ULSTER UNIVERSITY Paper No CPF/19/09

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS FORUM Agenda Item 9

10 April 2019

TITLE: PRINCIPLES FOR ASSURING THE ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND THE QUALITY OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE ON WITHDRAWN COURSES IN PARTNER INSTITUTIONS

SUMMARY: To receive a paper on the Principles for assuring the academic standards and the quality of the student experience on withdrawn courses in partner institutions.

ACTION REQUIRED:

For information.

**CPF/19/09**

**PRINCIPLES FOR ASSURING THE ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND THE QUALITY OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE ON WITHDRAWN COURSES IN PARTNER INSTITUTIONS**

**BACKGROUND**

In light of the increase in the number of courses being withdrawn or suspended in partner institutions the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee agreed that some principles and guidance be developed to:

* Assist Colleges in the management of the course closure process;
* Ensure the consistent, comparable and equitable treatment of students enrolled on these courses;
* Provide assurance to students, employers and other stakeholders that academic standards and the quality of the student experience are maintained until courses have been closed;
* Provide assurance to the University aa the awarding body that effective processes are in place for the delivery, management and monitoring of closing courses;
* Reduce the risk of decreased student satisfaction as expressed in NSS outcomes or through internal or external complaints and associated reputational risk.

**In all instances information provision and protocols are governed by the CMA guidance published in March 2015: *UK Higher Education Providers Advice on Consumer Protection Law*[[1]](#footnote-1) which sets out the providers’ responsibilities under consumer protection law. CMA guidance applies to all provision but is of particular relevance for withdrawn or closing courses where changes may be made to advertised provision and its associated terms and conditions as they affect both prospective and current students.**

In essence this guidance makes it clear that changes to the terms and conditions of course offerings must be clearly and unambiguously communicated to students at the (1) research and application stage (2) offer stage and (3) enrolment stages by providing them with the material information they need to make informed choices so that they can opt out or make alternative choices on a timely basis. Students must be advised of their right to cancel and all information must be provided in plain and intelligible language. Where material changes are made to existing provision the express agreement of students must be sought. Material information does not necessarily include all of the information that might potentially be of interest to a student but is the information which the student needs to make an informed choice. An HE provider’s terms and conditions and any changes made to them must not be deemed to be unreasonable in terms of fairness to the student.

**PRINCIPLES**

In arriving at the Principles and associated guidance notes consideration has been given to the student experience cycle.

**Applicants**

1. ***Successful applicants for entry to closing courses must receive formal notification of the fact that they will be the final intake to the course including details of any changes to the terms and conditions of their offer as advertised in the prospectus and associated course materials and handbooks.***

A standard communication will be sent to all applicants affected by course withdrawals seeking to reassure them that the College has appropriate processes in place to manage the delivery of courses to which there will be no further intakes and to advise them of the rationale for closure. Applicants will be advised that the academic standards of their course are assured as is the quality of their student experience. They may also be advised that the College and the University will monitor this closely and that their views will be sought and any issues identified addressed in a timely manner.

It may be too late in the admissions cycle for applicants to alter their course / institution choices but, if there is any scope to offer an applicant who indicates that they would prefer to enrol on a course not scheduled for closure an alternative, this should be followed up. Any such offer will be subject to the entry requirements to the programme being met and the capacity of the course to accommodate additional students. At this stage an applicant may elect to choose an alternative course at another campus of the College.

Communications to students should make it plain that in the light of the decision to close the course some of the previous discretionary terms and conditions may no longer apply. For example deferred entry will not be an option and opportunities for leave of absence during the period of the course will be severely restricted.

***Action Point: Colleges to draw up standardised templates for written communications to prospective applicants advising them of the status of the course, of any changes to the advertised programme and its associated terms and conditions and their options, including rights to cancel, as appropriate.***

**Admissions**

1. ***Students will complete their course on the campus on which they have enrolled and within the cohort with which they have enrolled.***

After a student has been admitted to a course they cannot be required to change campus even if the long term intention is to move the subject area to another location. In the interests of protecting the student experience and in order to avoid the risks associated with course delivery to small numbers, post enrolment students should not be offered the choice of moving to another campus where the same or a similar course is available. Such an approach would **only** be acceptable if **all** students in a cohort were willing to transfer.

