UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

STUDENT SUPPORT & EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE (SSEC)

Minute of the Meeting held on Tuesday 7th May 2024

Present: Jason Bohan, Nicholas Edwards, Jemma Murdoch, Lyn Batchelor, Steven Tucker, Katrina Foy, Charlotta Hillerdal, Timothy Baker, Erin Ferguson, Wendy Lowe, Rhiannon Ledwell, Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan, Mary Pryor, Lesley Muirhead, Iain Grant, Natalie Kinchen-Williams, Heidi Mehrkens, Sally Middleton, Susan Halfpenny, Margaret Jackson, Peter Henderson, Kirstin Annand, Rhiannon Thompson, Isabella Fausti, Scott Carle

Apologies: Martin Mills, Graeme Kirkpatrick, Melanie Viney, Steven Kearney, Stuart Duncan, Rebekah Walker, Martin Barker, John Cavanagh, Jenna Stuart, Lucy Leiper, Lindsay Tibbetts, Kelsey Pierce.

1) Welcome and new member introduction.

Nick Edwards (NE) opened the meeting and asked all committee members and guests introduce themselves.

2) Approval of the minute of the SSEC held on 15/02/2024

Minutes Approved.

No comments or amendments were received from members of the Committee. The minutes of the SSEC meeting held on 15/02/2024 were approved.

3) Review of Action Table from meeting held on 15/02/2024

Guidelines for personal tutors: Jason Bohan (JB) informed the committee there will be some updates to the staff resource pages. Madge Jackson's (MJ) guidance on terminology will be added, which will be done over summer. MJ had no further updates at this stage, but a follow up meeting would be useful. JB informed that committee that there will be a of couple things to add over summer related to pastoral support.

Widening Access data on withdrawal reports: JB has spoken to planning to see if widening access data can be included in non-continuation reports, and while it is complicated to set up, the team have provided reassurance this will be available in future reports.

Student Experience Survey outcomes: NE noted Duncan Stuart had sent his apologies for this meeting but reiterated that any feedback on the Student Experience Survey outcomes should be sent to Morag Beadie, as discussed in the February SSEC meeting.

Feedback on the Provisions documents discussed in the February SSEC: Lesley Muirhead (LM) met with Peter Henderson (PH) met and discussed PH's suggests around adjustments for spelling and grammar. Feedback on the proposed changes to provisions/adjustments has now been collated and will be factored into an updated document for action.

4) Extension Policy

JB introduced the agenda item and provided a summary of the documents. The paper proposed an institutional policy for extension requests to be introduced for the 2024/25 academic year. The paper is presented for comment and feedback. The policy is required due to student demand for consistency as varying policies across schools can be confusing. Within the Student Support Team, students often approach the advisers looking for support with extension requests and it takes the advisers significant amounts of time and emails or calls to ascertain the correct policy within each school, in order to advise the student. An institution-wide policy would simplify this process and reduce workload. Schools have reported a significant increase in extension requests and having clear and consistent institutional guidance would help manage the workload. Finally, all other Scottish universities have a policy on their websites with regards to extension requests, so the University of Aberdeen is an outlier in this area.

As a result of a clear demand for a policy, JB and colleagues initiated a consultation process, meeting with Directors of Education, School Administration Managers, the Students' Association and Student Advice & Support, to get thoughts on whether an institutional policy was required, which was met with a lot of support from all groups. A working group then drafted a policy and reviewed current practices at the University, which shows 12 variations of policies and procedures and sometimes it varies within schools as well. This causes significant challenges for students, especially those studying across more than one school, while it also presents additional challenges for staff as well.

The working group's policy draft was based on best practice across the sector and current practices within the institution, and that draft then went to a range of departments, groups and forums for comment. The paper presented to SSEC is a summary of the proposed policy. It was agreed this would not be a stand-alone extension policy, but would sit alongside the existing policy on unauthorised submission of late coursework, as the two documents sit will together.

