<u>The University of Edinburgh</u>
Senate Quality Assurance Committee

**Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 17 December 2020
at 2pm via Microsoft Teams**

Present:

Professor Tina Harrison **(Convener)**	Assistant Principal Academic Standards and Quality Assurance
Brian Connolly	Academic Policy Officer, Academic Services
Dr Gail Duursma	School Representative (Engineering), College of Science and Engineering
Olivia Eadie	Assistant Director and Head of Operations and Projects, Institute for Academic Development
Dr Katherine Inglis	School Representative (Literatures, Languages and Cultures), College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Nichola Kett	Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement Team, Academic Services
Professor Linda Kirstein	Dean of Education Quality Assurance and Culture, College of Science and Engineering
Stuart Lamot	Edinburgh University Students' Association Representative
Dr Paul Norris	Dean of Quality Assurance and Curriculum Approval, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Dr Claire Phillips	Dean of Quality Assurance, College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine
Professor Leigh Sparks	Deputy Principal, University of Stirling
Paula Webster	Head of Student Analytics, Insights and Modelling, Student Systems Partnership

Apologies:

Fizzy Abou Jawad	Vice President (Education), Students' Association
Dr Jeni Harden	School Representative (School of Molecular, Genetic and Population Health Sciences), College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine

1. **Welcome and Apologies**

    The Convenor welcomed Professor Leigh Sparks, Deputy Principal University of Stirling to his first meeting as the new External Member.

    The Convenor reported that Katie Scott had left the University for a post at another institution and thanked her for all her work as a member of the Committee.

2. **Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 9 September 2020**

The Committee approved the minutes of the previous meeting.

3. **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

For Discussion

4. **School Annual Quality Reports 2019-20**

The Committee discussed the report from the sub-group tasked with reviewing the School annual quality reports. The Committee also discussed a report outlining a selection of good practice identified by the sub-group.

It was noted that in response to the Covid-19 pandemic the Committee had suspended the normal annual monitoring, review and reporting processes for 2019-20. Instead a light-touch interim process has been put in place with the aim of complimenting ongoing academic contingency work during this academic year. Schools were invited to complete a streamlined reporting template focused on the impact of and learning from the Covid-19 pandemic but which also allowed for optional updates on actions identified from last year's reporting cycle and a reflection on other aspects of academic standards, student performance and the student learning experience. During this interim process, reflection on available data sets using the PowerBI Quality Data Dashboards has also been light-touch.

The Committee noted that the sub-group had focused on sections 2 and 3 of the reports (the optional section 1 information would be used to ensure continuity when the regular reporting process resumed) considering the following:
- what worked well across each College, including good practice that could be shared across the College and University?
- what could have worked better or required further development by the School, College or University?

The following themes of positive practice were noted:

- **Student and Staff Welfare**
  The sense of community evoked by the pandemic and support that academic and professional service staff provided for their students and each other within Schools was a strong positive theme throughout the reports. Of particular note was the good communication at local level between staff and students which helped manage expectations and allay anxieties at a very challenging time for all.

- **Teaching & Learning**
  The transition to hybrid delivery led to innovation in teaching & learning across Schools. Students and staff were particularly pleased with the partnership approach to curriculum adaptation and the co-creation of learning materials. It was noted that these discussions and new approaches would provide the University with a sound foundation on which to build the impending Curriculum Review.

- **Assessment**

Schools adapted and reformed assessment processes while maintaining standards in a very challenging year. Online and Open Book assessments were particularly well received by students, with feedback noting how the assessments allowed them greater scope to demonstrate their learning than traditional paper examinations alone. Staff also noted the positive impact this diversification of assessment methods had on the consistency of marking and their workload (once adaptations were made).

- **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**
  There were examples of Schools striving to promote an inclusive learning environment during the pandemic.

- **Administration**
  Schools rapidly developed new and innovative administrative systems and procedures in response to the pandemic. Of particular note was the move to online Boards of Examiners and PhD vivas which allowed Schools to draw on a wider and more international pool of external examiner expertise. The beneficial financial and environmental sustainability effects were also noted.

The following themes for further development at University level were noted:

- **Staff Welfare**
  Schools reported concerns that the pandemic has exacerbated existing issues in relation to staffing and workload pressures. As noted above a strong positive theme throughout the reports was the sense of community evoked by the pandemic and support that academic and professional service staff provided for their students and each other within Schools. However there is concern that the ongoing situation is having a significant impact on staff well-being and the potential impact that this might have on the student experience.

