

**Minutes of the Academic Standing Committee Meeting held at 4pm on Tuesday 29 September 2020
Online via Zoom**

Present: Stephen Hillier, Convener of ASC
Ann Smyth, Secretary of the General Council
Philip Mawer, Convener of the BC
Joyce Caplan (ASC)
Judith Drake (ASC)
Bruce Ritson (ASC)
Ario Santini (ASC)

In attendance: Tina Harrison, Assistant Principal, Academic Standards and
Quality Assurance
Fizzy Abou Jawad, EUSA VP Education
Alison MacLeary, Assistant to the Secretary of the General Council

1. Welcome and introductions

The Convener welcomed Professor Harrison and Fizzy Abou Jawad to the meeting of the ASC to discuss the impact of the pandemic on student learning, highlighting that teaching and learning and student wellbeing is an important priority for the committee, particularly during the current circumstances.

Professor Harrison gave her account of the University's response to covid-19 and future developments including the University's approach to hybrid learning. EUSA VP Education concluded by providing the perspective from the student body.

2. Presentation by Professor Tina Harrison, Assistant Principal Academic Standards and Quality Assurance

Semester 2, 2019-20

- The end of the last academic year almost entirely affected by Covid; a continually evolving situation;
- Messages sent to students re suspension of classes from 16th March 2020 and students given the opportunity to return home;
- University commenced digital delivery of teaching on 23rd March 2020;
- Rapid turnaround to reconfigure teaching methods and convert to online with the aim to deliver content in the best way possible and complete the end of the academic year;
- "Online pivot" - Not a "like for like" teaching experience - Key priority that students have access to materials and prepare for assessment;
- Academic Contingency Group comprised of key individuals from across the University and EUSA – a separate group set up to move swiftly and make changes, to ensure consistency and develop new guidance; any changes to the regulations went through the proper channels;
- A number of pragmatic changes made to ensure progression and completion of academic year 2019-20;

- Key decision to cancel exams for Pre Honours students (1st and 2nd year); in most cases these students progressed based on their coursework to date; as these grades would not carry forward to degree classification it was felt unfair to impose further unnecessary stress;
- Honours and PGT students were treated differently – invigilated exams were converted to take home “open book” assessments and students were given a 48 hour window to do this piece of work which was expected to take no more than 2 hours to complete; Detailed guidance provided for Boards of Examiners;
- University leading the sector with a “no detriment” approach to assure students that this method of assessment would not have a detrimental impact;
- Concerns that exams would not be of the same standard/quality and may result in grade inflation in some cases but an analysis of the performance of students indicates no significant grade increases overall;

Academic Year 2020-21

- Preparation for this began with the creation of the Adaptation and Renewal Team (ART) led by the Principal, which has a number of strands i.e. Students, Research, Estates and Reshaping to help identify appropriate actions in the short/medium and longer term;
- Vice-Principals with a responsibility for each of these areas lead on each strand; EUSA VP Education involved with the Student strand and the various sub-groups; the key focus is understanding the approach to delivering teaching for the start of the academic year;
- Hybrid Model of teaching – combining digital and in-person teaching and learning; first year UG and PGT students prioritised for face-to-face teaching and lab based students where facilities are an important part of teaching and learning;
- Large-scale lectures moved to digital delivery via the virtual learning environment (VLE); face-to-face sessions held in smaller groups;
- No traditional Exam diet in December - exams will be similar to the situation at the end of the last academic year with more takeaway exams or additional coursework;
- The results of a survey to find out the experiences of UG students after the exam diet of 2019/20 was used to adjust approaches for exams and remote digital learning for the new academic year;
- 3600 students responded – take home exams were preferred over traditional methods with concerns about performance, academic integrity and invigilation, which were addressed in subsequent guidance;
- TURNITIN software used to detect plagiarism;
- A task group was set up to focus on online and remote examinations which concluded with a number of recommendations taken forward for developing assessments in semester 1 this academic year;
- Additional support for students and staff provided; students could access short courses online to help them understand the new hybrid model of learning and access support;
- 665 Staff attended the Edinburgh Model for Teaching course to assist them with teaching using the new technologies;

