

BOARD OF GOVERNORS

ACADEMIC ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Friday 20 October 2017

Present: Prof P Wiles (Chair), Dr J Morrissy, Dr S Timothy, Mr M Conway (University Secretary + Clerk to the Board)

Apologies for absence from Prof J Bale

In attendance: Prof C Hughes, PVC for Student Experience
 Mr L Green, Head of Academic Quality and Standards
 Dr N McKay, Dean of Students (Item 6)
 Mr L Renwick, President of the Students Union (Item 6)
 Mr P Sweeney, Governance Services (Minute Secretary)

Paper reference	Minute reference	
	AAC/17/01	Chair's Opening Remarks
	1.1	The Chair welcomed all present to the first meeting of the Academic Assurance Committee. HEFCE's revised Operating Model for Quality Assessment required the Board of Governors to give its assurance to HEFCE on the University's approach to continuous improvement of the student academic experience, and the reliability of degree standards. The Academic Assurance Committee had been set up to enable the Board to fulfil this requirement and provide more genuinely independent challenge to the University than under the current academic governance model.
	AAC/17/02	Declaration of Interests
	2.1	There were no declarations of interest.
AAC/1/17/3	AAC/17/03	Academic Assurance Committee Terms of Reference and Membership
	3.1	Concern was expressed that inclusion of the term 'academic' made the Committee's remit broader than intended. The focus of the Committee was primarily on learning, teaching and assessment as well as the quality assurance processes for research degrees. The wider issues around research, including research integrity and consultancy should be picked up elsewhere. The term of reference should be redrafted to more accurately reflect the remit and circulated to members ahead of the next meeting.
		ACTION: Clerk to the Board

- 3.2 The external co-opted positions on the Committee remained vacant. Members questioned the value of pursuing people from other universities. This could lead to potential conflicts of interest and commercial confidence and would also only bring in the same type of skills and expertise already present in the University. More consideration was needed as to the type of external input that would help the Committee and this should take account of the full range of University external activities and reflect the range of stakeholders. It was agreed to take this away and forward some suggestions to the Committee with a view to appointing the new members in time for the next meeting in May 2018.

ACTION: Clerk to the Board

AAC/1/17/4

AAC/17/04

University Annual Quality Review and Action Plan

- 4.1 The Annual Quality Review (AQR) and Action Plan were intended to provide assurance to the Board of Governors in respect of the University's approach to the Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement of its awards during the period 2016/17 and the approach to the continuous improvement of the student academic experience. In introducing the AQR, the Head of Academic Quality and Standards make reference to the following key points:

- Quality assurance processes were being changed to ensure compliance with the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). The University was ahead of the sector in this.
- Sheffield Hallam was the leading university for apprenticeships and had a strong reputation in this area.
- Work with overseas partners remained a high-risk area.
- A review of Student Assessment Practice and Assessment Regulations had recently been conducted and its findings were being considered.

- 4.2 In discussing the report, members posed a number of questions to the PVC for Student Experience and the Head of Academic Quality and Standards. These questions covered:

- How far the AQR had been modified to reflect the new University Strategy.
- The bureaucratic complexity and length of time needed for the AQR processes
- The opportunity for academic staff to raise concerns
- The approach to and aims of collaborative partnerships.
- The approach to capturing the student experience and the involvement of students in the process.
- The response to continuing student dissatisfaction around timetabling.

- 4.3 The following points were made to the Committee:

i) All actions from the 2016 AQR had either been completed or incorporated into the 2017 Action Plan. A final update on the 2016 Plan would be presented to the Board at its meeting in November 2017.

ii) The AQR was fully aligned with the new University Strategy. Whilst some of the input did pre-date the Strategy, the evolving agenda around learning, teaching and assessment was being taken forward by the Shaping Futures Board. The 2017 Action Plan should provide confidence as to the extent to which this was happening.

iii) The University shared the Committee's desire for quality assurance processes which remained effective whilst being leaner and moving faster. Improvements had been made over the past five years but there was still some nervousness in the academic community about quality. The University was moving towards a more risk-based approach which would enable efforts to be targeted at high-risk activity such as overseas provision whilst empowering departments to approve and manage their own provision.

