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# HERIOT-WATT UNIVERSITY

## REPORT OF THE REVIEW TEAM

### ACADEMIC-RELATED PROFESSIONAL SERVICES REVIEW OF: Student Support and Academic Registry

**DATE:** 1, 2, 3 March 2017

**LOCATION:** Edinburgh Campus

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

An Academic-Related Professional Services Review of Student Support and Academic Registry took place between 1 and 3 March 2017, by a team comprising:

**Review Team:**

Dr Maggie Sargeant, School of Social Sciences (*Chair of Review meetings*)  
 Mr Mike Bates, Student Recruitment Service  
 Mr Craig Shearer, University of Edinburgh  
 Ms Lucy MacLeod, the Open University in Scotland  
 Ms Edel Gallagher, School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences (UG)  
 Miss Tiwaah Antwi School of Geoscience, Infrastructure and Society (UG)

**Advisors/Observers:**

Ms Helen Crosby, Academic Review Manager (*Chair of Private Team meetings*)  
 Mrs Lindsey Hall, Academic Review Facilitator  
 Mr Diarmuid Cowan, Student Reviewer Support  
 Ms Denise McCaig, Student Reviewer Support

The University agreed that a combined review of the two Professional Services should take place, and that the focus should be upon how the two departments support global assessment and examination processes in terms of policies, procedures and systems, and of the support provided directly to students.

The following key themes, as identified by the Professional Services, were used as a basis for identifying discussion topics during the review meetings.

1. Student Experience: consistency of experience in support for assessment and examination
2. Staff Experience: impact of globally diverse, complex systems and processes related to assessment and examination
3. Processes: extent to which processes are secure, fit for purpose and future proof
4. Technology: use of technology (rather than manual/paper-based approaches) to support assessment and examination processes
5. Management: effectiveness of the management of processes by the two departments

It should be noted that the Review Team used the Mitigating Circumstances Policy as a conduit for exploring the extent to which assessment-related policies were communicated, understood, managed and implemented, and how consistently these operated across the global University.

## **2. REVIEW TEAM CONCLUSIONS**

- 2.1.** The Review Team recognised a clear willingness from Professional Services and the University to address the issues as outlined in the scoping document and as heard during review meetings. There is an awareness of most of the issues identified by the Review Team and action has already begun to address these.
- 2.2.** As the scoping document demonstrates, the Team has observed the complexity in the management and operation of processes, through significant and duplicated efforts. Although processes are not failing, there are opportunities to simplify significantly and enhance the student and staff experience.
- 2.3.** The Review Team identified there is a clear mismatch between the student experience and staff perception of that experience and this has highlighted a need to improve communication with students with regard to assessment.
- 2.4.** Whilst complementary systems are resource intensive, there may be opportunities to share best practice in the development of a 'one Heriot-Watt' approach.
- 2.5.** The Review Team acknowledges that the proposed introduction of a portal through the Student Administration Revitalisation Programme is a positive step towards offering opportunities to enhance the students' experience of the assessment process.

## **3. AREAS OF POSITIVE PRACTICE**

The Review Team particularly commended the following areas of positive practice:

- 3.1.** The Team noted that there was an exceptional level of commitment to student experience through the work of the Disability Office. This was evidenced by positive comments across all campuses by both staff and students and regular references to staff 'going the extra mile' to support students.
- 3.2.** The Review Team was impressed by an institutional commitment across Professional Services and Schools and a truly collaborative approach to overcoming complexities and providing mutual support. It was noted that colleagues across the institution had worked together to find creative solutions to key challenges – notably in relation to technological barriers.
- 3.3.** A consistent and recurring theme in the review meetings was a joined-up approach across all campuses for the effective operation of Examination Boards. It was evident across campuses that the institutional commitment to consistency of delivery in this area was being prioritised and effectively implemented. It was noted that this is a crucial area in the University's positioning as a global institution.
- 3.4.** Also relating to the theme of a globalised institutional approach, the 'Go Global' scheme was recognised as a successful initiative for creating a supportive inter-campus community amongst students for assessment and that inter-campus experiences were being shared positively by students. It was noted that the Go Global scheme represented a comparatively unique feature of delivery for HWU and there was significant potential to expand this further in future years.

