UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE (SSEC)

Minute of the Meeting held on 05 December 2022

Present in person: Erin Ferguson, Jackie Tuckwell, Lucy Leiper, Martin Mills, Graeme Kirkpatrick, Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan, Nick Edwards, Abbe Brown, Jemma Murdoch, Lesley Muirhead.

Present online: Lyn Batchelor, John Cavanagh, Jason Bohan, Russell Moffat, Charlotta Hillerdal, Helen Pierce, Heather Branigan, Alison Jenkinson, Wendy Lowe, Martin Barker, Bekah Walker, Tim Baker, Melanie Viney.

Apologies: Duncan Stuart, Steve Tucker, Jaye Carr, Fiona Ritchie, Katrina Foy, Julie Timms, Akua Serwaa Agyeman, Grainne Ferrigan, Mary Prior, Carolyn Porter, Iain Grant, Hugo Taylor.

Welcome and chair's update

1.1   Introduction and welcome from Nick Edwards (NE) and Abbe Brown (AB).

AB did the initial introduction and group members introduced themselves at the start of the meeting. AB noted it was her last meeting as Co-Chair of the Student Support and Experience Committee and the group expressed their thanks for all her work.

NE updated the group on the ongoing work of the cost of living group over the last few months, involving Estates, the Students' Union, Student Support and individual schools. NE noted that currently there is less Hardship money available, but this is likely to increase in the new year, with the Development Trust and the team in Alumni possibly able to assist with extra funding. There are also groups in place to look at power shortages and the implications for the University and its students. Details will also be forthcoming about support available to students over the winter break but plans are in place. Out of office responses will be standardised and send to staff as appropriate.

Approval of the minute of the SSEC held on 22 September 2022
(copy filed as SSEC/051222/002)

2.1   No comments or amendments were received from members of the Committee. The minutes of the SSEC meeting held on 22 September 2022 were approved.

Update on SSEC Co-Chair

3.1   AB introduced Jason Bohan, the new Dean of Students and Co-Chair of the Student Support & Experience Committee, who will formally commence his role in January. JB thanked AB for the invite and said it was great to meet everyone in the committee and looked forward to starting the role.

Engagement with External Surveys

(copy filed as SSEC/051222/003)

4.1 AB introduced the paper submitted by Duncan Stuart, around the proposed reinstatement of external surveys for Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students. The paper marks out a proposal for discussion, around using the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) but not the International Student Barometer (ISB) due to overlap. The committee was also asked to discuss cost and scope. AB opened the discussion to the committee.

Lucy Leiper (LL) asked about Postgraduate Research (PGR) surveys and crossover with the Postgraduate Taught surveys and Graeme Kirkpatrick (GK) noted from the paper that PGR was included in the proposal and so AB recommended the paper goes to the PGR committee as well for discussion.

Alison Jenkinson (AJ) asked if it was possible to separate out the data so home-based and international student data could be looked at separately and AB said it was not clear from the information she had, but appreciated it would be very useful to have these subdivisions in the data categories if possible. LL suggested it would be possible to split up the data.

John Cavanagh (JC) said he was clear on the value of the survey for PGT but was less sure of the value with regards to PGR students, due to it being a much more individualised experience. LL agreed it was an individual experience but it also allowed for the University to identify important trends across a range of areas in order to make improvements to the student experience.

On external surveys, Russell Moffat (RM) informed the committee the Digital Experience Insight Survey will run again next year, with one survey for Undergraduate and PGT students and another for PGR students.

Lyn Batchelor (LB) asked if the Qatar and China campuses can be separated out in the data as well, which AB said would be very useful and so it would be followed up.

AB confirmed the committee was supportive of the proposal outlined in point 8 of the paper, supportive of the request for further budget and to extend the survey to PGR students.

NSS Action Plans

(SSEC/051222/004a)

(SSEC/051222/004b)

5.1 AB introduced the agenda item, looking at responses to the 2022 NNS Survey as a matter for discussion. NE added that Professional Services have been collating final comments and actions and will look to present these at the next SSEC meeting.

On the Institutional Action Plans, AB asked if there were any points for discussion on the eight action points for implementation and the TESTA pilots running across schools. Martin Mills (MM) felt their pilot generally went okay in the School of Social Sciences but he felt it also dis-embeds assessment and feedback from the wider context so it needs a rethink as it doesn't cover learning outcomes. MM suggested a more integrated approach would be of more use and noted that while feedback was seen to be an issue, comparatively few students look at their own feedback electronically. AB agreed a more integrated approach was best and it was being taken into account in the process.

GK said students always ask for more feedback and to receive it quicker but the was particularly an issue for PGT students, who often have to acclimatise quickly to a new

institution or after a gap from studies, or for those who arrive late for the start of their course.

JC added that we often don't understand what the students' understanding of timely feedback is, as it may differ from our own institutions and school targets. AB said she would feed that back.

