The University Of Sheffield.

University Secretary's Office.

Senate Academic Assurance Committee
Senate Annual Academic Assurance Report 2020
Executive Summary

Purpose

Following the formation of the Office for Students in January 2018, there is an enhanced regulatory requirement for governing bodies in Higher Education (HE) institutions to receive assurance regarding their institutions' maintenance of the requisite academic quality and standards in both learning and teaching and research. This report, produced by the Senate Academic Assurance Committee (SAAC), covers the full spectrum of academic assurance work that Senate has overseen over the course of the 2019/20 academic year, including the Committee's own activities, and aims to give Council assurance that Senate is discharging the powers delegated to it to govern the learning, teaching, and academic quality and standards of the University in an effective manner, and with appropriate rigour.

Assurance

(i.) External Assurance
Based on the work of Senate and SAAC in 2019/20, the top-level message of the report is that the University is (i.) fully compliant with the relevant external regulatory and/or statutory requirements pertaining to academic quality and standards as set out by the appropriate bodies and (ii.) either meeting or exceeding its own internal standards. The report evidences both Senate's and SAAC's assurance that quality and standards are being met across the range of academic activities, and both bodies can give assurance to Council in this regard. Across its different sections, the report contains several examples of good practice from the University, ranging from its degree outcomes being within the Office for Students' (OfS') agreed tolerances for Grade Inflation to the low overall number of Unfair Means cases reported for action to the central level.

(ii.) Internal Enhancement
In addition to being in line with external and internal benchmarks of good and best practice, the University conducts a self-assessment of its own processes as part of internal vigilance and a goal for continuous improvement. SAAC has a central role in this function, examining a number of agreed themes each academic year and making recommendations to Senate in the event that it identifies scope for their enhancement. The table below provides a visual overview of references to SAAC's 2019/20 themes in this report and the Committee's current level of assurance for each of them. The table assigns each item a red, amber, or green (RAG) rating. Where a topic is coded amber or red, this does not indicate a negative finding that carries implications for the University's compliance with its regulatory or statutory responsibilities; rather, it is to be read within the context of SAAC's stringent approach to assurance and accordingly high expectations. The corresponding sections of the report provide detail on the Committee's recommendations for enhancing its internal academic quality mechanisms and the action being taken to make improvements.

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Theme	Level of Assurance	Page Reference
Grade Inflation and Degree Outcomes	Not yet assured	8-10
National Student Survey 2019	Assured, but plan to revisit to check data trends	10-11
External Examiner Reports	Not yet assured	11-12
Assessment of Initial Response to COVID-19*	Assured	12-13
Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2019	Assured, but plan to receive an update on Supervision-related work and actions	14-15
PGR Submission Rates	Not yet assured	15-16
Unfair Means	Assured about the low number of central cases, but not about local (faculty and departmental/school) picture, for which data needs to be captured for a judgement to be formed	17-18

* This appraisal of the institutional response to COVID-19 relates specifically to the measures implemented in Semester 2 of 2019/20 and set out in 2.11, below, including the emergency transition to online learning and teaching and the safety net policy. SAAC will seek assurance about the processes and procedures to support the temporary blended learning model in place for 2020/21 as part of its Business Plan for the current year.

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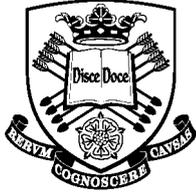
Senate Academic Assurance Committee
Senate Annual Academic Assurance Report

1. Introduction

1.1 General

Following the formation of the Office for Students (OfS) in January 2018, there is an enhanced regulatory requirement for governing bodies in HE institutions to receive assurance regarding their institutions' maintenance of the requisite academic quality and standards in both learning and teaching and research. At the University of Sheffield, the Council is responsible for reviewing "the learning, teaching and academic quality and standards of the University" (Regulation II:4.7) and has formally delegated this power to the Senate (Regulation III). Further delegations exist from Senate to either individual post-holders and/or certain of its committees. Therefore, Council requires assurance on an annual basis that the Senate is discharging these delegated powers effectively, and with appropriate rigour. The annual report supplements the routine reports of meetings of the Senate, information provided through the President & Vice-Chancellor's regular reports to Council, and periodic standalone Council agenda items relating to academic matters.

1.2 Governance of Academic Quality and standards

The Senate has a series of committees and sub-committees that collectively discharge its responsibilities to monitor and safeguard the University's academic quality and standards by undertaking and reporting activity to Senate and making recommendations for Senate to approve. The principal committees that fulfil this remit are:

- Senate Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC);
- Quality and Scrutiny Sub-Committee (QSC), a sub-committee of LTC;
- Senate Academic Assurance Committee (SAAC);
- Senate Research and Innovation Committee (RIC);
- University Postgraduate Research Committee (UPGRC), a sub-committee of RIC.

A precis of each of these bodies, all of which are referenced in this report, is provided as Appendix 1.

1.2.1 SAAC Themes on Academic Quality and standards 2019/20

At the start of each academic year, SAAC agrees the themes on which it will focus. For 2019/20, it selected the following core topics:

- **Grade inflation**, on the basis that, like 2018/19, it has remained a subject of national-level policy interest and a topic on which the OfS has concentrated;
- **Assessment and feedback**, for national exercises at both the undergraduate (National Student Survey) and postgraduate research (Postgraduate Research

Experience Survey) levels, to assure itself about the University's provision of a strong student experience;[1]

- **PGR**, in particular submission rates, to explore whether Senate's resolution (June 2018) that there should be a realistic expectation that a PhD could be submitted within a student's funded period was born out in recent data;
- **Unfair means**, including plagiarism and essay mills, to investigate longer-term institution trends and recent changes in student practices in this area;
- **Quality assurance of educational integrity and ethics**.