## **4. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT**

- 4.1.** The Review Team noted that there was a comparative lack of benchmarking undertaken by the University to ensure that best practice from across the sector was understood and incorporated into policy, process and practice. Future developments should be informed by detailed benchmarking activity across the sector and on a global basis.
- 4.2.** Some assessment and examination support policies appear to have grown organically rather than through regular, structured review and comparison to other institutions. Institutional organisation and structures reflected the specific characteristics of Heriot-Watt and its historical development (e.g. the reliance on the International Centre for Examinations located in the Edinburgh Business School rather than managed by an Academic Registry for servicing off-campus examinations). The Review Team recommends that the University undertakes a detailed benchmarking exercise in this area to learn from best practice in the sector, and notably around how technology can be used to enhance and simplify processes.

- 4.3.** It was suggested that staff in Malaysia are encouraging process change based on their experience derived at other HEIs, including foreign HEIs in Malaysia. The Review Team concluded that this constitutes a resource which could be used by the University as a whole and which would also benefit the 'one Heriot-Watt' approach.
- 4.4.** The Review Team noted that there were examples of collaboration across campuses in the setting and moderation of assessment and examinations. However, there is inconsistency of practice. It is recommended that the University adopts a procedure that requires the managing course leader to collaborate with all members of the course teaching team in the formulation of assessment instruments and examination papers. This would include sight by all teaching team members of the final examination papers. The use of a technology-supported procedure is likely to ensure consistency.
- 4.5.** The Review Team noted that examinations are largely based on the traditional model which entails setting an examination question paper with answers to be handwritten in an examination book. This approach is resource-intensive and might well be out of step with the learning habits of technologically advanced students. It is, therefore, recommended that the University considers introducing assessment instruments which continue to test the appropriate learning outcomes, but which consume fewer resources and meet the expectations of the student population.
- 4.6.** The Review Team supports the development of a student portal, allowing a single point of access to all student procedures relating to assessment and variations in their programmes of study (eg applying for re-assessment).
- 4.7.** The student experience of assessment across all campuses would be enhanced by more timely and targeted, proactive information and advice. The Review Team heard that staff would support a more longitudinal approach to student induction. It is recommended that the University considers, possibly as part of the Student Administration Revitalisation Programme, developing a University-wide framework of proactive communications, mapped on to the student journey, to receive consistent and timely information at key points using one method of communication at institutional level. The face-to-face examination briefing session for students (held in week 9) operated by the Foundation Programme in Malaysia should be commended and used as a model of good practice.
- 4.8.** The Review Team recommends that institutional, step-by-step guidelines be produced on mitigating circumstances. The guidelines should be transparent, written in plain English and provide timelines for decision-making.
- 4.9.** The Review Team observed that students were sometimes confused by terminology related to examination and student support procedures, such as 'provisional marks', 'mitigating circumstances', 'temporary suspension of studies', 'first attempt', 'second attempt', etc. The terminology used to communicate with students on these procedures should avoid institutional jargon and seek to adopt the use of 'plain English' throughout.
- 4.10.** The Review Team recommends that compulsory training be introduced across all campuses on procedures relating to students with particular assessment needs.
- 4.11.** The Review Team recognises that workable timetables are produced, however, it is recommended that the student experience of examinations could be enhanced with reference to: the timeliness of timetable publications; methods for communicating the publication of timetables; the personalisation of timetables; the increased spread of students' examinations across the examination diet; examination venues. The University should take advantage of the full potential of Syllabus Plus (including software upgrades) and associated products from Scientia to further enhance and simplify the examination processes.
- 4.12.** There are constraints for examinations scheduling as a result of the global nature of learning and teaching delivery and of the number of examinations which require to be timetabled. The Review Team considered that some of these constraints could be overcome by extending the examinations day/week. The Review Team would, therefore, recommend the consideration of scheduling examinations during evenings and over weekends (including Fridays). Best practice can be developed by mirroring similar arrangements followed by the Edinburgh Business School.
- 4.13.** For reasons of consistency and standardisation, authority for the processes relating to assessment has to reside with a single point of authority. It is, therefore, recommended that the University

