Senate Academic Assurance Committee
Senate Annual Academic Assurance Report 2020/21
Executive Summary

Purpose

The formation of the Office for Students (OfS) in January 2018 placed 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. The latest version of the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) HE Code of Governance (September 2020) puts the onus on governing bodies to ‘actively seek and receive assurance that academic governance is robust and effective’ (Primary Element 2.5). 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 2020/21 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 2020/21, the message of the report at the highest level is that the University is:

- 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
- 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 ongoing monitoring of degree outcomes data to work to enhance training and development opportunities for PGR Supervisors.

(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. Due to the nature of its role and remit, SAAC tends to select topics that either have a sector-wide profile (such as grade inflation) or have resulted from recent internal developments (such as grade scaling). The Committee is therefore not concerned by the preponderance of amber or red-coded items, as it is necessarily examining those areas that present the greatest challenge. With regard to amber-themed themes, the Committee is also mindful that, for several of its topics, a medium- or long-term timeframe for assessing the extent of its assurance is required: in the intervening period, these items must remain amber. The table below provides a visual overview of references to SAAC’s 2020/21 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.

The Committee’s themes for 2021/22 are set out in its Business Plan (see Sections 1.2.2, below: Appendix 3; and Sections 2.8.3 and 2.11.4 in relation to Senate’s 2021/22 plans regarding digital education and award gaps in turn).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Level of Assurance</th>
<th>Page</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COVID-19: Learning and Teaching</strong></td>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
<td>10-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assured that approach to L&amp;T was in full compliance with UK Government and Department for Education guidelines</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Internal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assured that work of Return to Campus Teaching Group was robust and achieved its outcomes</td>
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<td><strong>Grade Inflation</strong></td>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
<td>11-12</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assured that 2019/20 degree outcome data aligned to sector</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Internal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Want to maintain internal focus to understand range of factors informing increase in Good Honours besides Safety Net Policy</td>
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<td><strong>Assessment and Feedback: NSS 2020</strong></td>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
<td>12-13</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assured with institutional data in comparison to Russell Group and UUK benchmarking groups</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Internal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Remained assured regarding ‘Assessment and Feedback’ metric</td>
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<td><strong>BAME Award Gap</strong></td>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
<td>14-15</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• University middle-ranked in Russell Group: assured but scope for improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Internal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assured at range of institutional work in train to reduce gap, but need to monitor ongoing impact</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• SAAC to maintain focus in 2021/22</td>
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<td><strong>Grade Scaling</strong></td>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
<td>15-16</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assured that Policy informed by good practice in sector</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Internal</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Employment Outcomes</td>
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<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assured that institutional data is in line with sector</strong></td>
<td>16-17</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>However, low national response rate and limited data quality (not University related) do not provide basis for assurance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Internal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Internal data reports helpful, but scope to improve focus on aspects of student experience, e.g. outcomes in terms of graduate ethnicity and other participation characteristics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>PGR Supervisor Training</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assured that the principles underpinning PGR Supervisor CPD are consistent with sector practice and the expectations of relevant external bodies</strong></td>
<td>19-20</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Internal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assured that onus on sharing good practice that runs through CPD training provision at both the central and local levels will ensure good engagement and outcomes</strong></td>
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<td>REF Processes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assured that output selections and other key strategic decisions regarding the REF2021 submission were informed by the practice of other Russell Group institutions in particular</strong></td>
<td>20-21</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Internal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assured that processes informing the preparation and submission of the REF2021 return were fit for purpose and robust</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>SAAC to revisit REF2021 in 2021/22, after anticipated publication date of results, to assess assurance from academic perspective</strong></td>
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Information Classification: Internal
1. Introduction

1.1 General
The formation of the Office for Students (OfS) in January 2018 placed 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. The latest version of the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) HE Code of Governance (September 2020) goes one step further and puts the onus on governing bodies to ‘actively seek and receive assurance that academic governance is robust and effective’ (Primary Element 2.5). 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. This Annual Academic Assurance 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 in place a series of committees and sub-committees that, taken together, discharge its responsibilities to monitor and safeguard the University’s academic quality and standards by both undertaking and reporting activity to Senate and making recommendations for Senate to approve. The principal committees that 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 is provided at Appendix 1.

1.2.1 SAAC Themes on Academic Quality and Standards 2020/21
At the start of each academic year, SAAC agrees the themes on which it will focus. For 2020/21, it selected the following core topics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rationale for Selection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning and Teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. 2020/21 Approach to COVID-19</td>
<td>• Has exercised the University and sector with regard to its academic provision and governance, and been the subject of ongoing national and local media attention.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2. BAME Award Gap
   • For home students in particular, of interest to the OfS.
   • Need to monitor impact of interventions as part of work related to Access and Participation Plan and Race Equality Strategy.

3. Grade Inflation
   • Remains of abiding interest to the OfS, and is driving some of its work relating to academic quality and standards.

4. PGR Supervisor Training
   • Agreed to examine in 2018/19 in relation to previous theme on PGR submission rates.

5. Student Employment Outcomes
   • Wanted to assess performance of University in first Graduate Outcomes data.

6. Grade Scaling Policy
   • Wanted to assess the Policy and agree a timescale for revisiting it to assess its impact.

7. REF Processes
   • Wanted to reflect on the processes that informed the University’s REF2021 submission, with a view to returning to the theme once the REF2021 results were published in Spring 2022.

In addition, 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 Assessment and Feedback from the National Student Survey 2019, which was one of its major topics from 2019/20. 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. The Longlist is attached at Appendix 2.