Furthermore, one of SAAC's operating principles is to revisit themes from previous years to seek and provide reasonable assurance on an ongoing basis. To this end, SAAC also considered External Examiners, which was one of its major topics of interest in 2018/19. In order to maintain control over its business planning, SAAC established a Discussion Topics Longlist, with a view to scheduling its activities around three categories: (i.) previously-covered topics to be revisited for ongoing assurance, (ii.) ongoing topics, and (iii.) topics to address in future academic years The Committee has a standing item on its agenda to review and update the Longlist.

1.2.2   As Appendix 1, Section 3 details, SAAC's remit spans the full scope of Senate, and therefore covers learning and teaching, research and innovation, and the student experience. For a range of reasons, including the topics that have preoccupied the OfS and the significant and ongoing impact of COVID-19, SAAC's themes in 2019/20 were weighted towards undergraduate learning and teaching issues. Across a five year cycle of assurance work, it is intended that Senate and Council see a balance across the aforementioned areas in SAAC's business and the themes about which it aims to provide assurance.

1.3   Scope of This Report

This report covers the full spectrum of academic assurance work that Senate has overseen over the course of the 2019/20 academic year, including items that have either (i.) been considered at Senate itself at one of its four meetings in 2019/20, or (ii.) approved via a report from the committees set out in Appendix 1. It aims to give Council assurance about the robustness of the University's academic governance mechanisms and approach to academic quality assurance.

1.4   Structure of This Report

The report is structured according to the following rationales:

- At the broadest level, the assurance-related items are organised on the basis of whether their origin is internal or associated with external indicators and frameworks of quality and standards (acknowledging that internal work often takes place in response to these indicators and frameworks);
- Within those larger groupings, the items are further sub-divided according to which domain of Senate's activities the item belongs (learning and teaching; research; and the student experience, with the third category in the context of this report relating to matters of conduct, appeals, and complaints);
- Within the domains, the items organised first are those considered at, or reported to, Senate via LTC or RIC; those organised second are items that SAAC has examined as part of its 2019/20 activities. Due to its specific role in in providing assurance to Senate and Council about the maintenance of academic quality and standards in learning and teaching and research, the items on

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[1] The University does not participate in the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) due to historical low response rates, and operates an in-house feedback-gathering process that SAAC has yet to consider.

SAAC's themes feature a specific statement, highlighted in bold, about its current level of assurance in relation to them. These statements should be read against the RAG rating table in the Executive Summary. As noted in that Summary, a red or amber rating does not connote that SAAC has made a negative finding with implications for the University's compliance with its regulatory or statutory responsibilities. Instead, it reflects the Committee's resolution that there is scope to enhance the University's existing (and externally compliant) quality processes in that area. That is, the ratings speak to SAAC's diligent approach to assurance and the University's commitment to continuous improvement. SAAC's Business Plan for 2020/21 is provided as Appendix 2.

INTERNAL

2. Learning and Teaching

Senate and LTC Activities

2.1 Access and Participation Plan

2.1.1 One of the OfS' general ongoing conditions of registration (Condition A1) is that the University has in place an Access and Participation Plan (APP). At both its meetings on 10 October 2019 and 11 February 2020, LTC discussed the APP, noting that the University will be monitored against the targets set. An Access and Participation Strategy Group has been convened and is charged with overseeing the University's delivery of the plan and its targets.

2.1.2 Considered at:
- LTC – 10 October 2019 and 11 February 2020

Reported to:
- Senate – 11 December 2019 and 18 March 2020 (via LTC Reports)

Council also considered an update on progress against the University's APP, received a presentation on engagement with local schools, and approved the University's APP monitoring return for submission to the OfS at its meeting on 24 February 2020.

2.2 Programme Level Approach

2.2.1 The Programme Level Approach (PLA) is the University's internal approach to programme design and delivery, and is founded upon viewing the content, structure, and assessment of a taught programme in a holistic manner to deliver the best and most joined-up student experience possible. Across the 2019/20 academic year, a range of work has taken place, with colleagues in the Strategic Change Office working with academic departments and schools to undertake reviews of existing programmes and their assessment regimes. This activity will continue in 2020/21, with a consolidation year for departments and schools to reflect on the PLA values and their own priority areas due to commence during the 2021/22 academic year. Senate is currently scheduled to receive an update on the PLA in Semester 1 of 2020/21.

2.3 Programme and Module Evaluation

2.3.1 To enhance the University's practice in gathering, analysing, and responding to student evaluation data at the module and programme levels, a Task and Finish Group had been formed to make recommendations to LTC. At its meeting on 11 February 2020, LTC discussed these recommendations, and follow-up meetings have been taking place with Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees and Trade Union representatives in advance of the operationalisation of the new system.

2.3.2 Considered at:
- LTC – 11 February 2020

Reported to:
- Senate – 18 March 2020

2.4 Annual Reflection

2.4.1 As part of an annual cycle, academic departments and schools are asked to review and evaluate both the effectiveness of their programme portfolio and the quality of their students' experience. The findings from this activity, together with an assessment of departmental and school strengths and areas for improvement, provide the

foundation for an Annual Reflection Report. From an external perspective, the process ensures that the University is able to provide assurances regarding the quality of its programmes and to meet the OfS' regulatory requirements as articulated in its general and ongoing conditions of registration (Condition B1).