adopts a standard institution-wide procedure for setting, marking and moderation, supported by technology.

- 4.14.** It is recommended that the use of corporate technology solutions be adopted to support the effective operation of policies and practices, for example timetabling, mitigating circumstances and systems used to disseminate examination papers/scripts.
- 4.15.** The Review Team recommends that the University adopts a more robust technology to support global Examination Boards which allow for consistency of decision-making in the interests of students.

## **5. REVIEW TEAM'S COMMENTARY**

### **5.1. Governance, Ownership and Management**

It was clear that the University recognises that significant improvements can be made to existing policy and practice, notably in the use of technology. Staff across the institution generally had a clear understanding of ownership of policy and practice, though the Review Team was unable to ascertain the level of engagement of Study World staff in Dubai.

The Review Team is of the view that the ownership and management of examination paper setting should reside with the managing course leader in very close collaboration with the teaching team. There were examples of excellent practice in some Schools where SharePoint is used to share the proposed content of the examination paper. Notwithstanding this, some staff in Dubai expressed a feeling of being 'far removed' from the process at times. The final examination paper was not always shared, with the result that mistakes in the paper were not identified. It is recommended that an institution-wide system is introduced for collaboration of global teaching teams with an agreed deadline for final checking of papers.

The Review Team recognised that the University's Code of Practice for the Management of Multi-location, Multi-mode Programmes has been acknowledged as excellent practice in the sector. However, it was noted that there are differing practices across and within Schools in operationalising the Code. This is why there is a need for a standard procedure for collaboration between teaching teams on the production of examination papers. See Areas for Development at 4.4 above.

### **5.2. Communication to Students**

General information about examination arrangements seem to have been communicated to students well in advance, apart from at the Dubai Campus where students were provided with their seating numbers at the reception, fifteen to twenty minutes prior to examinations. This practice is likely to have an impact on the students' examination preparedness in the broadest sense.

It was apparent that there is a mismatch between staff perceptions of students' understanding of examination and assessment policies and the reality. Discussions with students suggested that the extent to which students are sufficiently informed about assessment policies might be dependent upon the engagement of personal tutors. At the Dubai and Malaysia Campuses some of the students were unaware of the existence of some policies. There was a lack of clarity around the application of some assessment policies, and in particular, the Mitigating Circumstances Policy which was found difficult to interpret. The Review Team was of the opinion that to improve interpretation it would be beneficial if policies were written more concisely.

A number of students made the point that communication by e-mail was often ineffective because they tended to use other methods. The Review Team also noted a mixture of communication methods being used both within and across Schools. There is, therefore, a need for the University to adopt one method of communication in relation to examinations. Briefing sessions during the semester are recommended for managing students' expectation and on how they will receive information about examinations related issues such as the Mitigating Circumstances Policy, special arrangements for students with learning profiles, release of results etc.

A mixture of experience of communication relating to re-assessment was reported by students. Clearly, different practices are adopted across Schools and seen to rely on engagement by course leaders and personal tutors. It is recommended that a consistent approach be adopted in the support of students taking re-assessment (both academic and procedural).

Whilst not strictly within the remit of this review, the Review Team was made aware of a situation whereby the results for one course had been incorrectly input and had been corrected later. There had been some confusion amongst the Malaysia cohort around the release of their results. It is important that there is a shared understanding among the teaching teams of the practices regarding marking, moderation and external moderation in order that students have confidence in robust and credible procedures, which are transparent and clearly communicated to students.