Martin Barker (MB) suggested colleagues would like to get better feedback out to students and get more engagement, but perhaps colleagues aren't aware of the support available and expertise on hand which could be better used. Also, there may be resistance from staff due to workload implications or a perceived intrusion into what may be considered good quality feedback already, so it would be good to share best practice across the institution and for colleagues to realise this is an area for improvement. AB said it was very important to share best practice across the institution and to ensure this is embedded in the process, rather than feeling like additional workload.

On assessment and feedback, JB said within the School of Psychology, students often don't know how to access their feedback, so the school created a video instructing the students on how to access this information. Also, JB said that publishing a feedback calendar on each course page was a simple and effective way to keep students informed of when marks are due back, which has helped to manage expectations and provide clarity.

AB noted that all school action plans for NSS are on the SSEC Teams site, to share best practice.

MM noted the Turnitin system does make it a bit more difficult to access feedback than it used to be. He noted that feedback is often seen as a one-way process, from the marker to the student. He suggested as a University we also need to think about how that feedback is folded back into the class to spot themes for where students haven't done well, as that's the really meaningful part of the feedback process, creating a loop.

AB suggested it would be useful to have updates on School NSS Action Plans every 3 months.

JC added that he always talks to the whole class about themes from feedback and mistakes from the previous year's students, while LB noted that with new PGT students she always takes extra time to outline the marking processes. MM added that students don't always understand that they are marked on a curve and not in competition with each other. JC said he tried the voice feedback function on Turnitin and since then not a single student has queried their grade, so perhaps hearing someone talk through the feedback is a better system for students.

Looking ahead to NSS 2023, AB added it was a balance between encouraging student feedback without students also feeling harassed. A 50% response rate is required if the University is to get any data. The NSS Steering Group next meets in March.

Updated after meeting: Malcolm Harvey (MH) emailed AB to ask if he could attend in place of Stuart Durkin, but unfortunately this only came through after the meeting had started. MH replied later to say the draft action plan is in place, and the TESTA pilot is ongoing as well. SD will look to attend the next SSEC meeting and can update if required.

Continuation and Classification Activity Update

(SSEC/051222/005)

6.1   Based on long-running work of the SSEC, and in particular data sets discussed at Senate in May, AB introduced the paper. It focusses on the difference in continuation decisions, classifications and overall outcomes, especially with particular groups such as mature students and widening access students. AB noted there is a big debate about whether any student groups should be

treated differently, but said certain groups are having a different experience, according to the data, therefore it warrants further exploration. Groups such as estranged students feel it is good to have their presence recognised and the challenges they face. There is a plan in place which AB has called the Magnet Plan, as it draws together many departments and groups within the University. School-based action plans on continuation and classification are underway and will continue to be developed, while there is now a continuation and classification group which meets quarterly, which has been greatly aided by drawing together the vast amount of previous work in these areas. AB noted that continuation work had long been embedded in strategies but there was now an increased focus on classification, were widening access students in particular are not achieving the same degree classifications as other student groups. Currently, the classification data is not split up by school, but this would be helpful in the future. AB said the big questions were around why particular groups achieve less, how can this work be embedded in everything we do, how often we should update on this work and is this better done at institutional or school level? The discussion was opened up to the floor.

Tim Burrows (TB) asked what support we give for students who are under 18, and NE noted that while legally in Scotland a person becomes an adult at 16, any students under 18 will be proactively targeted with offers of support, similar to care experienced and widening access students, plus the support teams in halls are made aware of any students under 18 in order to provide support.

Helen Pierce (HP) asked what happens next with the action plan which they have been filling out and AB said it goes up on the SSEC MS Team in order for schools to share ideas and best practice, plus there are meetings as a community of practice to look at any challenges. HP added it was great to share plans as they don't want to feel like they were reinventing the wheel. AB added that it is related to NSS action plans, so it's important to identify any overlap and ensure there are two pieces of work which are related but complimenting each other rather than replicating work.

JB said getting the data to schools is the most important part of addressing these issues so they can address the issues fully-informed by qualitative and quantitative data.

On widening access, GK said other institutions do this very well, so we can learn from them. He added that links with NESCol 2+2 courses are a great widening access link as well and it's also important that institutional funding follows our policies, as UoA investment in this area is lower than universities like RGU and UWS. AJ suggested there were good points about funding and added that the University's articulation plan includes working closely with NESCol but also through other colleges as well, as there is a need to be engaging with a wide range of partner organisations rather than just one.

JC added that finances are only one small part of how people from less privileged backgrounds integrate at university and their likely outcomes, so any socio-economic data available would be very useful. AJ said that the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) was the most commonly-used metric but the University had recently added data on those who previously received free school meals, while being the first in a family to go to university was also looked at.

AB concluded agenda point 6 by noting the discussion will form part of the report from SSEC which goes to UEC in the New Year.