  Action: Committee Secretary to refer issue (with examples) to the University Secretary for response.

- **Communication**
  A theme that emerged across the School reports was University communications to students and staff and the need to ensure that University level communications to students align with local communications and plans as a key element to managing student expectations. There was also a widespread desire from staff for more information and clarity in relation to initiatives or projects that were halted due to the pandemic, such as the Personal Tutor (PT) and Student Support Review, the Student Experience Action Plan, and the Curriculum Review, to assist Schools in their own curriculum and student experience plans.

  Action: Committee Secretary to refer issue (with examples) to the Adaptation and Renewal Team for response.

- **Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion**
  Schools highlighted in a number of reports the impact of the pandemic on students with protected characteristics, caring responsibilities, and students from widening participation backgrounds.

Action: Committee Secretary to refer issue (with examples) to Convenor of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

- **Extensions and Special Circumstances (ESC)**
  Schools broadly welcomed the new ESC service and were able to recognise the longer-term benefits, but reported that the initial implementation had caused additional workload for staff, due to systems issues and response times, at a time when they were already under pressure. Some simplification of the process is in discussion as part of the recently announced assessment mitigation measures, in anticipation of a further increase in ESC requests from students. Looking ahead, the value of the ESC service will be in monitoring the ESC data to identify potential 'at risk' students, but the service needs to have the capacity to do this.

  Action: Committee Secretary to refer issue (with examples) to the Deputy Secretary for response.

- **Online Learning Platforms**
  Schools reported broad frustration with the various online teaching platforms that the University had in place at the outset of the pandemic, in part reflecting the rapid shift to digital delivery, and reported a desire for a strategic assessment of online learning technology going forward as part of the broader curriculum review and reform.

  Action: Committee Secretary to refer issue (with examples) to the Chief Information Officer and Director of Learning Teaching & Web Services for response.

- **On-campus Space and Resources**
  Access to the University's on-campus space and resources continues to be a persistent theme across School reports. Concerns were raised in terms of the quality and suitability of teaching and community building space that was under strain before the pandemic and which may be under further strain when students return to campus under social distancing constraints. There are opportunities going forward to consider the role and purpose of both physical and digital learning spaces as part of the wider curriculum review, drawing on the lessons learnt from hybrid teaching.

  Action: Committee Secretary to refer issue (with examples) to Convenor of Space Strategy Group for response.

- **Assessment and Progression Tools (APT)**
  Some Schools (predominantly in the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences) reported issues with the functionality and reliability of APT. Concerns were noted that ATP was not adequately flexible to deal with complex course structures and required manual calculations/checking.

  Action: Committee Secretary to refer issues (with examples) to Director of Student Systems and Administration for response.

The Committee noted that the that the streamlined interim process had been well received by Schools and commended the Directors of Quality and all the School staff who had collaborated in the process for their excellent work under very challenging circumstances.

The Committee agreed that, as was the case in the Schools, there had been some positive lessons from the adaptation of quality processes that should be built upon going forward. In particular, the streamlining of the reports while maintaining a good level of information on QA issues and activities. The Committee discussed the merits of a themed template that would allow for a more standardised approach to reporting while also allowing Schools the scope to expand on specific local issues and activities. It was agreed that Academic Services would explore reporting options, and the plans for the next QA reporting cycle, and discuss with the College Deans early in 2021.

Action: The Convenor to prepare a report on the areas for further development for consideration at University Executive.

5. **College Annual Quality Reports 2019-20**

The Committee considered the annual College Quality Reports for 2019-20. It was noted that many of the issues had been addressed during the previous discussion on the School annual reports.

5.1 College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

The College Dean of Quality thanked Alastair Duthie (Academic Administrator, Enhancement and Quality) for his work on the report.

The following key issues were noted for action at University level:

- **Assessment and Progression Tools (APT)** – need improved functionality and additional resource.
- **Extensions and Special Circumstances (ESC)** – need additional support and resource for this key service.
- **Learning Technology and Platforms** – need full integration and practical support/training.
- **Communications** – improved student communications and expectation management.
- **Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Support** - clear route to University support for initiatives identified in local EDI Action Plans; including reviewing and further developing support for Widening Participation (WP), care experienced and students with caring responsibilities in order to improve their university experience.
- **Personal Tutor and Student Support Review** - support for a return to the PT system review delayed due to Covid-19 at the first opportunity.