1.2.2 SAAC Themes on Academic Quality and Standards 2021/22

For 2021/22, SAAC has confirmed its intention to focus on the following core topics, with latitude to include other themes that might arise, as appropriate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rationale for Selection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning and Teaching</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Digital Education</td>
<td>• To review the plans for this area under the Education pillar of the University Vision and Strategy and make</td>
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<td><strong>1.2.3</strong></td>
<td>The Committee’s Business Plan for 2021/22 is attached at Appendix 3.</td>
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<td><strong>1.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Scope of This Report</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>This report covers the full spectrum of academic assurance work that Senate has overseen over the 2020/21 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.</td>
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<td><strong>1.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>Structure of This Report</strong></td>
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<td>The report is structured on the following basis:</td>
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<td>• 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);</td>
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<td>• Within those larger groupings, the items are further subdivided according to which domain of Senate’s activities the item belongs (learning and teaching; research; and the student experience);</td>
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<td>• 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 2020/21 activities. Due to its specific role in</td>
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|   | recommendations, as appropriate.  
|   | • To gain assurance that lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic are taken forward. |
| **2.** | Knowledge Exchange |
|   | • To assess the University’s response to Research England’s Knowledge Exchange Concordat. |
| **3.** | Award Gaps (BAME, Disabled, International Students) |
|   | • To build on the work undertaken in 2020/21 to assess award gaps for different groups in the student population, and assess the current mechanisms in place to reduce these gaps. |
| **4.** | REF2021 |
|   | • To build on the work undertaken in 2020/21 to assess the University’s REF2021 results and provide a statement on the Committee’s assurance in this respect. |
providing assurance to Senate and Council about the maintenance of academic quality and standards in learning and teaching and research, the items on 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 at Appendix 2.

INTERNAL

2. Learning and Teaching

Senate and LTC Activities

2.1 COVID-19: Learning and Teaching

2.1.1 Given its significant and ongoing impact on the internal and external learning and teaching environments in 2020/21, COVID-19 was an abiding theme in LTC’s reporting to Senate and also constituted the subject of three substantive Senate agenda items on 14 October 2020, relating to Semester 1: 16 December 2020; and 17 March 2021, relating to Semester 2. Council was kept abreast of the University’s evolving plans throughout 2020/21 via the President & Vice-Chancellor’s regular reports.

2.1.2 The first of Senate’s discussions concentrated on the approach that the Return to Campus (RTC) Teaching Group had taken from June to October 2020 to manage the impact of COVID-19 on learning, teaching, and the delivery of all related activities on campus for staff and students via a blended approach that balanced virtual and in-person provision. Assurance was provided that the University’s plans and decisions in this area had been reviewed against the Department for Education’s (DfE’s) Guidance on Reopening Buildings and Campuses, and that the RTC Teaching Group had, since the start of the 2020/21 academic year, transitioned into an On-Campus Activity Monitoring Group with a refreshed membership.

2.1.3 On 16 December 2020, Senate received a presentation on planning for Semester 2, where it was intended that the volume of in-person teaching would increase and that there would be a concomitant improvement in students’ campus experience. It was reported that students were missing the opportunities for peer-to-peer support, prompting work to review the potential use of facilities and space to enable in-person interaction. All Departments/Schools were committed to providing the best educational experience possible. Senate welcomed the significant gains made in the area of assessment and examinations; this included the simplification of assessment structures, which had proved popular with students, and which was linked to the aspirations of the Programme Level Approach (PLA; see 2.3, below).

2.1.4 Senate’s third discussion focused on plans for delivering learning and teaching in Semester 2 in the context of the national lockdown on 4 January 2021, which prevented the desired increase in the proportion of in-person tuition. There were exemptions that enabled face-to-face-teaching for the bulk of programmes in Medicine, Dentistry and Health and for some education and social work courses during
this period. As a residential campus-based university, Senate agreed that the University was committed to increasing face-to-face teaching as soon as possible, subject to UK Government guidance. Senate also received updates on plans for the Semester 2 assessment period and the ensuing operation of examination and classification boards.

2.1.5 Considered at:
- LTC – 10 October 2020 and 11 November 2020
- SAAC – 17 November 2020 (see 2.8, below)
- Senate – 14 October 2020 and 17 March 2021

2.2 Degree Outcomes 2019/20 and the Safety Net Policy

2.2.1 In addition to supporting Senate and the wider University with the immediate policy response to COVID-19, LTC reviewed and reported to Senate on the effect of the Safety Net Policy and related adjustments to student assessment and progression on completing UG students’ degree outcomes in 2019/20. The data is attached at Appendix 4. SAAC also interrogated this data as part of its continuing theme of grade inflation (see 2.9, below). At the institutional level in 2019/20:
- The total increase in Good Honours (2:1 and First) degrees was 5%, compared to an average increase of 1% between 2015/16 and 2018/19.
- The proportion of First Class Honours degrees rose 11% compared to a 2-3% increase per annum in the preceding four academic years.

The paper also set out the degree outcome trends within the Faculties and Departments/Schools over the same period, assessed the effect of the Safety Net Policy on the BAME Award Gap (see 2.11, below), and outlined a series of next steps that LTC had agreed in order to consolidate understanding of the Policy and other contributing factors on 2019/20 degree outcomes.

2.2.2 On 9 February, 2021, LTC discussed the institutional approach to COVID-19 mitigations in 2020/21. Students who were carrying a safety net benchmark from 2019/20 continued to have this applied, but no benchmark was used for 2020/21 grades. In place of the Safety Net Policy, it agreed a requirement for Examination Boards to consider performance against previous years’ averages to ensure that students are not unfairly disadvantaged by the impacts of the pandemic. Around this time, the Russell Group published a joint statement on approaches to ensuring fair assessment and protecting the integrity of degrees.

