

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE (SSEC)

Minute of the Meeting held at 10:05am on 3rd May 2023 via Microsoft Teams

Present: Erin Ferguson, Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan, Jemma Murdoch, Lesley Muirhead, Lyn Batchelor, John Cavanagh, Jason Bohan, Russell Moffat, Charlotta Hillerdal, Helen Pierce, Alison Jenkinson, Duncan Stuart, Steve Tucker, Tim Baker, Katrina Foy, Jenna Stuart, Jaquie Tuckwell, Nick Edwards, Rhiannon Thompson, Janine Chalmers.

Apologies: Lucy Leiper, Akua Serwaa Agyeman, Wendy Lowe, Melanie Viney, Derryck Shewan, Hugo Taylor, Jaye Carr, Kelsey Pierce, Mary Prior, Martin Mills, Graeme Kirkpatrick, Heather Branigan, Martin Barker, Fiona Ritchie, Julie Timms, Carolyn Porter, Iain Grant

Welcome and chair's update

- 1.1 Nick Edwards (NE) welcomed members to the meeting and began by reminding the group that Student Support Services will be open as usual over the summer, and also they can be contacted for any issues around the cost of living, where students require financial support or advice.
- 1.2 Jason Bohan (JB) said there are no new updates from him which are not already on the agenda. There was an update on actions from the last meeting's actions and on the discussion around provisions, a meeting took place with the School Disability Coordinators to discuss revising provisions and there will be further updates on this matter at future meetings. JB also updated on discussions around developing an extension policy and this is an ongoing discussion with the Registry Team to decide where it would sit, as it would be a large piece of work, plus the absence reporting procedures would likely be included in the review.

Approval of the minute of the SSEC held on <date>

(copy filed as SSEC/030523/002)

- 2.1 No comments or amendments were received from members of the Committee. The minutes of the SSEC meeting held on 07/03/2023 were approved.

Withdrawals Report 2022/23 First Semester

- 3.1 JB introduced the paper, which summaries student withdrawals for the first semester and this data is broken down by several categories, including by month, to identify key trends. There are positives as the undergraduate rates are only slightly increasing, with the highest rates being Year 1 students in December. However, the postgraduate rates have reduced. There is work still to be done to help schools to retain students. The majority of the withdrawals tend to be for health or personal reasons but there is not currently enough data available to know how schools can be supported to intervene. The papers will be followed up in 3 months' time.

Protected characteristics will be included in the data in future reports on withdrawals. JB opened the discussion up to the group for ideas on how to support students who are at risk of withdrawing.

John Cavanagh (JC) said it would be useful to have the gender information included for Athena Swan purposes. He also noted that while PG withdrawals were up within Engineering, a large number of these were students who had signed up to individual courses via the online store, had self-assessed and who received funding to do the courses. JB confirmed these groups were not included in this data. JC suggested student often don't engage with a personal tutor or support staff before withdrawing and also questioned the quality of the data if students aren't spending much time on the form.

NE said the majority of the withdrawal forms he has seen do not have any additional information added. He also noted the Support for Study policy is there to help students for whom studying is perhaps not the right option at the current time and this policy will be discussed at future meetings. We can possibly use some data from this process to inform support policies. JB added that more data would be very useful and there also needs to be a clear path for students returning to study, so that transition is as seamless as possible.

Tim Baker (TB) said he keeps his own database for students in his school in order to get as much useful data as possible. Where students withdraw from study due to disability, it would be good to get data on the type of disability, but TB acknowledged data protection legislation may mean this is not possible. Domicile is also something TB has looked at in order to spot trends by region rather than country.

From the School of Education, Katrina Foy (KF) noted the wider climate had a big impact on those within that school, with strikes and legacy issues from Covid within primary and secondary schools combined with general dissatisfaction in the teaching sector.

Steve Tucker (ST) added that the data can be used to target specific cohorts at certain times of year from a school level, where clear trends have emerged showing higher withdrawal rates.

Student Engagement Post-Pandemic

- 4.1 NE introduced the item as a discussion and follow-up on general issues raised at the previous SSEC meeting on levels of student engagement post-pandemic and also any specific issues which the group wished to discuss. JB added that the item was on the agenda partly as a follow-up from the discussion about withdrawals, but also to get more information from schools on trends they have identified around whether students are generally happy in their studies.

TB noted that with 13 programmes across his school, they only recently realised that 2nd Year students in LLMVC have very poor attendance records across all lectures. He added that he had seen an increasing number of students who don't seem interested in anything, whether

study, work or hobbies, with Year 2 seeing a large number of students not submitting assessments.

