

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

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

Minute of the Meeting held on Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2024

*Present:* Jason Bohan (Chair), Erin Ferguson, Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan, Rhiannon Ledwell, Jemma Murdoch, John Cavanagh, Wendy Lowe, Melanie Viney, Tim Baker, Kelsey Pierce, Mary Prior, Jackie Tuckwell, Natalie Kinchin-Williams, Charlotta Hillerdal, Sally Middleton, Duncan Stuart, Lucy Leiper, Helen Pierce, Steve Tucker, Lindsey Tibbetts, Heidi Mehrkens, Margaret Jackson, Stevie Kearney (Clerk), Morag Beedie (Guest), John Barrow (Guest).

Apologies: Nick Edwards, Lyn Batchelor, Martin Mills, Susan Halfpenny, Graeme Kirkpatrick, Martin Barker, Katrina Foy, Jenna Stuart, Iain Grant, Lesley Muirhead.

**Welcome**

- 1.1 Jason Bohan (JB) welcomed committee members to the meeting and welcomed new member, Peter Henderson from NCS and guests Morag Beedie (MB) and John Barrow (JBar).

**2) Approval of the minute of the SSEC held on 27/11/2023**

*(copy filed as SSEC 15022024-002 Minutes 27-11-23)*

- 2.1 Minutes of the last meeting approved.

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

- 3.1 Graeme Kirkpatrick (GK) to update at next meeting on the KPI discussion with Iain Grant. Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan (SSV) said no comments had been received on the Welfare Committee as yet but asked for any other comments on the Welfare Committee to be emailed through.

**4) School of Psychology Neurodiversity Update**

- 4.1 Madge Jackson (MJ) introduced the update on the School' of Psychology's neurodiversity work and shared slides with the committee. MJ summarised the neurodiversity framework models of the medical model and the social model. The medical model pathologises while the social model gives a wider context. The school is looking at how they can ensure students reach their potential. The work in this area ties in with the work of the Disability Team and the adjustments put in place. The aim is to be as inclusive as possible and address wider wellbeing issues. Often students struggle to get a medical diagnosis and find difficulties with their studies but don't

know why. The overarching aim is to “Foster and maintain a neuroinclusive learning, research and workplace culture” which aims to support students and staff. The school is looking at the support in place already but will look at other universities too for best-practice. Research will include student voices as well, to ensure they are at the centre of the policy.

Attrition rates are high amongst neurodivergent students. The school has developed an internal structure to support this target group. The school’s consultancy board includes three PGT students and they meet twice a term for student input on the challenges they face and support which can be put in place. This board is in the process of creating a charter which will feed into the University’s diversity strategy.

To make the school more inclusive, the terminology used is being reviewed with students and a terminology guide is being developed which MJ is happy to share with other schools. Reporting processes are being reviewed to encourage more students to share information with their school and language use is central to this process. The school is also looking at how they can reduce anxiety around oral presentations and removing any uncertainty for students is central to the school’s work. Visibility around neurodiversity is also key to the school’s plans and a neurodiversity group is being developed, along with events to support and encourage students to engage with the support on offer.

Tim Baker (TB) said he would be happy to be involved for his school. TB mentioned a lot of students have adjustments, especially where they do not have a diagnosis, so asked how we can ensure consistency across schools. MJ said this was the aim, but it was a long-term cultural change and a forum for all schools is being created to encourage as much input as possible, but there is a recognition of diversity of approaches.

Heidi Mehrkens (HM) asked if MJ could assist in advising personal tutors. MJ is happy to assist and will be in touch with HM to follow up. JB said it would be good to have some simple guidelines for all personal tutors around opening up conversations and consistency of language. JB and MJ to follow up on this point.

**Action:** JB and HM MJ to discuss guidelines for all personal tutors

Wendy Lowe (WL) asked around moving on from presenting the medical model as the polar opposite to the social model, when she feels this is not the case. WL wondered if it’s possible to present the two models as being more aligned. MJ agreed the polarisation is unhelpful but it’s useful if people realise there are two models and the strengths of both. WL noted that historically the medical model is stigmatised.

JB noted the paper on provisions later in the meeting will add to the discussion around the use of language.

## **5) Induction, Transition and Employability Week**

- 5.1 John Barrow (JBar) introduced himself and the agenda item known as ITEW for discussion and input. In the September Senate meeting the new three term structure was approved and the Welcome Week enhancements are central to these plans. The aim is to run the ITEW in September and January, starting in the 2024/25 academic year.

JBar asked for group members to get in touch if they would like to be involved in the planning process. The key question is whether activities should be school specific or University-wide. JBar said there were plans within Careers around University-wide events such as entrepreneurship activities. Much of the activity could be focussed on years two to five, as first year students have a lot of other considerations when arriving at the University. JBar suggested more of a slow burn of introducing activities rather than lots of activity at the start of their studies.