The policy applies to all on-campus and online UG and PGT students, but does not apply to PGR students. It outlines the expectations for students and schools and outlines an indicative list of mitigating circumstances, and also circumstances that would not normally meet the criteria. Extension requests would normally be made within 7 days of the deadline and the length of extension would generally be up to 7 calendar days, but could be shorter. The length of extension normally cannot go beyond the advertised feedback return date, while the paper also outlines the types of supporting evidence which would be required to accompany an extension request, which ties in with the existing policies and procedures on student absence. The paper proposed that all extension requests go via the Absence Reporting Tool on the Student Hub, which will be renamed to ensure clarity on the purpose of the tool, with a working name of Absence Reporting and Extension Request Tool, while work will be done to make the process more functional.

Tim Baker (TB) said he felt the policy is very promising. However, TB felt the current process within their school, where students email their course coordinator in the first instance, allows for pastoral support and signposting where required. TB also noted that it would be useful if students can be allowed to request extensions further in advance than the suggested one-week period.

JB said he appreciated the need for pastoral support and signposting to Student Support Services and this was discussed with School Administration Managers, particularly those whose schools already use the Absence Reporting Tool for extension requests. The current system allows students to add a section explaining their circumstances and there is also a section to upload any supporting documents. A request has gone in to create an easier system, for more dialogue with students where required.

LM said she has provided feedback around students with disabilities or health related issues who will know well in advance of a week ahead of a deadline that they will require an extension. Getting the extensions organised early will mean a lot less stress for such students. LM also asked for mandatory fields on the form to give the reason for the request and for how long they would like the extension to be, so school can manage what is reasonable and fair under the circumstances. If a student feels the extension is not long enough, they can then be advised on applying for Good Cause/Medical Cause if required. LM also noted the Absence Reporting Tool also allows students to report impaired performance, so has three functions and suggested a catch-all term such as 'extenuating circumstances form' might be more appropriate.

JB agreed the policy needs to give flexibility to students with disabilities and other challenging circumstances, and the policy used the qualifier "normally", which gives room for flexibility. However, in many cases a student applies well ahead of a deadline, when it is not clear at that stage if the student will complete the work on time or not and these early requests add to the workload of the Administration Team within each school. If approved, the new policy will then have supporting 'Guidance for Schools' information to ensure clarity on how and when the policy should be used.

Additionally, JB noted the next step is to work with the Digital Team on the functionality and required fields for the form, the language used and then a working group will review these developments and look at a suitable name which reflects the functionality of the tool.

Erin Ferguson (EF) mentioned this topic has been discussed within committees at the Law School and so it was useful to have additional information. The Law School is supportive of a University-wide policy but has a lot of online students who are working as legal practitioners and do their studies on an ad hoc basis, so the current proposals may be too rigid. Therefore, is there flexibility that can be given to these students?

JB said it was a very going point and it's tricky to balance the needs of diverse groups of students. JB noted areas where on campus students and online students differ, such as if an on-campus student's laptop stops working, they would be expected to use computers on campus and it wouldn't be reason for an extension, but an online student may not have access to another computer so an extension request may be granted. The list is indicative and requests will be assessed on a case by case basic to give flexibility where required.

Susan Halfpenny (SH) suggested including information in the support section (1.11.2) about digital and information skills support, flagging up support from the Service Desk, Digital Skills Team and Information Consultants. SH offered to draw together some information summarising the support available, and JB said this would be very welcome.

Action: Susan Halfpenny and Natalie Kinchen-Williams to summarise digital and information skills support and send to Jason Bohan and Isabella Fausti

JB confirmed the paper is going through various committees and then to Senate, and hopefully it can be approved in time for the new academic year. If approved, work will then begin on the guidance for

schools in time for September and work will commence with the Digital Team to make improvements to the online reporting system. As appropriate, related policies will be updated.

5) Policy and Procedures on Student Appeals

Steve Tucker (ST) introduced the updated policy on student appeals, which is often interlinked with the complaints procedures. ST noted the complaints procedures cannot be changed due to governance regulations, but the appeals policy can be reviewed. The appeals policy was last updated in 2011 and currently there is concerns about workload implications from those dealing wit appeals on a day-to-day basis.