### **5.3. Student Support**

The Review Team sought to explore whether there were inconsistencies across Schools and across campuses in both (a) the interpretation of student policies and (b) the way in which student policies were being operationalised. The Review Team looked at two areas in some detail: support for disabled students and application of the University's Policy on Mitigating Circumstances. The Team also sought feedback on the support available to help students understand and comply with examination processes and regulations.

#### **5.3.1. Additional Support Requirements**

The Review Team heard a clear commitment to student support, notably in relation to additional support requirements and finding solutions for students across all campuses. There was also confidence from staff that processes in support of students requiring additional support had been made consistent across Schools. There was nothing heard to the contrary during discussions with students, although there was a view among UK students, which could be assumed to be the same for students at other campuses, that there may be a lack of awareness about the availability of support for disabilities, including Disabled Students Allowance.

The Review Team noted: (i) that a measure of cultural difference and more recent introduction of statutory obligations meant that there was, among some staff, a less well developed understanding of the range of disabilities which might affect students' experience of study and assessment in the Malaysia and Dubai Campuses (for example, in relation to dyslexia). This may lead to some students' needs not being met on an equitable basis across campuses; and (ii) that students on all campuses can find it difficult to understand and appropriately invoke the University's policy on mitigating circumstances, made worse by variation between Schools in how the policy is operationalised.

Whilst it is expected that ALPs provide for reasonable adjustments with respect to arrangements for students with disabilities, it is left to course coordinators to ensure this is happening. There is no formal assurance process for the provision of appropriate student support.

There was a suggestion (by students) that individual academic staff (across all campuses) may not be aware that a learning profile exists until the student alerts them to this and some expressed a lack of confidence in Schools for remembering to implement agreed examination support arrangements. The Review Team heard (indirectly) that some UK Go Global students had found it difficult to access equivalent support at the Dubai and Malaysia Campuses.

There would appear to be a need for UK-based staff from the Disability Service to have more time to devote to staff development, especially in the non-UK campuses, at a time when their resources are already stretched through increasing demand (caused especially by a growing number of students disclosing and seeking help with mental health problems).

Issues relating to the provision of venues for accommodating students with additional support requirements is reported at section 5.4.3, Examination Venues.

#### **5.3.2. Mitigating Circumstances Policy**

There was evidence of some disjunction between teaching staffs' and students' views. Students appeared to have limited understanding of the Policy on Mitigating Circumstances, of how to find it and of how an individual case might be progressed. In general, UK staff appeared to be confident with the application of the procedures within their own Schools but there seemed to be a lack of certainty amongst staff (academic and support) and students

about what constitutes acceptable evidence; students are also aware of different School approaches for applying the Policy and procedures. Students expressed a desire for more transparency around the process and more timely notification during the application process with regard to progress and timescales.

Schools appear to rely on the fact that information is published in the Student Handbook and a degree of concern was expressed by staff about publicising the Policy around the time of the examination diet for fear of prompting trivial cases. However, both academic and support staff did confirm that students often do not fully understand (or take in) the information which they receive at induction.

To enhance consistency and to speed up the process for students, there would appear to be scope for exploring the separation of cases which could be determined quickly and in advance, from those requiring academic consideration and a decision by the Examination Board. Technological solutions are also suggested at Section 5.5 below.

## **5.4. Examination Timetabling**

### **5.4.1. Publication of Timetables**

It is recommended that an earlier publication of the examination timetable is investigated. This is to meet the demand for earlier notification from international students arranging travel and for part-time students (Dubai/Malaysia) organising examinations around work commitments. Dates of the examination diets are publicised well in advance however, students indicated that earlier publication of a timetable (a final timetable with no changes) would be advantageous to them making arrangements. The Review Team heard examples whereby employers had refused annual leave requests to undertake examinations whereas earlier notification may have resulted in requests being accommodated.