2.4.2   In the 2018/19 academic year, SAAC considered the Annual Reflection process and fed its views into a broader review that was in train during that period. At its meeting on 10 October 2019, LTC assessed a proposal for a revised Annual Reflection process, with core changes outlined in the areas of data use, administrative load, and strategic alignment with Learning and Teaching priorities. LTC endorsed the proposal and its implementation during 2019/20, noting that it represented the first stage in defining a more focused, evidence-based, and impactful approach to annual review processes. There is scope built into the process to add refinements over the next two to three years in response to local feedback. The reports/actions plans that departments and schools produce as their output from the process will be followed up at the mid-year point.

2.4.3   Considered at:
- LTC – 10 October 2019

Reported to:
- Senate – 18 December 2019 (via LTC Report)

2.5   Degree Outcomes Statement

2.5.1   Related to the general issue of the value of the University's degree outcomes (see Item 2.8, below), the LTC Report to Senate for its meeting on 18 March 2020 noted the University's intention to develop and publish a Degree Outcomes Statement. Senate received and approved this Statement at its meeting on 24 June 2020, which was reported to Council on 13 July 2020. The Statement has its origins in work the UK HE sector has undertaken to protect and demonstrate the value of University qualifications, be more transparent, and ensure confidence in these qualifications from students, employers, and the wider public. A Statement of Intent that Universities UK (UUK) published in May 2019 encouraged Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to:
- Ensure assessments continue to stretch and challenge students;
- Review and explain how final degree classifications are calculated;
- Support and strengthen the External Examiners system (see 2.10, below); and
- Review and publish data on students' degree outcomes.

This crystallised in the following two publications, both of which were the product of joint work undertaken by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA), UUK, GuildHE, and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA):
- Guidance on producing a Degree Outcomes Statement by the end of the 2019/20 academic year;
- A common Degree Classification Framework, which will act as a reference point for HEIs by describing high-level attributes expected of a graduate to achieve a particular degree.

The Statement is aligned to the guidance and includes:
- Outcomes criteria;
- Degree classification descriptors;
- Data on degree classes awarded.

2.5.2   Considered at:
- LTC – 11 February 2020 and 21 May 2020

- Senate – 24 June 2020

Reported to:

- Senate – 18 March 2020

2.6   A Levels

2.6.1   In light of the student recruitment challenges posed to the UK HE sector by COVID-19, including the University's own Home/EU and Overseas student recruitment, the University has anticipated that the quality of the student intake for 2020/21 will be lower than in previous years and adjusted down the entry tariffs for some of its programmes to accommodate this and maximise its recruitment position. Senate is assured that this activity will not impact on the University's commitment to maintaining academic quality and standards. With regard to the correlation between student entry grades and degree outcomes (see 2.8, below), Senate will continue to monitor the data, including for the 2020/21 cohort of students.

2.7   Other Activities Reported to Senate by LTC

2.7.1   LTC reported a range of other learning and teaching-related activities to Senate in 2019/20, including those listed below. In all cases, Senate was satisfied with the matters reported and approved any recommendations made.

- Approach to Maintaining and Assuring Assessment Data – 11 December 2019
- Revised Dual and Interdisciplinary Programmes Policy – 11 December 2019
- Learning and Teaching Conference – 18 March 2020 (covering employability and education for sustainable development, two of the strategic priorities for the PLA in 2019/20)
- Employability and Careers Activity – 18 March 2020 (approval of an Employer Advisory Forum and Skills and Employability Delivery Group)
- Changes to LTC Terms of Reference – 18 March 2020 (to reflect Senate's decision to give RIC oversight of PGR quality assurance instead of LTC)
- Review of Institutional Outcomes Criteria and Classification Descriptions – 18 March 2020
- Revised Graduate Teaching Assistant/Associate Policy
- Entry with Recognition of Prior Learning Agreements – 24 June 2020
- Revised Taught Session Recording Policy – 24 June 2020
- Procedure for Withdrawal of an Award – 24 June 2020

SAAC Activities

2.8   Grade Inflation and Degree Outcomes

2.8.1   Across the 2018/19 and 2019/20 academic years, the OfS has made several announcements expressing its concern at what it terms 'unexplained' increases in Good Honours (2:1 and First) degree outcomes in HE institutions. The Conservative Party's manifesto for the 2019 General Election also announced its intention to explore means of addressing grade inflation alongside perceived 'low quality' courses. Although the OfS' press release on the subject in January 2020 noted that the trend has started to stall, it remains one of abiding interest within the sector. One of the OfS' ongoing conditions of registration, as articulated in the Regulatory Framework (Condition B4), is that an institution's qualifications should retain their value both at the point of qualification and over time. As a result of its assurance work in this area in 2018/19, SAAC was satisfied that the University as a whole was maintaining the value of its degrees relative to peer institutions, but retained grade inflation as an in-depth theme for 2019/20 to establish the picture at the local level.

2.8.2   At its meeting on 19 November 2019, SAAC considered a report commissioned from Academic Programmes and Student Engagement (APSE) that provided a visual overview of the Good Honours (i.e. 2.1 and First) degrees that the University has awarded over the previous four academic years (2015/16 to 2018/19).[2] It also broke down that data further to reveal the degree outcomes of students who entered the University in one of three broad entry tariff bands (Above AAB, AAB and Below, and Non-Tariff), charting the correlation between these entry grades and students' final degree classifications. LTC considered the same data set at its meeting on 11 February 2020. The report is provided as Appendix 3.

2.8.3   The main trends identified at an institutional level were:

- A small increase in the percentage of Good Honours degrees awarded (+2%) in the reporting period, which included a year-on-year upward trend in the number of First-class degrees awarded (+7%).
- Across the three tariff bands, a year-on-year rise in the number of First class degrees awarded, with a sharper increase (+9%) for Above AAB students compared with AAB and Below (+6%) and Non-Tariff (+5%).
- A modest level of variation in degree outcomes across the reporting period between faculties and departments and schools.