The main changes, as outlined in section 4.2, centres around the introduction of a competency test as the earliest stage of the process. This will involve Academic Services and experienced staff within schools doing an early assessment to screen appeal applications to ensure they meet the criteria in order to be progressed. This will also help manage student expectations and rule out any appeals which are simply questioning academic judgement.

On group appeals, when a group of students all appeal on the same issue, there will be an appellant nominated by the group and they will be the main point of contact.

4.2.3 then covers appeals against C7s as currently around 40% of all appeals are against a C7 but around three-quarters of these are upheld, resulting in a significant use of staff time and a raising of student expectations. The new policy is designed to ensure as many cases as possible are dealt with as frontline issues and do not require to be submitted as formal appeals.

Finally, 4.2.4 covers the timeline for a response, which ma be more than 3 days, to allow for relevant discussions to take place with those involved.

Lyn Batchelor (LB) noted the list of issues which will not be taken forwards as appeal, which appears at the start of the paper, is really useful as often students need to see this information written down for it to register properly and will hopefully help schools to advise students correctly on which issues can be appealed and which cannot.

6) Non-continuation Report 2022/23

JB introduced the report, which is a summary of the report, which is a summary of full-time undergraduate non-continuation data for 2022/23 and is presented for information. As internal data, it is particularly useful as HESA data focusses on Year 1, which this report is more comprehensive. Schools use this data in their action plans but it is also the data that feeds into many of the external university guides.

The headline results, compared to the previous year's report, shows the non-continuation rate of 5.0% is very similar to last year at 5.1%. At school level, Engineering has traditional seen quite high numbers and this has come down to 8.6%, meaning the work they have undertaken is helping the figures. Law is the lowest at 2.3%. Year 1 remains the year with the highest number of non-continuing students, and this reaches a peak around the mid-point of term one.

Looking at non-continuation rates by domicile, Scottish students have the highest non-continuation rates but there is a worrying trend amongst international students with more withdrawing from studies compared to previous years. Male students are slightly more likely to withdraw from studies

and in terms of ethnicity, white students represent higher numbers of those in the non-continuation than BAME students. Students who have reported a disability also represent an increased number of those not continuing with studies.

TB said he monitors data within his school and has seen a significant increase in students with disabilities compared to last year, which is in part due to increased numbers getting diagnoses. They have seen large numbers of Scottish Year 1 students with disability markers withdrawing from studies this year, and something more proactive would be useful when looking for solutions. TB also felt some students in this category would benefit from part-time study options, as they are currently struggling to balance full-time study, employment and managing a disability or disabilities.

Rhiannon Ledwell (RL) said the data on international student non-continuation matches the patterns seen by the Student Association's advice cases, and an extra level of support would be very useful here, to assist with the transition to new academic structures and systems. A personal tutor for international PGT students would be useful, with additional transitional support for UG students as well. RL noted that international students generally don't have the option to study part-time and face restrictions on employment opportunities and income.

JB said the pastoral support for international students should be reviewed again this year, after Senate decided against offering Personal Tutors for PGT students, but other support could be implemented. Some schools have offered study skills courses for PGT students.

Wendy Lowe (WL) queried how other schools work around part-time students as it's almost impossible to do with placements in the medical school and some provisions which are put in place are then knocked back by placement providers as they are impractical. WL feels more flexibility and part-time study would not be feasible within the Medical School.

JB noted that it's difficult to be consistent across schools due to the variation in programmes offered.

PH said the feedback from parents at the most recent offer-holder day indicated they were worried about a skills gap from school to university, and noted the recent reports indicating GCSE results this year are predicted to be the worst in 30 years. This is partly caused due to learning gaps which developed during the pandemic which is now having a knock-on effect for our future cohorts of UG students coming direct from school. PH said he felt this needs an institutional approach rather than the more ad hoc approach of directing students to Student Support or the Student Learning Service.

In reply, JB said it was a very good point and needs to be considered if it sits at institutional level or at school level and PH said that whichever approach is taken, consistency was very important.