Timelines for Guaranteeing Provisions for Assessments
C6 Processes and Disability Provisions

8.1   AB outlined the agenda item, which is around the link between the C6 system and students who have a disability provision in place of an allowance for poor attendance. She said there are two possible interpretations. Firstly, that the provision allows for one extra additional missed session. The other view, which ties in with the updated disability provisions, is that students must be able to meet the learning outcomes of the course and the provision means that the student in question does not need to continue to provide evidence, but would not gain any extra allowance if unable to attend and thus able to meet the desired learning outcomes. This is different from the previous guidelines and the confusion may be caused by out-of-date information still available on the website. AB added that when discussed with School Disability Coordinators, there was no clear and consistent view on how this particular provision is applied and students were also confused after receiving a C6 when they thought the provision would mean the C6 would not be issued.

LM said the provision is as it is described in the Provisions Guide, so is there to ensure a student does not have to continue to provide medical evidence for absences where it relates to an ongoing health condition. It is at the school's discretion as to how much of the learning can be missed. As this can vary between schools, LM felt it was a useful discussion to have at the committee.

AB asked for any other views, as if it can be resolved at the meeting that would be ideal, but if it is more complex then the issue needs to go for wider discussions.

WL said there seems to be a bit of confusion around how much a student can miss and how each school interprets this. The School of Medicine tries to provide flexibility but also stick to the 90% rule for attendance. WL added that conversations with students are important, so they know what to expect. Also, the School of Medicine's students need to ensure they meet the General Medical Council's outcomes and these will override any disability provisions in place. Overall, WL said the provisions for clinical placements need to be cleared up as soon as possible.

TB added that consistency across schools which have joint honours is very important as it proves very unhelpful and when provisions and processes are interpreted differently depending on which school is delivering the courses.

JC said the caveat of "where possible" is useful as it means the school would have more scope to decide if the implementation of the provision would hinder the student's ability to meet the learning outcomes, for example, where a clinical placement requires attendance, as opposed to lectures which could feasibly be studied from home if a student has serious mobility problems.

AB said that is probably an issue for wider absence and monitoring work, but the main issue to address first is does a student get anything extra in terms of attendance allowance if they have the provision concerning attendance in times of poor health. Is it about evidence, or is the student allowed to miss more in terms of classes?

JM suggested there could be more clarity in terms of what the Student Support Team mean when implementing a provision. Then there needs to be clarity at school and course level of what is being

assessed and what level of attendance is appropriate, which will not be consistent across schools as some are externally regulated and accredited. JM also said it would be good to tie this into the work on Graduate Attributes and looking at the wider picture of preparing graduates for the world of work rather than just academic work. Overall, JM notes there is ultimately only so much of a course that can be missed, so there has to be a cut-off for each course.

HP said the issue is a very complicated one with different schools, disciplines and course coordinators taking different approaches, which causes confusion and anxiety for students. Uniformity is required but it is not clear if this is possible.

LM added she felt the key thing to consider is what are the core competences and learning outcomes being assessed and is attendance required to demonstrate these. LM asked if disabled students can demonstrate these via a different method, as a reasonable adjustment?

On flexibility, Charlotta Hillerdal (CH) said flexibility is essential as students with ongoing health issues cannot choose not to be ill, so it would be good to look at instances where students could make up for missed time, for example, a short written assignment in place of a missed seminar.

AB said CH's point sums up where the discussion is at, with no clear outcome on this issue and a lot to balance. Student Support's document is clear in that all the provision means is no requirement for additional evidence. There are many cases where a student has very valid reasons for missing a class and currently the C6 process is there to try and get them back on track. It is one for further discussion and AB will go back to Emma Tough and to the Task and Finish Group. JC noted that students don't see the C6 process as a source of support.

Widening Access Vision

(SSEC/051222/006)

9.1   AB informed the committee the Widening Access Vision is included for information. AJ said the Implementation Plan is being developed and any comments on this would be very useful. She added that the Implementation will be an evolving piece of work while the Vision is a statement of where the University wants to be by 2040.

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.

Reflection on SSEC Task and Finish Groups (TFGs)

12.1   AB updated on the Pastoral Review TFG, of which AB is the outgoing Chair, to be replaced by JB. The group met on 25 October to discuss the paper which went to UEC on 01 October and also the lengthy report when went to Senate for an academic review. This received support, but also concern over workload and resourcing. The next phrase is to continue to enhance resources but to update existing IT capabilities and to try and enhance PGT support.

On the Monitoring TFG, AB noted positive feedback from Senate to make it a more supportive system, but again with concern about workload and resourcing. AB is meeting with Registry colleagues next week to look at how we can make updates and change terminology around C6/C7 systems and communications. JB will lead this work from January.

NE updated on the Code of Practice, which was approved by the University Court in late November and will now progress to the Business Committee of the General Council in March 2023, with a view to final approval in April. Communications will be prepared and there will be a final meeting of the TFG before winding it up, with the Code of Practice due to be in place on 01 August 2023.

AOCB

13.1   NE expressed his thanks on behalf of all those involved in the SSEC for AB's work as Dean of Students and Co-Chair over the last three years and for all the great work and significant changes she was able to implement during her time in the post.

Date of Next Meeting

14.1   The next meeting of the Student Support & Experience Committee will take place on 07 March at 10. This will be a hybrid meeting, with options to attend both on campus (venue TBC or via MS Teams)