EXTRACT FROM LEARNING AND TEACHING COMMITTEE MINUTES

**15 October 2014**

14.84 COMPULSORY PLACEMENT AND FINAL YEAR DISSERTATION/PROJECT IN UNDERGRADUATE AND INTEGRATED MASTER’S DEGREES

The Committee at its June meeting had been disappointed to note that the number of courses providing placement in 2012/13 had decreased overall. This was a matter of concern given the emphasis of both the University and DEL on student employability. The Committee had also recognised the contribution of placement to future graduate-level employment, which was an important factor affecting the University’s position in various league tables. Another factor, further study was influenced by students’ experience of their own research-led enquiry through the final year dissertation or project, and the Committee noted that the University was below its benchmark in this regard.

The Committee had, therefore, recommended to Senate that, in principle, a period of placement and a final year dissertation/research project be integral parts of the curriculum for all undergraduate Honours and integrated Master’s degree programmes (min 14.41 refers). Deans were asked to report back to this meeting on the implications of these proposals for their provision and their plans and timeframe to achieve them.

The Committee considered the Faculty responses (Paper No LTC/14/24) and acknowledged that the policy would present challenges for a minority of courses. A number of general issues had been identified and it was thought that clarification and guidance would be needed, particularly in relation to placement. The University would not dictate arrangements to achieve these outcomes but would expect Faculties to explore options and adopt appropriate solutions.

Placement

The Chair reminded Faculties that the University’s Employability and Marketing Strategy included the expectation that by 2020 all students at Ulster should have the opportunity to undertake work experience as part of their programme of study and this would be expected to be one of the key features defining the Ulster Student Experience in undergraduate degrees. It was noted that those courses which had recently introduced placement had seen benefits in the overall curriculum through enhanced industry/employer relations and closer links with University alumni.

Professor McAlister emphasised the need for the University to advance its ambitions and to give greater priority to this in the short to medium term, particularly in view of the evidence of the positive impact that placement had on student performance and subsequent employment.

The Sub-Committee on Employability and relevant central departments would be expected to work closely with Faculties and to provide appropriate guidance. The Chair confirmed that a period of study abroad would not be counted as work experience, and that the Committee’s recent discussions regarding paid placements related to year-long placements (min 14.39 refers).

Dissertation/Project in Final Year Honours Degrees

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The Vice-Chancellor confirmed that those courses which currently did not make provision for placement and/or a final year dissertation/project now needed to bring forward proposals to do so. Subject to Senate approval of the recommendation, he indicated that failure to do so would put at risk the future continuation of the course.

AGREED:

1. that it be further recommended to Senate that Faculties make provision for a period of placement and a dissertation/project module (in final year) as a compulsory component in all undergraduate and Integrated Masters’ degree programmes **from the September 2015** **intake** and that Faculties aim to introduce as soon as possible optional periods of placement and dissertation/project modules for existing students on programmes where these were not currently provided;
2. subject to Senate approval of i) above, Faculties consider these matters and ensure that course/subject teams, which do not already meet these objectives, take appropriate steps to achieve them and to present proposals through the submission of CA3 forms or in documentation for forthcoming validation events;
3. that the Sub-Committee on Employability develop further guidance on the options for introducing periods of placement within undergraduate Honours and Integrated Master’s degrees.

**18 June 2014**

14.41 Monitoring of Placement

The Committee noted that approximately one-third of full-time undergraduate degrees had a year-long placement and, while there had been a small increase in the number of students taking the year in 2012/13, the number of courses providing placement had decreased. This was a matter of disappointment and concern given the emphasis of both the University and DEL on student employability, through the Learning and Teaching Strategy and DEL’s HE Strategy with the latter expecting all students to have the opportunity to undertake a period of work placement whilst undertaking a higher education course (Graduating to Success 4.3).

It was further recognised that the placement experience contributed to future graduate-level employment, which was an important factor affecting an institution’s position in various league tables. Another factor, further study, was influenced by students’ experience of research-led enquiry through their own final year dissertation or project. While this was an expectation of the University’s degrees, course teams were currently permitted not to include one if they could demonstrate to validation panels how its outcomes were met elsewhere in the curriculum.

It was noted that the University appeared to be losing ground against these particular measures. The Vice-Chancellor recommended that placement and the dissertation/project should both be compulsory elements in undergraduate honours degree programmes. It was noted that other institutions had made such strategic decisions and had seen benefits. Different placement models existed which might accommodate those subject areas where year-long placements were considered problematic. An imaginative approach as well as using the existing alumni network and broadening students’ horizons through seeking opportunities outside Northern Ireland would help. Deans were generally supportive of the proposals but recognised the challenges that they would represent.

AGREED that:

1. it be recommended to Senate that, in principle, a period of placement and a final year dissertation/research project be integral parts of the curriculum for all undergraduate and integrated Master’s degrees;
2. Deans report back by October 2014 on the implications of these proposals for their provision and plans and timeframe to achieve them.