

The University of Edinburgh
Senate Quality Assurance Committee

**Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 27 February 2020 at 2pm
in the Liberton Tower Room, Murchison House, King's Buildings**

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
Nichola Kett	Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement Team, Academic Services
Dr Linda Kirstein	Dean of Education Quality Assurance and Culture, College of Science and Engineering
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
Steph Vallancey	Vice President (Education), Students' Association
Paula Webster	Head of Student Data and Surveys (Student Systems), co-opted representative for Student Systems.

Apologies:

Brian Green	Deputy Associate Principal (Learning & Teaching), University of Strathclyde
Dr Jeni Harden	School Representative (School of Molecular, Genetic and Population Health Sciences), College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine
Dr Katherine Inglis	School Representative (Literatures, Languages and Cultures), College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Sarah Moffat	Edinburgh University Students' Association Representative
Katie Scott	Peer Support Manager, Students' Association

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Convenor welcomed **Dr Paul Norris** (Dean of Quality Assurance and Curriculum Approval, CAHSS) and **Olivia Eadie** (Assistant Director, IAD, Head of Operations and Projects) to their first meetings as members.

2. Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 5 December 2019

The Committee approved the minutes of the previous meeting.

3. Matters Arising

The Committee noted that two responses to the School Annual Quality Reports were still outstanding and would be circulated once received.

Action: Committee Secretary to circulate the outstanding responses.

For Discussion

4. Annual Monitoring and Reporting

The Committee received a set of papers relating to annual monitoring and reporting processes.

4.1 Retention, Progression, and Attainment

The Committee considered a proposal for systematic monitoring of retention, progression, and attainment data.

The [2017-18 Thematic Review of support for Mature Students and Student Parents and Carers](#) and the [2018-19 Thematic Review considering black and minority ethnic \(BME\) students' experiences of support at the University](#) had recommended that the Committee implement systematic monitoring of retention, progression, and attainment data. Both reviews had noted that the University was seeking to expand its intake beyond the 'traditional' student profile as part of a new Widening Participation (WP) Strategy. The review panels were in agreement that the University must recognise the range of support needs of these new and diverse student cohorts and that, in some aspects, these may diverge from the provision of support that the University has traditionally been geared towards. Both reviews had stressed the importance of using data to understand the extent to which student needs have been supported by the University particularly in regard to the 'distance travelled' by these groups of students and the 'value added' by the University. The review panels were also in agreement that the University had a duty of care to support all of its students and provide them with an equal opportunity to succeed at their studies.

The Committee also noted that issues relating to retention, progression and attainment had gained increasing attention from the UK and Scottish Governments. As these issues gained more publicity, poor performance in related metrics was a risk to the University's reputation. Therefore it was important for the University to better understand which groups of students were at higher risk of not completing their studies or of attaining a lesser outcome than their peers.

The Committee also noted the current Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Enhancement Theme Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience, was also challenging institutions to reflect on the data available within the Scottish sector to understand what is working and what could be improved.

The Committee discussed the current annual monitoring, review and reporting processes and noted a number of opportunities and fora for retention, progression, and attainment issues to be raised and considered. Annual Programme Monitoring, and School and College Annual Quality Reports encourage academic areas to engage with progression and performance data and highlight any equality and diversity issues. The Internal Periodic Review process also provides Schools with an opportunity to reflect on areas for development and again a key element of this process is the requirement to engage with progression and performance data. In each of these processes retention, progression, and attainment issues are raised and considered. However, this tends to happen on an ad hoc basis dependent on the diligence or priorities of the particular members of staff authoring the reports or the specific school or subject area. The University does not have a specific and systematic process for monitoring retention, progression, and attainment issues.

The Equality Diversity Monitoring and Research Committee (EDMARC) produces an annual report analysing student and staff data by the key equality dimensions of gender, age, disability and ethnicity. The report provides the University with comprehensive statistical data on protected characteristics to support the monitoring of equality and diversity within the University. However, staff are not required to systematically engage with the EDMARC data once it has been published on the University's Equality and Diversity website. Instead, the data is simply made available to Colleges and Schools for use if they wish to take it forward.

It was noted that across the sector there appears to be two broad approaches to the monitoring of retention, progression and attainment data. Some institutions rely on broad annual monitoring and reporting processes to capture and consider issues. However, some institutions dedicate specific, institution-level mechanisms to undertake analysis and direct actions. This approach appears to reflect the growing importance of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) at an institutional level and their application for multiple reporting purposes (internal and external).

The Committee considered options given the drivers to enhance monitoring of retention, progression, and attainment data and the absence of a clear standard approach to the issue across the sector.

It was agreed that a single threshold KPI would not be appropriate given the diversity of subject areas and student cohorts across the University. It was noted that this approach had not been particularly effective at Edinburgh in the past (for example the 80% satisfaction threshold for the Personal Tutoring system in each School) and recent research undertaken by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) suggested that local interventions, tailored to address issues specific to disciplines and the characteristics of specific student cohorts, were more effective.