2.2.3 Considered at:
- LTC (11 November 2020)

Reported to:
- Senate (16 December 2020)

2.3 Programme Level Approach

2.3.1 The Programme Level Approach (PLA) is the University’s flagship policy for informing programme design and delivery, and is founded upon a holistic conceptualisation of content, structure, and assessment of a taught programme to deliver the best and most joined-up student experience possible. At its meeting on 11 November 2020, LTC discussed PLA plans for 2020/21, noting that a series of meetings over summer 2020 involving core learning and teaching personnel in each academic Department/School with a senior member from another Faculty had facilitated the sharing of learning and offered a forum for external perspective and challenge. LTC also reported that UEB would receive a progress update on the PLA in November 2020, together with
recommendations for aiding the implementation of PLA activities as business as usual in Departments/Schools.

2.3.2 UEB’s consideration of the PLA update and accompanying recommendations took place on 24 November 2020. UEB welcomed the level of institutional progress made, observing that the timeframe for embedding PLA had been extended until 2021/22; for 2020/21, Departments and Schools had been asked to continue reviewing the 2019/20 PLA priorities. UEB also approved the recommendations made.

2.3.3 Considered at:
- LTC – 10 October 2020 and 9 February 2021
- UEB – 3 November 2020

Reported to:
- Senate – 16 December 2020 and 17 March 2021 via Reports of the LTC

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/School strengths and areas for improvement, provide the foundation for an Annual Reflection Report to Quality and Scrutiny Committee. From an external perspective, the process ensures that the University is able to provide assurances regarding the quality of its programmes and thereby meet the OfS’ regulatory requirements as articulated its [general and ongoing conditions of registration](#)(Condition B1).

2.4.2 At its meeting on 11 November 2020, LTC noted that the Annual Reflection process for 2020/21 had been initiated. These meetings with each Department/School took place over the course of November 2020 to January 2021, and entailed a review of degree outcomes data, the production of assessment plans, and a consideration of progress with PLA. QSC received the relevant report at its meeting on 3 March 2021, and reported onward to LTC. Two principal concerns, both of which fall in the bounds of internal enhancement rather than external compliance, were identified:

- The marked increase in Good Honours degrees (see 2.2, above), which did not seem to be attributable to the Safety Net Policy alone. QSC identified the lack of invigilated examinations and the recommendation, in March 2020, to reduce assessment where practicable as potential additional contributing factors. SAAC’s separate examination of grade inflation based on this data is considered in 2.9, below.
- The persistence of award gaps for BAME students (see 2.11, below), disabled, and/or international students, which merited ongoing careful monitoring, and for which more granular data would be instructive.

2.4.3 Considered at:
- LTC – 11 November 2020 and 20 May 2021
- QSC – 3 March 2021

Reported to:
- Senate – 16 December 2020 and 23 June 2021

2.5 Mental Health and Wellbeing

2.5.1 Student mental health and wellbeing has become an increasingly significant consideration for UK HE institutions, and forms an important pillar of students’ experience. To assure itself about the current offer to students in this regard, Senate
received a presentation at its meeting on 16 December 2020 that noted that the University's current Student Mental Health Strategy 2017-20 was being revised in the light of two new sector documents: the UUK Mentally-Healthy Universities Framework, and the Student Minds University Mental Health Charter. A One University approach will be taken henceforth, and will inform the production of a University Mental Health Policy that Senate will consider at a future meeting.

2.5.2 Considered at:
- Senate – 16 December 2020

2.6 Faculty and Departmental Changes

2.6.1 The establishment or abolition of Faculties or Departments is a matter reserved for Council under the provisions of Regulation II. Given the possible impact of such decisions on students’ educational experience, Council often elects to seek Senate’s advice on such matters. During 2020/21, Senate considered and/or approved the following changes for onward recommendation to Council:

- **CITY College and International Faculty**: At its meeting on 16 December 2020, Senate noted the controls in place, and planned, to ensure the quality of teach out for University students at the college until the end of the contract in 2023/24. At the same meeting, Senate approved recommending to Council that Regulation X should be amended to remove mention of CITY College as an International Faculty of the University, and revoke the associated delegated powers from 1 July 2021, as set out in Regulation X, paragraphs 3.1.5 to 3.1.8, as they are governed by a contractual validation arrangement through the period University of Sheffield students are taught out.

- **School of Bioscience**: Also on 16 December 2020, Senate received a presentation on the Biologies Review and considered a proposal to reconfigure the three departments of Animal and Plant Sciences, Biomedical Science, and Molecular Biology and Biotechnology to create a single new School of Bioscience from September 2021. Senate approved recommending to Council the creation of the School of Bioscience, and the amendment of Regulation IX (2.1.6.) relating to the composition of Senate, to reflect the merger and the establishment of a new School of Bioscience.

- **Department of Archaeology**: At its meeting on 23 June 2021, Senate gave thorough consideration to UEB’s recommendation to Council that, in place of being a standalone academic unit, the key areas of strength in teaching and research within the Department of Archaeology should be retained and realigned with disciplines across the University, in areas of complementary activity. Following the meeting, Senators were invited to provide their views on the recommendation to Council via an online form in response to key questions.

