## **Undergraduate Academic Forum**

## (21st November 2024)

BACKGROUND

#### **Follow-up from UAF action points**

#### Provisional Timetables

10 minutes

* Students do not receive their timetables (including weekly class timings and locations) until Week 0/1.
* Part-time working students are disproportionately affected by this. An ability to plan work commitments around scheduled learning and teaching timings is important to ensuring that they are able to balance between paid work and schoolwork.
* Given that venues may vary based on class sizes and therefore advising, students do not need to know the location, only time and date.
* How can we ensure that students have better notice on what their semester’s schedules and commitments are likely to be?
* This will also help students (especially those in joint degrees) make early preferences for module choices.

#### Module Handbooks

10 minutes

* Students found an extremely variable level of information available to them in module handbooks.
* There currently does not seem to be a policy or universal guidance that covers basic requirements of all module handbooks.
* The following have been identified as must haves by the Education Committee:
  + Tutor(s) contact info.
  + Required attendance expectations
  + Marking criteria
  + Learning objectives, transferable skills/graduate attributes
  + Required readings
  + Extensions and self-certification procedure
  + Coursework and competencies
  + AI guidance and good academic practice
  + Referencing style
  + Weekly lecture themes
  + A link to the Appeals Policy and the Association Help Hub
* More so, we would like certain requirements necessary for accessibility purposes:
  + Format (always provide a word or screen-reader-friendly alternative)
  + An English alternative (for Modern Languages)
* How can we work to ensure this is standardised across all taught modules?
* Was this followed up on from the previous meeting?

**Biology and Chemistry Placement Programmes *Tuition Fees***

30 minutes

#### Context

An industrial placement is a mandatory component of any Integrated Masters programme within the School of Biology, with students unable to go for a year on placement changed onto the BSc track. Even for students in the School of Chemistry, where the 4000 level credits are taken at St Andrews, a placement is seen as an invaluable experience akin to ‘a golden ticket’ by both staff and students alike. Students unable to afford accommodation and other living costs alongside these tuition fees are therefore disadvantaged simply on the basis of their personal financial situation. For students with loans from either the SLC or SAAS, the respective agencies only cover 50% of the maximum fees with students being left to cover the shortfall from their own pockets (for RUK students in AY 2023-24, this amounted to £4,625).

Students in Biology and Chemistry were surveyed in Weeks 3-5 to find out the student perception of placements in industry and the effect of tuition fees on student experience. We received 75 responses spread across all levels of undergraduate study. Students describe these fees as a significant negative in their student experience and as adding an extra stress on top of finding the placement in the first place along with accommodation and adjusting to a new place to live. This is particularly those where there is little to no remuneration in their placement, with only 20% (n=10, 63%) of current 5000-level Biology students having undertaken paid placements last year.

Of students surveyed, 40 out of 61 (66%) reported that paying full tuition fees caused them financial worry and negatively impacted their mental health. A further 12 students reported that they either dropped out of the Integrated Masters programme or didn’t not consider it due to the costs involved.

Many express frustration at the costs charged despite their loss of access to physical university infrastructure and services available only on campus while paying out of their savings, and some are taking up a part-time job in addition to their 40hr/week placement just to stay afloat. The University justifies the tuition fee cost of a placement through access to some services, 30 credits of online taught content for the School of Biology and site visitations by supervisors.

In the School of Chemistry, content is taught asynchronously with assessments spaced periodically throughout the year but there is no scheduled contact time; the School of Biology sets coursework to be completed remotely and provides only limited contact time over four hour-long tutorial sessions via Teams. Both Schools have significantly reduced contact time and students are, for the most part, left to work in isolation. In AY 2023-24, students in Biology were offered two 20-minute Teams sessions and survey of 5000-level Biology students (n=10, 63%) reported that only 40% received a visit from their academic supervisor and no students received more than one visit. Other universities in the sector have recognised the accessibility issue that these fees pose to students without the income to cover the fees and are not charging full tuition fees in years where students are working in the private sector. Many of these placements are credit-weighted equivalently to programmes at St Andrews and include distance learning modules as a part of the assessment, mirroring the provision here (see table below).

Benchmarking within the sector

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Scottish Unis** | **English Unis** |
| Edinburgh (replaces final year project) | Leeds (credited) |
| Glasgow (credited) | Manchester (credited) |
| Aberdeen | Bristol (credited) |
| Robert Gordon | York (credited) |
| Napier | Newcastle |
| Dundee | Reading |
|  | Sheffield (credited) |
|  | Oxford |

\*Oxford has up to a third of the fees returned – Students pay in full whilst on a placement and then can claim it back

Provisional Data from the Disabled Students’ Network Survey

* The Disabled Students’ Network release an extensive survey every 2 years to help inform advocacy. This data is provisional as the survey is still open. This year, there is a question about disabled students' experience with support on placement, years abroad, etc.
* Currently, they have 76 responses for said question which is only for students who have attempted to access years abroad and placement. The following graph summarises the data:

A blue circle with orange triangle and a blue circle with white text

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

* When this data is filtered to only students taking Biology or Chemistry, no students reported being adequately supported.
* Student services have also confirmed that for those on placement programmes outside of the country, due to legal and regulatory rules, they are not allowed to access support services any more clinical than an occasional check-in (including counselling, therapy and wellbeing related services).

