

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

**STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE (SSEC)**

Minute of the Meeting held on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> November 2023

*Present:* Jason Bohan (Chair), Erin Ferguson, Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan, Rhiannon Ledwell, Jemma Murdoch, Lesley Muirhead, Lyn Batchelor, John Cavanagh, Wendy Lowe, Melanie Viney, Tim Baker, Kelsey Pierce, Jena Stuart, Mary Prior, Jackie Tuckwell, Martin Mills, Graeme Kirkpatrick, Martin Barker, Susan Halfpenny, Natalie Kinchin-Williams, Sally Middleton, Heidi Mehrkens, Margaret Jackson, Stevie Kearney (Clerk).

*Apologies:* Nick Edwards, Duncan Stuart, Lucy Leiper, Helen Pierce, Julie Timms, Steve Tucker, Martin Mills, Lindsey Tibbetts, Katrina Foy, Charlotta Hillerdal, Julie Timms, Iain Grant.

**Welcome and chair's update**

- 1.1 Jason Bohan (JB) welcomed committee members to the meeting and asked the group to look over the previous minutes.

**2) Approval of the minute of the SSEC held on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2023**

*(copy filed as SSEC/210923/002)*

- 2.1 Rhiannon Ledwell (RL) noted initials were wrong on a comment, so Stevie Kearney (SK) made a note to amend the error. The minutes of the SSEC meeting held on 21/09/2023 were approved.

**3) Review of Action Table from meeting held on 21.09.2023**

- 3.1 JB noted that the planned action to break down data by Widening Access groups will be implemented for all data going forwards. Lesley Muirhead (LM) has spoken to the Library team about provisions, so that action is completed. Graeme Kirkpatrick (GK) and Iain Grant (IG) were to follow up on a previous agenda item around KPIs and are meeting in December and will report back to the group at the next meeting. Susan Halfpenny (SH) had an action to provide information on Library Services for School Action Plans, and this is in progress.

**Action:** GK and IG to report back at the February SSEC to update on the KPI discussion

**4) Support for Study policy draft**

- 4.1 Jemma Murdoch (JM) introduced the paper on the Support for Study Policy, as this has not been updated since 2016, but has been used more regularly in the last two years. The policy

needed to better reflect the way it is being used, but also to ensure it links with the revised Code of Practice, which was recently updated. The paper is currently an internal working draft and takes into account best practice across the sector, to ensure the terminology used best captures the purpose of the policy. In tandem with the redraft, Student Support Services have worked to revise risk assessment procedures and policies around complex casework. The Student Case Management Group meets weekly to assess cases raised through the Support for Study Policy, the Code of Practice and the Student of Concern procedures. JM will also set up a group to create a more formal draft for the next SSEC meeting. JM asked for any further volunteers to be involved in the working group, particularly from the academic teams. JB noted the policy would be particularly helpful for colleagues within individual schools, to help manage complex challenges. Lyn Batchelor (LB) said Marwa from her team would be able to join the working group and JM made a note to make contact as an action from this meeting. John Cavanagh (JC) asked about the policy and the mixing of two groups; struggling students and disruptive students, and how these groups are supported. JM said students who are disruptive are rare but it identifies a support need, so the policy keeps both groups together due to the support needs. The policy is designed to assist students to succeed in their studies, alongside other policies, and it will be advertised to students accordingly. Jenna Stuart (JS) can help in the short term but will be off from the spring onwards, so is keen to ensure online students' needs are included and can send a colleague to future meetings if she is unable to attend. Kelsey Pierce (KP) also volunteered to input from the Registry Team. JM suggested the policy could go to the Monitoring Group for comments as well, to ensure academic input, and JB agreed this would be a good idea.