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan (SV) said there was a combination of factors which would explain a lot of what TB mentioned, with the cost of living crisis having a significant impact, students adjusting to being on campus after several years of remote learning, support for disabilities and hidden disabilities. TB added that his point was about identifying why student life has become more difficult and what can be put in place to reverse this trend.

JC suggested that students often don't have the same friendship networks they would have had in previous years so are more isolated and don't have the same avenues for peer support.

Jacqui Tuckwell (JT) said with halls they see a larger number of students reaching crisis point and only engaging with support services when things have escalated to a really bad situation. They also see students not mixing with flatmates in the same way.

Charlotta Hillerdal (CH) said they have seen poorer attendance within her school and a large increase in the number of extension requests, but feels the wider world is a worrying place for young people right now, which must have an impact. It's hard to know how to help when a lot of the issues are not areas the University can influence.

SV added noted the large number of mature students are often impacted by caring responsibilities and they can often suffer from increased isolation due to the age difference with classmates, while international students can find it difficult to make new friends. It would be good to try and create inclusive spaces and events at school level which reflect the work done by AUSA in this area.

JB suggested reviewing opportunities for community events and ensuring all activities were inclusive would be useful. TB said it would be good to look at the Buddy Scheme being an opt-out service rather than opt-in to create more of a community feel from the point of arrival for new students to try and engage with the most isolated and vulnerable students. JB said it was worth looking at how the Buddy Scheme can be expanded.

Assessment Period and Exam Arrangements

- 5.1 JB noted the agenda item was included as a discussion point to allow schools to feedback on any issues around the current assessment period. On the marking boycott, JB noted is a concerning situation and causing anxiety for students. The situation is being monitored very closely but the impact on students is not clear at the moment.

Discussions have been had with schools, Registry, Estates and others around exam arrangements, particularly where provisions mean some students need a separate room or access to computing facilities. Many schools have reported not having enough rooms to meet all the requirements, while there have been issues with not having printing facilities in the rooms where a student is using a computer. These issues were discussed prior to this exam diet and will be reviewed once the assessment period has concluded. The aim is to minimise disruption for students and schools.

JB also mentioned that Old Aberdeen medical practice is now refusing to write medical notes for students due to the workload involved. Jemma Murdoch (JM) is in communication with them and this will have an impact not only on absence reporting and assessments, but for disability provisions as well. Conversations have been had with the Directors of Education in each school and we will need to be more flexible by accepting other forms of evidence where possible. Going forwards, this issue is likely to mean the University will need to review its policies around medical evidence for absences, assessments and provisions. This has been discussed with Registry and will be developed over the summer.

JC raised the issue of the fees charged by other GP surgeries and how these can be prohibitive for many students due to the costs. JC also asked about the classification of Covid. NE confirmed Covid is not treated the same as any other medical conditions in terms of our procedures.

NE added that current procedures – where a student is ill and doesn't have supporting medical evidence, so is asked to get a letter from Student Support – does not add anything as they Student Support team can only confirm the same information the student has already told their school. So, this is not a particularly student-friendly system. There will be discussions about how we can get medical evidence for instances where it is definitely required, such as for provisions and accreditations. Overall, the aim is to create a student-friendly system but one which is not open to abuse.

Lesley Muirhead (LM) add that the Discretionary Fund is there for students to apply to if students are unable to afford a medical letter from their GP.

Risk Register

- 6.1 NE introduced the University's Risk Register, which was provided in Excel format to the committee, as a separate document to the papers. NE drew the committee's attention to the 'Education: UG and PG' tab as being the most relevant to this meeting. Of the 10 risks identified, only 3 were scored red and only 1 remained amber after mitigations, but this relates to the EEC's focus on work placements. There may be risk connected to the current assessments and the marking boycott, and this would be added if it becomes a factor.

JC noted that the rise of AI is potentially a big issue and emerging in importance, with students able to use this technology to create essays. JB confirmed it is not currently in the Risk Register but there are lots of conversations around this and it is likely to be added to the Risk Register in the future. This could be tied in with existing work on contract cheating. NE also noted the technology is an opportunity as well and JC added that it is here to stay and University's need to embrace it.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy

7.1 Janine Chalmers (JCh), Head of Organisational Development, joined the meeting as a guest and introduced a review of existing policies, starting with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy. The review group was made up of staff and students and overall it was found it matched well with best practice across the sector. There were some areas for enhancement, such as the addition of more comprehensive support documents at the end and also some additional appendices to cover definitions, as this is an area which is evolving quickly and needs to be kept up to date.