2.6.2 Considered at:
- Senate – 16 December 2020 and 23 June 2021

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 2020/21, including those listed below. In all cases, Senate was satisfied with the matters reported and approved any recommendations made.
• New, Significantly Amended, Discontinued, and Suspended Programmes Approved by Faculties – 14 October 2020, 16 December 2020, 17 March 2021, and 23 June 2021; and Recommended to Senate under Chair’s Action – 16 December 2020
• Updated University of Sheffield Graduate Attributes Framework – 14 October 2020
• Withdrawal of unrestricted module choice permanently from 2021/22 and replacement by guided module choice from a selection of optional modules determined by the Department – 16 December 2020
• The revised Recognition of Prior Learning Policy – 16 December 2020
• The Student Sports Participation Policy – 16 December 2020
• The revised Safeguarding Policy – 16 December 2020
• A Term of Reference to protect academic freedom – 17 March 2021
• An amendment to the General Regulations to allow all examination boards to recommend UG exit awards in exceptional circumstances – 17 March 2021
• A change to the General Regulations, to be enacted alongside the implementation of SITS in 2022/23 for the systematic introduction of Undergraduate Exit Awards – 17 March 2021
• An institutional Grade Moderation Policy – 17 March 2021
• An institutional Grade Scaling Policy – 17 March 2021
• A revised Teaching Awards Scheme for 2020/21 – 17 March 2021
• Further revisions to the General Regulations (XIV, XV) – 23 June 2021

SAAC Activities

2.8 COVID-19: Learning and Teaching

2.8.1 At its meeting on 17 November 2020, SAAC received and considered a paper on the Student Return to Campus that had been discussed at Senate on 14 October 2020 (see 2.1, above). During discussion, SAAC recognised that the subject was a developing one and that, while it was not possible to form a definitive judgement on the 2020/21 approach, it could recommend questions and issues for further examination.

2.8.2 SAAC Level of Assurance

External Assurance

SAAC was assured that the University’s approach to its learning and teaching was in full compliance with the UK Government’s and DfE’s guidelines, which UEB and Health and Safety, working with Estates and Facilities Management and colleagues in Faculties and Departments and Schools, kept under consistent review.

Internal Enhancement

SAAC was assured that the work of the RTC Teaching Group had been robust and achieved its outcomes. The Group had established a sound approach for delivering learning and teaching via the blended model that aligned with Government guidelines. In respect of ongoing and future work to adapt learning and teaching during the pandemic, the Committee recommended that consideration be given to the following:
• A broad level of academic representation on groups associated with the learning and teaching response to COVID-19 should be maintained;
• Single points of failure in data collection and utilisation, e.g. with regard to the capacities of teaching spaces, should be avoided;
• Central decision-making should be used when a local decision is not appropriate or viable but, when acceptable, local decisions should be encouraged in order to help academic departments/schools to inform their own plans;
• The impact of the 2020/21 approach to COVID-19 should be monitored across student groups to ensure the ongoing provision of the best experience possible in the circumstances.

2.8.3 Action Taken
The On-Campus Activity Monitoring Group considered SAAC’s recommendations, and continued to oversee learning and teaching arrangements at the University until it was stood down at the end of 2020. Senate received regular updates throughout the remainder of 2020/21 on the University’s plans and approaches, which were flexible to meet the evolving challenge of the pandemic (see 2.1, above). In acknowledgement that the enhancement of in-person teaching with digital provision will be retained over the longer term, the Committee plans to test its assurance about the University’s strategic plans in the area of digital education as part of its 2021/22 work.

2.8.4 Considered at:
• SAAC – 17 November 2020
Reported to:
• Senate – 16 December 2020 (via Report of the SAAC)

2.9 Grade Inflation
2.9.1 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. Its regulatory concern about increases in Good Honours degree outcomes in English HE institutions has been a fixture of its work to date. The OfS’ activity in this area in 2020/21 included a November 2020 report examining data up to the end of 2018/19 that described almost half of First-class degrees as ’unexplained’. The UK Government has likewise made grade inflation and the perceived ‘low quality’ of some courses signal policies of its HE agenda. Given its high profile, SAAC has made grade inflation a theme in each of the Committee’s years of operation.

2.9.2 At its meeting on 2 March 2021, SAAC considered the paper on degree outcomes and the impact of the Safety Net Policy discussed at LTC on 10 October 2021 and reported to Senate on 16 December 2020 as part of its ongoing theme on grade inflation (see 2.2, above).

2.9.3 SAAC Level of Assurance

External Assurance
SAAC recognised that increases in 2019/20 degree outcomes had been witnessed across the sector, owing to local application of similar Safety Net Policies to safeguard students’ academic
performance from the deleterious impact of COVID-19 on their learning and teaching. It was therefore assured that the University’s data was not misaligned.

**Internal Enhancement**

SAAC was not yet fully assured about the absence of grade inflation at the University, and its general conclusion in this respect accords with QSC’s observations (see 2.4, above). SAAC recognised the impact of the Safety Net Policy and the general alignment between the University’s 2019/20 degree outcomes and the broader sector-level trend. SAAC saw a need to maintain internal focus on this area to understand the range of factors informing the increase in Good Honours and First Class Honours degrees, and to assure itself that the increase would diminish in a post-pandemic environment.

2.9.4 Action Taken

As noted above, both LTC and SAAC will continue to analyse data on degree outcomes to assess changes in the levels of Good Honours degrees awarded. Reviews of local grade inflation formed part of the most recent Annual Reflection 2020/21 exercise, the initial conclusions of which were considered at QSC at its meeting on 3 March 2021 and reported to LTC (see 2.4, above).

2.9.5 Considered at:

- LTC – 1 October 2020
- SAAC – 2 March 2021

Reported to:

- Senate – 16 December 2020 (via Reports of LTC and SAAC)

2.10 **Assessment and Feedback: National Student Survey 2020**

2.10.1 The OfS-commissioned National Student Survey (NSS) 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. The headlines results of the 2020 exercise, which ran from 10 February to 30 April 2020 and coincided with both industrial action and the initial COVID-19 lockdown period, were presented to Council at its informal meeting on 25 August 2020. SAAC discussed the results and associated data reports from the University’s Reporting Service at its meeting on 17 November on the back of LTC’s initial discussion of these results on 1 October 2021. The overall rate of satisfaction for the University had fallen from 88% to 85% (2% higher than the Russell Group and Universities UK (UUK) averages); scores in four categories had not decreased (‘The teaching on my course’, ‘Learning opportunities’, ‘Learning resources’, and ‘Learning and community’) but had done so in four others (‘Assessment and Feedback’, ‘Academic Support’, ‘Organisation and Management’, and ‘Student Voice”).

