Inclusion of Recommended Patterns of Teaching (RPT) in a tabular format in undergraduate course handbooks: a paper containing background, explanation and additional guidance[1]

Paper date: 31 May 2017

A. What is the background to this?

1. The *Policy and Guidance on course information (P&G course info)*[2] was introduced in Trinity term 2015 with the intention of enhancing the quality and accessibility of information for students about their course. The *P&G* defines the information to be provided to all students on taught courses, including suggested standard text where appropriate. It contains a template for course handbooks. Courses are not required to follow the format or order of the template, but are expected to cover the material specified in it.

2. When the template was launched for 2015-16, one area that was identified as in need of further development was how information about teaching and learning (section 3.1 of the course handbook template) was presented to students.

3. Reviews of the implementation of the *P&G course info* (which have looked at all available course handbooks)[3] have confirmed that the information provided in course handbooks in relation to teaching provision could be enhanced:

> It is understandable that the way that information is presented on the type and amount of teaching a student can expect to receive will vary depending on the type of course involved. However, the amount and level of detail provided in many course handbooks was minimal and for many courses it was very difficult to get any clear sense of how many contact hours a student would be likely to experience. Handbooks often included descriptions of the type of teaching, but less frequently included the number or duration of sessions. It would be very difficult for students on many courses to get a picture of how many contact hours they would experience. This is an area where course handbooks could be significantly improved. (Paragraph 18 of Annex A of QASC(TT16)19)

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[1] This paper, prepared on 31 May 2017, draws content from a number of committee papers and other documents:
- Education Committee Circular Ref 18-16/17: *Communication from Education Committee: inclusion of recommended patterns of teaching in course handbooks* [This document, circulated after the end of HT17, provided advance notice of the intention to include an RPT template in the *P&G course info*.]
- Quality Assurance Subcommittee paper QASC(TT17)11 *Policy and Guidance on course information*: addition of template for recommended patterns of teaching (RPT)
- Senior Tutors' Committee paper SCSTC 17/37 *Policy and Guidance on course information*: addition of template for recommended patterns of teaching (RPT)

[2] http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pandgoncourseinformation/

[3] QASC(HT16)06 and QASC(TT16)09.

4. The area of student workload was the subject of one of the recommendations of the University's 2016 Higher Education Review carried out by QAA.

> Recommendation 3: Provide explicit guidance to enable a consistent approach to student workload across the University (Expectations B1, A3.1, B3, B4, B6).

5. The University's HER action plan[4] included work on recommended patterns of teaching (RPT), on the basis that having clear, accessible information on RPT provides an essential starting point to enable departments/faculties and colleges to consider the expectations made of students in terms of workload.

B. How does this fit in with other policy requirements?

6. The *P&G course info* as published in Trinity term 2015 requires the inclusion in handbooks of information about:

> Teaching patterns - explain the number of lectures or classes, the number of hours students are expected to spend in practicals, project work, or fieldwork; the normal tutorial pattern for the course or the year in question. Also give information on class sizes where applicable. (Section 3.1 of the course handbook template)

7. The *Policy and Guidance on undergraduate learning and teaching[5]* (approved by Undergraduate Panel in Michaelmas term 2016 after consultation with Senior Tutors' Committee (STC)) states that:

> All those bodies responsible for an undergraduate degree course must publish recommended patterns of teaching covering all forms of teaching including tutorials. These should be readily available to staff and students within course handbooks (and/or equivalent online material). (Section 3.21 of the *P&G UGLT*)

C. What additional information will be required in course handbooks?

8. The *P&G course info* was updated during TT17 to specify that information about the RPT for the course should be included in tabular format.

9. Undergraduate course handbooks already contain information on how the course is taught, but this information is often distributed in various sections and it can be difficult for students to gain a clear picture of what faculty/department teaching is offered overall, as well as for colleges to be clear what the department's view of the RPT for the course is.

10. From 2017-18, information about the RPT should be provided in a tabular form within the course handbook. The RPT table can be situated within the main body of the course handbook, or included as an annex or appendix (with an appropriate link from the relevant section of the course handbook).

11. The RPT template captures the following data:
    - *Type* of teaching provision: lectures, classes, tutorials, practicals, project or dissertation/thesis supervision

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[4] The HER action plan can be found here: http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/qa/extqualityassurance/

[5] http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pguglearningandteaching/

- *Provider*[6] of teaching: department, college

- *Amount* of teaching: how many hours per term

  o Where teaching is provided only in a specific term or order, this should be specified.

  o Where teaching can be provided in any term (in agreement with tutors/departmental advisors), this should be noted.

- A statement that indicates that colleges may, where appropriate, provide teaching in different quantities or formats than that presented in the table[7].

D. What work has been undertaken to make sure that this can actually be done?

12. Work has been undertaken in Education Policy Support to develop a template suitable for recording RPT across all departments, to offer students a clear overview of the teaching that they can expect at different stages of their course. The use of the template was piloted with a range of courses across all divisions to ensure that it has sufficient flexibility to cater for a broad range of course structures and teaching methods while retaining a common outline. This work has been carried out by EPS officers in consultation with colleagues in the relevant academic departments, with the intention of ensuring that policy requirements were not imposed which departments felt to be undeliverable.

13. The RPT information for the pilot courses (which deliberately included some courses which divisional officers advised would be more challenging to map in a tabular format) is available from the *P&G course info* webpage[8] as exemplars, so that other courses can see the different ways in which the tabular format can be adapted to deal with complex provision.

