ULSTER UNIVERSITY

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS FORUM

23 January 2019

Paper No: CPF/19/03 Agenda Item: 6

TITLE: ANNUAL COURSE REVIEW 2017/18

SUMMARY:

To consider a paper on the outcomes from the 2017/18 annual course review.

ACTION REQUIRED:

For consideration.

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SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES FROM THE 2017/18 ANNUAL COURSE REVIEW

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an extract of the report from the Sub-Group reviewing the annual course review submissions from partner institutions for the 2017/18 academic year. The report was considered and approved by the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee (ASQEC) at its meeting on 30 November 2018.

1. UPDATE ON ACTIONS TAKEN TO ADDRESS ISSUES RAISED IN THE 2016/17 REVIEW

The Sub-Group reviewed and approved the actions taken or proposed by partner institutions to address the issues raised as part of the 2016/17 annual course review. They were concerned that while training had been provided to College staff on how the University calculates success and retention data, there were still variances between University generated data and that provided by partner institutions. They asked that senior management within Colleges provide training to relevant staff on the data which must be provided in the Self-Evaluation Report (SER).

Matters forwarded to Faculties and the Collaborative Partnerships Forum (CPF) were also addressed to the satisfaction of the Sub-Group.

1. GENERAL ISSUES ARISING FROM THE 2017/18 REVIEW

The Sub-Group met on 6 November 2018 to review the annual course review submissions received from partner institution. Again, as with last year, Sub-Group members were asked to classify programmes as ‘Red’, ‘Amber’ or ‘Green’ depending on the completeness and quality of the submission received. No programmes this year were designated as ‘Red’ or ‘Amber’.

A recurrent theme throughout the provision and indeed the most significant problem which HE provision Colleges face, is that of low student numbers, and in consequence of the viability of the programmes on offer. Most of the courses struggle to recruit students at the levels originally agreed at evaluation/revalidation time, and the levels of attrition (particularly in terms of early leavers and non-returners) are often disappointingly high. While there is ample evidence that the quality of the teaching and pastoral care delivered at the College results in good pass rates and high levels of academic achievement among students who actually complete the programmes, a good number of programmes appear to attract student cohorts which are too small to be viable, both financially and in terms of the quality of the student experience, in the longer term. There is substantial evidence, across all partner institutions, of attempts to identify and respond to existing market needs, in terms of the appropriateness of the choice of campus and mode of delivery.

The Sub-Group noted that at the last meeting of ASQEC Committee endorsed the recommendation from the Task and Finish Group that a minimum intake of 15 (to include both full-time and part-time) be introduced.

In previous reviews the University expressed concern about poor practice in partner institutions regarding the use of APEL for admission. The Sub-Group noted a marked improvement this year in adherence to Ulster University policy in relation to APEL. In particular they commended senior management at South West College for the implementation of a strict mechanism for dealing with applicants’ APEL requests. Colleges now have in place mechanisms for efficient and fair assessment of candidates’ prior learning, whether academic or experiential. FPMs will follow up on the small number of programmes where they were not actively involved in the APEL process.

The quality of the documentation provided by partner institutions was on the whole very good. There were very few documents missing or incomplete, and in the overwhelming majority of cases the documentation demonstrates that the courses are managed and administered with efficiency and commitment. Some course teams appear to have struggled with the statistical section of the SER, both in terms of the accuracy of the data and as regards the way it is presented in the template provided. This led, on occasions, to some misrepresentation of what actually happens on the courses, for example in relation to exit awards (some Course Directors confuse them with final-year awards). The action plans at course level range from very detailed to minimalistic. While it is clear that the Colleges as a whole do exercise an appropriate level of institutional oversight of the process, the occasional repetition of the same wording across different documents (e.g. in relation to NSS results) indicates that a level of cutting and pasting took place during the preparation of the documentation.

One group of students that the College does not seem to pay quite as much attention to is non-returners. Given the generally low student numbers, the numbers of non-identified non-returners per cohort may not be very high, but they do accumulate across campuses and provisions. The fact that students in that category seem to quite often remain unreported is of concern.

**The Sub-Group asked that HE Co-ordinators be again reminded of the need to track and record non-returners and implement strategies to encourage the return of these students.**

Another issue with regard to early leavers is the late timing in the reporting of such students to the University by Course Directors. Students may leave the course at any point and will be tagged as early leavers. On occasion, students terminate their College registration but this information is not passed on to the University. Sometimes early leavers are not picked up until the course results sheets are being completed.

**The Sub-Group recommended that Colleges be reminded that they must notify the University immediately of any early leavers.**

The Sub-Group noted that in the SER course teams were asked to reflect on data over a four-year period. This allows for trends to be identified and action taken where appropriate. There was little evidence of course teams critically reflecting on data over the four years. **The Sub-Group asked that this be included in the training which needs to be provided to course teams by HE Co-ordinators on the data required in the SER.**

In terms of the quality of the actual delivery of the programmes and the assessment of student progress, the Sub-Group commended the course teams for the excellent work they do. The reports of the External Examiners and the FPMs are invariably very positive, and they demonstrate a very high level of professionalism and commitment from staff. Emerging issues are identified and addressed, as appropriate, at module and/or course level, and the general themes emerging from the reports – for example, regarding the use of electronic submission of assessment, the significance of feedback, etc. – are common to the entire HE sector in the UK.

