

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN  
**QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE (QAC)**

Minute of the Meeting held on 30 March 2022

*Present:* Ruth Taylor (Chair), Jason Bohan, Isla Callander, Isabel Crane, Bill Harrison, Faye Hendry, Ondrej Kucerak, David McCausland, Jerry Morse, Jeff Oliver, Michelle Pinard, Tom Rist, Thanga Thevar, Jo Vergunst, with Kyra Lamont, Lucy Leiper, Gillian Mackintosh, Morag Macrae, Ann Simpson, and Liam Dyker (Clerk) in attendance.

*Apologies:* Darren Comber, Isa Ehrenschwendtner and Emily Strickland.

**MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

*(copy filed as QAC/300322/001a and QAC/300322/001b respectively)*

- 1.1 The minutes of the previous meetings of 26 January 2022 and 24 February 2022 were approved, subject to the amendment of the date of the meeting in February as well as the addition of the vote.

**MATTERS ARISING (ACTION LOG)**

- 2.1 Student Absence related to PGR Students (minute 2.3 refers): It was agreed to put this action on hold in the meantime to allow for vacancies to be filled in the PGR School. It was noted that work will also commence on reviewing the Code of Practice for PGR Students, and this work will feed into that. It was noted this will likely take place in June 2022.

**ARRANGEMENTS FOR ACADEMIC YEAR 2022/23**

- 3.1 The Committee heard an overview of the paper, noting this had previously been considered by the Campus Planning Group which had provided some feedback (relating to active learning in large spaces, the need for early communication to students, and the probability that testing will not be in place in the way that it currently is in AY2022/23). The Committee noted these principles flowed from the work of the Delivery of Education TFG, which is going forward in two phases: (i) for academic year 2022-23 and (ii) the delivery of education from 2023/24 onwards. The move to more full use of the campus with all students required on campus from September was highlighted.
- 3.2 The Committee expressed general support for the principles and highlighted the positive direction of travel. Some queries regarding spaces available to Schools for teaching were noted, particularly in relation to large lecture theatres. In response, it was noted that the University would be using the mechanical ventilation capacity, which in some cases was less than the 'normal' capacity of the room, and that all information about the capacities of rooms would be available soon so as to inform timetabling.
- 3.3 Some members queried the ability to use on-campus exams and the importance of clarity on this issue early in the timetabling exercise. In response, it was noted that the option would be available for those who sought it. However, members were urged to consider the positives that have been gained from the period of the pandemic in relation to modifications to assessment approaches. Further, it was advised additional work was being carried out on the structure of the half-sessions to ascertain whether there may be a dedicated period for exams or assessment submissions.
- 3.4 Some members sought clarity on the guidance on automated feedback. Responding, it was advised that staff will be supported to provide feedback in as streamlined a way as possible. It

was highlighted that relevant tools, guidance and support will be available for staff. It was acknowledged that students will still receive the appropriate feedback that they require.

- 3.5 Some members queried the possibility of continuing the online delivery for some programmes. It was advised that any such proposal would be required to go through the relevant quality assurance processes. However, caution was urged to ensure there are appropriate resources in place and the impacts on student visas, given students are required to study on campus as a condition of their visa. Similarly, it was suggested instances like these may be more appropriate via the On-Demand route.
- 3.6 The Committee was content to approve the principles and for these to progress to the University Education Committee for further discussion.

#### **ADDITIONAL ANNUAL MEETINGS FOR PARTNERSHIPS REPORTING AND ITR FOLLOW-UP REPORTING**

- 4.1 The Committee heard a summary of the proposals for partnerships reporting and ITR follow-up reporting. It was noted that the rationale for these meetings was to streamline the processes and to provide strategic institutional oversight of the issues raised. It was noted that these proposals were amendments to approved processes at earlier meetings of QAC.
- 4.2 Members were supportive of the proposals, however, some expressed concern for the implications of the scheduling of Internal Teaching Reviews should there be an institutional deadline for follow-up reporting. Responding, members were assured that a pragmatic approach to reporting will be taken, whereby Schools will not be expected to report on actions in January following an autumn ITR. It was agreed that a common sense approach will be taken to ensure enough time has passed to allow the School to report on any progress to recommended actions.
- 4.3 The Committee was content to approve the proposals to the additional QAC meetings and associated alignment of deadlines for partnerships reporting and ITR reporting.