2.10.2 One of SAAC’s major purposes in reviewing the University’s NSS 2020 performance was to establish if the gain in ‘Assessment and Feedback’ in 2019 was uncharacteristic or part of a broader trend and, in so doing, ‘close the loop’ on this theme. It noted the slight reported decrease in satisfaction.
2.10.3 SAAC Level of Assurance

**External Assurance**

For NSS 2020, 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**

With regard to the ‘Assessment and Feedback’ metric, SAAC recognised the contextual factors that could have contributed to the slight fall in performance compared to 2019 and remained assured, thereby closing the loop on this part of its considerations. The Committee was also assured that the available NSS results data was more detailed than in previous years, which presented opportunities to consider the processes additional to Annual Reflection for capturing and disseminating good practice from the survey. SAAC recommended to Senate that further thought be given to such opportunities.

2.10.4 Action Taken

Although the OfS announced a review of the NSS to address concerns about how survey may be creating burden and impacting on academic standards, subsequent work at the internal level to respond to the University NSS results and consider SAAC’s recommendation continued. The first stage of the OfS review has now been completed, and the OfS Board has agreed to the continuation of the NSS. The second stage will take a broader look at the NSS’ purpose, including which questions should be asked to support regulation and student information.

2.10.5 Considered at:

- LTC – 10 October 2020
- SAAC – 17 November 2020
- Senate – 14 October 2020 (via the Report of the LTC) and 16 December 2020 (via the Report of the SAAC)

Reported to:

- Senate – 16 December 2020 (via the Reports of the LTC and SAAC)

2.11 BAME Award Gap

2.11.1 The BAME Award Gap refers to the difference in the proportions of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students awarded a Good Honours (First or 2:1) undergraduate degree when compared to White students. In relation to home students, the gap is a matter of ongoing interest to the OfS as well as other sector bodies such as AdvanceHE. On 17 November 2020, SAAC received and considered a paper that had been discussed at Council Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (EDIC) on the Award Gap. The institutional data in the paper covered (i.) the number of University of Sheffield students from all domiciles and the home domicile from a BAME background, (ii.) the withdrawal rates of first-year home UG students from BAME backgrounds compared to White students over the previous five academic years (2015/16-2019/20), and (iii.) the Good Honours (2.1 and First) rates of home UG students from BAME backgrounds compared to White students and the corresponding size of the award gap over the previous five academic years (2015/16-2019/20).
2.11.2 Among SAAC’s main observations were:

- It would be useful to benchmark how the University’s proportion of students from a BAME background (23% from all domiciles and 21% from a home domicile in 2019/20) compared with sector peers.
- Some departments/schools had a marked award gap that had remained in place across the five academic years analysed in the paper.
- It was unclear at which point in BAME students’ degree programmes the award gap tended to open. Obtaining this data at the earliest stage possible for departments/schools with the largest gaps could enable targeted actions to be put in place.
- It could be beneficial to consider data in departments/schools where an intervention had been implemented, e.g. work to foster a more inclusive curriculum, with acknowledgement that such data could be more qualitative than quantitative in nature.

2.11.3 SAAC Level of Assurance

**External Assurance**

Although SAAC’s focus was on internal data rather than the University’s position in the sector context, the most recent benchmarked report available via the University’s Reporting Service places Sheffield in the lower-middle of the Russell Group, indicating scope for improvement.

**Internal Enhancement**

SAAC was assured both by the robust data set informing internal work on the BAME Award Gap, and the range of institutional work in train to reduce the gap. With regard to the former, it noted the scope for further enhancement, as set out in 2.11.2, above. In terms of the latter, the ongoing impact of the measures in place need to be monitored. To follow up on the issues noted, the Committee will return to the theme. QSC’s separate identification of the need for continued monitoring of data is noted in 2.4, above.

2.11.4 Action Taken

SAAC agreed that it will undertake further work to consolidate its assurance about the processes and mechanisms in place for taking action on the data and sharing of good practice. This will be extended to include not just the BAME Award Gap that those that persist for disabled and international students also. QSC’s observation of the potential usefulness about more granular data warrants further deliberation. SAAC will identify the most appropriate internal colleague to invite to a future meeting for the purpose of discussing the data-related matters and broader institutional efforts to reduce the gap. On a wider level, institutional efforts to address the Award Gap continue across a broad range of academic and Professional Services areas. The University’s Access and Participation Plan (APP) makes the gap a priority area of attention; under its stipulations, Human Resources collects and provides equality, diversity, and inclusion data for both staff and students to inform organisational planning and decision-making. Sitting alongside the APP is a Race Equality Strategy and Action Plan, which the Race Equality Steering Group, a Sub-Group of EDIC, oversees, reporting to its parent body on this and other strategic initiatives concerning matters of equality.
2.11.5 Considered at:
- SAAC – 17 November 2020

Reported to:
- Senate – 16 December 2020 (via the Report of the SAAC)

2.12 Grade Scaling

2.12.1 Grade scaling is the adjustment of a set of marks for a module/assessment in order to ensure that students’ grades properly reflect their achievements. At its meeting on 8 June 2021, SAAC considered the Grade Scaling Policy that Senate approved on 17 March 2021 for introduction in the 2021/22 academic year, subject to the production of worked examples in guidance that would sit alongside the Policy. The Committee’s purpose was to consider the principles of the Policy and agree the post-implementation evidence it wished to review at a later stage to test its assurance that the Policy was being applied in an effective and consistent manner across the University’s academic Departments/Schools. It was noted that previous work regarding grade scaling had brought into relief the institutional variation in practice, and that the principles set out in the Policy were intended to guide local procedures.