John Cavanagh (JC) agreed it was a good concept. JC suggested entrepreneurship work at University level would work well as it would create opportunities for students to collaborate across schools rather than solely within their own schools. School-specific activities could be more appropriate as students near graduation.

Lindsay Tibbets (LT) noted that a lot of students in years 2 to 5 often don't arrive for Welcome Week and accommodation is often unavailable at that point. Academic writing would be an area to include. LT asked how online students would be included and if a school slot would still happen in Welcome Week.

JBar said the school slot could be protected as feedback indicated this was something individual schools favour. Online vs on campus is also being considered to ensure inclusivity for all students. On accommodation and arrival dates, any activities in Welcome week would fit best at the end of the week, when more students will have returned to Aberdeen and online students will be engaging.

TB said a lot of students in their school don't return until teaching starts as they are working and need the income, so asked how those students can be engaged in Welcome Week activities. JBar said many of the skills students develop in their employment are central to their development and there could be a link between part-time work and Welcome Week development activities.

Sally Middleton (SM) noted there could be a lot to take on board for articulating students, who may prefer online activities. JC noted there is a danger of penalising less affluent students, who need to maximise income and work throughout Welcome Week and thus miss any scheduled activities.

## **6) Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) results**

- 6.1 Lucy Leiper (LL) introduced the PRES item, which last ran in 2017, prior to the 2023 survey. The most recent survey got a good response rate, but the next survey is

expected to have a lower number of responses across the sector. The response rate was 21%, which is lower than the sector average of 36%, but the survey opened late which limited response times. This year's survey has opened earlier, and this should be reflected in the overall response rates.

Overall, the University did well in the results, with overall satisfaction at 81%, which is ahead of the sector average. Areas for improvement are around gender, sex, ethnicity and disability, while first generation scholars and those from widening access backgrounds generally score below the University average on overall satisfaction.

LL reported the results for trans students were the area of most concern for the University and schools are working hard to ensure additional support is put in place. On ethnicity, we did better than the sector average, particularly for students who identify as black.

On the data arranged by school, LL noted that response rates were low in some schools so that results should not be taken as a measure of the quality of delivery. Sector-wide, students are looking for more opportunities to develop research communities across universities.

Here at the University of Aberdeen, orientation has been revamped to create more of a cohort model and sense of community, with dates moved for key events, based on feedback. There are plans for a PGR Community Fund for PhD students with ideas on how to create a better sense of community and belonging. The proposed intercultural event which was due to take place in January has now been moved to May.

On culture, the new disability guidance is now in place and has been a really big, significant project, working with Lesley Muirhead in the Student Advice & Support Team.

The Development Trust has also provided funding for a project designed to increase resources for supervisors to reflect the diversity of the PGR student population. The budget is being looked at to see if more can be done to promote work experience opportunities and this is being considered at Dean and Senior Management level. Additional work has gone in to increase awareness of the Careers Service and to provide more resources specific to PGR students.

JC asked about a specific point on racism, with regard to a reported increase in antisemitic incidents reported across schools and universities in the UK. LL noted that the paper presented today doesn't include the free text comments, and we may see some feedback on this point when the free text responses are updated.

## **7) Support for Study paper**

- 7.1 Jemma Murdoch (JM) updated the committee on key points on the revised Support for Study policy, with clarity a key consideration in the redraft. Key changes are highlighted in the paper, especially around the use of language and the balance between providing a supportive policy which also works within the University's regulations. A student-facing guide will be produced to sit alongside the more formal policy document. Action Plans have been renamed Engagement Agreements, to ensure buy-in to the process and collaboration. An appeals section has also been added, aligning with the University's Code of Practice and more clarity has been provided on when the policy applies and when it does not.

LT welcomed the guidance for schools but asked if there would be reflection on yesterday's judgement in relation to duty of care in the case at Bristol University. JM said the court ruling in relation to Bristol will have implications for all universities in terms of making reasonable adjustments and assessment methods. Our approach is more flexible now in terms of students not being able to get diagnoses, while we can also do in-house screenings. JM noted that referral to Student Support by schools was central when providing support and meeting our obligations under law, to ensure students receive all the support required. JM said the case outcome didn't change each university's duty of care, as the judge did not rule on that point.

MJ asked if students need a diagnosis in order to have reasonable adjustments. JM said no, as interim adjustments can be given, but generally a diagnosis is preferred for longer-term support and the Adviser will use their judgement to establish what support is required and if a screening would be helpful, or referral to NHS.

TB asked what happens in terms of an appeal if a student doesn't get a diagnosis and disagrees with the outcome. JM said students would initially be encouraged to speak with the Student Support Management Team and it would be reviewed through the Student Case Management Group. If the student was still dissatisfied, they could follow the formal appeals process.

The committee has approved the paper and it will now progress to further committees and Senate.

