

## University of Birmingham

### **Report of the Thematic Review of Postgraduate and Undergraduate Teaching Assistants**

Note: the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee considered a fuller version of this report at its meeting on 4 May and had a detailed debate on the issues arising. The key recommendations from that discussion are presented in this summary report to the Senate.

#### **Origins of the Thematic Review**

1. In June 2008, Senate approved a number of revisions to the Code of Practice on The Teaching and Academic Support of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students by Postgraduate Teaching Assistants and Undergraduates (hereafter 'the Code of Practice'), subject to:  
  

*'a review of the operation of the Code of Practice as part of the BIQAES process, following a period of detailed consultation with Schools, for report to the Senate in March 2009;'*
2. In September 2008, the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (UQAEC) set the following objectives for a Thematic Review of Postgraduate and Undergraduate Teaching Assistants:
  - (a) to identify areas of variance with the Code
  - (b) to consult with Schools regarding the reasons for variance
  - (c) to consider any amendments to the Code which might be required
  - (d) to ensure provision of effective support for PGTA's and their co-ordinators, including training, mentoring, access to learning materials
  - (e) to consider PGTA progression and completion rates
  - (f) to consider changes, as appropriate, to the contract used to appoint and pay PGTA's
  - (g) to clarify the terminology used to refer to students carrying out various types of teaching activity and to confirm which are subject to the Code of Practice.

Items (a) to (c) were addressed by UQAEC, whilst items (d) to (g) were subsequently referred to the Graduate School Management Board for consideration.
3. A progress report was submitted to Senate in June 2009. Senate agreed that:
  - (a) *a further two rounds of exemptions from the Code of Practice on the Teaching and Academic Support of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students by Postgraduate Teaching Assistants and Undergraduates should take place;*
  - (b) *the Graduate School should review the provision of support and training for PGTA's, the contract for their employment and progression / completion rates;*
  - (c) *Senate should receive conclusions to the Thematic Review at its meeting in June 2010.*

## **Outcomes in 2009/10**

### **The Review of the Code of Practice - objectives (a) – (c):**

- (a) to identify areas of variance with the Code;
  - (b) to consult with Schools regarding the reasons for variance;
  - (c) to consider any amendments to the Code which might be required.
4. **In relation to objective (a)**, Senate agreed that the process of requesting exemptions from the terms of the Code of Practice would be the primary means of identifying areas of variance in current practice from the Code's requirements.
5. Two rounds of the exemption process took place in 2008/09 and 2009/10. In 2009/10, 16 requests for exemption were received from eight Schools, across every College except Medical and Dental Sciences (as detailed in Appendix 2) and 15 requests were granted. In comparison, in 2008/09, 27 requests for exemption were approved out of 44 submitted.
6. The notable fall in requests for exemption from the terms of the Code of Practice and the fact that all exemptions were granted (after clarifying points) appears to indicate two things: firstly, it appears that the process is working as a quality check on teaching, and ensuring that use of PGTAs is limited to appropriate areas; secondly, the involvement of Directors of Quality Assurance and Enhancement has meant that only requests for exemption from the terms of the Code of Practice with merit are submitted to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for approval.
7. An analysis of the approved exemptions, by School and by level of teaching for both 2008/09 and 2009/10 is provided in Appendices 1 and 2. The exemption forms simply request an indication of which clause of the Code of Practice will be contravened, and do not request precise information about the quantity of marking or teaching to be carried out by the student, e.g. in percentage terms as part of a module. Therefore, it is not possible to provide summary information at this greater level of detail.

### **Conclusion**

8. The summary analyses in Appendices 1 and 2 and a sampling review of some of the individual exemption requests indicates that there is no obvious University-wide pattern in the exemptions which are requested and / or approved. The majority appear to be for one-off situations, although some Schools tend to use students in teaching or supporting certain courses on a regular basis.
9. Therefore, it seems that there is no particular clause of the Code of Practice which is inappropriately limiting the involvement of students in teaching and support activity and that the Code of Practice is fit for purpose in safe-guarding the involvement of students in teaching activity.
10. **In relation to objectives (b) and (c)**, a survey was issued to College Postgraduate Leads in March 2009 regarding use of doctoral researchers in teaching, (see paragraph 13 below), which included a question asking whether they now felt that the Code of Practice was fit for purpose, assuming exemptions could still be sought. If they did not feel this was the case, Colleges were asked to outline the remaining changes they wished to

make, bearing in mind the need to ensure appropriate assurances are in place for any students involved in teaching.