2.12.2 Among SAAC’s main observations were:
- It could be clarified by the Academic Programmes Office whether the Policy primarily aimed to standardise the application of scaling or restrict its use to exceptional or abnormal cases. In the case of the latter, it was acknowledged that such cases could be subject to local interpretation.
- It would be beneficial to provide a companion document on grade calibration (the regular and systematic numerical adjustment and mapping of marks onto the University marking scale).
- Although the application of grade scaling could in some instances provide a control on grade inflation, there was not a strong connection and the two subjects would be better treated in a separate fashion.
- Being clear with students about the instances in which grade scaling had been applied to module assessment could help to build greater understanding of, and confidence in, the practice.

2.12.3 SAAC Level of Assurance

External Assurance

SAAC was assured that good practice from other HE institutions had been consulted in the drafting of the Grade Scaling Policy. It noted that further understanding of how sector peers in particular disciplines utilised calibration and scaling could be helpful both to the implementation of the Policy and the production of related guidance on grade calibration.

Internal Enhancement

SAAC endorsed and was assured by the Grade Scaling Policy, noting that the actions outlined above could enhance understanding about the practice among staff and student audiences. The Committee agreed that Departments’/Schools’ provision of the following information/evidence could inform its future scaling-based considerations:
1. Whether or not scaling had been applied.
2. If so, the reason underlying its application.
3. If so, what the grade distribution before and after scaling was, and when compared to the other modules offered in the Department/School.

2.12.4 Action Taken
The Grade Scaling Policy has been shared with Faculties and Departments/Schools for implementation in the 2021/22 academic year. Further thought will be given in the Academic Programmes Office about the outputs that could be produced to provide a basis for gauging assurance about the impact of the Grade Scaling Policy on local practice. SAAC will consider the theme again when sufficient evidence has been collected to enable a review of the Policy. Current planning is for SAAC to revisit the Policy at a meeting in Semester 1 of 2022/23, reviewing data gathered during the Semester 2 examination period in 2021/22.

2.12.5 Considered at:
- LTC – 26 February 2021
- SAAC – 8 June 2021
- Senate – 17 March 2021

Reported to:
- Senate – 23 June 2021 (via the Report of the SAAC)

2.13 Student Employment Outcomes
2.13.1 The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) coordinates the annual Graduate Outcomes data exercise, which replaced the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey. The first Graduate Outcomes survey results, published in June 2020, analysed the outcomes of graduates from the 2017/18 academic year 15 months after completion of their degrees. Graduate Outcomes differs from its predecessor in respect of both data collection methods and reporting timescales. Although there are no definitive national performance indicators at present, it is anticipated that the OfS will introduce a measure linked to academic quality and standards once it has completed a sector-wide consultation.

2.13.2 At its meeting on 2 March 2021, SAAC considered the first set of Graduate Outcomes data (for 2017/18 leavers), at both the University level and across UK HEIs, as part of its 2020/21 theme on this subject. This consisted of a Careers Service paper and three data reports housed in the University’s Reporting Service (B7.1.1-B7.1.3). During discussion, the Committee noted there had been reported concerns across the sector with the quality of the data.

2.13.3 SAAC Level of Assurance

External Assurance
SAAC welcomed the fact that the University’s Graduate Outcomes data was largely in line with the sector. However, the relatively low response rate and limited quality of the data precluded its use as a basis for assurance, and this warrants referral to the body operating the exercise on behalf of HESA.
Internal Enhancement

SAAC agreed that the paper and data reports were largely helpful. However, further work is needed to improve the reporting focus on aspects of the student experience, e.g. outcomes in terms of graduate ethnicity and other participation characteristics (such as the outcomes of privately funded students against those from state-funded schools and colleges). In addition, the Committee sees a need to benchmark the University data with that of peer institutions in the Russell Group and/or fellow northern civic institutions rather than the sector at large.

2.13.4 Action Taken

SAAC's concerns regarding the quality of the Graduate Outcomes data were reported to Senate and the Careers Service. The second set of Graduate Outcomes data was published in July 2021 and covered 2018/19 graduates.

2.13.5 Considered at:
- SAAC – 2 March 2021

Reported to:
- Senate – 17 March 2021 (via the Report of the SAAC)

3. Research

Senate and RIC Activities

3.1 COVID-19: Research

3.1.1 At its first meeting of 2020/21 on 23 September 2020, RIC considered a broad range of internal and external matters relating to COVID-19 and its impact on research and the provision of support to PGR students, which made it a subject germane to the student experience. Relevant updates were reported to Senate at its meeting on 14 October 2020, and covered:

COVID-19 Policies
- The partial re-opening of laboratories and research facilities in summer 2021 to reinstate research to the campus subject to the agreement of extended hours and rotas to maintain social distancing.
- The production of guidance to facilitate the resumption of research outside of laboratories and dedicated research facilities on campus.
- The generation of guidance to cover fieldwork, international travel for research, and the resumption of qualitative research.

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Grant Extensions
- The University’s receipt of a funding allocation from UKRI to enable it to offer costed extensions to UKRI-funded grants, together with the internal rationale agreed for making allocation decisions.

PGR Students
- UKRI’s offer of funded stipend extensions of up to six months to UKRI-funded students in their final year of funding to enable them to complete their doctoral research within their funded period, together with the University’s provision of a comparable scheme to its own funded students.

3.1.2 Considered at:
- RIC – 23 September 2020
3.2 Research Excellence Framework (REF)

3.2.1 The Research Excellence Framework (REF), is the sector-level system for assessing the quality of research in HE institutions in the UK. The 2020/21 academic year marked the culmination of multi-year preparations for the institutional REF2021 submission on 31 March 2021. In the lead up to the deadline, the regular Reports of the RIC to Senate detailed progress and outstanding tasks relating to the staff to be submitted; the selection of outputs for each research unit; and institutional support for the production of impact case studies (ICS) and environment narratives, together with the relevant internal drafting milestones.