The Committee agreed that the approach to monitoring Degree Classification Outcome data provided an alternative model which could be expanded to encompass retention and progression data. In April each year the Committee receives an annual report on degree classification outcomes of successfully exiting undergraduates, including sector trends in undergraduate degree classification outcomes. Any subject areas considered to have diverged substantially from either the University average or comparators in their discipline are then asked to specifically reflect on the issue, and any proposed remediation, in their School Annual Quality Report. The Committee then continues to monitor progress via these two annual reporting processes until the issue is considered to have been resolved. This approach ensures systematic University oversight whilst also encouraging Schools to engage with the specific data on attainment, reflect on the issues and context, and then seek local solutions.

The Committee agreed that this approach should be expanded to include data on retention and progression as well as attainment. It was also agreed that timescales should be reviewed to determine if the data could be considered earlier in the academic year.

4.2 Differential Attainment

The Committee considered an analysis of differential levels of student attainment and discussed the data challenges to attaining a better understanding of retention, progression, and attainment.

The Committee noted that the differential attainment analysis had been conducted by Student Systems in response to Thematic Review discussions at September's meeting. The analysis tracked cohorts of students comparing the relative probability of different groups of students completing, achieving a first class or a first and/or upper second class degree. Data for three entry cohorts was combined and tracked to allow for robust analysis of the outcomes of BME and WP.

The Committee discussed the methodological approach and interpretation of the attainment data. It was agreed that a robust baseline data set was of fundamental importance. It was also agreed that the data must be drawn from key moments across the student journey and interpreted using a methodological approach agreed by relevant academic and professional services statistical experts.

The Committee discussed the data challenges to attaining a better understanding of retention, progression, and attainment:

- **Data Granularity** – granular analysis of retention/non-continuation rates can be problematic as the University's flexible curriculum means that students can move between programmes and even between Schools, making the analysis needed of different cohorts challenging.
- **Data Capture** - the current approach to recording students' reasons for withdrawal (including for non-continuation) provides limited information. Data is collected on the reasons for student withdrawal, but in a lot of cases this will be very high-level such as 'Personal reasons' which provides little help in understanding why individual students leave the University or why particular groups are more likely to withdraw than others. Schools may have more comprehensive local information on why students withdraw but this is not readily available for central analysis.
- **Data Set Size** - numbers can be very small in relation to protected characteristics which means it can be difficult to draw inferences from the data and staff may perceive the numbers to be insufficient to be useful. The provision of trend or benchmarked data to schools can be helpful under these circumstances to develop an understanding of the bigger picture and help place information in context. There is also a need to balance monitoring against wider data protection concerns.
- **Data Analysis** – the Student Management Information tool (STUDMI) contains the source data on every student at the University, including multiple demographic and socio-economic variables. The complex nature of this data will require specialist statistical modelling analysis and therefore any enhancement to this element of the annual monitoring and reporting process would depend on allocation of sufficient analytical resource.

The Committee agreed that it would implement systematic monitoring of retention, progression, and attainment data.

The Committee agreed that timescales should be reviewed to determine if the data could be considered earlier in the academic year.

The Committee agreed that the first step would be to determine the data set and the methodological approach.

Action: Head of Student Data and Surveys (Student Systems) and Dean of Quality Assurance and Curriculum Approval (CAHSS) to examine data set and methodological options for monitoring retention, progression, and attainment and report back to the Committee.

4.3 Annual Monitoring, Review and Reporting Policy – Minor Changes

The Committee considered proposals for minor changes to the Annual Monitoring, Review and Reporting Policy and accompanying documentation.

The Committee approved the proposed changes, with the following noted:

- It was agreed that the requirement to reflect on the Personal Tutor system should be amended to reflect on 'student support' within each school. It was noted that this would provide a useful benchmark for the proposed new system of student support due for implementation in 2020-21.
- It was agreed that the requirement for Colleges to provide benchmarked data for schools should be removed. It was noted that the Scottish Funding Council's requirement for the provision benchmark data could now be met via the Annual Monitoring Data PowerBI reports.
- It was agreed that reporting on postgraduate research (PGR) provision should be by exception (good or bad) and that, while there were gaps in the PGR data, Schools should be asked to reflect on the available data.

The Committee discussed the potential impact of the coronavirus. It was noted that a specific question in relation to the impact of the coronavirus may need to be included in the report template and guidance.

Action: Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement Team (Academic Services) to discuss annual monitoring requirements in relation to the coronavirus with Deputy Secretary Student Experience.

5. Thematic Review

5.1 Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Students 2018-19 - Progress Update

The Committee considered the initial 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.

The Committee welcomed the strategic discussions stimulated by the report's publication and the proposed holistic action plan. However, it was agreed that detail on each individual action was needed to assure the Committee that each recommendation would be addressed.

Action: Committee Secretary to request initial updates on each individual recommendation for the May meeting.