11. Four of the five Colleges responded, with a broad consensus in at least three Colleges that the Code of Practice was fit for purpose. There were some requests for interpretation of the Code and some suggestions for changes, mainly from EPS and LES Colleges, which are set out in appendix 3, together with comments from UQAEC on the points raised.
12. UQAEC gave careful consideration to the points raised and decided that it would recommend some minor amendments to the Code of Practice, for the purpose of clarification only. These include clarification regarding the responsibilities of Schools with regard to training, as the responses from Colleges suggested that there was not widespread understanding that provision of appropriate training was a requirement, not optional.

**Support and training for PGTAS - objectives (d) – (g) - referred to the University Graduate School:**

- (d) to ensure provision of effective support for PGTAs and their co-ordinators, including training, mentoring, access to learning materials;
  - (e) to consider PGTA progression and completion rates;
  - (f) to consider changes, as appropriate, to the contract used to appoint and pay PGTAs;
  - (g) to clarify the terminology used to refer to students carrying out various types of teaching activity and to confirm which are subject to the Code of Practice.
13. For the purposes of investigating objectives (d) – (g), the Graduate School gathered information on both University and College/School sources of teaching support and development for doctoral researchers that are paid to teach and/or provide academic support within the University. A survey was sent to each College asking for the following information:
    - i. The number of doctoral researchers engaged in paid teaching and/or academic support.
    - ii. Whether these doctoral researchers are on contracts and, if so, how many.
    - iii. The type of contracts used.
    - iv. Details of the teaching support and training provided to their doctoral researchers.
    - v. If known, the number of their doctoral researchers that have attended APOD teacher training sessions in 2008-2010.
    - vi. Whether, in their view, the Code of Practice is fit for purpose.
  14. A detailed analysis of the information gathered from this survey was presented to UQAEC. The key findings were as follows:
    - i. The data provided by Colleges regarding the numbers of doctoral researchers (and other students) involved in teaching and academic support does not correspond, in all cases, with the reported numbers of students employed on a contract for their teaching.

- ii. In light of (i) above, it is not currently possible to make an accurate judgement as to whether all students involved in teaching are attending the APOD teacher training sessions, as required.
- iii. There is no centrally held, comprehensive record (in HR or Finance) of the doctoral researchers who are on a contract of employment for teaching / academic support, so the University has no way of monitoring all PGTA numbers other than by drawing on the records kept by individual Schools and Departments.
- iv. HR and Finance records do not differentiate between students who are in receipt of a studentship which carries associated teaching responsibilities, and students who are employed to teach, independently of their programme; further work is required in order to develop appropriate terminology to distinguish between the different ways in which students are employed to provide teaching and academic support (in fulfilment of objective g).
- v. The University's student record system does not record whether or not a doctoral researcher is employed to carry out teaching or academic support. As a result it is not currently possible to differentiate those that teach from those doctoral researchers who do not in order to ascertain whether there are any differences in their progression and completion rates.

### **Recommendations**

- 15. Senate is invited to **endorse** the minor amendments to the Code of Practice which have been approved by APRC, as set out in appendix 4, to take effect from 1 August 2010.
- 16. Senate is invited to **approve** the recommendations:
  - (a) that the University Graduate School continue to monitor the provision and take-up of training provided by APOD and by Schools / Colleges for doctoral researchers involved in teaching or academic support and to investigate the issue of unpaid time spent by doctoral researchers on supervision of undergraduate and Masters project work (reported by the College of Life and Environmental Sciences);
  - (b) that the College HR Business Partners be charged with ensuring that all postgraduate and undergraduate students involved in teaching or academic support have a contract, that terminology be developed for distinguishing between different types of roles and contracts, and that copies of all PGTA contracts are held by the University centrally, as well as copies being kept within Schools.