Although these trends do point to a rise in the number of Good Honours and First class degrees that the University has awarded, the rate of the increase remains within the OfS' tolerance threshold and does not therefore give rise to concern.

2.8.4   <u>SAAC Level of Assurance</u>

At the time of the meeting, SAAC was assured that the institution-level data met the OfS' standards and wanted to undertake further work on the departmental-/school-level data to consolidate its understanding of the local trends. LTC has since undertaken work to:

- Share the data with departments and schools for consideration;
- Agree that Faculty Directors of Learning and Teaching should have oversight of degrees awarded and follow up any data trend outliers identified with the relevant departments and schools; and
- Defined future data requirements regarding degree outcomes, with an onus on greater granularity (e.g. separating Integrated Masters awards, and disaggregating non-tariff students to look at University of Sheffield International College students).

External Assurance

SAAC is assured that, for the University as a whole, there does not appear to be evidence of grade inflation. The increase in the Good Honours degrees awarded by the University is within the OfS tolerance level and therefore meets the external benchmark of quality and standards in this area.

Internal Enhancement

On the basis of the data it considered in November 2019, and acknowledging the work that LTC is overseeing, SAAC wishes to

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[2] One of SAAC's general principles is that it should not commission new work but use existing outputs to determine its level of assurance regarding a theme. In this instance, given that grade inflation was a live issue in the HE sector, it decided to waive this principle.

continue its examination into local trends in degree outcomes within academic departments and schools to ensure that its investigation is comprehensive and rigorous.

2.8.5 Action Taken

In addition to the actions that LTC has taken, outlined above, SAAC will revisit the theme as part of its 2020/21 assurance work to assess the data at a more granular level and report to Senate on its updated level of assurance. Senate will also receive routine reporting of these matters through LTC. This includes a report to Senate at its meeting in December 2020 on the work that LTC has overseen to assess degree outcomes for 2019/20, including the impact of COVID-19 and the implementation of the Safety Net Policy in Semester 2 of 2019/20 (see 2.11.1, below). Work is also in process on a Grade Moderation and Scaling Policy, which will be taken through the Senate governance structure during 2020/21. Council will receive an update on these matters via the 2021 Annual Academic Assurance Report. With regard to the presentation of degree outcomes information, SAAC will work with APSE to report with a greater level of detail in the future, including data on standard deviations from the institutional mean.

2.8.6 Considered at:

- SAAC - 24 September 2019 (where the Committee discussed a New Statesman article that cited an alleged instance of grade inflation in an academic department of the University, with discussion focussed on the article's collation of grade inflation and grade moderation and scaling practices, and the University's utilisation of these practices) and 19 November 2019
- LTC – 11 February 2020

Reported to:

- Senate – 23 October 2019 (via SAAC Report) and 18 March 2020 (via LTC Report)

2.9 Assessment and Feedback: National Student Survey (NSS) 2019

2.9.1 The National Student Survey, commissioned by the OfS, is the UK HE sector's largest annual survey and gathers valuable information on final-year undergraduate (UG) students' satisfaction with their programme and institution of choice. At its meeting on 10 October 2019, LTC discussed the headline results for the University from the 2019 iteration of the NSS; SAAC did likewise at its meeting on 19 November 2019 as part of its 'Assessment and Feedback' theme. At the highest level, the results showed:

- An institutional response rate of 69% (+10% on 2018).
- An overall satisfaction level of 88%, which placed the University in second place in the Russell Group (up from sixth place in 2018).
- The 'Assessment and Feedback' score reaching its highest level (72%) in five years, though this remained the lowest satisfaction rating across all of the major categories.

2.9.2 The 2020 exercise of the NSS was open for final-year UG students between 10 February and 30 April 2020. The headlines results were presented to Council at its informal meeting on 25 August 2020.The results will be analysed at a more granular level by LTC and SAAC in the first half of the 2020/21 academic year.

2.9.3   <u>SAAC Level of Assurance</u>

External Assurance

For NSS 2019, SAAC was assured by the institutional outcomes and the position of the University across all the major categories of the survey compared to other institutions within the Russell Group and UUK benchmarking groups.

Internal Enhancement

SAAC recognised that, although the 'Assessment and Feedback' score had improved and was higher than the Russell Group average, it remained lower than the UUK average and therefore warranted monitoring.

2.9.4   <u>Action Taken</u>

In order to monitor the University's ongoing performance in this metric, and discern whether the improvement is uncharacteristic or part of a broader trend, SAAC will consider the NSS 2020 outcomes at its meeting in November 2020 and report its findings to Senate. Council will receive an update via the 2021 Annual Academic Assurance Report.

2.9.5   Considered at:
- LTC – 10 October 2019
- SAAC – 19 November 2019

Reported to:
- Senate – 11 December 2019 (via LTC and SAAC Reports)

2.10   External Examiner Reports

2.10.1   The University utilises External Examiners to provide an independent overview of its programmes of study and assess the consistency of their academic quality and standards measures with the relevant national qualification frameworks. This activity proceeds in line with an internal [Code of Practice](#) and the Quality Assurance Agency's [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#). At its meeting on 9 June 2020, SAAC reviewed the process through which QSC received a summary of the small number of issues that had been highlighted for an institutional response through the External Examiner Reports. The purpose of the Committee's examination was not concern about external assurance and the findings of the examiners' reports but internal process and the limited/narrow view of issues that QSC had tended to be given. In investigating the matter SAAC noted that, whereas analysis of, and resulting action from, the reports had tended to be effective at the local level, the reporting of the full overview to QSC had not been as robust in comparison, as it focused on institutional issues raised by a small number of Examiners. Recent measures implemented over the last year had aimed to foster a more joined-up approach, and SAAC noted QSC's discussion and responses/actions for each of the issues in the 2018/19 External Examiner Reports that were escalated for institutional attention.