LM said it would be helpful to look at the Inclusion and Education Framework and whether that is still fit for purpose or requires review, and it would also be useful to do an audit of provision in each school and share best practice.

MP added that the Student Learning Service runs early in order to support new arrivals and they have been in discussions with John Barrow about the plans for an enhanced welcome week this coming academic year. MP also noted that the AW (Academic Writing) task in week one helps identify students who are not engaging or who struggle with this task, to provide an early support intervention. MP outlined the good work going on in SLS and JB agreed the challenge is in how this can be scaled up. MP added that this support needs to be drip-fed for students rather than all provided during welcome week and JB agreed students have many other priorities when the start a new course.

Heidi Mehrkens (HM) said in the History department they are looking at meeting students below the study skills level, which is the classroom skills level. They are currently planning to have taster sessions for tutorials during welcome week to allow students to experience a tutorial session and try to address some of the anxiety some students have when it comes to attending classes in person. MP agreed engagement has to be the first stage, so felt this approach was useful.

7) Corporate Parenting Plan

Jemma Murdoch (JM) introduced the item, which Stevie Kearney (SK) has been working on but was unable to attend the committee meeting today. Under the Children and Young People's Act 2014, the University has legal responsibilities towards young people who have been looked after or care experienced, and as such we are required to keep, maintain, publish and update a Corporate Parenting Plan, and there isn't a current version for the relevant teams to work from and no version available on the University's website. Therefore, within Student Support, the decision was made to create a first draft and to then circulate round other teams/stakeholders for comments and input. The plan was to do more individual consultation but with recent staff changes at the University, it was agreed the best process would be to introduce the first draft to SSEC and then a more final draft can be sent to the relevant committees and pass through governance processes before publication.

JB noted this is a very important piece of work and especially in light of the Stand Alone charity recently folding, given they did a lot of vital work in this space. JB asked where the data is held on this group of students and who is keeping track of support and engagement. Considering how we monitor this group of students is a key question, and JB also wanted to know about the role of the personal tutor in supporting care experienced students, in the way they do with direct entry students. The plan does not mention anything around monitoring and engagement, and whether care experienced students are more likely to have C6s/C7s and JB wondered if we can do more on this point. Finally, there is no mention of adjustments we can implement and this could be useful to include.

NE noted that the plan is a legal requirement and many of the points JB raised would likely go into an accompanying document which has a different purpose and audience and SK has been working on this alongside the high-level document.

JM added that the data and availability of information is an ongoing issue of debate, on account that disclosing a student's background to someone who is not trained to provide that type of support may have negative outcomes, or lead to assumptions or bias which is not accurate or in the best interests of the student. Two students with dyslexia may have quite similar needs but two students from a care experienced background can have very different life experiences and support needs, so we've always tended to be quite cautious about providing the data to personal tutors without the context, so currently care experienced students will meet with Student Support to discuss adjustments and support needs, and this can then be communicated to the personal tutor with the student's consent. Due to the low numbers involved this approach has worked, but what can be enhanced is the messaging to particular groups called as widening access students, in order to ensure they are aware of the type of support we can provide as a university. JM added that resource is often the issue when it comes to monitoring groups such as care experienced students. On the point around adjustments, JM noted that the draft was produced prior to the recent approved changes to the adjustment processes, so this is one of the areas that will be added in to the document at the next draft.

Sally Middleton (SM) agreed with JM around the challenges associated with identifying care experienced students. Some won't tick the box on their UCAS form so as an institution, we would be

unaware they are care experienced. Also, SM noted there is still a lot of stigma around identifying as care experienced, with many students reporting negative experiences when dealing with agencies who should have robust policies in place, so it is better that care experienced students are allowed to self-identify, especially when speaking to staff within their school and their personal tutor. SM asked if JB could include the Widening Access staff pages into the annual updates JB mentioned previously, should staff need more information on the groups we support. SM also noted that while the Corporate Parenting Plan is about students and not data, it would be useful for JB to speak to Planning as they do have the data on Widening Access groups, to include in retention report, as we report back to the Scottish Funding Council on care experienced student outcomes. As Widening Access covers a wide range of categories, it would be a case of identifying which categories should be included in the data sets.