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Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching, Learning and Quality)

May 2010

# Appendix 1

## Breakdown of approved exemptions – 2008/09

	Discipline		Level				Level of teacher		College				
School	Science	Art	C	I	H	M	PG	UG	A&L	EPS	LES	MDS	SS
Biosciences	4			2	2		2	2			4		
Chemical Engineering	3			3			3			3			
Computer Science	3		1			2	2	1		3			
Electronic, Electrical and Computer Engineering	1			1			1			1			
English and American and Canadian Studies		3			1	2	3		3				
Government and Society		2		2			2						2
Languages, Cultures, Art History and Music		1			1		1		1				
Mathematics	1			1			1			1			
Physics and Astronomy	5			1	4		5			5			
Sport and Exercise Science	4			4			4				4		
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>

No response received from Health and Population Sciences

# Appendix 2

## Breakdown of approved exemptions – 2009/10

	Discipline		Level				Level of teacher		College				
School	Science	Art	C	I	H	M	PG	UG	CAL	EPS	LES	MDS	SS
Biosciences	2			2			2				2		
Computer Science	2					2	2			2			
English and American and Canadian Studies		2			1	1	2		2				
History & Cultures		1		1			1		1				
Languages, Cultures, Art History and Music		2		1	1		2		2				
Physics	2				2		2			2			
Social Policy		1		1			1						1
Sport and Exercise Science	4			4			4				4		
Total	10	6		9	4	3	16		5	4	6		1

**Comments from Colleges regarding the Code of Practice**

College of Arts & Law

1. The College agreed the current Code of Practice was fit for purpose. It did state however that it would be helpful if former, as well as current, doctoral researchers could be PGTA's. It noted that in the current job climate this arrangement would benefit both parties.

*UQAEC commentary: As former doctoral researchers could be employed as Part-time Visiting Lecturers, they fall outside the scope of the Code of Practice which relates to students only and therefore no change should be needed to the Code of Practice.*

College of Engineering & Physical Sciences

2. The majority of Schools in Engineering and Physical Sciences either agreed that the Code of Practice was fit for purpose or returned no comment disagreeing with this statement. The Schools of Computer Science, Civil Engineering and Physics raised some concerns with the current Code of Practice and proposed the following changes:

- (a) That a principle be introduced whereby once an exemption is granted, then it remains granted for future years (unless it depends on particular individuals which may change from year to year).

*UQAEC commentary: exemptions are awarded to individual students, taking into account their specific experience. Even where it is intended for the same student to be involved in teaching on a specific module for a limited number of years, it was considered that it would be difficult to keep track of when that exemption was due to end, with a consequent risk that it might transfer to another student without appropriate checking, or review of whether the exemption was still required. UQAEC decided that it was preferable to continue with an annual exemption process.*

*UQAEC affirmed that it did not consider it appropriate to grant exemptions for an unlimited number of years, enabling any students to be involved in teaching / academic support for a particular module, as this is in contravention to the principle of an exemption (which is meant to be for exceptional, non-recurrent circumstances) and there would be no central oversight of the students' suitability for this work.*

- (b) That there is recognition of "lab-based" assessments, which are small, frequent (typically weekly or biweekly) assessments in a lab situation in which it is essential that the work is assessed there and then, so the student can get immediate feedback. These are considered suitable for PGTA's to mark, regardless of level, provided there is appropriate monitoring, moderation and record keeping. Exemptions along these lines have been granted before, but it is proposed that this should become accepted practice in the Code of Practice and should no longer require exemption.

*UQAEC commentary: UQAEC noted that the provisions in the Code of Practice regarding use of students in teaching / academic support apply to all types of assessment. It did not wish to exempt any particular type of assessment from the Code of Practice, thereby removing all controls over the way in which students are involved in such assessment. If this were done for one type of assessment, it would likely lead to requests for other types of assessment also to be exempted.*

- (c) That there is recognition of the use of PGAs in marking exams above level 1.