#### **INSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT OF EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORTS**

- 5.1 The Committee heard a summary of the proposed approach to the institutional oversight of External Examiner reports. Members were informed that the external examining project is coming to a conclusion, with final stages including the publishing of the reports and the associated automated workflows to the external examining process. It was proposed that a School summary for undergraduate and postgraduate taught is prepared annually to allow comparisons between years.
- 5.2 Members were broadly supportive of the proposals, particularly in the interest of greater transparency. Discussion ensued regarding the publishing of reports and the format this will take. Some reported instances where the external examiners were not provided with a School response, and some concerns were raised with regard to generic School responses. It was noted that the whole report, including School and QAC responses will be published. In the case where aspects of a report may be contentious, it is proposed that this is taken up with the Chair of QAC, the Committee and the relevant School. It was also reported that, currently, the Head of School may delegate the School response to the Director of Education or the Programme Coordinator to provide a response, and it is also within the duty of QAC to ensure the School has responded appropriately to the content of the report. It was agreed that all School External Examiner reports and responses should be reviewed and agreed at School Education Committees. It was agreed that the instances where the external examiner was unable to view the School response will be looked into. **Action: MM/Clerk**
- 5.3 It was suggested that the summaries and reports be reviewed at a specific point in the next few years to ensure the decision to publish does not impact on the feedback received in the

reports. The Committee were informed that there is already a year without publication in which summaries have been generated, and these can be compared going forward.

- 5.4 Some members also noted that external examiners change every three or four years and therefore each examiner will approach reporting differently and therefore it will be difficult to note any trends or issues with respect to 5.3.
- 5.5 The Committee was content to approve the proposals.

### **EDUCATION COMMITTEE REMITS**

- 6.1 The Committee heard an overview of the education committee remits, noting the outcome of the Senate Effectiveness and Governance Reviews. The Committee were advised that the University Education Committee (UEC) is proposed to become more strategy and innovation-focused, while QAC will oversee quality assurance and policy development. It was noted that due to the substantial change in remit, the current committee should be dissolved and membership appointed afresh. The value of current members was recognised.
- 6.2 Discussion ensued regarding the timescales for delivery of changes. It was noted the changes to the Committee structures were to be implemented for academic year 2022/23. Members were advised that where recruitment of a new member is required, there could be a transition phase in the interim.
- 6.3 Further discussion ensued regarding membership of the Committee, sub-group and Senate representation. It was noted that student representation will remain on each Committee. It was further noted that the Convenors of the Committees are all ex officio members of Senate by nature of their role and the quota currently allotted to QAC members on Senate will remain. Some members expressed concern with the loss in expertise and experienced membership given the proposed changes. This issue was acknowledged and Schools will need to decide who they wish to act as their School QA representative. It was suggested that the Directors of Education and School QA Representatives should work closely together.
- 6.4 Some members expressed concern regarding additional workload on School QA representatives. It was advised that systems and approaches have been put in place to remove some of the operational activity from members. It was noted additional resource has been approved to continue to assist with some of the operational activities of QAC. It was highlighted that the development of policy will be in collaboration with School Education Committees, of which the School QA Representatives will be a member. It was further noted that Heads of School are aware of the change and understand the impacts on workloads.
- 6.5 Some members queried the improvements that will be made following the implementation of the changes. It was noted that there was currently a potential issue with QAC acting as a sub-Committee of UEC rather than as a Committee of Senate. It was noted that the proposed structure is common within the sector.
- 6.6 In summarising, the Chair advised the paper would be updated in light of feedback from the Committee. It was noted the remits would progress to UEC in April and to the other sub-committees, and to Senate in May for approval. The Committee was advised the outcome will be reported back.  
**Action: Chair/Clerk**

### **QATAR RELICENSING: QUALITY ASSURANCE ARRANGEMENTS**

- 7.1 The Committee heard an overview of the paper and expressed its thanks to the team responsible for this work. It was noted this was a collaborative piece of work between AFG colleagues and the University, and led by the University. It was acknowledged the paper forms part of a larger piece of work for the Qatar relicensing. It was highlighted that the University has responsibility for quality assurance in the Qatar campus.

- 7.2 Following discussion regarding the student association involvement in Qatar, the Committee were content to approve the paper and associated documentation for the relicensing submission.

#### **QATAR: CHANGES TO DELIVERY OF EDUCATION DUE TO WORLD CUP**

- 8.1 The Committee heard a summary of the proposed approach to the delivery of education in Qatar during the period of the World Cup. The Committee were informed that the Qatar Ministry have stringent oversight of the education provision and it was noted that the University has been informed that all other universities and schools will cease the delivery of education during this period. It was highlighted that colleagues from the University worked collaboratively with colleagues in AFG to find a solution. It was proposed that first year start dates remain, while the second, third and fourth year and postgraduate taught students start dates will be brought forward. The Committee were advised of the teaching and assessment proposals over this period.
- 8.2 Discussion ensued regarding the rationale behind this and the autonomy of the University in making strategic decisions regarding the teaching delivery. A number of committee members were concerned about the unprecedented change to the teaching schedule and its impact on teaching and learning due to the tournament. However, it was noted that the Ministry has overall control with regard to education provision.
- 8.3 Some members sought reassurance that the compression of the teaching term from 10-weeks to 8-weeks for level 1 students will not negatively impact their studies. It was advised that the level 1 curriculum and programme structure differs in Qatar from those in Aberdeen, therefore it should not have a detrimental impact on their studies.
- 8.4 Some members sought clarity in the table outlining the proposed approach, particularly in relation to the block teaching at PGT level, whereby block 4 will be taught first. It was agreed that the blocks could be reviewed. **Action: DMcC/GM**
- 8.5 Staffing was raised as an issue, particularly for the computing science programmes, noting the workload implications of commencing new courses. It was noted that computing science staff will be unable to travel to Qatar. It was agreed that this issue will be resolved out-with the Committee. **Action: BH**
- 8.6 In terms of precedence of closing universities for the World Cup, it was suggested that this was unlikely in other countries, given the size of Qatar and the level of infrastructure required for the event. It was agreed that the University needs to provide the best experience for students.
- 8.7 Following discussion, the Committee agreed to approve the proposed approach to the delivery of education during the period of the World Cup.