Student Experience enhancements prior to Covid-19

- There has been significant investment in the student experience;
- Student Experience Action Plan (StEAP) established in 2018 – 3 year plan tasked with taking a more holistic approach to the overall student experience instead of looking at individual aspects of the NSS; funding for some of these activities has been affected by Covid;

- The development of a new Health and Wellbeing Centre to respond to increasing focus on health and wellbeing and the rise of students declaring a mental health disability; the scheduled opening in March 2020 was delayed due to Covid;
- Service Excellence Programme (SEP) – delivering improvements in student admin support e.g. personalised timetables and information hubs;

Current and future developments

- University learning from the hybrid teaching and learning experience; the rapid changes around the teaching of students have had some positive developments which should be retained and built upon;
- The massive shift to online and digital delivery is continually improving to provide an engaging and interactive learning experience;
- Using quality assurance processes to look at the impact on teaching and learning and the student experience;
- Colm Harmon, VP Students engaged in pre-Covid discussions to reduce reliance on exams and simplify the curriculum;
- The complex architecture of the degree programmes offers too many options and this has impacted negatively on NSS results which show that overall student satisfaction is a combination of teaching, learning opportunities, assessment and academic support;
- Challenge is to develop a curriculum with a strong disciplinary focus that will enable graduates with the skills/attributes and values that align with Strategy2030.

EUSA VP Education concluded this part of the meeting to relay points from the student perspective:

- Impressed with how the University handled the shift to online teaching;
- The assessment process was well received but some concerns about feedback and grades;
- The main concern is the lack of asynchronous teaching environment resulting in a sense of isolation at being unable to learn along with peers.

Discussion

- There was no physical meeting of Exam Boards but external examiners were given access to the VLE to review/comment on student work;
- Awareness of the groups of students who are unable to make the transition to online learning – role of the Personal Tutor to monitor this and EUSA signpost to resources e.g. Advice Place which provide extra support;
- Not a smooth transition but continual improvements will result in an a revolutionary way of teaching in semester 2 in an environment where staff and students will be able to work in a more cohesive way than in the recent past;
- EUSA VP Education reported that there is a huge range in the ratio of online c.f. in-person teaching that a student would typically receive across the different schools in the University;
- Professor Harrison explained that the amount of face-to-face lectures have been reduced e.g. Business School students receive a series of recordings of lecture material weekly plus an hour long live face-to-face session supplemented by additional virtual group meetings;
- Final year students will have 1:1 meetings on demand to discuss their dissertation; teaching colleagues are encouraged to connect regularly with their students;
- Acknowledged that students are not currently receiving valuable aspects of the student experience gained through involvement in societies and volunteering opportunities at this current time due to government guidelines re social distancing; society activities continue online but this can be intimidating for new students and affects their sense of belonging;

- There is no desire to streamline the curriculum to offer degree programmes that are limited to the skills required by employers; the aim is to reduce the collection of individual named degrees, some of the courses within which have only one or two students; instead look at pathways through degrees so that there will be some degree of cohort identity;
- Opportunity to name degrees on exit so that graduates will leave the University with the mix of subjects taken shown in the title of their degree.

The Convener thanked Professor Harrison and Fizzy Abou Jawad for sharing their time with the committee and invited them back for a future meeting.

3. Apologies for absence

Apologies had been received from Gordon Cairns.

4. Notes from the meeting held on 22 June 2020

The notes had been previously circulated and were approved.

5. ASC Workplan for 2020-21

Members discussed priorities for ASC and proposals for future speakers;

- Invite a Head of College or School to get their perspective on the particular challenges and issues post-covid on the range of disciplines that they oversee e.g. Dorothy Miell, Head of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences;
- Members were interested in hearing about career progression and support for early years teaching staff, the well-being of staff during the pandemic and the practical challenges associated with this period, for example, will students from Schools where access to lab based teaching is critical e.g. Vet/Medicine have gained sufficient practical experience upon graduating;
- The Secretary reported that the four strands of the Global Academies will come together to form the Edinburgh Earth Initiative which is part of the Adaptation and Renewal activities and proposed that this could be an idea for a future meeting;
- Convener asked members to send any more suggestions for speakers to the GC office.

The Secretary confirmed that for this semester meetings of Standing Committees are closed.

Action – Secretary will invite Jon Turner, Director, Institute for Academic Development (IAD) to the next meeting of the ASC

6. Any other Business

There was no other business.