5.2 College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine

The College Dean of Quality thanked Victoria Bennett (Quality Officer) for her work on the report.

The following key issues were noted for action at University level:

- **Staff Welfare** - an increase focus on staff welfare and support, especially mental health and well-being.

- **Staffing Levels** - a commitment to protect staffing levels for those involved in delivering teaching and supporting students. Uncertainty about post replacement is adding to degree of stress among staff.
- **Extensions and Special Circumstance (ESC)** - review of the new centralised ESC service with a view to addressing the impact of increased workloads for staff locally and student experience currently being experienced.
- **Communications** - careful consideration of external messaging to avoid the implication that online or hybrid models are inferior to in-person, on campus approaches for learning and teaching.
- **No Detriment Policy** - consider a broad (University-level) reflection on the No Detriment Policy including any impact/unintended consequences which may result in an uplift of awards.
- **Survey Fatigue** - with the advent of Pulse Surveys, whilst acknowledging their purpose, there is concern that this may lead to survey fatigue among our students and potentially impact on highly valued responses to more locally-gathered student feedback. Any reduction in course- and programme-level feedback could hamper our ability to improve our courses.
- **Data Requests** - consider processes to enhance the co-ordination of requests for information/data from central university to reduce workload in local areas.
- **Data Provision** - whilst acknowledging the welcome progress with data provision: Schools/Deaneries have access to less of the student survey responses (there is no information from courses with fewer than 10 responses); the course mark apps only provide average course mark and pass rate; demographic data is limited in granularity (restricting ethnicity to black, Asian, and minority ethnic "BAME" and "white" is likely to miss lots of information due to differences in attainment between groups within BAME grouping); PTES free-text responses are not specific to programme (separate data for online and on-campus programmes and MSc by research under taught regulations as well as standard taught MScs would assist with local interpretation and planning).

5.3 College of Science & Engineering

Dean of Education Quality Assurance and Culture thanked Heather Tracey (Deputy Head of Academic Affairs) for her work on the report.

The following key issues were noted for action at University level:

- **Personal Tutor and Student Support Review** - clarity is required over the plans for implementation of recommendations from the PT and Student Support Review, including timescale for intended implementation.
- **Mental Health Training** - provision of further training in mental health support for student support teams, to enable them to deal with School-level mental health support needs (e.g. via named contacts).
- **Communication** - need for improved channels of communication on key decisions coming out of core governance structures.
- **Postgraduate Research (PGR)** - move forward improvements associated with PGR annual review process as identified via the Service Excellence Programme (SEP).
- **EUCLID** - establish processes around the Student Systems Partnership Prioritisation Board to enable more visible prioritisation of EUCLID Developments.
- **On-campus Space and Resources** - prioritise developments to the built environment where quality of estate is poor (e.g. Engineering, Biology, GeoSciences). The delay in building projects is negatively impacting student recruitment and

experience. Consideration of transport options for the King's Buildings campus and reinstatement of the shuttle bus are a priority for students accessing campus.

The Convenor commended the Colleges on the quality of the reports.

Action: Academic Services to direct College issues to relevant individuals/areas for consideration and ensure that responses are disseminated to the College as part of the 2021-20 annual quality reporting process.

6. **MOOCs Annual Update 2019-20**

The Committee received and discussed an update on the University's portfolio of MOOCs including: portfolio summary data; new courses; courses completing development; courses approved by strategy board; and enrolment and certificate data for all courses.

The Committee noted that MOOCs would be included in the annual quality reporting process once the regular reporting process had resumed.

7. **No Detriment Policy**

The Committee considered an analysis of the outcomes of the University's "no detriment" policy implemented for taught programmes in response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students. It was noted that some Schools had seen increases in the proportion of undergraduate students achieving a first class or upper second class degree but at University level the increase was modest. However, though the proportion of students achieving a first class degree increased the attainment gaps for black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) and Widening Participation (WP) students have widened. The Committee agreed that further analysis is required to understand what has driven these differential levels of attainment in relation to equality and diversity.

Action: Academic Services and the Head of Student Analytics, Insights and Modelling, Student Systems Partnership to consider options for further analysis of the impact of the No Detriment Policy.

8. **Annual Reports 2019-20**

8.1 Undergraduate Taught External Examiner Reports: Thematic Analysis

The Committee considered an analysis of data from the External Examiner Reporting System (EERS) covering undergraduate programmes for the academic year 2019-20.