UQAEC commentary: *The Code of Practice currently allows PGAs to be involved in summative assessment for levels 2 and 3 (see section 2.6) but up to a limit of 30% of the module mark. It was assumed that the College was suggesting that PGAs should be allowed to mark a greater proportion of assessment at levels 2 and 3 (Intermediate and Honours level). UQAEC considered that it was not appropriate to increase the proportion of marking by students at levels 2 and 3, in order to maintain confidence amongst students and external examiners in the rigorousness of marking processes at these levels which contribute to the final award.*

### College of Life & Environmental Sciences

3. The College submitted the following comments on the current Code of Practice:

- (a) The School of GEES considers that section 1.2 of the Code of Practice (see extract below) is insufficiently clear in relation to the situation in GEES where doctoral researchers on School studentships are obliged to do 50 hours of teaching as part of the terms of receiving the studentship – it is possible to argue that this is part of their approved programme of study. The School requests clarification as to whether or not the Code of Practice applies to this group of students.

*“1.2 This Code of Practice does not apply to those students undertaking teaching duties as part of their approved programme of study, for example those on teaching training programmes or those undertaking ‘peer marking’ as part of a module.”*

UQAEC commentary: *it was confirmed that the Code of Practice does apply to students carrying out teaching duties in accordance with the terms of a studentship. It was agreed that this would be made clear in the Code of Practice.*

- (b) The College queries section 1.4.2 of the Code of Practice that states that “academic support should not involve any substantial amount of preparation” (see extract below). The College uses doctoral researchers for academic support which in their view does require them to do substantial preparation; for example, doctoral researchers facilitate workshops in which UG students work through numerical and other sorts of problems. Although the College supplies the doctoral researchers with worked answers, the demonstrators do have to work through the problems so that they can explain them to the students. The College considers this to be substantial preparation, although the length of time taken would depend on the individual demonstrator.

*“1.4.2 ‘Academic support’ includes laboratory demonstrating and helping students in classes with practical work including laboratory-based work, study skills workshops, assisting with fieldwork activities, mentoring, managing e-learning discussion boards, peer assisted support and language laboratory support. The academic support should not involve any substantial amount of preparation and should be closely supervised by the academic staff member responsible for the module.”*

UQAEC commentary: *UQAEC reviewed the two types of contract currently in use to employ students in teaching / academic support: the small group teacher contract and the postgraduate demonstrator contract. It was noted that the contract for small group*



*teachers clearly states that 'Each contact hour is assumed to require a further hour of preparatory or follow up work', and the maximum number of hours of employment (6 hours) per week includes preparation and marking time.*

*Similarly, the contract for postgraduate demonstrators states that 'the hours (including preparation and marking time) ....shall not exceed an average of six hours per week'. However, the 1 to 1 ratio of preparation to contact hours is not stated in this case, indicating that the preparation is expected to take less time. The 1 to 1 ratio can be read as a indication of 'substantial' preparation in this context, applicable to postgraduate demonstrators only.*

*Therefore, provided that demonstrators are not spending an equal amount of time in preparation as they are in delivery of academic support, then they are not considered to be undertaking 'substantial' preparation, which would be in contravention to the Code of Practice.*

- (c) The College wishes to highlight that the current Code of Practice does not cover day-to-day supervision of UG and Masters project work by doctoral researchers. This is not an area where any doctoral researchers get paid but often they can be expected to take on an unreasonable amount of responsibility. The College is currently discussing this and hopes to agree on best practice that should then be adhered to across the College.

*UQAEC commentary:* *UQAEC requested the Graduate School Management Board to gather further information on this issue, so that a decision could then be taken as to whether and how this matter should be addressed within the Code of Practice.*

#### College of Medical & Dental Sciences

4. The College agreed the current Code of Practice was fit for purpose.

#### College of Social Sciences

5. No response was provided.

**Code of Practice on the Teaching and Academic Support of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students by Postgraduate Teaching Assistants and Undergraduates**

**Proposed amendments to take effect from 1 August 2010**

Proposed additions are underlined and deletions are struck through:

