EXTRACT FROM ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE MINUTES: 22.10.20

EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENT

20.58 Meetings of Boards of Examiners

Dr Moore presented a paper addressing matters raised at a Covid-19 Workstream 4 sub-group in July relating to the holding of online boards of examiners in response to the restrictions caused by the pandemic (Paper No ASQEC/20/25a).

She reported that the adoption of an online format for boards of examiners in June had been overall a success, with everyone rising to the challenge of the new remote and online environment. A number of benefits were noted and following a process review involving Student Administration and the faculties changes had been introduced to improve the efficiency of these meetings. Dr Moore noted in particular that paperless meetings were to be retained. Course result sheets for the online boards had been shared through the Examinations Office SharePoint site and synchronisation issues had been addressed and guidance notes and a video developed.

Dr Moore highlighted that more external examiners had attended the online boards than the face-to-face boards held the previous year. Externals had also commented that they worked well. The paper made four recommendations relating to the continuation of such a format, notwithstanding the pandemic:

* giving consideration to removing the normal expectation of physical meetings of boards of examiners, and the consequent requirement for special permission for an alternative video-conference arrangement for the participation of external examiners, if they were unable to come to the campus;
* greater flexibility in the timing of external examiner visits;
* that externals should normally attend the board of examiners on campus in their first year of appointment;
* that the expectation that external examiners attend boards be retained but that this might be either in person or remotely.

Some faculties had commented on their wish to provide greater flexibility in the timing of external examiner visits and it was noted that such flexibility already existed as examiners were able to visit two times per year and more frequently at the discretion of the faculty.

It was clear from the comments from faculties in the paper (Appendix) that there was widespread support for the continuation of online boards of examiners and faculty members re-affirmed that support. There was no intention to diminish external examiner participation in boards of examiners and the value of face-to-face engagement with course teams was recognised. The option for them to visit the campus, when operating normally, for meetings of boards of examiners, and to meet with students, would be retained.

Ms Paris noted that online boards of examiners were viable within the University for internal programmes using standard infrastructure and platforms but advised that such uniformity did not exist for collaborative partner institutions and suggested that arrangements for these boards of examiners should be subject to FPM approval. Dr Moore proposed that early engagement with colleges to explore the capability of their platforms might enable better working arrangements.

AGREED that:

1. the routine organisation of online meetings of boards of examiners be allowed;
2. the requirement for external examiners to participate in meetings of boards of examiners where results which contribute to awards were being considered be re-affirmed;
3. boards of examiners should normally be held in a face-to-face format in the first year of a new external examiner’s appointment;
4. faculties be reminded of the existing flexibility in the timing of external examiner visits to campuses;
5. further consideration be given to the arrangements for meetings of boards in partner institutions.

 EXTRACT FROM ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE MINUTES: 4.12.17

17.112 MEETINGS OF BOARD OF EXAMINERS BY VIDEO-CONFERENCE

 The Chair reported that in October 2017 the Affiliate College Executive Board for QAHE had asked whether video-conference might be permitted for future meetings of Boards of Examiners.

 The Committee received Paper No ASQEC/17/42 on this matter and noted that in 2011 the former Teaching and Learning Committee had discussed the question of video-conference meetings of Boards and noted that University policy expected face-to-face meetings and required attendance of externals at such meetings when results contributing to final classification were being considered. A video link was permitted as a one-off alternative arrangement in emergency situations. The policy was re-affirmed at that time, including the proviso that the Pro-Vice-Chancellor responsible might authorise exceptional departures. The Committee had also approved a specific request for one course.

 Mrs Paris strongly believed that video-conferencing of Boards of Examiners in partner institutions should not be permitted as the presence of externals on campus was critical to the moderation process. Professor Fee considered that the specific 2011 decision which related to the fully online PgCert/Dip/MSc Social Research Skills with Specialisms remained valid.

 It was suggested that the use of Blackboard Collaborate might also be an appropriate alternative means for meetings of Boards. Professor Murphy supported the use of video-conference or Blackboard Collaborate on a risk-based approach only and subject to appropriate assurances about the discharge of the external examiner’s responsibilities.

Professor Bartholomew considered that the face-to-face meetings with external examiners were very valuable. The University would not wish to encourage a culture of external examiner non-attendance or remoteness in view of the benefits from close engagement with course teams and students.

AGREED that the current policy regarding video-conference be re-affirmed, and that the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) be authorised to consider and approve exceptions in the following circumstances:

i) individual cases made by Faculties for specific courses to depart from University policy (when outside the timetable for consideration by the Committee);

ii) waivers to permit one-off arrangements eg use of video-conference, Skype, or Blackboard Collaborate to mitigate the effect of non-attendance of an external examiner owing to exceptional circumstances.

 EXTRACT FROM TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE MINUTES: 30.3.11

11.45 BOARDS OF EXAMINERS BY VIDEOCONFERENCING

The Committee considered a request from the Faculty of Social Sciences to hold the Board of Examiners for PgCert/Dip/MSc Social Research Skills with Specialisms, a fully online course, by videoconference (Paper No TLC/11/15). While the Faculty’s request related to the particular course, the Committee was asked to consider the general principle of holding Boards of Examiners by videoconference.

The Committee noted that current University policy expected face-to-face meetings of Boards of Examiners (on a single campus) and required attendance of externals at meetings when results which contributed to final classification were being considered. The use of video link was, however, permitted as a one-off alternative arrangement in emergency situations. The Faculty had identified difficulties in travel for past and current external examiners and believed that a permanent arrangement for video-linked Boards in this course would be an efficient use of time and resources. The course had a small number of students, and samples of work were sent in advance for moderation. It was noted that there were no technical difficulties.

The Committee noted that this was the first instance where a Faculty had sought to conduct a Board permanently by videoconference, even though the University had a number of courses which were entirely delivered in distance-learning mode. The Committee noted the desirability of encouraging full engagement and participation by external examiners during visits to the University and that a small number seemed to wish to keep to a minimum time spent on campus. Whilst technological advances might make a videoconference Board workable for a small course, it was generally felt that this would not be feasible for more sizeable cohorts nor for a number of Boards meeting at the same time.

AGREED that:

1. the request to hold the Board of Examiners for PgCert/Dip/MSc Social Research Skills with Specialisms by videoconference be approved;
2. the current policy be re-affirmed, but that the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) be authorised to consider and approve as exceptions requests from Faculties to depart from University policy.