JB also raised the issue of who is responsible for overseeing the journey of widening access student once they join the University, and SM said that while a group to oversee this work would be great, it's not possible on current resourcing levels, but it could fall within the remit of a wider group looking at transitions.

TB said he'd never seen any previous version of the Corporate Parenting Plan and didn't know it existed, so was delighted to see the paper. TB said in his experience many students use university as a break from the past and do not wish to disclose care experience to the institution, but also that often staff are unsure of what is required of them in this area, and what support we provide as a university, so can we get this information more widely disseminated to students and staff.

NE said TB would not be alone in not having known about the Corporate Parenting Plan previously, but this was the first time we've attempted to make it link up more with our day-to-day activities and have the high-level plan feed into action plans to ensure we meet our responsibilities to care experienced students and provide the right level of support during their studies.

SH mentioned there is the digital poverty fund to help students who are unable to afford IT equipment, although it would be preferable to change the name to digital inclusion or similar. NE mentioned that Student Support is involved in that process and SH confirmed that students can only access the support via referral from the Hardship Fund team.

NE mentioned that as the plan is part of the institution's governance, we are awaiting an update on the formal process it will follow and if it will go to the University Court for approval. JM said there is time to provide more feedback or input to herself or directly to SK, as we prepare the next draft and get clarity on the next steps.

8) Pastoral Support for International Students

Martin Barker (MB) not present, but JB said MB raised concerns around pastoral support for international students and wanted to bring this to the attention of the group. There is a working group already. JB suggested this was perhaps something to take away and have a think about.

Action – **Martin to introduce the conversation in next meeting? Invite others who could speak to this.**

9) Inclusion adjustments for online essay-based exams

Madge Jackson (MJ) said the agenda item came about as a result of a Year 4 Psychology students, who had issues with online exams, and was later diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia. She found it difficult to get the support she needed within the 2-day period allocated to her essay-based exam. She sought proofreading support from people she knew and found the time allocated was not sufficient given the extra challenges she faced. MJ used the example as part of a wider discussion about how the University can support students in similar situations.

LM said this was an interesting point and she was aware of a student from another school who was looking for proofreading support, but our proofreading service is not available for this type of assessment, as there is a 3-day turnaround for the service. The response from the school was helpful in that they explained the differences between an online exam and an online essay, in the way they are marked, and adjustments such as 'no penalty for poor spelling or grammar' can be applied and students can benefit from the use of assistive technology. Therefore, it is useful to speak with students in more detail on such situations and we should look to ensure that all students, not just students with adjustments, should be made aware of the differences between online exams and online essays.

MJ agreed that more upfront information would be useful, especially in differences in the marking approach and clarity for staff. JB said a lot of work was done at the time of the lockdown in 2020 to ensure assessments were moved online in a fair and equitable way, but it hasn't been fully reviewed since then. This could be done under the Inclusive Education Work which is taking place. JB also noted that online exams are being scheduled alongside in person exams and there isn't proper oversight to avoid scheduling conflicts. That issue is being looked at shortly. MJ mentioned it is a big challenge to avoid clashed in scheduling when students have courses across multiple schools.

NE asked JB how best to take this issue forward, and NE said there is a Exams Working Group which he chairs and there is a meeting coming up soon where scheduling will be discussed, while some other upcoming meetings will look at the Inclusion Education Framework and JB will update at the next SSEC on the progress in those meetings.

ACTION: JB to update committee at next meeting on the discussions around scheduling of exams to avoid date clashes

10) Policy and Procedures on Student Absence (PGR)

10.1 This paper was included for information and there were no further comments from the committee.

11) AOCB

11.1 There were no points raised.

12) Date of Next Meeting

12.1 - The next meeting of the Student Support & Experience Committee will take place on 15th August at 2:05pm. This will be hybrid, so committee members are invited to join in person in the University Court Room, or via MS Teams.