It was noted that students at the Dubai Campus are notified (on the day via a notice) of the location of examinations shortly prior to the examination. It is recommended that other methods of disseminating this information are explored to provide an improved student experience.

Other issues relating to the use of technology to support examination timetabling are reported at Section 5.5.

### **5.4.2. Scheduling of Timetables**

The Review Team heard that students were of the view that the scheduling of examinations did not always allow them to maximise their performance across all examinations. Students highlighted that 'back to back' scheduling i.e. on consecutive days, was a frequent occurrence and not favoured by students. It is recommended that the scheduling process attempts to prompt the spread of examinations, although it is recognised that constraints such as venue availability, clash avoidance, complexity of time-zone policy, etc may play a factor in the outcome of individual students' timetables.

It is also recognised, however, that students' expectations are for a spread of examinations to optimise individual performance across the diet. It was noted that the current timetables are scheduled with reference to parameters that may (in part) result in a higher likelihood of clumping examinations. One such parameter is the avoidance of the weekend period (recognised across the three campuses) as well as religious periods such as Ramadan. It was reported, however, that Edinburgh Business School successfully holds examinations on Fridays and during religious periods. Students also indicated that examinations at weekends and evenings would be acceptable if this improved their individual timetables.

In order to lessen the constraints on the scheduling of examinations and thereby potentially improve students' timetables, it is recommended that non-traditional times are considered in the future i.e. weekends and evenings.

The scheduling of examinations based on time-zones contributes to the complexity of the examination process; however in order to provide a cohesive global approach to the delivery of examinations, it seems to be a pragmatic solution. It was recognised that a further division

into three time zones would place burdens on academic staff for the preparation of additional papers.

#### 5.4.3. Examination Venues

The issue of the provision of adequate examination venues on the Edinburgh Campus was noted, as was the impact this has on examination timetables. It is recommended that the issue of examination venues is reviewed with the view to increasing the efficiency of use or increasing the provision of space.

It was also noted that students at the Dubai Campus are aware of the examination timetable at the same time as their UK and Malaysia contemporaries (although time differences cause some asynchronicity), but are made aware of the venue only on the day of the examination and, sometime, with little notice. This is unsatisfactory since it impacts on student preparation in the broadest sense.

For the Edinburgh Campus, there was particular concern raised around the provision of rooms to accommodate students requiring additional support. Currently, these appear to be organised by individual Schools, which leads to a spread of rooms across the University and the need for multiple invigilators. The preferred solution, for both the Disability Service and the Schools, is for a central provision of examination venues. The Review Team would support this recommendation, which could have the added benefit of reducing the likelihood of agreed support arrangements being missed.

### 5.5. Technology and Software

#### 5.5.1. General

There is a clear need for the University to invest in technology to deliver much more modern solutions to key challenges facing a highly internationalised University. There is, however, a clear plan in place through the Student Administration Revitalisation Programme to deliver to this challenge, but this will be dependent on an appropriate level of investment.

Whilst improvements are required in relation to process and use of technology, there was a clear commitment across Schools and Professional Services to ensure the effective delivery of examinations and assessment. On occasion, this was dependent upon finding appropriate work-arounds to process weaknesses.

The Review Team recognised that although the technology currently adopted achieved the basic operational requirements, it would generally support the statement in the scoping document i.e. *“The University lags behind the rest of the sector in its use of technology to manage and facilitate assessment and examination processes, which hampers the University operating as a global institution in this area”*. From the evidence provided by the Professional Services’ Management Team, School representatives and staff from the Dubai and Malaysia Campuses, it was clear that to operate globally the University has to make full use of all available technology and good practice and avoid the use of manual practices which are resource intensive and unsustainable. The use of ‘shadow systems’ built and developed locally to the plug gap of under provision of central systems was highlighted as a contributing factor to the complexity of assessment processes. It is therefore recommended that the most appropriate technology tools and good practice are identified to eliminate manual processes and standardise systems and approaches. The Review Team recognised the potential important role of the Student Administration Revitalisation Programme in filling in the central gaps in technology and systems and acting as a catalyst to the provision of standardisation of systems and the streamlining of practices.