**1. Preamble**

- 1.1 This Code of Practice applies to all teaching and academic support of undergraduate and postgraduate taught students by postgraduate students or other undergraduate students where the student providing the teaching or support is doing so in addition to their own programme of study. It does apply to students carrying out teaching or academic support duties as a condition of receipt of a studentship.
- 1.2 This Code of Practice does not apply to those students undertaking teaching duties as part of their approved programme of study, for example those on teaching training programmes or those undertaking 'peer marking' as part of a module. For these students separate provisions are made for their training and supervision and for quality assurance of their activities. This Code of Practice does not apply to Honorary Lecturers or contracted staff of the University who may also be students. For these students the regulations and terms applicable to all academic staff apply.
- 1.3 This Code of Practice differentiates between postgraduate students and undergraduate students in terms of the type, the amount and the level of the teaching or academic support that they may do.
- 1.4 This Code of Practice differentiates between **'teaching'**, **'academic support'**, **'formative assessment'** and **'summative assessment'**.
  - 1.4 .1 **'Teaching'** includes undertaking occasional lectures, holding seminars and tutorials, facilitating workshops, assisting with the supervision of undergraduate research projects or dissertations and all activities included under 'academic support'. The teaching may involve a measure of responsibility and discretion in a limited field; it may also involve substantial preparation at least equal to and sometimes greater than the time spent in actual teaching.
  - 1.4 .2 **'Academic support'** includes laboratory demonstrating and helping students in classes with practical work including laboratory-based work, study skills workshops, assisting with fieldwork activities, mentoring, managing e-learning discussion boards, peer assisted support and language laboratory support. The academic support should not involve

any substantial<sup>1</sup> amount of preparation and should be closely supervised by the academic staff member responsible for the module.

- 1.4 .3 **‘Formative assessment’** includes assessment that does not contribute to the final award (as a mark or as credit), but is undertaken for developmental purposes. Formative assignments, essays or presentations may be required of students in order for feedback to be provided prior to students undertaking a piece of assessed work which does count towards the degree classification.
- 1.4 .4 **‘Summative assessment’** includes assessed work which contributes to the final award (as a mark or as credit), such as unseen examinations, essays, dissertations or presentations.
- 1.4 .5 It is noted that some activities may fit into more than one of the categories above, for example fieldwork which may involve leading activities including devising the schedule for the work (more likely considered as ‘teaching’) or may involve supporting academic staff by providing additional support as a source of advice (more likely considered as ‘academic support’). In such cases the academic member of staff responsible for the module should use their judgment, consulting with the Head of School if necessary.

## 2. Postgraduate Students involved in teaching or academic support

- 2.1 A Head of School may appoint postgraduate students as Postgraduate Teaching Assistants (PGTAs). Postgraduate Teaching Assistants may be known by another name in some Schools but the duties and responsibilities should be commensurate with those described in this Code of Practice.
- 2.2 Postgraduate Teaching Assistants may be involved in the **teaching** of and in the provision of **academic support** for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students following appropriate training and subject to supervision by academic staff.
- 2.3 Postgraduate Teaching Assistants will not be the sole or main supervisor of an undergraduate research project or dissertation including MSci/MEng projects. Postgraduate Teaching Assistants will not be module convenors, responsible for a module and may only deliver such teaching as specified in this Code of Practice.
- 2.4 Postgraduate Teaching Assistants may be involved in the **formative assessment** of undergraduate students at all stages of an undergraduate programme and of postgraduate taught students.
- 2.5 Postgraduate Teaching Assistants may be involved in the **summative assessment** of undergraduate students at stage 1 of an undergraduate programme, where this assessment is subject to supervision and moderation

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<sup>1</sup> Substantial preparation for students involved in academic support is considered to be where the time spent on preparation is equal to, or more than, the time spent on delivery of the academic support.

by academic staff.

- 2.6 Postgraduate Teaching Assistants may be involved in **summative assessment** at stages 2 and 3 or for postgraduate taught students where each individual piece of assessment does not exceed more than 10% of the overall mark for the module and the total does not exceed 30% of the overall mark of the module. In all cases, this assessment should be subject to supervision and moderation by academic staff.
- 2.7 Where a School wishes to make an exception to this rule (i.e. to allow PGTA's to be involved in summative assessment other than as specified in 2.6), the proposal should be approved in advance by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality & Students).
- 2.8 Each School will complete a PGTA checklist as part of the BIQAES process for consideration by the College Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee.

