UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

ACADEMIC POLICY COMMITTEE

STUDENT EXPERIENCE ENHANCEMENT GROUP

Minutes of a meeting held on
Thursday 3 March 2011

Present:

Ms C Fyfe (Chair)
Dr A Armellini
Professor Cashmore
Mr P Jackson
Dr P Lynch
Dr J Scott
Professor Thomas

Mrs L Bailey
Mr D Cox
Ms L Jones
Dr M Rawlinson

In attendance: Mrs L Masterman (Secretary) and Miss K Pountney (Assistant Secretary)

Apologies for absence were received from Mr A Nutt

UNRESERVED (ONLY) BUSINESS

11/M1 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Group considered the minutes of a meeting held on 18 November 2010.

The Group approved the minutes as a correct record, subject to a correction within minute 10/M28 as follows:

The Group determined that each format had merit and the current ideal was for handbooks to be available in both hardcopy and online versions.

11/M2 MATTERS ARISING

With respect to Student Handbooks (minute M/28 refers), the Chair reported that she had reviewed the present year’s student handbook provision in detail with the Academic Registrar and Director of the Division of Corporate Affairs and Planning. They believed arrangements presently governing the content of student handbooks were suitable to remain in place whilst Student and Academic Services was conducting the extensive review underway of academic regulations, codes of practice and guidelines. The arrangements would be reassessed following the review and in time for departments’ preparation of 2012-13 handbooks. In the interim period, the Director of the Division of Corporate Affairs and Planning would arrange for improved options to be made available to departments for the cover and bindings of hard copy versions of student handbooks.

The Group agreed it was no longer necessary to establish a task and finish working group to consider student handbooks at the present time.

The Group noted that the full report of the evaluation of learning spaces was now available to download from the Academic Practice Unit website (minute M/30 refers).

With respect to minute M/36 Higher Education Academy, the Group heard that an Early Day Motion had been tabled in the House of Commons against the proposed dissolution of Subject Centres by the HEA.

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11/M3  CHAIR’S REPORT

Report of meetings held in February 2011 with course representatives

The Chair reported that the frequency of meetings she and the Vice-Chancellor held with course representatives had now increased to six per year due to their increasing popularity.

Questions raised by course representatives at the meetings this term had been concerned largely with the additional value students would get in return for the higher fees they would pay. In particular, there was strong support for more opportunities for appropriate study in settings outside the University, particularly for students whose study was not within disciplines with fieldwork or industry components. Students had also voiced some concern about the potential for the student experience to suffer when a significant majority of a programme’s cohort was from a single overseas country.

The Chair confirmed that in many instances course representatives had been directed to their departmental Student Staff Committee; it being the proper forum for discussion and resolution of the issues they had raised. In response to other questions posed, she had been able to report on a variety of improvement work currently been undertaken by the Group’s working groups as well as central University services. She was following up the remaining issues with appropriate individuals across the University and proposed that the Group consider the issue involving alternative study settings at its earliest appropriate opportunity.

11/M4  ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK WORKING GROUP

The Group received reports of meetings of the Working Group held on 6 December 2010 and 7 February 2011. The Chair of the Working Group drew attention to the continuing activities of the Working Group in engaging students with feedback and proposals for an institutional policy for the return of marked coursework within 21 days. He also reported on the Working Group’s recent discussion with the Head of the AccessAbility Centre about coursework extensions for students with disabilities, following identification by AccessAbility tutors of inconsistency of practice across the University. Other projects for 2011 would include recommendations for improvements to online marking capabilities and, at the Group’s request, further work on identifying good practice in relation to feedback to students about examination performance in ways that are cost and resource effective.

The Group acknowledged the challenges involved with identifying a practically viable policy to apply to coursework extensions for students with disabilities. It welcomed the adoption of a more consistent approach by departments and the Working Group’s efforts towards finding a satisfactory solution to such a complicated issue.

The Group considered the Working Group’s proposal that under normal circumstances marked coursework should be returned within 21 days of its submission and it discussed appropriate mechanisms for monitoring this turnaround time. It agreed that the ideal was for monitoring to be supported through a centralised system. In the absence of resources with this capability, it would be managed at department level and reported in annual developmental reviews.

