



## SPECIAL MEETING OF SENATE MINUTES

Monday 19 June 2023

14.00, virtual Microsoft Teams meeting

### **Present:**

Professors: Banissy, Barbour, Bickers, Birdi, Cater, C Chapman, Clark, Clatworthy, Dermott, Dillingham N Edwards, George, Hodos, Juncos, Marklof, R Martin, McGirr, Mundell, Nabney, Nairn, Neild, Oliphant, O Madhloom, O'Toole, T Parkin, Powell, Raven, Ridley, Robbins, Roberts, Rust, Sandvoss, Savery, Schwarzacher, Smart, Spear, Squires, Tahko, Tavaré, Taylor, Tether, N Timpson, Tormey, Warburton, Welch, West, Whittington, Wilding.

Ms T Adeniyi, Ms Y Ankaine, Dr M Allinson, Mr J Barrie, Mr S Buffonge, Mr X Chen, Dr A Clayton, Dr S East, Dr T Ellson, Dr V Erlandsson, Mr E Fay, Ms J Inglis on behalf of Mr D Freda, Dr C Fricker, Dr H Gadelha, Ms A Garr, Dr F Ginn, Dr G Hemani, Dr J Howarth, Ms L Macey (Postgraduate Education Officer, Bristol SU), Dr J McManus, Mr M Munafo, Dr M Gillway, Dr D Pamunuwa, Dr B Pohl, Dr S Proud, Dr J Ross, Mr S Williams (UG Student rep). Dr K Trimmis, Dr M Werner.

**In attendance:** L Barling (Deputy Head of Governance), J Bridgwater, T Brunnock, C Buchanan, P Coonerty, R Day, T Ellson, M Flay, M Gillway, H Gorst, H Quinn, C Relton, P Vermeulen, C Warburton, D Wilson.

**Apologies:** Prof M Allen, Dr P Allen, Dr N Carhart, Prof I Craddock (Academic Trustee), Dr S Das, Prof C Faul, Prof R Glynn, Prof A Linthorst, Dr B Main, Prof D Manley, Prof P Manzini, Prof M Munafò, Prof R E Wilson.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 The Vice-Chancellor welcomed Senate members to this Special Meeting of Senate, and it was noted that the meeting was quorate.

#### Background

1.2 By way of context, Senators were reminded that at its meeting on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, the Board of Trustees under [Ordinance 9.2.2](#) ordered the Vice-Chancellor, "representing Senate as its Chair and acting in her absolute discretion in what she considers to be in the best interests of the University and its students, shall (subject always to the provisions of the Charter and Statutes of the University) have the power (after consulting with such members of Senate as she considers appropriate) to determine what methods of examination and assessment of a student's ability or proficiency shall be adopted by any relevant internal examiners and the relevant external examiners of the University for the purpose of:

- i. the award of any degree, diploma or certificate of the University
- ii. the classification of any degree of the University
- iii. the assessment of satisfactory performance or proficiency before any student is allowed to pass from one part of a programme of study or one University year to another; and similarly have the power to exercise the authorities of University examination boards to approve the award of any degree, diploma or certificate so examined or assessed."

- 1.3 On the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2023, the Vice-Chancellor approved the [temporary regulations](#) for degree progression, award and classification in order to mitigate the impact of the industrial action upon academic outcomes at the summer exam boards in 2023.
- 1.4 The following was **NOTED**:
- 1.4.1 The Resolution today was being presented to Senate for discussion, together with the University's response. In accordance with the University constitution (Ordinance 6, 4), and with reference to the Senate Standing Orders, the Resolution had been signed by more than 21 members (22 members in total), and this was why the Special Meeting had been called.
- 1.4.2 In accordance with the University constitution, Senate was not able to overturn a decision made by the Board of Trustees, however, it was able to discuss and declare an opinion on any matter whatsoever relating to the University, and the Board shall take into consideration any observations expressed by Senate (Ordinance 6, 2.2).
- 1.4.3 Senate was therefore being asked to declare an opinion on whether, in accordance with its responsibility to safeguard academic quality and standards across the whole University, Senate believes that the temporary regulations for degree progression, award and classification, bring the University to a position where it is not meeting the Office for Students (OfS) conditions of registration or the QAA Quality Code core practices in respect of quality and standards. In accordance with Ordinance 6.2.2 having discussed and declared its opinion on the matter Senate was being asked to report Senate's opinion to the Board of Trustees at its meeting on [7July 2023] to ensure that such opinion was considered by the Board of Trustees.
- 1.4.4 Senators were reminded that in accordance with the Senate Standing Orders, "Staff (Class 4) members and Student (Class 5) members provide an important link between Senate and the constituency from which they were drawn but do not represent that constituency; They have a responsibility to Senate and the University which overrides any responsibilities they may have (or may perceive to have) to colleagues in their constituencies".

## **2. SENATE RESOLUTION**

- 2.1 RECEIVED and **CONSIDERED**: paper ref: (SN/22-23/038) (*on file*).
- 2.2 The proposer, Dr F Ginn (Class 4, Academic Staff) presented the Resolution to Senate.
- 2.3 Dr F Ginn proposed that Senate should declare an opinion that it found the temporary regulations unacceptable and that they should be overturned, and that this opinion should be reported to the Board of Trustees at its meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2023.
- 2.4 In his and the other 21 proposers' opinion, Dr F Ginn summarised the reasons why it was felt that the temporary regulations were unacceptable. The following was **NOTED**:
- 2.4.1 Excessive discretion had been given to exam board chairs for large sections of units;
- 2.4.2 There was no limit to the number of units that could receive a proxy mark;
- 2.4.3 The regulations allowed school exam boards to be bypassed and expertise to be dismantled;
- 2.4.4 There was a lack of oversight of external examiners;
- 2.4.5 There was uncertainty about how these amended regulations met professional accreditation standards;
- 2.4.6 In the absence of a full run of marks this would lead to lower degree classifications for some students and higher for others;

- 2.4.7 Some awards may not be credible at the point of being granted, or equivalent to other degrees previously awarded;
- 2.4.8 The QAA quality code stated that the assessment process should be fair reliable and transparent - these temporary regulations offered uncertainty and unclear discretionary powers;
- 2.4.9 Senate was not consulted on the temporary regulations.

### **3. UNIVERSITY RESPONSE**

- 3.1 RECEIVED and **CONSIDERED**: paper ref: (SN/22-23/039) (*on file*).
- 3.2 The PVC Education, Prof T Jessop, introduced the University's response to the Resolution.
- 3.3 Prof K Whittington (APVC Quality & Standards) delivered a PowerPoint presentation summarising the key points (*on file*). The following was **NOTED**:
  - 3.3.1 The temporary regulations were designed to ensure the academic credibility and integrity of the University's awards were maintained, thereby protecting student's interests.
  - 3.3.2 The University is accountable to the OfS for compliance with its ongoing conditions of registration. These were the B conditions in relation to academic quality and standards. The OfS expected Universities to protect student interests along with many universities and Bristol had received a letter from the OfS in relation to the MAB which stated that the OfS expected the University, as a provider, to continue compliance with its ongoing conditions of registration.
  - 3.3.3. Whilst the QAA was no longer the dedicated quality body in England, the temporary regulations were drawn on guidance they have provided to Universities to help them consider how to mitigate the impact of the MAB.
  - 3.3.4 The temporary regulations were an important response to ensure that students were not disadvantaged, that they can graduate/progress on time where this is academically appropriate and that awards accurately reflect their academic potential.
  - 3.3.5 The temporary regulations were based both on principles established during the COVID pandemic and on those contained in Bristol's academic regulations. They rely on using evidence of students' achievement across the entire programme, and so attaining all of a programme's intended learning outcomes and external accreditation requirements where relevant.
  - 3.3.6 The temporary regulations aligned with accepted precedents in relation to discounting of units – for example current provisions around extenuating circumstances and the COVID package of mitigations. No dissent was raised by Senate when the COVID measures were implemented and the same methodology for implementation was used.
  - 3.3.7 The temporary regulations represented proportionate measures which would enable examination boards to determine whether or not it could make awards and whether these could be classified.
  - 3.3.8 These temporary regulations enabled the University to discharge its duty to students in line with all of our conditions of registration with the OfS, in particular B4 - ensuring that academic awards were credible and that they were credible compared to those granted previously, and B3 - delivering successful outcomes for its students in line with their academic attainment.