JCh noted that the Equality Act identifies nine protected characteristics, but the University takes a much wider view, which is covered in the EDI policy. As a high-level document, once approved, the next step will be to review all other policies within this area of work which sit underneath this document. After approval, there will be an implementation process to ensure all relevant stakeholders are aware the document has been updated. JCh opened the agenda item up for questions or comments.

Alison Jenkinson (AJ) said she didn't see much in the document about the University's statutory obligations as a Corporate Parent, as an employer. AJ noted there was information about supporting care experienced students but asked if more information was required on our employment policies here, possibly as an employer of former students who are care experienced or for those who are new to the university but have identified as being part of this category. AJ also said the document possibly lacked information on practical support for staff and students with disabilities.

JCh said there were quite a few legal areas which were not included in the document but if AJ felt the Corporate Parenting information needed to go in, this could be discussed. On the practical support for those with disabilities, JCh said that as this particular document is a high-level policy, the practical support would typically appear in the policies which sit below this particular one and these discussions are being had at the moment.

JCh questioned the reference to 'affirmative action' in the appendices and suggested it was a statement of law but without any function as it doesn't relate to any specific action and is a very complex area. JCh said it was useful to have it included and the University will need to take some proactive actions in areas like representation, particularly amongst the higher grades in the staff structure. It was emphasised that it is about positive actions in the University's processes, not positive discrimination, which is not legal.

TB said it was a great resource and asked where staff can access this information, with JCh replying that there will be implementation plans and communications going out to staff in relation to these revised policies once approved.

Lyn Batchelor (LB) complimented the group on the work and in particular the resources section, which will be particularly useful for students coming from Qatar to Aberdeen on placement and will assist in reassuring concerned parents as well.

Religion and Belief Policy

- 8.1 JCh introduced a 2nd policy which has been updated, which is the Religion and Belief Policy. Much of the review has been around the tone of the policy and was partly a result of academic colleagues raising concerns about students not engaging with their studies during times of religious festivals and this led to the creation of the policy in 2014.

The review group felt the expectations on students were too high and also the policy needed to be widened out to staff and students. The previous version lacked a definition of religion and belief and the revised version has more information on freedom of speech and more support included. JCh also noted the University has adopted the Young Academy of Scotland's Charter for Responsible Debate, so this information has been added to the document.

Postgraduate Survey

- 9.1 There are surveys for postgraduate research students (PRES) and postgraduate taught students and the Student Experience team have been ensuring students are aware of the surveys and the benefits of filling these out. Similar to the NSS, there will be a report produced afterwards which will then go to relevant committees and will inform individual school action plans. The PRES is currently open and has had a 12% response rate so far. It opened on April 24th and closes on May 15th. The postgraduate Taught survey will open slightly later, from the 26th of May to the 16th of June. Results will be discussed at future SSEC meetings, hopefully by September.

ACTION: JB to present survey result at September 2023 SSEC if ready

Reflection on SSEC Task and Finish Groups (TFGs)

- 12.1 This item was brought forward in the agenda by NE. The Code of Practice on Student Discipline has been approved at Court and will come into effect from August the 1st. It will be added to the webpages on Student Discipline over the next few weeks alongside the existing code, which is still in place until July 31st. The TFG will have one more meeting and then report back to committee at the beginning of the new academic year.

JB will bring a paper to the next meeting to summarise his two TFGs. With the Monitoring Group, there was previously discussion of a business case being made to develop IT systems for C6s and C7s. The business case requires more detail prior to approval so this work is underway and there will be an update at the next SSEC meeting in June.

On the pastoral Review TFG, the aim was to revise the online resources, especially with personal tutor information. A small group from the TFG is working to simplify the webpage structure and the proposals will be discussed at the forthcoming Senior Personal Tutor Forum to ensure wider consultation. Again, this will be given a fuller report at the next meeting.

ACTION: JB to provide papers on his two TFGs for the June SSEC meeting

Reflection on this meeting's discussion regarding equality, diversity, inclusion, health, safety and wellbeing.

10.1

The Committee felt these topics were widely covered and there were no additional comments.

Reflection on Aberdeen 2040 Updates on Operational Plan

11.1

The Committee felt the meeting was structured around the Operational Plan and there were no additional comments.

ACTION: NE to bring the revised Aberdeen 2040 Action Plan to the first SSEC meeting of the new academic year.

AOCB

13.1

Stevie Kearney (SK) informed the committee the calendar invites for SSEC meetings for the 2023/24 academic year will be sent out this week to allow members to plan ahead.

ACTION: SK to send out calendar invites and book a room for an in-person meeting in early 2024.

Date of Next Meeting

14.1

The next meeting of the Student Support & Experience Committee will take place on 7th June 2023 at 10:05am. This will be via MS Teams and in the University Court Room.