#### **INTERACTIVE DESIGN INSTITUTE REVIEW AND QA REPORT 2021**

- 9.1 The Committee heard a summary of the report and thanks were expressed to the clerking team. It was noted that discussions were positive and that student feedback was also positive. The recommendations were noted and the IDI and Business School have engaged on these.
- 9.2 Questions were asked regarding the reasons for this partnership delivery. Responding, it was noted that the partner is delivering the teaching in a scalable way. Further suggestions were made with regard to the terminology used.
- 9.3 The Committee was content to approve the report subject to amendment.

## INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW (ITR)

### (i) SCHOOL OF GEOSCIENCES INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW REPORT

- 10.1 The Committee heard a summary of the report, noting the key themes which had arisen across the course of the review. It was noted that there were very active External Subject Specialists who were content with the standards and pedagogic provision. The Committee heard of the discussions related to interdisciplinarity and how the School is working collaboratively. It was noted students were complimentary regarding the diversity in assessment, though there appeared to be a need to review those assessments which were adopted in response to the pandemic. Further issues were identified particularly in relation to the clarity in roles and responsibilities.
- 10.2 The Committee was content to approve the report.

### (ii) SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, MEDICAL SCIENCES AND NUTRITION (FOCUS ON MEDICAL SCIENCES AND NON-HEALTHCARE) INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW ONE-YEAR FOLLOW UP REPORT

- 11.1 Members of the Committee heard a summary of the follow up report, advising of the robust response to the ITR Report. It was noted that the School was the first to undergo a virtual ITR. The themes were outlined and the actions associated. It was advised it was clear as to how the School was progressing with the actions identified in the review.
- 11.2 A query was raised with regard to the level of detail in the response and its relationship with the annual follow-up report. Responding, it was advised that this could be an opportunity for Schools to outline as much detail as they wished to their ITR report. The role of the proposed action table in relation to workload implications was noted.
- 11.3 The Committee was content to approve the follow up report.

## POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH (PGR) MATTERS

### (i) SUBMISSION OF FINAL PhD THESIS VIA TURNITIN

- 12.1 The Committee heard an overview of the proposed approach. It was noted the current approach is out of line with the sector and this proposal would bring the University into line with other Higher Education institutions. The role of Turnitin was noted, as was the role of training for PGR students, particularly in relation to the avoidance of plagiarism and academic integrity.
- 12.2 In general, members were supportive of this proposal. Some members suggested generic terminology to allow for variation in the use of systems. Discussion ensued regarding plagiarism and the students' understanding, as well as the implications for study at PhD level. It was noted that the avoidance of plagiarism topic had been built into the online research integrity course.
- 12.3 Some members sought clarity on whether the system was equipped to handle large documents and differing file formats. It was advised that submissions would still be reliant on supervisors' judgements. It was highlighted that this approach will help to alleviate cases where plagiarism has been identified at the point of examination. It was noted discussions around file formats were ongoing and the outcome of those discussions should be brought back to the Committee at a later date. **Action: LL**
- 12.4 The Committee was content to approve the proposed approach to submission.

(ii) GUIDANCE FOR THESIS SUBMISSION WITH OR BY PUBLICATION

- 13.1 The Committee heard a summary of the proposed guidance for thesis submission with or by publication, noting this was at the request of Schools. It was highlighted that 'by publication' meant incorporation of publications stylistically. It was noted that previous consideration at Postgraduate Research Committee and Research Policy Committee highlighted the need for publications to be peer reviewed. It was also advised this guidance will be updated with the Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research.
- 13.2 Members of the Committee expressed mixed views on the proposed approach to submission by publication, given the uncertainty around how much, and the quality of, work the candidate has completed. Some also had concerns with regard to plagiarism. It was advised that students would be required to submit a coherent thesis, with robust introduction and conclusion. It was also highlighted that students will be asked to comment on their contribution to any collaborative paper used and any further queries could be sought from the manuscript or co-authors.
- 13.3 Some members queried the requirement for the publications to have been accepted. It was noted this was a requirement to preserve the quality of the thesis. It was agreed that an update could be brought back to the Committee, should that be helpful. **Action: LL**
- 13.4 The Committee was content to approve the paper.

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

- 14.1 The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday 4 May 2022 at 2:05pm, via Microsoft Teams.