## **5) Education Action Plans**

- 5.1 JB introduced the agenda item on Education Action Plans, which are all saved on the SSEC Teams site for committee members to view. Schools were asked to look at a number of areas, including NSS scores, graduate outcomes, non-continuation and other data. The first issue to address was the NSS feedback, where the University is underperforming, at 65<sup>th</sup> nationally, so there is room for improvement. JB asked for school input, particularly with regards to assessment and feedback. Martin Barker (MB) from SBS noted that feedback timing is crucial, so the school is putting measures in place for quicker feedback responses and so the students are not left waiting, and this has been communicated to academic colleagues as a priority matter. There are also some inconsistencies in the way feedback is provided. Some colleagues are providing extensive feedback, which is time consuming, while others are providing feedback which students feel is insufficient. This is especially important with regards to Honours courses. Templates have been created to guide colleagues in providing feedback. Additional training has also been provided. Staff workload is also an issue being looked at, as part of this process. The school is also looking to reduce the number of assessments, which should ensure remaining assessments are marked quickly and appropriate feedback is provided.

Heidi Mehrkens (HM) from DHPA said the action plan is in place and all feedback is being reviewed alongside Mary Prior from the Centre for Academic Development (CAD). The school will be adding a feedback timetable to manage student expectations and to provide additional transparency. DHPA is also looking to facilitate more opportunities for sharing of best practice. Communication will focus on the purpose of feedback for students, which includes meetings

and emails as well, to cover informal and formal feedback. JB noted it would be good to share this information with the wider SSEC group.

JC noted he only saw the plan on the morning of the meeting and wasn't involved in its production, but was happy to share the information he has on the action points. There is a timetable in place so students know when feedback will be provided and the school is also working to ensure there are no overlapping assignments. School policy is to provide feedback within 2 weeks and those who do not meet that deadline will be contacted by the school office. Emphasis has been placed on providing positive feedback, which has been well received by students. JC noted that there's a trade-off between speed and quality, and that students like to get feedback as soon as possible, but this is not always possible if more comprehensive feedback is to be provided.

Tim Baker (TB) said his school is focussing on fewer in-course changes, and to try and standardise processes across programmes, especially to help manage the expectations for joint-honours students. The main goal is not to change processes, but to ensure all programmes within the school are doing the same thing. JC agreed, that students compare one course to another, so feel feedback is slow, even within it is delivered within the University's planned timeline. Those who give extensive feedback also risk setting unrealistic expectations for other academics, if they are going above and beyond the required level of feedback.

MB agreed inconsistency is an issue which comes up regularly and should be proactively approached, with colleagues open to feedback. HM said giving comprehensive feedback is important and it's helpful to not dumb down feedback through a standardisation process. JB noted some students feel overwhelmed by extensive feedback, but MH noted she warns students in advance that extensive feedback will be provided but students have the option to receive less feedback, but none have ever taken up this option. GK said the feedback to the Students' Association hears a lot from students about inconsistencies, so an element of standardisation is useful. Rhiannon Ledwell (RL) said feedback is often not clear for students in terms of knowing how to improve their performance.

Erin Ferguson (EF) from the Law School said colleagues had undertaken focus groups to get more information and the students didn't seem to understand the common grading scale and how this relates to individual performance. Workload pressures often lead to inconsistencies, especially with academics who have to give feedback to several hundred students.

Wendy Lowe (WL) said MMSN has had a good response to the feedback issued, despite large numbers of students. Exam assessments are the main issue, with students then getting individual feedback in meetings after the initial responses. The school has a regular staff-student meeting where the school responds to the "you said, we did" policy. The clinical skills sessions provide more immediate feedback and this is well received by students.

Within the School of Psychology, Madge Jackson (MJ) said an element of standardisation has been introduced with rubrics, which added to the standard feedback and this is being trialled with her Year 3 students. There is also a comprehensive review of all undergraduate courses, in terms of content and assessments, with some assessments streamlined, focussing on Year 1 at the moment. The interpretation to the grade can sometimes be a point of confusion for students, so the rubrics will hopefully help on that point.

On non-continuation data, JB said a sense of belonging is seen as a priority and several schools have this built into their action plans. HM said it was an issue within DHPA, especially within the History course and there's a compulsory module included in Year 1 to address this issue, which as worked well.