2.10.2   In visiting this area, the Committee intended to 'close the loop' on the element of its 2018/19 theme on External Examiners concerned with mechanisms for reporting and responding to issues raised in External Examiner Reports. It was acknowledged that separate assurance work will be required in respect of the postgraduate research

(PGR) examiner element of the External Examiners theme, which remains on SAAC's Discussion Topics Longlist.

2.10.3   SAAC Level of Assurance

External Assurance

SAAC considers there to be no grounds for concern in respect of External Examiners' independent assessment of the University's programmes of study, noting that this area was not the object of its examination.

Internal Enhancement

SAAC is assured that appropriate issues are being surfaced in the summary of issues, and that relevant action is being taken by QSC to further reinforce the process of reporting the institutional issues that External Examiners have raised.

2.10.4   Action Taken

Improved reporting has been put in place and will provide QSC with a more comprehensive overview of External Examiners' judgements against the sections of the reporting proforma, including data on the number and types of issues raised. On this basis, SAAC will consider the QSC response and the Overview of 2019/20 External Examiner Reports at its meeting in June 2021 in order to gauge how the issues raised are being addressed. Council will receive an update via the 2021 Annual Academic Assurance Report.

2.10.5   Considered at:
- Quality & Scrutiny Sub-Committee (QSC) – 2 April 2020
- SAAC – 9 June 2020

Reported to:
- Senate – 24 June 2020 (via SAAC Report)

2.11   Assessment of Initial Response to COVID-19

2.11.1   On 3 April 2020, the OfS released guidance on how it would approach the regulation of quality and standards during the initial period of disruption resulting from COVID-19. In the same month, the Quality Assurance Agency published guidance on the use of 'No Detriment' (safety net) policies. In response, the University reported the emergency measures it had implemented in Semester 2 of 2019/20 to manage the impact of the pandemic on learning, teaching, and assessment to the full range of bodies involved in its academic governance structure (as set out in 2.11.5, below). The resulting document covered the delivery of teaching, the Safety Net Policy to safeguard student outcomes, examination boards and the role of the External Examiner, results, resits, graduation, transcripts, and the plan for delivering learning and teaching during the 2020/21 academic year. At its meeting on 9 June 2020, SAAC reviewed these measures to satisfy Senate that they were suitably comprehensive.

2.11.2   With regard to the above measures, which had to be introduced with considerable flexibility and at pace, APSE has led University efforts to adapt its policies and processes covering the education and assessment of its taught students.

2.11.3   <u>SAAC Level of Assurance</u>

Internal Enhancement

> **As with the other bodies that considered the report, SAAC is assured that the core decisions taken in the areas outlined above during Semester 2 of 2019/20 were sensible, robust, and proportionate to the context. The Committee highlighted the fact that it will be important to undertake a lessons learned exercise to inform future approaches (in particular if remote learning, teaching, and assessment are in place for the foreseeable future).**

2.11.4   <u>Action Taken</u>

As noted in the Executive Summary, SAAC will seek assurance about the processes and procedures to support the temporary blended learning model in place for 2020/21 as part of its 2020/21 assurance work and report its conclusions to Senate. Council will receive an update via the 2021 Annual Academic Assurance Report.

2.11.5   Considered at:
- LTC – 21 May 2020
- SAAC – 9 June 2020
- Senate – 24 June 2020 (as substantive paper and through SAAC Report)
- Council – 13 July 2020

3.   Research

Senate and RIC Activities

3.1   Assessment of Initial Response to COVID-19

3.1.1   As with learning and teaching, the immediate University response to COVID-19 from the research and research support perspectives was concentrated on policy changes associated with the changing external and internal environment. At its meeting on 12 May 2020, UPGRC discussed the funding implications of the pandemic and the situation as it stood for various funding bodies and university partners. RIC's consideration of COVID-19 at its meeting on 13 May 2020 covered the following areas:

- The continuation of research awards and applications throughout lockdown and the remote working period, recognising the equality, diversity, and inclusion issues associated with working from home.
- Through the Russell Group and Universities UK, lobbying UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) and other bodies to address issues such as costed extensions, and using these groups to establish best practice on topics such as furloughing and planning for the return to campus.
- The ongoing work to ensure that the phased reinstatement of research activity on campus was linked to the University's strategic plans and priorities alongside the practical issues of reopening laboratories.
- The development of new principles for institutional match funding, allowing credible and viable support for strategic research bids.

At its meeting on 24 June 2020, Senate received and endorsed a report that (i.) detailed the University's decision to extend the scheme announced for final year UKRI-

funded doctoral students to University-funded PGR students that receive a full or part-stipend, and (ii.) outlined ongoing and future support for PGR students.

3.1.2   In tandem with the practical considerations set out above concerning funding and returning research activities to campus, Research Services has led University efforts to adapt its policies and processes in the area of PGR student assessment and examination (e.g. measures for maintaining progress review mechanisms and students' vivas). The Programmes and Provision Team Leader from Research Services was part of a panel that contributed to a QAA Webinar on this subject, the output of which was a document in QAA's broader 'COVID-19 Supporting Resources' series on '[Supporting the Assessment of Postgraduate Research Students]'.