3.2.2 The Vice-President for Research will deliver a presentation on REF2021 reflections and next steps at Senate’s first meeting of 2021/22 on 13 October 2021.

3.2.3 Considered at:
- RIC (23 September 2020 and 5 November 2020)

Reported to:
- Senate (via the Reports of the RIC)

3.3 Other Activities Reported to Senate by RIC

3.3.1 RIC reported a range of other learning and teaching-related activities to Senate in 2020/21, including those listed below. In all cases, Senate was comfortable with the matters reported and approved any recommendations made.
- The establishment of the University Early Career Researcher Committee (UECRC) – 14 October 2020
- An amendment to the General Regulations for Higher Degrees by Research, following initial approval by UPGRC and RIC – 16 December 2020
- Charters for Early Career Research Staff and the Development of Research Staff by their Line Manager, following approval by UEB and RIC – 16 December 2020
- A statement that the University will not act as research governance sponsor for devices that come under the requirements of the Medical Devices Regulations, following approval by Research Governance Sub-Committee and RIC – 16 December 2020
- Changes to the RIC Terms of Reference – 17 March 2021
- Amendments to Regulations XIV and XVI – 17 March 2021
- Adoption of the Preventing Harm in Research and Innovation (Safeguarding) Policy – 17 March 2021
- Publication of the University Statement on Open Research – 17 March 2021

SAAC Activities

3.4 PGR Supervisor Training

3.4.1 SAAC reviewed PGR submission rates in the 2019/20 academic year (included in the Annual Academic Assurance Report 2019/20), noting that it would examine the outputs of work on PGR supervisor development once these were available. At its meeting on 2 March 2021, SAAC received a presentation on the principles underpinning the University’s commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) for PGR supervisors. The new CPD model had been discussed at University Postgraduate Research Committee (UPGRC) and Senate Research and Innovation Committee (RIC)
and reported to Senate; SAAC’s focus was on both the details of the new offer to supervisors and future plans to review the refreshed provision.

3.4.2 SAAC noted the rationale underlying the new CPFD model. The three different CPD strands were outlined, which were designed to cater to the needs of new supervisors; incoming, experienced supervisors; and internal experienced supervisors in turn.

3.4.3 SAAC Level of Assurance

**External Assurance**

SAAC was assured that the principles underpinning the University’s commitment to continuing professional development for PGR Supervisors brought the University into greater alignment with sector practice concerning mandatory supervisor development and the expectations of concordats linked to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding.

**Internal Enhancement**

SAAC endorsed the new model for delivering PGR Supervisor CPD and was assured that the onus on sharing good practice that ran through the provision at both the central and local levels would ensure good engagement from new and experienced supervisors. Having identified concerns with mechanisms to ensure, and raise issues about, quality of PGR supervision at its meeting on 20 November 2018, there were now firmer grounds for assurance. Ongoing work to embed the principles will need to (i.) ensure that PGR students can contribute to the CPD discussions and feel enabled to provide feedback on their supervision, and (ii.) put in place the conditions to drive cultural change around PGR submission and completion rates.

3.4.4 Action Taken

The new PGR Supervisor CPD model is in the process of being implemented. The team overseeing the programme has committed to a review after the first year of operation, which SAAC welcomes. SAAC will revisit the theme of PGR submission rates in future meetings, to track how the progressive embedding of the new principles and training provision influences the proportion of PGR students able to submit within their funded period.

3.4.5 Considered at:

- UPGRC – 29 September 2020
- RIC – 5 November 2020
- SAAC – 2 March 2021
- Senate – 23 March 2021

Reported to:

- Senate – 16 December 2020 (via the Report of the RIC) and 23 March 2021 (via the Reports of the RIC and SAAC)
3.5 REF Processes

3.5.1 On 8 June 2021, SAAC considered a paper that overviewed the processes involved in each part of the REF2021 exercise, ranging from the initial preparatory work to the institutional submission itself. This was with a view to assuring itself that the procedures, both in part and as a cumulative whole, were suitable and robust and provided a platform for the University to optimise its submission. The paper summarised the decision-making structures that shaped the larger exercise, including the REF Steering Group and the arrangements in place at the Unit level; the development and implementation of the institutional REF2021 Code of Practice; the criteria that guided decisions about the staff selected to submit outputs; and the principles that steered the selection and submission of outputs, ICS, and the environment templates.

3.5.2 SAAC's main observations were:

- The University opted for an inclusive approach that balanced the selection of a broad and representative selection of staff and an onus on maximising output quality, recognising also that Research England expected Russell Group institutions to submit a large contingent of research-active academic staff.
- The annual REF2021 stocktakes incentivised and supported the routine reviewing and provision of feedback for outputs, which in turn aided the definition and driving up of standards. The work to establish which members of staff required additional support to produce a high-calibre output was also welcome.
- The output selection procedure that Units followed, as set out in the Code of Practice, was transparent and fair.
- Some equality, diversity, and inclusion concerns had been expressed about the selection of ICS. In this regard, actions to provide further support to all members of the REF-eligible staff base, with the aim of building capacity and confidence, could be valuable.

3.5.3 SAAC Level of Assurance

External Assurance

Although Research England will not publish REF2021 outcomes until 2022, SAAC is confident that the University’s output selections and other key strategic decisions were informed by the practice of other Russell Group institutions in particular.

Internal Enhancement

SAAC was assured that the processes that informed the preparation and submission of the REF2021 return were fit for purpose and robust, acknowledging that there were some areas for further reflection, including further support to staff around the production of ICS.