JB said several schools have built in additional support roles, to help students with the sense of belonging to the University and this will be followed up with school later to share best practice. MB said within SBS, they are looking to ensure the role of the personal tutor is prioritised and to try and provide further support to those from vulnerable groups, such as widening access students. This allows a proactive approach to students who are at risk of dropping out. JB said this is an issue being looked at and will be followed up. Allocating students to a particular member of the team is a manual process, so there are some practical issues to be worked through.

## **6) NSS Professional Services comments and responses**

- 6.1 JB said Nick Edwards was due to summarise this agenda item but was unable to attend the meeting today. JM said it is being followed up by Student Support. Some of the challenges in responding to the comments is contradictory feedback, which makes it difficult to provide adequate responses. Many of the comments from the NSS related to challenges faced during the pandemic, so those students didn't have a typical experience during their studies. There were many positive comments on our support services, but a common thread was students not being aware of the support available. This communication need has been identified and is being progressed.

Natalie Kinchin-Williams (NKW) said her team have had good conversations with course leads, to pick up on any specific feedback and that while the results have been positive, her team are available to assist and look for ways to improve our services. Mary Prior (MP – CAD) said they have an initiative called Transforming the Student Experience Through Assessment and it is designed to work with academic staff and students, through a survey and focus groups, to gather information on their experience of feedback. Where potential over-assessment exists, this is being looked at both for staff workload and student workload. The accessibility of learning resources has had a full audit of online resources for both Achieve and Achieve+, for undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. There is also provision for PGR students who are also often early-stage staff members, to ensure learning materials are fully-accessible. MP noted the connections with the Student Support team have been significantly strengthened recently to ensure students with additional support needs, to provide a more joined-up service for students.

## **7) Survey Season and Planning for NSS**

- 7.1 JB directed the committee to the papers attached for information, particularly with regard to the NSS, plus the PTES for postgraduate taught students and PRES for postgraduate research students. There is also a new survey for Undergraduate Student Experience, for Year 1 to 3 students. Schools will also be asked to check the correct students are being entered into the NSS data pool.

MB asked about low uptake, as postgraduate students often do not reply. JB noted that the timing and short window contributed to this, so adjustments have been made and there will be a longer response window this year and communication on the survey season will hopefully increase response rates. It's also important that students see the results of the surveys and what changes have been implemented, so students see the value in completing the surveys.

### **8) Student Welfare Committee**

- 8.1 As part of the University's commitment to mental health and wellbeing, it is proposed that each school appoints a mental health and wellbeing champion, so it's useful to make school aware this will be implemented in the new term, with formalised roles for each school's nominee. LB noted that in Qatar, there are cultural issues around identifying mental health issues and so the school would be unable to participate at this time. However, there is good uptake of use of the Student Helpline, which indicates a possible need to be explored in the future. Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan (SV) noted she took this point on board but was happy to look at any ways to provide this support in the future, in a way which addresses the sensitivities. JM said it would be helpful to work to de-medicalise issues such as stress and anxiety, to reflect the understanding of study-related stress and remove the stigma. LB said making it about study-related stresses would be useful, also taking into account religious festival such as Ramadan, where students cannot fully-focus if they have not eaten, so the re-framing of the discussion is useful. JB asked any feedback be sent directly to SV.

**Action:** Committee members are encouraged to send any feedback to SV on the Student Welfare Committee proposals.

### **9) Education Data Schedule 2023-24**

- 9.1 This item was included for information and there were no comments.

### **10) AOCB**

- 10.1 EF asked about disability provisions for the forthcoming exam period, due to a lot of requests for extra time, with the exam deadline approaching soon. Lesley Muirhead (LM) said there is a deadline in place to be guaranteed adjustments. After that deadline, it is at the discretion of the schools and the exam team, to see if it's possible to put the support in place. If it's not possible to make an adjustment, Student Support will advise on Good Cause processes, which are also up to the school to determine if it meets the criteria.

### **11) Date of Next Meeting**

- 11.1 The date of the next meeting of the Committee is Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> February at 10:05am, via Microsoft Teams or in person, University Office, Court Room.