Discussion

* Overall views on the research collected.
* Expectations from student representatives.
* Possible next steps to action the financial inaccessibility impact of this programme.
* Roll within the context of a wider university employability strategy.

**Classroom technologies**

25 minutes

### SRC Motion

The full motion is attached as an appendix to this document. The resolves we need to action include:

1. The President of Education, Faculty Presidents, Disability Officer and Carers, Commuters, Mature, and Flexible Learners (CCMFL) Officer will advocate for a review of current lecture capture guidance and its effectivity.
   1. This includes discussing if using better captioning services remains a ‘disproportionate burden’ and what can be done for students that rely on this service if so.
2. This SRC mandates the President of Education, Faculty Presidents, Disability Officer and CCMFL Officer advocate for an audit of recording availability and captioning accuracy.
   1. This is to include breakdowns by school and modules, to see how many lecture recordings are available to students per module and what percentage of lectures are being successfully recorded and uploaded, through referencing timetables.
   2. To see how many lecture recordings available to students are from previous academic years.
   3. To include caption accuracy data of how many words are accurate in captions, and the most frequent types of captioning errors.
   4. The CCMFL Officer and Disability Officer to work with the university to survey experiences with lecture capture quality, as a supplement to the audit.
3. The Disability Officer, CCMFL Officer and President of Education will support extended support for staff in facilitating lecture capture – including an example bank of good practice, encouraging more uptake of training, and a long-term goal of automation. The Disability Officer and CCMFL Officer will also work alongside the university in improving resources for staff on good practice in recording lectures.
4. The Disability Officer, CCMFL Officer and President of Education will advocate for a centralised method to report issues with recording and captioning, along with integrating feedback on this into the current MEQ structure. This should also include an improved way to keep track of staff reports of technical failures.

This is following on from an agenda item from last semester on technological failures in classrooms led by the Science and Medicine Faculty President.

What are some of the short-term and long-term steps we can take to action this motion? What is already being done, and what can be improved upon?

**Self-Certificates**

25 minutes

### Context

An email was sent to all students in the School of Philosophy, Social Anthropology and Film Studies on February 18th:

“As a School we are no longer approving self-certifications. This means if you submit one and do not attend a lecture/seminar/tutorial you will be marked as absent. Please continue to submit them if you know you are going to miss a class, so we are aware of why you have missed it and can consider this at the Special Circumstances board when deciding on penalties for absence. Please check the undergraduate handbook for information on the standard penalties.”

Some comments provided to the SRC Disabilities Officer and their subcommittee:

* Disabled students are worried that this change in policy will be used unfairly to penalise absences. Despite the reassurances given by PAFS, disables students still have these fears. I feel this is due to the way PAFS communicated this change, the unnecessary stress (tangible or not) this places on disabled students, and the complete lack of actual justification given for this change
* On that last point, students are immensely confused by this change because in all of the emails being sent out, there are the assertions that ‘this doesn’t really change anything’ - so why on earth alter this at all, and cause all of this distress for students?
* Disability Services, Student Services, and a number of members of staff within PAFS had no idea this change was happening. Disabled PAFS students who are, understandably, going to their disability advisors or school EDI reps are facing complete confusion from staff who had no idea this change was taking place. This is only serving to double down on the stress disabled students are feeling.
* Without giving any personal details, we have heard concerns from disabled students who have described having anxiety attacks over this change, considered dropping subjects, and concluding that university workloads must just not be for them. These are not the thoughts and feelings which any department at this university should be causing, intentionally or not, students to feel.

Discussion

Based on feedback from School Reps, there is a sense that some of these have been mitigated by later communications. However, it might be worth clarifying:

* What this means for:
  + Academic Alerts
  + Students with reasonable adjustment plans
  + Disabled students
  + International students with visa compliance responsibilities
* Future policies that may be dependent on self-certificates (like religious observance or in some schools, extensions).
* Overall, the practice around reporting absences also tends to vary quite a bit (e.g. few schools need email explanations on top of self-certificates) why is this the case?
* In the future, how can we ensure that student representatives are meaningfully informed and engaged in the decision-making and dissemination of such changes so that negative impacts can be mitigated and all affected student groups are adequately considered?

### **AOCB**

[Teaching Awards](https://www.yourunion.net/representation/academic/teaching-awards/) and [One Union Awards](https://www.yourunion.net/about/awards/one-union-awards/)

* Staff are also able to nominate students for the latter. Can we help market it to them?

Issues of Disabilities and Access in surveys and SSCCs

#### UAF Dates

* April 17th