The University Of Sheffield.

University Secretary's Office.

Annual Academic Assurance Report

1. Senate Academic Assurance Committee and its Activities 2018/19

1.1.   The academic year 2018/19 was Senate Academic Assurance Committee (SAAC)'s first year of operation. It was established following the Senate Effectiveness Review and a related Council and Senate Task and Finish Group on Academic Standards and Quality.

1.2.   In deciding how to exercise its function to assure Senate regarding the maintenance of academic quality and standards in learning and teaching and in research, SAAC recognised that it would not be possible to cover all aspects that sit within this remit. 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 restrict its approach to a narrowly risk-based one.
- Where significant work was taking place or planned the Committee would, as a matter of course, wait for this to be concluded and so use the output to inform its views on a particular issue.
- Where themes had a high profile in politics or HE policy, it could be appropriate for the Committee to consider them.

1.3   The Committee agreed to focus on three principal themes in 2018/19:

- External Examiners – to seek assurance regarding the role of external examiners for all students including Undergraduate, Postgraduate Taught, Postgraduate Research and Apprentices; the existing processes; the feedback loops; and whether there was variation between faculties
- Grade Inflation – on the basis that this is a subject of sector-level interest and a topic in which the Office for Students (OfS) has shown considerable interest;
- Professional Accreditation –to assure itself that the guidance received in relation to professional accreditation did not contradict University regulations and guidance.

SAAC's main discussions, actions, and proposals in relation to each theme are set out below.

1.4   External Examiners

The role of External Examiners across all student groups was the Committee's first theme. As part of this focus, the Committee concentrated on (i.) the processes underpinning the operation of external examining, (ii.) the feedback loops that ensure that examiner recommendations are taken forward and that examiners in turn receive appropriate updates on progress, and (iii.) the variation in practice between Faculties.

1.4.1   To inform its work in this area, SAAC considered a range of background papers and invited guests to its meeting on 20 November 2018 in order to provide the relevant departmental and faculty, and taught and research, perspectives (The invitees were Dr

Maria Gil Molto, DLT in Economics, to speak to the departmental and UG/PGT perspectives; and Dr Kate Reed, PGR Lead, Social Sciences, to speak to the faculty and PGR perspectives, alongside Joanne Rowlands, PGR Support Team Manager, Research Services).

1.4.2   On 29 November 2018, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published its updated [QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#), which contains specific advice and guidance sections on External Expertise and Research Degrees. The Committee has undertaken work, much of which remains ongoing, to assure itself that practices both between and within faculties is compliant with this advice and guidance.

1.4.3   (a) UG and PGT
SAAC observed that there are different approaches regarding the appointment and use of external examiners. Nevertheless, in all cases, faculties and departments have in place clear assurance mechanisms for working with, and acting upon the recommendations of, external examiners.

1.4.4   SAAC Actions and Recommendations
To further assure itself on the robustness of external examining at the taught level SAAC has recommended two process-based modifications:

- The process for identifying the university wide themes from external examiners report that are presented to Quality and Scrutiny Sub-Committee (QSC) could benefit from greater academic input. To this end, QSC is considering a proposal for a system of automatic reporting that would proceed to the Faculty Committees and, thereafter, to Learning & Teaching Committee when appropriate.
- Feedback loops could be more extensively used so that external examiners and staff within the University could be appraised of the changes made in response to external examiner reports. The Committee proposed that external examiner recommendations that had been implemented should be signed off in the succeeding academic year.

1.4.5   (b) PGR
SAAC noted that the guidelines for appointing external examiners varied between faculties; much of this variation, however, reflects differences in subject- and discipline-based practice and is not therefore a matter of concern. The Committee's main focus has been on safeguards for the avoidance of perceived, potential, or actual conflicts of interest in the process for appointing research degree external examiners. This can be a particular issue for specialised fields that depend on a small pool of available examiners, as the likelihood of the same examiner being appointed on several occasions is greater. SAAC has taken steps to raise awareness of this risk and, in doing so, assured itself that appropriate measures will be put in place to mitigate it.

1.4.6   SAAC Actions
- In February 2019, the Chair of SAAC met the Deputy Vice-President for Research and Innovation (Postgraduate Research); the PGR Lead for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities; and the Programmes and Provision Team Leader, Research Services to discuss conflicts of interest in the context of appointing external examiners of research degrees. The outcome has been the incorporation of this issue into the Quality Assurance of Research Programmes work on which the PGR Lead for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities is leading.

In relation to external examiners, SAAC is reasonably assured that that the systems in place within the University are sound. SAAC has recommended process-based modifications to further improve the system of internal controls.

1.5   Grade Inflation
SAAC's second in-depth theme was grade inflation. The Committee had an initial discussion on the issue at its meeting in February 2019, using as its basis data on degree outcomes over a six-year period between 2011/12 and 2016/17 (which came from a report considered at Learning and Teaching Committee in October 2018). The data brought into relief that the rate of increase in the proportion of 'Good Honours' (Firsts and 2:1s) awarded at Sheffield has been under half that of the rest of the Russell Group combined, and around one third of that at non-Russell Group institutions. The overall picture therefore appears to show that the University has less cause for concern regarding this theme than the bulk of other institutions, including its immediate peers in the Russell Group.