### **4. SUMMARY AND AGREED NEXT STEPS**

- 4.1 A discussion ensued, with comments being made in support of the motion and also against the motion.

- 4.2 The Vice-Chancellor invited Prof C Relton (Academic Staff member of the Board of Trustees) and Mx R Day (Student member of the Board of Trustees) to summarise the discussions and to provide feedback to the Board of Trustees at the meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> July:

For the motion

- 4.3 Concern that there remained a high degree of uncertainty about how marks would be allocated. Despite the published framework, there could still be a detrimental impact to a minority of students.
- 4.4 Concern was highlighted that changing regulations in light of a MAB was a severe 'intervention' when more may have been possible to change the root cause of the problem (i.e. resolve the MAB).
- 4.5 Some members commented that the University's argument that the temporary regulations followed previous precedent (i.e. during Covid or mitigations in place when a student has Extenuating Circumstances) did not stand. Under both Covid and ECs, a student's performance had been impacted. Under Covid the disruption was force majeure and under ECs the disruption was on the student side. In the case of the MAB, student performance had not been impacted, rather the marking process.
- 4.6 Concern that staff had not had the opportunity to discuss and debate the temporary regulations, and that there was a sense that these were pushed through 'under the radar' of many. Discussions reflected a sentiment that debate of temporary regulations 'bypassed Senate'.
- 4.7 The phenomenon of 'exit velocity' was raised, whereby students could gain momentum and see a concomitant rise in attainment towards the end of their degree period, thus placing more weighting on earlier attainment might unfairly bias the final outcome. Worries particularly around students not getting the classifications they required for job offers which they might otherwise have attained if their final term work had been marked.
- 4.8 Discussion around whether marks might be able to be included if they were completed after the exam board had sat and marks had been issued, i.e., could a conditional degree be awarded to be confirmed at a later date if any marking was pending?
- 4.9 Concern about excessive discretion given to Faculty Education Directors and Exam Board Chairs and School exam boards potentially being bypassed under the new regulations.
- 4.10 Concern around the new degrees being 'devalued' and not holding the same weight as degrees from previous and in future years.
- 4.11 Concern raised by the SU around the disparity between some students being extremely affected by the MAB and others not being affected at all.

Against the motion

- 4.12 The process for developing and implementing temporary regulations followed the procedures that were established during the Covid-19 pandemic and no concerns had been raised about these processes at that time.
- 4.13 Senate was assured that no processes had been 'flexed' to make regulation changes more rapidly or less thoroughly.
- 4.14 The temporary regulations were discussed at University Learning and Teaching Committee, whose membership included representatives from all Faculties, Student Sabbatical Education Officers. Further consultation was undertaken with Faculty Education Directors and the Chairs of UAQSC and UEC.
- 4.15 Temporary regulations were grounded in prior experience, drawing on advice from the QAA and regulatory bodies and were aimed at producing a measured set of mitigations.
- 4.16 All mitigations followed the principle of appraising whether the student had met the intended learning outcomes for the Unit or course concerned.
- 4.17 The 'exit velocity' issue was acknowledged. Marks could be updated at the September examination boards, if they became available, which could lead to classifications going up. This could not lead to classifications going down.

- 4.18 Student appeals could be pursued if needed using the established process and if appropriate a complaint could be raised. Student communications would provide information on how either route could be followed.
- 4.19 Senators were reminded of the motion: **Senate must uphold its responsibility, to safeguard academic standards across the whole University, and Senate is asked to declare its opinion to the Board of Trustees on whether to overturn these amended regulations.**
- 4.20 A vote (For/Against/Abstain) to uphold the motion was held at the end of the debate and the results were as follows:
- 4.20.1 **For:** 17% (11)  
4.20.2 **Against:** 78% (50)  
4.20.3 **Abstain:** 4% (3)

**THE MEETING CLOSED @ 15.08.**

SIGNED BY THE VICE-CHANCELLOR and PRESIDENT (CHAIR):

Redacted: personal data

Date: 9<sup>th</sup> October 2023