The Group recommended the marking turnaround proposal for consideration by the Academic Policy Committee.

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LEARNING SPACES

The Group heard from the Head of the Academic Practice Unit that progress was continuing to be made on identifying how learning spaces should be equipped. Students had commented favourably on the renovated Bennett Link rooms and had confirmed that the refurbishment was of the sort that they wanted to see replicated elsewhere. The Group noted that the learning spaces project was considering a multitude of aspects impacting upon the state of rooms, including their management, timetabling and cleaning.

The Assistant Director of IT Services (Customer Services) reported that IT Services was surveying departments about their experiences of teaching within certain rooms. She agreed to consult with the Head of the Academic Practice Unit in order to help identify rooms to be included in the survey.

WORKING GROUP ON STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY

The Group received minutes of a meeting of the Working Group held on 8 December 2010 and a verbal report from the Chair of the Working Group of a meeting held on 28 February 2011.

The Group noted recent developments in using the Graduates’ Review publication to encourage alumni to engage with departments about student employability, work on guidelines to assist staff in the writing of student references and progress with the practice interviews pilot.

The Group welcomed the guidance that the Working Group was producing in collaboration with HR about student reference writing. It suggested that students would also benefit from guidance about employment references and proposed that this should feature within student handbooks.

SUSTAINABILITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

The Chair of the Working Group gave a presentation on the aims of the Sustainability pilot project and a preliminary report of the outcomes and recommendations from the first completed review, which had been of the School of Biological Sciences.

She explained that the Working Group had been able to plot learning and teaching related activities in Biological Sciences, shown as a proportion of contracted staff time. Of these activities ‘hidden time’, which included administrative responsibilities, had consistently taken up a greater proportion of staff time than contact time. The review assessed the cost of learning and teaching in Biological Sciences at £2.34m for around 500 students or approximately £4,670 per student. The information gained was consistent with TRAC data.

The Group noted that the reviews considered costs incurred by departments only; the costs would be significantly higher if those incurred by central services were also included.

The Group noted that an interim report on the findings of the pilot should be available for consideration at its next meeting. Reviews of seven departments would have been conducted by that point. The final report would follow in July 2011.

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11/M8 PERSONAL TUTORS

The Group received a report of a meeting of the Working Group held on 14 December 2010. The Chair of the Personal Tutors Working Group reported that 18 course representatives had been employed to consider perceptions held about the personal tutor system and they had received training to equip them with this task.

The Working Group had distributed nearly 700 questionnaires on the personal tutor system to academic staff via departmental secretaries. Approximately 200 responses have been received to date. A variant of the staff questionnaire would be distributed to students in the Summer term. The Chair of the Working Group outlined preliminary feedback from the project and advised that a full report would be available to the Group at its next meeting.

Members of the Group were asked to promote the questionnaires amongst staff and students in their colleges. The Group asked the Assistant Secretary to circulate the website addresses of the questionnaires to its members.

11/M9 JOINT DEGREE PROGRAMMES

The Academic Director of the College of Arts, Humanities and Law gave a preliminary report on work in the College reflecting upon the experience of joint degree students. This had been initiated in response to concerns about consistency and student performance raised by external examiners and Student Staff Committees.

The Group agreed that this work was both important and timely and noted that it would have an opportunity to consider a full report on the issue at a future meeting.

11/M10 TEACHING AWARD SCHEMES 2011

The Chair reported that:

i) an internal panel had identified three suitable candidates for National Teaching Fellowships in 2011 following its consideration of submitted draft applications. The individuals were receiving support in finalising their applications in time for the HEA’s submission deadline.

ii) the 2011 University Teaching Fellowship scheme and new Teaching Partnership Award scheme for students had been launched.

Members of the Group were asked to publicise these awards within their colleges.

11/M11 INCENTIVISING TEACHING

The Group heard from Professor Cashmore that the Minister for Universities and Science had recently held a roundtable discussion about incentivising teaching that she had attended. The Group was pleased to note the discussion had acknowledged that recognising and rewarding activity at promotional level was of key importance.

11/M12 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Group noted the date of its remaining meetings in 2010-11 as follows:

Thursday 9 June 2011

Duration of meeting: Two hours

CHAIR