The Committee noted the high number of commendations across the University and the low number of issues requiring attention. The main theme of commendation across all three Colleges was the assessment process and the most commendations of a single sub-theme was for good practice and innovation (in the Programme Development theme). Of the issues highlighted by External Examiners the most frequently mentioning were in relation to the provision of information and issues raised in a previous report.

8.2 Academic Appeals – CLOSED PAPER

The Committee considered the annual report on academic appeals from academic year 2019-20.

The Committee noted that there had been a slight decrease in the volume of academic appeals, 221 in contrast to 237 the previous year. This however must be viewed in the

context of the delay in notification of final degree classifications, examination results and progression decisions to students this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the University's response to this, including the introduction of the 'No-Detriment' policy for the final assessments of academic year 2019-20.

The Committee noted the size of the annual report and agreed that next year's report should be streamlined by reducing the volume of data and enhancing the level of analysis.

8.3 Student Discipline – CLOSED PAPER

The Committee considered a report on the number of breaches of the Code of Student Conduct over the course of the academic year 2019-20.

The Committee noted that the total number of misconduct offences continued to involve a very small proportion of the student population. In 2019-20 the figure was equivalent to under 1.5% of the overall student population.

Action: Academic Services to ask Accommodation, Catering and Events (ACE) for an update on the potential move to transfer the income from student fines to student hardship funds.

8.4 Complaint Handling

The Committee considered a report on the handling of complaints to the University for the academic year 2019-20.

The Committee noted that there had been a significant increase in complaints due to the pandemic. In particular there had been an increase in complaints concerning requests for fee refunds, accommodation refunds and other concessions, and regarding community relations with local residents.

Action: Academic Services to explore options for complaint data collection mechanisms.

8.5 Annual Review of Student Support Services

The Committee considered a report on the review of Student Support Service annual reports for 2019-20, highlighting areas of good practice and themes for consideration in the next reporting cycle.

The Committee noted the themes arising from service reports:

- **Staff response to challenges**
  Services unanimously showed an impressive response to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. This was only possible due to the commitment, flexibility and creativity of staff. Staff adapted quickly and responsively to the huge changes necessitated by lockdown, enabling provision to continue for the most part uninterrupted. Heads of service praised the "inspiring attitudes" and "commitment and passion" of their teams, while also acknowledging the huge pressure the pandemic and resulting challenges have placed on colleagues. The majority of services reported that staff had adapted well to working from home, although this was more challenging for a few services where some key provision relies on in-person interaction (for example Student Disability Service and the Advice Place).

- **Working across boundaries**

Nearly all services reported on the benefits of improved and closer working with other areas. There was an increase in collaborative working with other teams, services and with Colleges and Schools to ensure appropriate responses to challenges and to support rapid change. This resulted in strengthening existing relationships and forging new ones.

- **Digital processes for enhancement**
  Out of necessity, many processes had to be pivoted to digital provision. Services found much of this resulted in improved and streamlined processes which they intend to maintain and build upon. For some, the rapid change to digital processes meant implementing planned changes sooner. For others, digital processes remain more challenging in some areas, for example where key provision relies on in-person interaction. The Director of the Careers Services notes, "Just because we can deliver an effective service digitally doesn't mean we should."

The Committee approved the report and the areas identified for further consideration by the student support services.

9. **Student Staff Liaison Committee Guidance**

The Committee approved the following change to the membership section of the Operational Guidance of Student Staff Liaison Committees (SSLC): *'Society Office Bearers of relevant academic societies within the School or subject area may attend SSLC meetings'.*

For Information and Formal Business

10. **Task Groups**

The Committee noted the updates on activities of the two current task groups: the Personal Tutor (PT) system Oversight Group and the Data Task Group.

11. **Thematic Review 2018-19: Update**

The Committee noted the progress update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Thematic Review 2018-19: Black and minority ethnic (BME) students' experiences of support at the University.

12. **Enhancement Theme: End of Theme Report**

The Committee noted the University's end of year 3/theme report of the Enhancement Theme, Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience.

13. **External Examiners: Exceptional Appointments Report 2019/20**

The Committee noted the report on College approvals of exceptional External Examiner appointments made during 2019/20.

14. **Internal Periodic Review: Reports and Responses**

The Committee confirmed that it was content with progress implementing the recommendations from the internal periodic reviews.

15. **Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

16. **Date of Next Meeting:** Thursday 25 February 2021, 2pm, MS Teams