1.5.1   While the trends described above have given the Committee a strong platform for assurance on grade inflation, it has identified an area that warrants further attention: the data needs to be interrogated at a more granular level to (i.) establish the position by faculty and department, and (ii.) unpack the reason behind any variation in degrees awarded between years.

1.5.2   Given the scope of the work outstanding, and the national attention that is being accorded to grade inflation at present, the Committee plans to maintain its focus on the theme in 2019/20.

1.5.3   SAAC Actions
- The Committee plans to interrogate the data at a more granular faculty and departmental level to discern variations in inflation across different academic areas.
- The Committee plans to invite the Vice-President for Education to one of its meetings to discuss the theme in further detail and address the concern relating to diversity in practice between examination boards.

In relation to grade inflation, SAAC will make a report to Senate following its further work. The evidence suggests that at the institutional level that the University is maintaining the value of degrees relative to peer institutions, but this remains work in progress, and SAAC will report at a later date.

1.6   Professional Accreditation
SAAC's third in-depth theme was professional accreditation, including which courses have it, which no longer have it, and which never sought it. The Committee had an initial discussion on the issue at its meeting on 20 February 2019, and followed up on its observations at the meeting on 9 May 2019, where it invited a guest to provide an insight from an academic area which offered accredited degrees to students (Aidan Hoggard, Technology Advanced Learning Lead, School of Architecture).

1.6.1   The Committee noted that, while professional accreditation provided a standardised degree regardless of the institution awarding the degree, it could not be considered a substitute for QA. This is because accreditation is not an appropriate avenue for some courses, and therefore a lack of accreditation is not an indicator of a deficit in academic quality.

1.6.2   The Committee noted that the requirements for achieving an accredited degree were often higher than those of a standard University degree, giving rise to scenarios in which students could pass a degree but not have it professionally accredited. Some departments such as Architecture had introduced alternative awards for such cases. In addition, the Committee was concerned about different programme regulations used by some Departments running courses with professional accreditation that may conflict with University regulations. These potential contradictions in University- and programme-level regulation, in areas such as resit policy, render the University susceptible to challenge from dissatisfied students. The invited guest was part of specific additional work that the Committee undertook to assure itself that these kinds of contradiction were not active issues for its accredited degrees.

1.6.3   SAAC Actions
•   To provide further assurance in respect of these potential risks, the Committee agreed that there should be a discussion with Learning and Teaching Committee regarding professional accreditation and the concerns that had arisen as a result of its focus on the theme.

In relation to professional accreditation, given the identified issues of concern SAAC were not yet fully assured and specifically referred the policy in relation to resits to Learning and Teaching Committee.

1.7   Other Activities
In addition to its three in-depth themes, SAAC undertook assurance-related work in the following areas in 2018/19:

1.7.1   (a) PGR Quality Assurance
At its meeting on 9 May 2019, the Committee provided feedback on proposals in Research Services for reforms to the process of Quality Assurance of Research Programmes. It was proposed that QA activities be reviewed in the wake of the publication of QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education in November 2019, as part of the 2018/19 Quality and Standards workstream. The Committee was made aware that, at the present time, there is limited ongoing QA review of collaborative programmes subsequent to initial due diligence and programme approval, and that formalised departmental reflections have not been undertaken in recent years. The Committee notes that, at its meeting on 19 June 2019, Senate endorsed review arrangements for new and continuing PGR programmes that had been put forward by Research and Innovation Committee.

1.7.2   The Committee noted that, for collaborative research programmes, there was no mechanism for quality assuring the work undertaken outside of Sheffield. The process of capturing information on all collaborative work was challenging, but the new system could help mitigate against work being overlooked and minimise the reputational risk to the University. The Committee suggested that a Sheffield-specific version of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey would help capture information, and that PRES was not currently prescribed by the QAA.

1.7.3   The Committee also noted that this issue further highlighted the challenges around approval of external examiners for PGR provision, which was an issue the Committee would consider further in 2019/20 (see Section 3 below).

1.7.4   (b) Annual Reflection
At its meeting on 19 February 2019, the Committee received for information two Faculty Annual Reflection Reports and the Report and Minutes of the QSC concerning its discussion of Faculty Annual Reflection Reports. Departments had shared their views that Annual Reflection could be more useful and that the current system felt disjointed. The establishment of the new Data and Performance Evaluation team in APSE was therefore an impetus to develop a new dashboard that would help tailor feedback and support.

1.7.5   Revisiting the subject at its meeting on 9 May 2019, SAAC commented and provided feedback on the current process for Annual Reflection. The Committee observed that the requirement for annual reflection on challenges and issues arising had a deleterious effect insofar as it distracted departments from engaging in a more forward-looking process that could focus on specified priorities each year. The Committee also suggested that the timing of Annual Reflection could be brought closer in line with the Planning Round to help alleviate the administrative burden on departments.

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2. SAAC Activities 2019/20

2.1   Themes that the Committee will consider in 2019/20 include:

(i.)   Grade inflation, including the work of a QSC Task and Finish Group that is being established to look at (i.) grade scaling and moderation, and (ii.) the institutional controls in place to govern these practices;
(ii.)   Assessment and feedback;
(iii.)   PGR, particularly submission/completion rates and systems for feedback;
(iv.)   Unfair means, including plagiarism and essay mills;
(v.)   Quality assurance of educational integrity and ethics.