



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

University
Secretary's
Office.

The Council, 8 July 2019

Report of the Senate Academic Assurance Committee

Date: 9 May 2019
Chair: Professor M Vincent
Secretary: Mr M Borland

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report provides Council with an update on the activity of the Senate Academic Assurance Committee as requested by Council at its November meeting. Professor Mary Vincent, Chair of the Committee, will be attending Council to present and discuss this report.
- 1.2 Council is invited to comment on:
 - (i) the Committee's activity to date for 2018/19
 - (ii) the approach for the 2018/19 Annual Assurance Report

2. Background and Context

- 2.1 Following the Senate Effectiveness Review Senate agreed to establish a new Senate Academic Assurance Committee (SAAC) to raise issues and to provide advice and assistance to support Senate in discharging its responsibility to ensure effective academic oversight of quality and standards and to provide assurance to Council. The SAAC met for the first time in October 2018.
- 2.2 Council considered and approved the 2017/18 Annual Academic Assurance Report at its November 2018 meeting. The full Council minute is attached as Appendix A and Council agreed that it should receive a further update on SAAC's activities later in 2018/19.

3. Activity for 2018/19

- 3.1 The Committee recognised it would not be possible to cover all aspects of quality assurance in its first year of operation. The Committee agreed that its role was that of oversight and established the following broad criteria to determine which themes it would consider:
 - The Committee would look at perceived risks, but would **not** take a purely risk-based approach.
 - Where significant work was taking place or planned the Committee would normally wait for this to be concluded and so use the output to inform its views on a particular issue.
 - Where themes have a high profile in politics or HE policy, it could be appropriate for the Committee to consider them.
- 3.2 The Committee agreed to look at the following themes in 2018/19:
 - (i) External examiners across all student groups, including their role and how the University uses the information they provide

- (ii) Grade inflation, specifically the position by Faculty and by Department
- (iii) Professional accreditation, including which courses have it, which no longer have it, and which never sought it

3.3 Potential themes that the Committee may consider in 2019/10 included:

- Identifying the core values that underpin academic endeavour.
- Assessment and feedback, including but not limited to National Student Survey returns
- PGR, particularly submission/completion rates and systems for feedback
- Plagiarism

3.1 Activity to date for each of the three themes and other activity is provided below:

(i) External Examiners

- a) SAAC considered the external examiners theme for all students including Apprentices, Undergraduate, Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research students. This included the role of external examiners and how the University uses the information they provide. It has done this through a discussion at its November meeting with invited guests to provide departmental and faculty, and UG and PG perspectives. The Committee had a further discussion at its February meeting.
- b) The Chair of the Committee has met with the Deputy Vice-President (Research and Innovation) to discuss the aspects related to PGR students. The Committee has provided input at its May meeting to the draft proposals for reforms to the process of Quality Assurance of Research Programmes.
- c) The Chair of the Committee has met with the Chair of the Quality and Scrutiny Sub-Committee (QSC), a sub-Committee of the Learning and Teaching Committee, and will attend the next QSC meeting on 12 June.

(ii) Grade Inflation

- (a) The Committee has had an initial discussion on grade inflation. SAAC is interested to look at the position by Faculty and by Department and the reasons behind any variation. The Committee will consider grade inflation in further detail in 2019/20.

(iii) Professional Accreditation

- (a) Professional accreditation, including which courses have it, which no longer have it, and which never sought it was originally identified as the third of the Committee's in depth topics for the year. However, during discussion the Committee recognised that professional accreditation cannot be seen as a proxy for quality assurance as there can be reasons why accreditation may not be appropriate for some courses. SAAC therefore agreed to undertake further specific work to seek to assure itself, and to assure Senate, that guidance received in relation to professional accreditation was not contradictory to University regulations and guidance.
- (b) At its May meeting the Committee discussed the potential tension between the University's requirements and those of accrediting bodies and invited a guest to provide an additional departmental perspective from a department with a number of professionally accredited courses.
- (c) The Committee is looking to have a discussion with the Learning & Teaching Committee regarding professional accreditation.

(iv) Other activity: Annual Reflection

SAAC received for information at its February meeting two Faculty Annual Reflection Reports and the Report and Minutes of the Quality and Scrutiny Sub-Committee of its discussion on Faculty Annual Reflection Reports. At its May meeting the Committee commented on and provided feedback on the current process for Annual Reflection.

4. Next Steps

4.1 The SAAC met for the first time in October 2018 and as a consequence it has not had detailed involvement in producing the 2017/18 Annual Academic Assurance Report. SAAC agreed that the most appropriate approach for last year was to present the full report to Senate and to then present the full report to Council's November 2018 meeting. In future years the SAAC expects to have a more active role in producing the Report and would look to provide a full report to Senate with a summary report provided to Council.

4.2 In future the Committee wishes to see the report include:

- A values approach to academic quality, recognising that for the Report this may necessitate using other kinds of data and non-statistical information.
- Greater visibility of the Faculty role, and specifically of the work of Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees.
- More trend information showing changes over a longer time period.

4.3 SAAC will present its 2018/19 Annual Academic Assurance Report to Senate in October. Then in accordance with the recommendations of the joint Council and Senate Task and Finish Group on Academic Assurance, the report would be reviewed by a small joint Council and Senate sub-group between Senate in October and Council in November. The Report would be presented to Council in November.

5. Recommendation

5.1 Council is invited to comment on:

- (i) the Committee's activity to date for 2018/19
- (ii) the approach for the 2018/19 Annual Assurance Report