## **8) Aberdeen Student Experience Survey (ASES) results**

- 8.1 The agenda item was introduced by Morag Beedie (MB) who noted the paper includes links to school-specific data. The response rate was slightly down at 12% and satisfaction rates are similar to previous reports. The qualitative data is particularly useful and will be shared with schools to inform action plans. Professional Services teams have already reviewed the data and identified actions which can be implemented now and other longer-term plans. Online and Qatar students noted welcome activities seemed to be geared more to on campus students and actions will be implemented to improve this area of work. The buddy Scheme is being developed to improve the

student experience for new students. Feedback will also be provided to students for transparency.

**ACTION:** School reps to ensure the data is reviewed at school level and any actions arising are to be reported back to MB.

## 9) Student Withdrawals Report 2022/23

- 9.1 JB presented the Student Withdrawals Report, which contains data for the last three academic years. At Undergraduate Level, withdrawal rates are 4.9% for the last year compared to 5.2% in 2021/22, although this is still higher than the average over a longer period. For Postgraduate Taught students, withdrawal rates fell to 4.8% in 2022/23, from 9.8% the year before.

There is some variation across schools, and this is being looked at by individual school management teams. The main issue is around not getting much information on why students withdraw from study, as most tick the “other” box on the withdrawal form and do not provide further detail.

JB invited comments from the committee and noted the report data feeds into the Education Acton Plans each school has and their strategies for addressing non-continuation rates.

LT said the Business School identified spikes based on recruitment from individual countries. It’s important to target students who are coming for legitimate reasons, rather than those seeking to claim asylum. LT also said significant problems exist for students with unreliable sponsors who are unable to pay agreed amounts, or for students who cannot get money out of their home country due to restrictions on currency transfers and are thus impacted by currency devaluations.

Kelsey Pierce (KP) asked if the withdrawal form could be revised so we get more useful data on why students withdraw, as a large number just tick the “Other – personal reasons” box. JB noted that this was a good point and was already being looked at.

SM asked why Widening Access wasn’t a category which was included in the data and JB said he would speak to the Planning Team to see if this data can be provided.

**Action:** JB to speak to planning to see if widening access data can be added to the withdrawals report

## 10) Review of Study-Related Provisions

- 10.1 JM introduced the agenda item relating to work by Lesley Muirhead (LM), who has updated the paper which came to SSEC in September. These updates are noted in the paper provided to SSEC. Terminology has been considered and the aim is to reflect the social model, with ‘inclusion’ and ‘adjustment’ used as terms, instead of ‘disability’

and 'provisions'. The paper outlines plans to expand adjustments to a wider group of students with protected characteristics. The Disability Coordinators title has been changed to Inclusion Coordinator and an updated list of provisions has been added, to ensure less need to use the free text section.

JB added that it's important to note that the new adjustment codes are not new in the sense that it is support which was previously in place, but the new codes make it easier to use, with more clarity. JM noted a guide will be provided to schools and the application of provisions will still come down to academic judgement at school level.

Peter Henderson (PH) asked about the adjustment for poor spelling and grammar in relation to non-subject-specific terms. PH also asked about the use of software for spelling and grammar and the difference between software such as Microsoft Office and services like Chat GPT. JM said she would ask LM to get back to PH on that point.

**ACTION:** LM to contact PH for further discussion

TB asked about the provision of high-quality captions and his understanding of the way these were provided to students last term, but the budget couldn't support this work, so the policy was changed, which was a move he disagreed with. TB asked if there are ways to ringfence the commitments made to students and avoid changing policies for financial reasons rather than best practice.

JB agreed it was disappointing to lose the high-quality captioning but the bill the University was facing was around £100k per year. Looking at what other universities do, automatic captioning is standard for a lot of universities and where these are not of a high enough quality, there is some money ringfenced within the University to provide high quality captions.

WL mentioned the challenges faced at school level when changes happen, such as the captioning issue raised by TB. WL asked if the new adjustments had been shared with schools and JB confirmed this had already been done. JM added that IT are ready to implement the revised adjustments as soon as they get confirmation.

JC asked if more can be done at policy level to support those who are visually impaired. JB noted a lot of work has been done to ensure documents are accessible, but this is an area for improvement. JM said it can be very difficult to make adjustments, but the Student Support team generally works very closely with visually impaired students.

LT noted attendance can often be poor for student parents, if they have a child who is ill, while they also struggle to get parked on campus as they arrive later if they have to go via nursery first, which causes lateness for class. JM said any students impacted by these issues should contact Student Support to look at support options.

**ACTION:** JB asked for any feedback on the revised adjustments to be sent to LM by March 4<sup>th</sup> at the latest and SK to add a reminder to the SSEC Teams channel.

## **11) AOCB**

- 11.1 JC asked who to speak to about reserved staff parking and JB said he will feedback to the Estates Team.

## **12) Date of Next Meeting**

- 12.1 The date of the next meeting of the Committee is Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> April at 10:05am, via Microsoft Teams or in person, University Office, Court Room.