5.2 Reflection on Thematic Review Process

The Committee considered a paper reflecting on the Thematic Review process since its introduction in 2015 and discussed options for the future approach to Thematic Reviews.

It was noted that at the meeting held on Thursday 23 May 2019 the Committee agreed that due to the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) there would be no Thematic Review during 2019-20. Instead, Academic Services would take a reflective look at the reviews to date, highlighting any overarching themes or issues, and set out options for the future approach to Thematic Reviews.

The Committee noted that the following three Thematic Reviews had been conducted since 2015:

- [2015-16 Thematic Review of Mental Health Services](#)
- [2017-18 Thematic Review of support for Mature Students and Student Parents and Carers](#)
- [2018-19 Thematic Review of black and minority ethnic \(BME\) students' experiences of support at the University](#)

Academic Services had also co-ordinated a fourth review which, though technically not a Thematic Review, was very much thematic in nature: [2016-17 Review of support for Disabled Students](#).

The Committee noted that student collaboration had been an essential feature of each of these reviews. Students had been heavily involved in setting the themes, in defining and leading the consultation process, and determining the key issues and recommendations of each report. It was noted that the strength of this collaborative approach had been evidenced by the positive feedback from student representatives upon the publication of each report and their enthusiasm to keep up momentum by being involved with the recommendation implementation work of each. The reviews had also utilized an agile and responsive methodological approach (including interviews, small focus groups and surveys) which provided opportunities to explore issues further or take enquiries in new directions.

The Committee noted that the Thematic Review process had provided the opportunity and space for marginal issues and underserved groups to become focal points of University level enhancement activities. The Committee noted that the key theme cutting across the reviews had been the need for the University to improve the way it collects data on underserved student groups and how it uses the data to ensure that these groups are supported to progress and succeed in their studies (see agenda item 4).

The Committee noted the key challenge of the collaborative and responsive approach to Thematic Review had been the relative resource intensive nature of the process. The agile approach noted above required more co-ordination and administrative resource than the traditional approach to internal reviews (focused around a set number of staff and student meetings scheduled on a set number of days). Organising a range of interviews, focus groups, surveys, and additional meetings requires additional work on the part of the review co-ordinator and can require additional time of each member of the review panel.

The Committee was in agreement that the current approach to Thematic Review should be maintained but that it should be reserved for significant issues requiring in-depth exploration.

It was agreed that using Thematic Review as an irregular but in-depth mechanism would signal the importance of the issues under consideration.

6. External Examiner Reporting System (EERS):

6.1 Postgraduate Taught Reports - Thematic Analysis 2018-19

The Committee considered an analysis of data from the External Examiner Reporting System (EERS) covering postgraduate taught programmes for the academic year 2018/19.

The report noted a high number of commendations across the University and a low number of issues that required attention. Of the commendations, it was noted that the main theme across all three Colleges was good practice and innovation with many commendations related to the range, quality and diversity of teaching, learning and assessment. Of the issues raised the main theme was the provision of information to examiners.

Action: Academic Services to analyse External Examiner responses for “helpful hints” on providing consistent feedback and disseminate suggestions to the Colleges.

Action: Colleges to communicate to Schools the importance of moderation processes being made transparent to their students and staff.

Action: College representatives to ensure that the outcomes of the Committee's discussions are made available to and considered by the relevant College committee(s) and report back on positive comments regarding the quality of programmes.

6.2 Total Reports 2018-19

The Committee considered the summary of the total number of undergraduate and postgraduate taught reports submitted through the External Examiner Reporting System.

7. UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Advice and Guidance Mapping

The Committee considered the mapping of the University's policies and practices to the advice and guidance that underpins the UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Enabling student achievement. It was agreed that a reference to the Service Excellence Programme Personal Tutor and Student Support Review should be included in the section addressing the first Guiding Principle.

The Committee **approved** the Advice and Guidance Mapping.

8. Mid-year update on progress against SQAC priorities

The Committee noted the mid-year update on progress towards the Committee's priorities agreed at Senate in May 2019.

9. Internal Periodic Review

The Committee approved the following final reports (and noted the commendations and recommendations):

- Internal Periodic Review of Literatures, Languages and Cultures (PGR & PGT provision)
- Internal Periodic Review of School of Social and Political Science (PGR provision)

10. Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)

The Committee noted the update on preparations, next steps and information on visits for ELIR 2020.

11. Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Update

The Committee noted that the QAA had published updates to the following Subject Benchmark Statements:

- [Professional Services programmes](#) (November 2019)
- [Arts and Humanities programmes](#) (December 2019)
- [Characteristics Statements](#) (February 2020)

Action: Committee Secretary to circulate benchmark statements to relevant Heads of School, Directors of Teaching, and Directors of Professional Services.

12. Knowledge Strategy Committee Update

The Committee noted the update for information.

13. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

14. Date of Next Meeting:

Thursday 23 April 2020 at 2pm in the Elder Room, Old College.