result of the MAB. The aim in such circumstances would be that all students would be able to exit with a classified degree. Ruth noted the comments around academic standards and indicated that these would be the subject of discussions going forward in terms of how the University does things, for example moderation, and how this compares with the rest of the sector. This would give the opportunity for review after which there may be a decision to change. In terms of standards overall, the intention was to apply the principles which are embedded. The comparison with Covid was to highlight that the approach had been used previously and it had supported students with the difference being this time that students will have completed all their assessment, which they may not have done during Covid. Ruth conceded the point made about the email and noted it was there to give an opportunity to ensure knowledge was available across the institution and wasn't intended to circumvent any regulations previously approved.
- 89.26 Jen Walklate, School of Social Science, echoed Brice's concern with how the use of MAB@ was detailed in the documents and welcomed the addition of further clarification of its intended use. Jen queried how the internal deadlines had been determined? She also queried whether the alternative markers would have relevant expertise, based on the understanding, that in some instances, alternative markers would be Heads of School while in others they would be PG students.
- 89.27 Ruth confirmed the email issue would be clarified; the internal deadlines had been supplied by the Heads of School working with the Academic Managers to permit Ruth to go into Schools at an appropriate point to determine what the issues might be for individual students; Ruth reiterated that alternate markers should be identified as having relevant expertise and this was something the Head of Schools would be able to do. Ruth confirmed that the current

regulations already permit a variety of individuals to undertake marking and in the current context it was crucially important that students are afforded every possible opportunity to have their work marked.

- 89.28 Ilia Xpolia, School of Social Science, followed up on the point made by Jen and queried whether the University would be open to challenge in appeals in terms of those undertaking marking not being appropriately knowledgeable. The main concern within her School was that the measures would be unfair on students: students whose work is all marked may actually end up being at a disadvantage to students whose work was not marked. There was also concern about the potential reputational damage which might be done as a result of the proposed measures. The School had also raised the issue of students potentially having problems with visa schemes.
- 89.29 In terms of the point about appeals, Ruth indicated that the expectation was that students would rather have their work marked and get their degree classification than waiting for an unspecified period for it to be marked. Ruth noted, in terms of fairness, that these measures would only be applied to a small proportion of an individual's degree classification and while there might possibly be one or two students who may be advantaged as a result of the 'no detriment' approach, the policy was aiming to address the wider issues of the students who are impacted and ensuring they were able to be awarded their classifications in a timely manner.
- 89.30 Lorna Stewart, School of Education, spoke on behalf of a few colleagues who were UCU members within the School who wanted their views to be heard. Many of the issues had already been raised so did not need a response rather she raised them to add weight to the previous points. Colleagues were concerned about the possible erosion of academic standards; the serious possibility of devaluing of degrees; and also the serious implications for immigration compliance. Colleagues' main request was that the University reopen negotiations with the relevant professional bodies. Lorna confirmed that Ruth had addressed the points made already.
- 89.31 The Principal noted that the ultimate erosion of standards would be for a student not to be awarded their degree and that that was the problem being faced and what the proposed measure were seeking to address.
- 89.32 Jo Hicks, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture noted that Examiners are responsible for standards and accreditation and hence subject level expertise is important, however, the document shifts responsibility to the Head of School for making important decisions. No Head of School could be expected to have the knowledge of an Examiners' Meeting. He noted various instances in the document where the Head of School is expected to take on responsibility for appointment of Examiners, or exercise discretion and queried whether this represented a shift away from subject experts having responsibility for making decisions to Heads of School, who are generally more compliant with management policy.
- 89.33 Karl Leydecker, Senior Vice-Principal, responded to clarify that Heads of School have ultimate responsibility for everything in their area and that is why they are given the responsibility in the document. The Heads of School work in conjunction with other officers in the School. He refuted the idea that Heads of School are brought in to ensure compliance with management and noted that this was not language he would accept.
- 89.34. Ruth added that, from an education perspective, the Head of School is ultimately responsible, but it was recognised that there would be discussion within Schools to ensure the correct decisions were being made by the Head of School in consultation with the relevant subject experts. There was no intention to undermine the role of subject expertise.
- 89.35 Jo noted that the document appeared to give rise for more concern than necessary, in terms of Heads of School acting in isolation from subject expertise, and requested that the document be amended to reflect the expectation of consultation as appropriate?

- 89.36 Ruth confirmed that she was happy to amend the document in a way that makes this expectation clear.
- 89.37 Jo highlighted the positive aspect of the document in terms of the acknowledgment that the MAB would end and that this might not be that far away. Jo noted that the meeting had begun with Senate welcoming the intention to return to negotiation and noted that this had been detailed in the all-staff communication from the Senior Vice-Principal issued previously, and he understood why this had not included reference to pay. Jo indicated his wish to move a motion but stressed this was in addition to the paper and not instead of it.
- 89.38 The proposed motion moved that: *'in order to expedite a conclusion to the marking and assessment boycott, being realistic about how that might happen, the University of Aberdeen publicly commits to apply pressure to UCEA to move to move towards negotiations on pay and working conditions as quickly as possible.'*
- 89.39 Tracey Slaven, University Secretary, clarified a technicality that the motion should call for 'Senate' not the 'University' to commit to apply pressure. Such a statement from the University would require engagement from Court.
- 89.39 The Principal confirmed that this might be a position Senate would wish to support, but as he had highlighted to elected members at the meeting prior to Senate, the University could not afford to move on pay without jeopardising jobs. The Principal acknowledged, nevertheless, that it was correct to put the motion and to vote on it.
- 89.40 Tracey Slaven, University Secretary confirmed the arrangements for voting stressing that those in the room should vote only in the room and not using the Teams form.
- 89.41 Senate voted to pass the motion proposed: 46 votes in favour, 14 votes against with 16 abstentions.
- 89.42 The Principal noted the position of Senate but confirmed that the position of the University remained unchanged, subject to any direction he might be given by Court.
- 89.43 Brice Rea sought clarification on the situation regarding the desire to provide classified degrees to permit international students to meet the requirements to apply for post study visas, given the advice received from the Scottish Government, the Home Office and the Citizens' Advice Bureau that it was the responsibility of the University to provide the information to students about how they met the requirements. Brice indicated that his understanding was that the University did not know how students would be able to meet the requirements. He queried whether support should be given to the proposal if it was unknown whether the measures proposed would meet visa requirements.
- 89.44 Ruth Taylor confirmed that were the proposals to be accepted there would be very few unclassified degrees awarded, the main intention of the measures was to ensure that a majority of students were able to graduate with a classified degree.
- 89.45 Tracey Slaven, University Secretary again confirmed the arrangements for voting, stressing that those in the room should vote only in the room and not using the Teams form.
- 89.46 Senate voted to approve the policy changes: 48 votes in favour; 26 votes against and 7 abstentions.
- 89.47 The Principal closed the meeting thanking members for a productive, constructive, collegial and respectful discussion in a very trying set of circumstances. He expressed his gratitude to everyone for doing their best to protect the University's students.