#### 5.5.2. Supporting Assessment Processes: Setting, Marking, Moderation

It was apparent that the traditional method of written examinations is the norm across all Schools and campuses. The Review Team identified the mismatch between students’ use of technology during studies but the requirement to use pen and paper for assessment. The Review Team investigated with staff (and students) if any alternative technology-based assessment is used instead of hand written examinations. A few small scale (but successful) attempts at the use of online assessment were identified at the Edinburgh and Dubai

Campuses however not at a level or scale as might be expected. Edinburgh Business School has trialled on-line examinations in the belief that independent distance learning students would benefit from this approach, however, take-up was only around 20%.

Staff expressed concerns in response to suggestions for technology-supported assessment and examinations because of a lack of confidence in security and reliability of software.

It is recommended that the investigation of technology-based methods of assessment as an alternative to paper based examinations is supported and encouraged.

For the collaborative development of assessments, it is recommended that a standard technological solution (SharePoint was mentioned as good practice) is adopted to allow academic colleagues across all campuses to access examination papers during the preparation stages to enhance their contribution to paper setting.

There were varying approaches to the moderation of examination scripts, all of which involved staff resources for the scanning of scripts or posting out by courier. The University should consider a standardised method to support the efficient moderation of scripts.

#### 5.5.3. Invigilation

Issues were raised by Dubai staff in relation to invigilation and the rules on student behaviour in examinations. Staff clearly felt that they were not properly informed of required examination etiquette and, while they are not allowed to be in the venue at the time of the examination, they felt they should have confidence in how and what rules were being applied. This plays into the recommendation that there should be 'one point of truth' with regard to examination procedures; additionally, training should be consistent across all campuses.

#### 5.5.4. Supporting Boards of Examiners

Whilst staff across all three campuses were content that they had an equal role in Examination Boards which are managed by UK-based School administrators, there were issues with the use of Skype, which was unreliable. The University requires more robust technology to support global Examination Boards which allow for consistency of decision-making in the interests of students.

#### 5.5.5. Timetable Scheduling

It was noted from discussions with Academic Registry staff that the current technology used to manage and schedule examination timetables (Syllabus Plus provided by Scientia) is fit for purpose and does generate a workable timetable. It was also noted that the examination software is linked to the student records system (Banner) via the Connect Platform and that students' special requirements were recorded within Banner. It is recognised that elements of the scheduling process require manual intervention e.g. synoptic examinations, IDL examinations, students' special arrangements.

The current use of sector-leading software (Syllabus Plus) is commended, however it is recommended that the University takes advantage of the full potential of Syllabus Plus (including software upgrades) and associated products from Scientia to further enhance and simplify the examination processes.

It was also noted that the final display of the timetable is as a spreadsheet uploaded to the web, which students (and staff) need to search through to identify their individual examinations. Seating numbers are delivered via the web (this process provided a personalised timetable as a by-product). The future development of a student portal will potentially allow the delivery of personalised timetables to students based on their course records. This method of delivery of timetables is common within the sector and it is recommended that this is adopted in order to enhance the student experience and improve communications.



#### 5.5.6. Student Portal

The Review Team commends the development of a student portal as a positive step in enhancing the student experience. It was noted that the Professional Services' Management Team recognise the potential of a portal in supporting the simplification and enhancement of the assessment processes e.g. displaying personalised examination timetables. It is recommended that the portal is fully utilised to improve communications with students by, for example, pushing automated and targeted communications with reference to the assessment timeline.

It is also suggested that technological solutions (such as the portal) are developed to provide automated and standardised solutions to other key student processes, such as applying for Mitigating Circumstances. Web-based solutions can provide a standard approach and guide the student through the process (including ensuring only valid applications are submitted).