3.1.3   Considered at:
- UPGRC – 12 May 2020
- RIC – 13 May 2020
- Senate – 24 June 2020

3.2   Other Activities Reported to Senate by RIC

3.2.1   RIC reported a range of other learning and teaching-related activities to Senate in 2019/20, including those listed below. In all cases, Senate was satisfied with the matters reported and approved any recommendations made.
- Changes to RIC Terms of Reference – 11 December 2019 and 18 March 2020 (to reflect Senate's decision to give RIC oversight of PGR quality assurance instead of LTC)
- Good Research and Innovation Practice (GRIP) Policy – 11 December 2019
- Knowledge Exchange Framework – 11 December 2019 (see 7, below)
- Research Excellence Framework – 11 December 2019, 18 March 2020, 24 June 2020 (see 8, below)
- Revisions to the General Regulations for Higher Degrees, Postgraduate Diplomas, and Postgraduate Certificates (from UPGRC) – 18 March 2020
- Proposed amendments to the General Regulations for Higher Degrees by Research – 24 June 2020
- New Policy on Posthumous or Aegrotat Awards for Postgraduate Research Students – 24 June 2020
- PGR Supervision: Overarching Principles for Mandatory CPD – 24 June 2020
- Update to the Research Data Management Policy – 24 June 2020

SAAC Activities

3.3   Assessment and Feedback: Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)

3.3.1   In tandem with its focus on the NSS 2019 as part of its 'Assessment and Feedback' theme for 2019/20 (see 2.9, above), SAAC interrogated the University's results from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2019. The Committee noted the pleasing increase in the response rate (41%, compared to 36% In 2017), and that the University sat within the Russell Group upper quartile range in seven of the eight metrics tested (Supervision was the exception, but was still felt to be satisfactory; the Committee also noted work being progressed in this area, as outlined in 3.3.2, below). Formal training to support teaching was highlighted as the most significant sub-metric, falling within the Russell Group third quartile range.

3.3.2   SAAC Level of Assurance

External Assurance

SAAC was assured by the University's relatively strong institutional performance in PRES 2019, especially when benchmarked against Russell Group peers. The results indicate that there are no areas of concern that are liable to impact on external views of the University. The Committee did not see a need to review the PRES 2020 results

Internal Enhancement

SAAC was assured that Research Services' follow-up action on the PRES during 2019/20 results prioritised the two areas (supervision and teaching-related training) that saw the lowest outcomes. In respect of supervision, the Committee noted that a piece of work is in train to look at the mandatory development of PGR Supervisors beyond their initial period of probation

3.3.3   Action Taken

The above-mentioned work on PGR Supervisors has been ongoing, and is reported on as part of the broader suite of measures to address PGR submission rates in 3.4.4, below. SAAC will receive a progress update on the supervisor-based work in 2020/21, which will be reported to Council via the 2021 Annual Academic Assurance Report.

3.3.4   Considered at:

- SAAC – 19 November 2019

Reported to:

- Senate – 11 December 2019 (via SAAC Report)

3.4   PGR Quality Assurance: Submission Rates

3.4.1   At its meeting on 19 June 2019, Senate endorsed changes regarding a proposed new model for PGR quality assurance. Some of the signal features of the proposal were:

- A fit-for-purpose process with programmes undergoing a tailored programme approval process, categorised according to risk.
- Responsibility for approval to sit with UPGRC, reporting to RIC, which reports in turn to Senate. Any taught elements to continue to proceed to LTC for approval.
- Quality Assurance of existing programmes to be reviewed every two years.

3.4.2   A broader aspect of academic quality and standards at the PGR level relates to submission rates. In June 2018, Senate agreed that there should be a realistic expectation that a PhD could be submitted within a student's funded period. UPGRC was tasked by UEB to define the Sheffield PhD within the context of submission within the funded period. To gauge the University's historical performance in this metric, SAAC opted to look at (i.) each department's/school's submission data for PGR students at the University who started their degree between the 2009/10 and 2015/16 academic years, and (ii.) the submission rates within the funded period for UKRI Research Council-sponsored PGR students. The Committee noted that Research Services was working to bring PGR student submissions into closer alignment with funding period end dates for students in receipt of either internal or external funding.

3.4.3   SAAC Level of Assurance

External Assurance

SAAC does not believe that the institutional submission rates are out of alignment with other HE institutions in the sector, including Russell Group peers, noting the object of its examination was progress against the internal rather than external benchmark.

Internal Enhancement

When set against the institutional target, SAAC is broadly assured with the data on PGR submission rates but notes the scope for improvement and that targeted work has been initiated to accomplish this aim.

3.4.4   Action Taken

Since SAAC's November 2019 meeting, PGR submission rates have remained a focus (the proportion of University PGR students submitting their thesis within their time-limit, usually 4 years for full-time students or pro-rata for part-time). RIC is continuing to focus attention on submission in the funded period, as it is acknowledged that PGR students continuing to work unfunded is the single biggest stressor on their mental health. To this end, RIC has undertaken work to ensure that expectations for PGR students are transparent and realistic: a revised Doctoral Development Programme has been implemented; and plans to institute mandatory supervisor training are in train, which will emphasise the importance of submission in the funded period and provide necessary support for supervisors. The University's new Planning Framework uses submission in the funded period as an indicator under the PGR heading for departments/schools. This aims to move away from PGR numbers as a focus, and instead to shift consideration to the quality of the PGR students the University recruits and their experience. Submission rates have been improving, but it is probable that COVID-19 will have an impact on this work. In acknowledgement of the fact that all of the work set out above entails significant cultural change, SAAC agreed to revisit the subject in 2021/22. The longer timescale is to allow for any changes to begin to take effect and will therefore provide a firmer basis for assurance.