External Examiners confirmed that the documentation they received from course teams was useful and relevant, and that they received it in a timely manner. They received adequate samples of examination scripts and coursework submissions. In general, they said that the Boards of Examiners were chaired to a high standard. External Examiners frequently referred to the professionalism of exam board meetings which allowed them to undertake their role effectively.

The Sub-Group were pleased to see that there was not a problem this year with regard to students having access to suitable WBL placements. One of the strengths of Foundation degrees offered in partner institutions is the interesting and industry-relevant WBL and the involvement of employers in the assessment process. This had been explicitly commented on in External Examiner and FPM reports. In particular, they noted the increase in the number of international WBL opportunities which help equip students with the necessary skills and understanding to live, work and study in the international context.

A number of External Examiners commented that the marks on the WBL module were over-generous, in particular where industrial partners engage in the students’ assessment. While employer input can lead to effective course design and good employability, it should not result in over-generous marking. The Sub-Group noticed that, in particular, subject networks were aware of the issue and were taking steps to address it.

A number of courses across partner institutions are now in teach-out situations as they are being discontinued. **The Sub-Group felt it would be important to seek reassurance from Colleges that there are sufficient resources and processes in place to ensure the quality of the student learning experience during the teach-out period.**

As per Ulster University’s requirements, Course Committee (CC) and Staff Student Consultative Committee (SSCC) meetings were taking place once per semester. In some partner institutions CC meetings are held once a month. Minutes of these meetings were being taken, with copies normally being sent to the FPM. In most cases course teams were using the University’s agendas and minutes templates provided through the CPF. It was noted that in a small number of programmes, there was good practice whereby students were taking the minutes of the SSCC meeting. However, it was evident that minutes of meetings were still not being routinely forwarded to FPMs.

**The Sub-Group recommended that a named contact within each partner institution be responsible for forwarding minutes of CC and SSCC meetings to the FPM on an ongoing basis similar to the process that is now in place for the review of marketing materials. Course Directors will also be encouraged to use the University’s agenda and minutes templates.**

The Sub-Group were concerned that in a number of courses student names and personal details were still being minuted. On the other hand there were some instances where so much of the minutes were redacted that it was impossible to follow what was discussed in the meeting. They noted that guidance had been provided to HE Co-ordinators on the naming of students in the minutes of meetings.

The Head of Library Services confirmed that there were no major issues with library provision in partner institutions. However, the Sub-Group realised that access to resources, both print and online, remains challenging. The Colleges have very limited budgets and libraries only buy what they must. The number of copies is never generous and in many instances they no longer have the current editions of all texts on their reading lists. Staff levels are at a minimum and the library opening hours are finely tuned. Students did not appear to have an issue with regard to library access or to the availability of texts and journals.

The Sub-Group noted that Associate Students no longer have access to the University’s online resources. While some students expressed concern in SSCC meetings about online access, the Sub-Group were satisfied that students were informed of the new arrangements. It was also noted that the FPM for Counselling was taking effective action to address student concerns regarding access to University resources.

1. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS 2017/18

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|  | **Recommendation** | **Responsible for Action** |
| 1. | That partner institutions provide a named contact who will be responsible for forwarding all Course Committee (CC) and Staff/Student Consultative Committee (SSCC) minutes within their institutions to Faculty Partnership Managers on an ongoing basis at agreed junctures. | Collaborative Partnerships Forum |
| 2. | That the FPM Annual Report be amended to take account of College specific issues within a subject network. | Faculty Partnership Managers |
| 3. | That HE Co-ordinators ensure that:   * Course Directors notify the University immediately of early leavers; * Staff development be provided by HE Co-ordinators for all Course Directors and key staff on the completion of statistical data on the Self-Evaluation Report (SER); * Course Teams be encouraged to use the University template for CC and SSCC meetings;   Course Teams track and record non-returners and implement strategies to encourage the return of these students. | Collaborative Partnerships Forum |
| 4. | That Boards of Examiners should only be chaired by appropriate staff who have been trained by the University. | Collaborative Partnerships Managers |

1. AREAS OF GOOD PRACTICE

As part of the review the Sub-Group identified the following areas of good practice:

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| 1. | The ‘Book Club’ which is run as part of the students’ tutorial sessions was very well received by students. The concept of the ‘Book Club’ is to encourage students to engage with literature and develop critical thinking skills. |
| 2. | CT working with staff to identify best practice in the presentation of materials on Moodle. This partnership for learning is mutually beneficial. |
| 3. | The provision of a Student Conference where industry experts present to students. |
| 4. | Verbal quizzes to reinforce the information provided on the various stages of the appeals and complaints procedures and students sign a declaration that they have been provided with all relevant information. |
| 5. | Retention Working Groups at institutional level. |
| 6. | Introduction of online assessments and feedback. |
| 7. | Introduction of online appeals and complaints procedures. |
| 8. | The use of Facebook to engage with students. |
| 9. | Industry sponsored awards. |