3.5.4 Action Taken

The Vice-President for Research will lead two institutional reviews of REF2021. The first, to take place before the expected publication of REF2021 results in April 2022, will focus on the University’s preparation for the submission; the second, to commence after the results have been released, will be more analytical in emphasis. Taken
together, these planned reviews should provide clear and defined channels for lessons to be learned and further improvements to be identified. SAAC will revisit REF2021 at its meeting on 8 June 2022 to assess its level of academic assurance in the institutional outcomes and subsequent internal analysis undertaken. This will enable the Committee to provide the academic assurance that forms the chief part of its remit.

3.5.5 Considered at:
- SAAC – 8 June 2021
Reported to:
- Senate – 23 June 2021 (via the Report of the SAAC)

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 17 March 2021 the following two reports for information, which provided Senate with a comprehensive update on the statistics relating to the University’s and Students’ Union’s formal student conduct-related processes:

1. **Student Formal Procedure Cases 2019/20: Report to Senate**
The paper summarised Student Formal Procedure Casework for the 2019/20 academic year, reporting on the volume of activity in each area (Appeals, Complaints, Case Reviews1, Discipline, Fitness to Practise, and Progress, as well as cases submitted to the [Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)](https://example.com)). The report is attached at Appendix 5.

2. **Students’ Union Complaints and Discipline Annual Report 2019/20**
The Students’ Union (SU) 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. The report is attached at Appendix 6.

4.1.2 With regard to the report on Student Formal Procedure Cases 2019/20, the trend towards the growing magnitude and complexity of casework (+204% since 2012/13) witnessed in recent years continued. Over the last four years, the number of cases escalated to a central level has expanded from 628 to 872, representing a 39% increase.

4.1.3 Reported to:
- Senate (17 March 2021)

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1 A Case Review stage within the University’s student complaints procedure is how Council exercises its responsibility in respect of student grievances. The Case Review process is led by a Vice-President with support from Student Support Services.

2 The [Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for Higher Education](https://example.com) 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.
SAAC Activities

4.2 Unfair Means

4.2.1 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. The subject was one of SAAC’s themes in 2019/20. At the time, SAAC identified that it was not possible to gain assurance about the University’s total volume of Unfair Means cases and their outcomes due to the lack of reported data at the Faculty and Departmental/School levels.

4.2.2 Action Taken

Although Unfair Means was not one of SAAC’s 2020/21 themes, SAAC sought an update from the Student Administration Service on any actions undertaken in response to the perceived data gap. With effect from the start of the 2021/22 academic year, there will be a reporting tool in place to record local cases in Departments/Schools, on the back of a recommendation from a University Task and Finish Group on Student Discipline and Senate’s subsequent endorsement. Once it is available, SAAC will examine the first report/analysis of this data, using the wider range of information to reassess its level of assurance.

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.

5.3 Over the course of 2020/21, key OfS activities included the following:

- Consultations on reportable events, the OfS’ approach to monetary penalties, and publication of information about HE institutions;
- A consultation about academic quality and standards, which has moved into its second phase;
- The introduction of a new condition of registration to protect students if a university or college closes.

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

6.1 The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) 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 has operated according to a ‘Gold’, ‘Silver’, and ‘Bronze’ award scale: the University is rated ‘Silver’ based on its participation in the previous award in June 2019.

Information Classification: Internal
6.2 No TEF exercise took place in 2020; during 2021, a new framework is being developed for proposed sector consultation in Autumn 2021, which draws on the recommendations in Dame Shirley Pearce’s Independent Review of the TEF. There is therefore no recent University result to report for the TEF.

6.3 In its response to the Independent Review, the UK Government announced that it will request that the OfS develop a revised provider level TEF, minimising administrative burden and with no subject-level assessments. The principal purpose of the revised TEF will be to incentivise enhancement across all providers and will fall under the provisions of the OfS Regulatory Framework. A secondary purpose will be to inform student choice of provider. It is intended that the revised framework will be in place with provider assessments completed by September 2022.

6.4 Considered at:
- LTC – 9 February 2021

Reported to:
- Senate – 17 March 2021

7. Research: Knowledge Excellence Framework (KEF)

7.1 The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) assesses UK HEIs’ effectiveness in using public funding to share knowledge with external partners from other sectors. Introduced in 2020, it sits alongside the TEF and REF as Research England’s ‘third pillar of University assessment’, and is overseen at the University by Partnerships and Regional Engagement.

7.2 On the back of its participation in the 2019 KEL pilot exercise, the University took part in the inaugural KEF Initiative. The results from the first iteration of the KEF were published earlier in 2021; the University sat in the top 10% of all institutions in four out of seven categories (IP and Commercialisation, Public and Community Engagement, Working with Business, Working with the Public and Third Sector).

8. Ofsted

8.1 Ofsted is a non-ministerial Department of the UK Government, reporting to Parliament. It is responsible for inspecting a range of educational institutions. On 28 September 2020, the Secretary of State for Education at the time, Gavin Williamson MP, announced that the Government had accepted the Augar Review’s recommendation that Ofsted become the single body responsible for the inspection of apprenticeship training provision at all levels to ensure consistency, regardless of the provider or the level of the apprenticeship. This change came into force on 1 April 2021.

8.2 At its meetings on 11 November 2020 and 9 February 2021, LTC discussed Ofsted’s increased remit and its implications for both the University’s regime of Ofsted inspections, which will affect four Faculties; and the University’s future apprenticeship provision, which will align with areas of strategic importance. The Apprenticeship Education Oversight Group will ensure that all relevant Departments/Schools meet the adjusted requirements, and will work in liaison with the AMRC and Academic Programmes Office on the delivery of appropriate training and good practice sessions.

8.3 Considered at:
- LTC – 11 November 2020 and 9 February 2021

Reported to:
- Senate – 16 December 2020 and 17 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.