3.4.5   Considered at:

- SAAC – 19 November 2019

Reported to:

- Senate – 11 December 2019 (via SAAC Report)

4.   Student Conduct, Complaints, and Appeals

Senate Activities

4.1   Complaints and Appeals

4.1.1   In line with Senate's annual business cycle, it received at its meeting on 18 March 2020 the following two reports to note, which cumulatively provided Senate with a holistic update on the statistics relating to the University's formal student conduct-related processes:

1. Student Formal Procedure Cases 2018/19: Report to Senate
    The paper summarised Student Formal Procedure Casework for the 2018/19 academic year, reporting on the volume of activity in each area (Appeals,

Complaints, Case Reviews[3], Discipline, Fitness to Practise, and Progress, as well as cases submitted to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)[4]). The report was presented in a new format to better highlight data trends which, for 2018/19, indicated the continued growth of casework in both magnitude and complexity over the last three years (23% increase from 2016/17 to 2018/19).

2. Students' Union Complaints and Discipline Annual Report 2018/19
The Students' Union is required to prepare an annual report, summarising student complaints and discipline cases, for submission to the Trustee Board, Students' Union's Council, and the University of Sheffield. This report is a summary and overview of student complaints and disciplinary matters addressed during the 2018/19 academic year.

SAAC Activities

4.2 Unfair Means

4.1.1 In a University context, Unfair Means refers to a student's or students' attempt to gain unfair advantage over another student or students in the completion of an assessment or exam, or to assist someone else in gaining an unfair advantage. It therefore forms part of the University's Discipline-related activity. Cases tend to be addressed first at the local department/school level before being escalated to the central level if deemed sufficiently serious. At its meeting on 9 June 2020, SAAC invited the Student Conduct and Appeals Manager to assess the University's work in this area. The range of issues discussed included:

- Changes and trends in student use of unfair means over time, including the number of cases and emergence of different types of unfair means;
- The University's communications to students on unfair means, including the balancing of positive messaging on students' maintenance of good academic practice against negative messaging on the consequences of them resorting to unfair means;
- Any concerns about the changed approach to assessment in response to the virtual working arrangements associated with COVID-19;
- The incidence of, and appropriate responses to, student plagiarism from utilisation of essay mills and/or translation software;
- How unfair means cases are manifested at PGR level.

4.1.2 The Student Formal Procedure Cases 2018/19 Report, categorising different cases reported to the central level, is provided as Appendix 4. The report includes cases that are reported to the central level (i.e. the most serious ones) but not local ones addressed at the departmental and school levels. The report does not distinguish between different types of Unfair Means.

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[3] A Case Review stage within the University's student complaints procedure is how Council exercises is its responsibility in respect of student grievances. The Case Review process is led by a Vice-President with support from Student Support Services.
[4] The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for Higher Education is an external organisation which provides an independent scheme for the review of student complaints. Students who are not satisfied with the outcome of decisions made by the University in cases related to academic appeals, complaints, discipline, fitness to practise and progress, and who have exhausted relevant internal University procedures, may have recourse to the OIA by submitting a complaint.

4.1.3   SAAC Level of Assurance

External Assurance

SAAC is assured that the number of cases reported to the central level, in particular those pertaining to use of essay mills and/or translation software and those from PGR students, is low. There are no grounds for concern regarding central institutional processes. As the 'Action Taken' section (see 4.1.4, below) makes clear, internal work being taken forward at present is to ensure ongoing compliance with the guidance of the OIA as the foremost external body operating in this area.

Internal Enhancement

SAAC identified that it is not possible at present to gain assurance on the University's total volume of unfair means cases and their respective outcomes due to the lack of reported data on cases that have been raised and resolved at the faculty and/or departmental/school levels. If this data were to exist, there could be a full and comprehensive understanding of how all the University's internal processes, both local and central, were functioning together.

4.1.4   Action Taken

SAAC reported the data availability concern outlined abovr in its report to Senate for the meeting on 24 June 2020. Both at that time and in the intervening months since, active steps are being taken in Student Support Services and academic departments and schools on this and other matters relating to Unfair Means. The gathering of Unfair Means data at departmental/school level was one of the agreed actions of the review undertaken in 2019/20 of Student Discipline practice and procedures against the OIA Good Practice Framework on Disciplinary Procedures. Departments and schools will report on this data for the first time at the end of 2020/21, via their Unfair Means Officers. Instituting this process will address the concern SAAC raised and enhance internal mechanisms. Communications with academic areas about Unfair Means procedures, including the changed approach to (virtual) assessment associated with COVID-19, have also been strengthened via the Elevate portal. Senate will receive the Student Formal Procedure Cases 2018/19 Report at one of its meetings in the second half of 2020/21.

4.1.5   Considered at:

- SAAC – 9 June 2020

Reported to:

- Senate – 24 June 2020 (via SAAC Report)

EXTERNAL

5.   OfS Conditions of Registration

5.1   Following the University's registration with the OfS in 2018, it must meet the ongoing conditions attached to this status in order to retain its registered status. To this end, the University maintains an OfS Operating Framework Conditions Compliance

Register, which is reviewed at each meeting of the [UEB Risk Review Group](#) and also provides the basis for OfS updates to Council.

5.2 Developments regarding current or new ongoing conditions of registration that impact on the University's academic governance will either be reported to Senate via one of its sub-committees or considered at Senate as a substantive item prior to its referral to Council.