### **3. Undergraduate Students involved in teaching or academic support**

- 3.1 A Head of School may approve in exceptional cases the use of undergraduate students in the provision of **academic support** for undergraduate students where this academic support is subject to appropriate and documented supervision by academic staff.
- 3.2 Undergraduate students may not be involved in the teaching of undergraduate students or in the marking of assessed work, whether formative or summative. Where a School wishes to make an exception to this rule based on the expertise of the undergraduates concerned, or in relation to a particular piece of assessed work, this should be approved in advance by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Academic Quality and Students.
- 3.3 Each School will provide an annual report to the College Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee outlining the use made of undergraduates including the number employed and on which modules, the activities they have been involved with and the training and support provided by the School. The College will confirm that these reports have been received and reviewed through the BIQAES Annual Checklist.

### **4. General Provisions**

- 4.1 The terms and duties of engagement must permit the Postgraduate Teaching Assistants and any undergraduates involved in academic support to complete the work for their own degree within the normal time period for that degree.
- 4.2 The teaching hours of a full time student who is a Postgraduate Teaching Assistant shall not exceed six hours per week averaged across the academic year. Training, preparation and marking time should be included in this six hour period. The weekly maximum may be redistributed across the academic year with the prior agreement of the student concerned.

4.3 The rates of remuneration shall be as determined from time to time by the University, and may be subject to limit by research councils or other sponsors.

4.4 Neither Postgraduate Teaching Assistants nor undergraduates involved in academic support shall attend Boards of Examiners.

## **5. Responsibilities of the School in relation to Training**

5.1 Postgraduate Teaching Assistants and undergraduates involved in academic support must receive appropriate training and support for the duties they are required to perform. This shall include attending generic training provided by the University but should also include discipline specific and module specific training provided by the School / College.

5.2 It shall be the responsibility of Heads of School to satisfy themselves that appropriate procedures are operated throughout the School for determining the suitability of individual students to undertake any teaching or academic support requested of them. Module conveners are responsible for ensuring that Postgraduate Teaching Assistants and undergraduates have relevant knowledge of the discipline and the subjects to be covered, a strong command of English (or the relevant language if undertaking activities in a foreign language) and/or the requisite computing or laboratory skills. Interviews or practical tests may be used to assess these skills and experience. Where practicable a probation period should be in operation.

5.3 The School should ensure that students involved in demonstrating have hands-on experience of the equipment to be used and guidance concerning the common problems and expected outcome of the experiment, and have been fully briefed on the safety procedures for that experiment and those in force for the laboratory concerned; a note of such guidance given should be retained.

5.4 Postgraduate Teaching Assistants involved in marking should be given information and guidance on marking schemes, assessment criteria and worked examples where appropriate.

## **6. Responsibilities of the School in relation to Supervision and Monitoring**

6.1 In each School using Postgraduate Teaching Assistants there should be an identified member of staff, 'the co-ordinator', responsible for overall co-ordination, monitoring and quality assurance (which may be carried out by different staff). This could include observation of teaching sessions, the use of evaluation forms, or holding review meetings for all students involved in teaching or academic support to discuss issues and techniques. Particular attention should be given to new appointments and a probation period considered.

6.2 Each Postgraduate Teaching Assistant should have a 'mentor', an experienced member of staff who could provide advice and support as necessary. Where possible this should be someone in addition to the member

of staff identified as the co-ordinator, but may be the research mentor.

- 6.3 In all cases a member of academic staff shall be responsible for the work of the Postgraduate Teaching Assistants and for the module overall, both for the delivery of teaching and for assessment.

## **7. Responsibilities of the College**

- 7.1 The College, through the College Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, will monitor the appointment, training, supervision and monitoring of Postgraduate Teaching Assistants and undergraduates involved in academic support through the completion of a PGTA checklist by each relevant School and through direct consideration via School Review. The College will also monitor the academic progression of students who undertake these duties in order to ensure timely completion of research objectives.
- 7.2 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students), will be the approval body for any exceptional appointments (as detailed above).
- 7.3 The College, through the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, will report any concerns in relation to generic training, remuneration, supervision or other concerns to the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee.