

Full Extract of Senate Minutes, Wednesday 16th March 2011

9. STRUCTURE OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR

Senate **RECEIVED**, as paper S/227/5, a report setting out recommendations from the Senate Working Group.

Mr Peter Clements was present for the discussion of this item.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) introduced the paper and drew Senate's attention to the following points:

- (a) Senate, at its previous meeting, had approved a number of recommendations on the future structure of the Academic Year and had agreed to set up a Working Group to examine further the following:
 - (i) the timing of the mid-year assessment and marking period;
 - (ii) the main end-of-year assessment period;
 - (iii) the Christmas and Easter vacations.
- (b) the Working Group had consulted widely, including Schools and Departments, Teaching and Learning Committees (School and University), a disability interest focus group, the Student Experience Forum, the Equalities and Diversity Forum, and a student parents focus group. In addition, an on-line questionnaire, targeted at all non-finalist undergraduates, was administered in February. Following consultation, none of the proposals attracted unanimity; An initial Equality Impact Assessment had been undertaken in December 2010 and had been revised to include the outcomes of recent consultations with equalities groups;
- (c) in respect of the timing of mid-year assessments, the Working Group had consulted on two options: a two week non-teaching period for assessment and marking after the Christmas student vacation of three weeks; and a split non-teaching period with one week either side of Christmas. A majority of Schools, a majority of Departments and the disability interest focus group had favoured the option of a two week assessment and marking period after Christmas but the results of the student questionnaire had been less straightforward. Taking into account the relatively small size of the number of respondents (around 7% of the total number of non-finalist undergraduates), and its overall marginal disagreement with either option, the Working Group felt that the student vote was split;
- (d) while it was intended that exam-type assessments must be held within the formal assessment periods, there was no requirement that formal submissions or other coursework assessments be limited to those periods;
- (e) the Working Group had concluded that, overall, the post-Christmas assessment and marking was the better option and recommended that the mid-year non-teaching period for assessment and marking should be held after Christmas. The Working Group had also concluded, following consultation, that the Christmas vacation period should remain as 4 weeks which should be achievable on the basis of an early finish in week 12 of the

new autumn term coupled with a late start in the first week of the mid-year assessment and marking period;

- (f) the Working Group had consulted on merging the Fresher's induction week (week 0) into teaching week 1, by allowing for introductory, discipline-specific teaching to begin in week 0. This had attracted majority support amongst Schools and Departments and from the student survey, although there were particular reservations about the impact on students with disabilities and for international students. The Working Group recommended that introductory (non-assessed) discipline specific teaching events should be timetabled for the Thursday and Friday of the Freshers' induction week (week 0);
- (g) in respect of Spring Term teaching period and the Easter public holidays, a clear majority of Schools and Departments and students had supported the proposals for a second 12 week teaching period, although some concerns had been expressed about the difficulties this might raise for those with caring responsibilities linked to the school holidays or about the possibility of some disabled students having to remain on campus due to the shortness of the break and facing some isolation as a result. The Working Group had therefore recommended that the second twelve week teaching term should be taught uninterrupted other than by a one mid-week to mid-week non-teaching period to accommodate the public and University Easter holidays;
- (h) in making its recommendations the Working Group had left the overall length of the teaching (and assessment) year unchanged. However, the Working Group recommended that further work be undertaken to look at the possibility of reducing the time devoted to the assessment periods to allow some additional time for other activities, particularly research, although this would have to be balanced to avoid exams being scheduled too close together.

In discussion, it was suggested that careful thought was needed to the separate assessment of Visiting or Exchange students at the end of the first period. It was suggested that this should be picked up as part of the Portfolio Review.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) recorded her thanks to Mr Clements for his work as Project Manager.

Senate **APPROVED** the recommendations contained in the paper and noted that Teaching and Learning Committee would:

- (a) undertake further consultation on the implications for the delivery of the Taught postgraduate curriculum over a 12 month period once the undergraduate term dates had been finalised;
- (b) consider arrangements for half-year Visiting or Exchange students in the first term as the post-Christmas assessment period did not allow for exam-type assessment for some of these students;
- (c) undertake further detailed work on the handling of assessment which would run in tandem with the changes emerging from the Portfolio Review;
- (d) consider guidelines for student consultation.