**Course Delivery and Assessment**

1. ***Modules must be delivered and assessed in the same manner as described in the approved course document or as amended by subsequent approved course revisions.***

The standard of teaching and assessment must be maintained and the arrangements for this must remain as described for the approved course. For example where a module is delivered by a number of staff each contributing to a different element this number should not increase, although the staff may be employed on a casual hourly basis. Similarly the balance of coursework and examination should not be varied unless there are sound pedagogic reasons for doing so and in this case the proposed change should come forward for consideration in the usual way. Changes to modules in year must receive student and external examiner consent exactly as for all other courses. It will not be appropriate to amalgamate classes at different levels.

There should be no reduction of class contact hours, changes to small group teaching or laboratory / practical work. Opportunities to use staff with some direct link to the provision should always be considered to preserve, where possible, some continuity of experience for students.

The number of optional modules can be reviewed in advance of student enrolment and applicants advised of any change to the advertised programme but options cannot be removed part way through the course except with the consent of all students.

In terms of the regulations governing courses these should follow the general regulations and students should have the same opportunities for first sit and resit assessments as all other students. Boards of Examiners will of course retain the normal discretion in arriving at their judgements but must ensure that students are not treated unreasonably or unfairly because they are on a closing course. However it may be helpful for Faculties to review the availability of exit awards in closing courses to ensure that Boards of Examiners have the maximum flexibility in determining the fairest and most appropriate student outcomes.

***Action Point: Course teams to consider the introduction of exit awards in closing courses where these do not already exist.***

**Course Management**

1. ***The standard approach to course management must be maintained.***
2. ***The Course Director must be either be a permanent member of staff or on a contract which covers the duration of the course.***
3. ***Students must be kept informed of any changes and where necessary their consent to these must be sought.***

The Course Committee should continue to meet as should the Staff Student Consultative Committee (SSCC). The Course Director should, wherever possible, be located on the same campus as the course and should fulfil the standard set of duties associated with the post. The role of the course director will be of particular importance in securing the effective management of the course to closure while preserving the student experience and staff must be allocated adequate time for this function. The role of module co-ordinator can be filled by a non-permanent member of staff but hours assigned must take account of this and must include time for attendance at Course Committee meetings and progress and Examination Boards and other associated administrative duties.

Exceptionally, where some change in the delivery arrangements for a course is unavoidable, students must be informed in a timely fashion and must be advised of the new arrangements.

**Student Complaints**

1. **Student complaint handling processes and practices should be accessible, clear and timely.**

Notwithstanding the College’s best endeavours, it may still be the case that some students are disappointed or dissatisfied with their experience. Poor complaints handling can undermine positive relationships with students and results in spending time and expense dealing with grievances which could have been resolved sooner. Investing time in the early diagnosis and resolution of complaints will pay dividends in terms of academic and support staff time and the continued positive experience of students.

At all relevant engagements, including induction and SSCCs, the opportunity should be taken to receive feedback, and as appropriate, to advise students of both their rights and obligations and of the College procedures for complaints and appeals.

**Student Support**

1. ***The arrangements for the provision of Studies Advice must be maintained*.**

Students must be assigned an Advisor of Studies and be accorded the opportunity to meet with them to discuss matters related to their academic progress. Where courses have adopted alternative patterns of studies advice provision these should be maintained. Meetings should take place on the campus where the student is located.

**Monitoring**

1. ***Colleges and course teams should be alert to any issues arising in relation to closing courses and take urgent action to resolve these.***

Indications that a course is at risk of failure might include increased student complaints, SSCC meeting minutes reporting concerns, reduced student engagement (poor attendance, failure to submit coursework or attend examinations), retention issues, poor performance or increased failure rates.

The University will also review this group of courses in detail as part of the annual course review process and will require action to be taken to address any concerns identified. This review may include discussions with students and staff.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/428549/HE_providers_-_advice_on_consumer_protection_law.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)