iv) The core responsibility for academic quality and standards had been transferred from the Academic Board to the Shaping Futures Board. However, Shaping Futures was not a route by which staff could raise concerns about academic matters related to teaching, learning and assessment and progress issues up to the Board if necessary. The University was currently developing a new mechanism to enable such challenge, a role previously performed by Academic Board.

v) The University had some very good overseas partnerships but had also taken decisions to exit from a number of partnerships, some of which were very recent. There were specific issues around one partnership that resulted in it being terminated after a short period of operation. Lessons from this were being picked up and the new governance arrangements would help prevent similar occurrences. These new arrangements would be implemented shortly. This included a more thorough approach to due diligence than had been operated previously. The due diligence report would be brought to the May 2018 meeting of the Committee.

ACTION: Clerk to the Board

vi) The University was implementing a new approach to capturing the student experience that reduced the tendency to over-survey students. Examples of this included real-time research of level 4 students and the Listening Rooms Project.

vii) Timetabling remained an issue in the University and had scored poorly in the National Student Survey for a number of years. To some extent this was a product of the complexity of available module mixes available and the number of delivery sites. Improvements were being made however and there had been a significant reduction in late changes to the timetable for 2017/18. Issues around timetabling linked to wider issues around course identify and the creation of academic communities.

- 4.4 On the basis of the report, the action plan and the responses to the points raised in discussion, the Committee recommended the AQR and Action Plan to the Board as a basis for it authorising the Accountable Officer to give the necessary assurances to HEFCE, via Part 2 of the Annual Assurance return. The Committee asked that the version of the report presented to the Board in November should be accompanied by the Annual Quality Review Cycle diagram (annex 1) plus a similar document showing how this linked with the University Strategy.

ACTION: PVC for Student Experience

AAC/1/17/5 AAC/1/17/05 **Overview of the Outcomes of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2017**

- 5.1 The Committee received the report which gave details of the University's submission to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the core and split metrics, feedback from the TEF Panel and an overview of the outcomes across the sector. In a brief discussion, members commented that whilst TEF had to be taken into account, it would be a concern if it drove all decisions about quality of the student experience.

AAC/1/17/6.1 AAC/1/17/06 **Student Voice Report 2016/17**
and 6.2

- 6.1 The Chair welcomed the President of the Student Union to the meeting and explained the role of the Committee in helping the Board to give necessary assurances to HEFCE on the quality of the student experience. The Union was very much a partner in this process and, with that in mind, discussion focused on how to get the most value from its contribution.
- 6.2 The Committee highlighted a few areas where it felt the Student Voice Report could be the basis for providing additional value to the quality assurance process. Members felt strongly that such a Report should be a Presidential Report, owned and signed-off by the SU President. In addition to any survey finding it could bring together any other relevant information about teaching, learning and assessment available to the Union. The timing of such a Report and the University's processes needed in future to be better aligned and reflect the cycle of the President's periods of office. None of this should prevent the Union continuing to produce a Student Voice report in its current form if they wished since this covered issues other than teaching, learning and assessment.
- 6.2 The report was recognised as a model of best practice, but it needed to be remembered that students were involved in many other quality assurance processes. The University valued the independent nature of the report and the role it played in putting a different perspective on issues. The Union would consider how best to report learning and teaching issues and whether a separate report was required but was concerned about projecting one aspect of the student experience over the others.
- 6.3 The Committee referred to comments made by the President of the Student Union at the Board meeting on October 2017 where he stated that the University had yet to respond to the report. The President

clarified these comments stating that he was aware that the Academic Assurance Committee would be considering the University's response ahead of the report going to the Board. His comments to the Board reflected frustrations over the time this had taken and over a number of other issues.

AAC/1/17/7 Closing Remarks

- 7.1 The Committee discussed the linked governor concept whereby individual governors became more closely involved with particular areas of the University. This might help their understanding of quality assurance processes and would make them more visible to academic staff. The Clerk reported he would raise the matter with the Chair of the Board.

ACTION: Clerk to the Board

AAC/1/17/8 Next Meeting

Friday 25 May 2018