6. Learning and Teaching: Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)

6.1 The [Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)](#) is a national exercise that the OfS leads on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE). It assesses (i.) excellence in teaching at universities/HEIs and colleges, and (ii.) how well institutions ensure excellent outcomes for their students in terms of graduate-level employment and further study. The TEF operates according to a 'Gold', 'Silver', and 'Bronze' award scale: the University is rated ['Silver'](#) based on its participation in the Year 4 award in June 2019, which is valid for up to two years (i.e. until 2021).

6.2 In January 2020, the OfS confirmed that there would be no TEF exercise for the UK HE sector in 2020. It has stated its intention to [develop a new framework](#) for the TEF, which will take account of the recommendations in Dame Shirley Pearce's expected [Independent Review of the TEF](#), which started in 2019.

7. Research: Knowledge Excellence Framework (KEF)

7.1 The [Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)](#), which UKRI oversees, assess UK HEIs' effectiveness in using public funding to share knowledge with external (regional and national) partners from other sectors. At its meeting on 23 October 2019, Senate received a presentation on the University's preparation for the first exercise of the KEF in 2020, covering (i) a definition of KE, (ii.) its increasing importance, (iii.) the KEF, (iv.) the University's ambitions in relation to KE, (iv.) the University's KEF roadmap, and (v.) KE support at the University. It was noted at that stage that a consultation and the outcomes would inform the final version of the KEF exercise.

7.2 The original deadline for HEIs in receipt of Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) allocations to submit narrative statements for the KEF was 29 May 2020. Due to COVID-19, this deadline was moved to 16 October 2020.

7.3 Considered at:

Senate – 23 October 2019

8. Research: Research Excellence Framework (REF)

8.1 The [Research Excellence Framework (REF)](#), overseen by Research England, is the sector-level system for assessing the quality of research in HEIs within the UK. The last iteration of the exercise took place in 2014, in which 99% of the University's research was deemed 'internationally recognised' or better.

8.2 As set out in 3.4.1, above, RIC's reports to Senate throughout 2019/20 have detailed institutional preparations for the next exercise of the REF in 2021. The update for the meeting of Senate on 24 June 2020 confirmed that Research England had postponed the REF submission date due to COVID-19. On 31 July 2020, the new date for submission was confirmed as 31 March 2021.

Appendix 1

Senate Committees Referenced in This Report

1.   Senate Learning and Teaching Committee

1.1   Senate Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) has overall responsibility for overseeing, enriching, and promoting the learning, teaching, and assessment culture of the University. This involves coordinating the development and implementation of its Learning and Teaching Strategy, and advising and supporting faculties in the development of UG, PGT, and PGR programme content and quality (where those PGR programmes incorporate taught elements), as well as the enhancement of quality and standards. In this function, LTC receives support from its Quality and Scrutiny Sub-Committee (see below). The Committee also advises and makes recommendations on policy developments relating to the OfS conditions of registration around widening participation and the Access and Participation Plan (see 2.1, above), and works to enhance the student experience. A full list of LTC sub-committees with their respective memberships and terms of reference can be viewed here.

2.   Quality and Scrutiny Sub-Committee

2.1   Quality and Scrutiny Sub-Committee (QSC) is a sub-committee of LTC; it is tasked with overseeing the University's framework for evaluating the academic quality and standards of its taught programmes and reporting to LTC, identifying both areas of good practice and areas for improvement, and noting actions taken. QSC also makes recommendations on changes to certain of the University's General Regulations and any underpinning policies and guidance that pertain to learning and teaching.

3.   Senate Academic Assurance Committee

3.1   Senate Academic Assurance Committee (SAAC) was formed in 2018 on the recommendation of the Senate Effectiveness Review and a related Council and Senate Task and Finish Group on Academic Quality and Standards. Its broad role is to assure Senate regarding the maintenance of academic quality and standards in learning and teaching and in research in line with the external reference points for best practice (e.g. the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education), alongside assurance-related work concerning enhancement of the student experience. It carries out these duties through a range of activities, which include the interrogation of reports and other documents, such as those from the other committees or sub-committees of Senate (for an example, see 2.11 in the main report, above); identifying issues and potential actions to address them; and making recommendations to Senate and/or other committees or sub-committees of Senate regarding policies, processes, and action plans. SAAC is also responsible on behalf of Senate for producing the Annual Academic Assurance Report from Senate to Council.

3.2   In each of SAAC's two years of operation to date, it has worked to the principles set out below to determine its business plan and establish the themes on which it will concentrate:

- The Committee looks at perceived risks, but does not restrict its approach to a narrow, risk-based one.
- Where significant work is taking place or planned the Committee will, 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 have a high profile in politics and/or HE policy, it could be appropriate for the Committee to consider them.

4.   Senate Research and Innovation Committee

4.1   Senate Research and Innovation Committee (RIC) has overall responsibility for overseeing and promoting the University's research culture. This involves championing equality, diversity, and inclusion across the full range of the University's research and innovation activities, leading on the development and implementation of the policies and strategies underpinning impact and commercialisation and the Research Excellence and Knowledge Exchange Frameworks (REF and KEF), and building clear institutional understanding about research horizons, needs, and strategy. RIC also makes recommendations to Senate relating to the University's Research Institutes and, through University Postgraduate Research Committee (see below), coordinates matters relating to PGR strategy and policy.

5.   University Postgraduate Research Committee

5.1   University Postgraduate Research Committee (UPGRC) is a sub-committee of RIC, and is tasked with leading and championing the University's PGR strategy and policy, and reporting to RIC on these broad areas. This includes monitoring the external environment for policy and funder developments, providing direction on the University's PGR recruitment activities, making recommendations on the deployment of PGR scholarship funding, and overseeing the PGR Code of Practice and the suite of underpinning processes and policies in support of the Code.