14. The experience of carrying out the pilot has demonstrated that most of the information required to populate the template is available within existing course information, although in some cases dispersed across several locations and formats, and the remainder is known by the course administrators/organisers: the job of populating the RPT template is therefore a **bringing together of known information** rather than the derivation and agreement of new information.

E. Why do we need to do this?

15. The most important reason we need to do this is so that clearer information is available to individual students and to colleges. The stimulus for putting this information in

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[6] For inter-collegiate classes and other similar arrangements, the provider in the RPT is the body perceived by the student as providing the taught provision, rather than the body funding that provision.

[7] Not all of the exemplars include this statement but final versions published in course handbooks should include appropriate notes to this effect.

[8] http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pandgoncourseinformation/

course handbooks rather than in alternative documentation is to maintain the position that the course handbook (alongside the *Examination Regulations* and the examination conventions) is the key information source for a course.

16. Clearer information about recommended patterns of teaching will enable:

- <u>students</u> to make informed choices about the papers or options that they decide to study and to see in one place how the teaching provision they receive dovetails together. In addition, in instances where students are concerned about the volume of teaching that they are receiving, it will enable them to identify how their college's provision relates to the pattern recommended by the department.

- <u>colleges</u> to understand the pattern of teaching expected by the department(s) for particular courses. While colleges will continue to be able to provide teaching in the way that they see fit, particularly to meet the needs of particular students, Senior Tutors are clear that there is a value to having the recommended pattern clearly laid out. Indeed, patterns provided by departments and faculties have been published by STC for some years[9]. However these are not consistently presented, are (in some cases) lacking in detail and are not necessarily up-to-date. The information gathered by STC is not student-facing or an obvious source of information for those involved in teaching on a course.

- <u>faculties and departments</u> to see and reflect on their own patterns in a format that enables comparison to cognate subjects.

17. The UK higher education funding bodies (jointly with the National Union of Students, UniversitiesUK, GuildHE and the Association of Colleges) have recently published a guide to good practice in providing information to prospective undergraduate students.[10] The guidance makes clear the importance of providing an overview of teaching and learning activities. While this guidance covers information for prospective rather than current students, it illustrates the increasing sector-wide expectations regarding the quality of information for students.

F. Does this mean that departments/faculties are telling colleges how to provide teaching?

18. The requirement for departments and faculties to set out the recommended pattern of teaching for the courses they are responsible for does **not** represent a change to the current position in which colleges can choose to provide a different pattern of teaching to that recommended. Instead, it makes the recommendations transparent, so that informed decisions can be made about where a college might wish to depart from those recommendations. Such departures might be for a variety of reasons, including the needs of particular students or the decision by the college or its tutors that other delivery patterns were pedagogically appropriate. These could include (but are not limited to) the provision of a smaller number of tutorials than stated in the RPT if the

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[9] https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/hierarchy/colleges/confcoll/seniortutors, Key Documents, Recommended Patterns of Teaching

[10] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/provinfo/

tutorial group size is particularly small, or the use of classes to replace tutorials where appropriate.

19. As noted in paragraph 14 above**Error! Reference source not found.**, the process of piloting the population of the RPT templates for a number of different courses has illustrated that the information already exists to populate the templates. The provision of RPT information is not intended to represent the unilateral imposition on colleges of departmental requirements, but instead to be the documentation of **existing shared understanding** between departments and colleges of the usual ways in which particular papers are taught.

G.   What resources are available to support us?

20. As noted in Section D above, a number of exemplars are available which illustrate the different ways the tabular format can be adapted to suit the requirements of particular courses.

21. EPS officers will be available during the Long Vacation 2017 to advise and assist departments with preparing their completed RPT information. Please contact Dr Rebecca Ehata (rebecca.ehata@admin.ox.ac.uk, (2) 86604) in Education Policy Support.

H.   What follow-up will there be?

22. A desk-based review of course handbooks in MT17 will be undertaken, to identify any cases where further work on the RPT information is required. This implementation review will also provide an opportunity to identify any courses where the RPT indicates unusually heavy or light student workloads.

I.   Are there other new requirements for course handbooks for next year?

23. Minor updates to the *P&G course info* have been made to reflect changes required as a consequence of the introduction of the revised version of the *P&G on undergraduate learning & teaching* earlier this academic year. These are highlighted in the course handbook template and can be summarised as:

- An expectation that course handbooks include information about the research-teaching nexus (insertion in section 2.4 of the course handbook template).

- A requirement for the inclusion of information explaining the purpose of tutorials (for UG course handbooks only) (insertion in section 3.1 of the course handbook template).

- Rewording in section 3.5 of the course handbook template in relation to the information required about the involvement of supervisors in the preparation of dissertations and other submitted work.

- Inclusion of additional requirements for the provision of information about the workload expected of students in term-time and vacations in section 3.6 of the course handbook template.

- Inclusion of a link to the *Policy on recording lectures by students* in section 7.4 of the course handbook template.

24. The main focus for enhancements to PGT course handbooks for 2017-18 is expected to be around the information provided about assessment and feedback. Further information can be found in Education Committee Circular Ref 19-16/17.[11]

J. Further information

Further information is available from Dr Rebecca Ehata (rebecca.ehata@admin.ox.ac.uk, (2) 86604) or Catherine Whalley (catherine.whalley@admin.ox.ac.uk, (2) 80305) in Education Policy Support.

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[11] This circular is available at
http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pandgoncourseinformation/.