

AGENCY MANAGEMENT BOARD MEETING WEDNESDAY 22ND FEBRUARY 2006

Present: David Stephen, Chief Executive
Martin Lowe, NEBM
Eileen Marshall, NEBM
Graham Gunn, SAAS
Audrey Heatlie, SAAS
Stephen Blyth, SAAS
Linda Pender, SAAS (Secretary)

Apologies: Professor Pauline Weetman, NEBM
Margaret Munckton, NEBM
Tracy Richardson, SAAS

1. It was noted that this would have been Pauline Weetman's last meeting since her appointment expired at the end of March. The Board recorded their appreciation of the valuable input she had made to its deliberations. David would write to Pauline expressing both the Board's and his own personal thanks.

Minutes of the previous meeting

2. The minutes of the meeting held on 24 November 2005 were agreed.

Matters Arising

3. David updated the Board on developments since the last meeting:-

- DSA – a report was no longer expected on the causes of the rise in DSA numbers. It was clear that the main increase was in students being diagnosed with dyslexia – probably due to institutions taking a more pro-active stance on such diagnosis. A wider review of policy on DSA was now being undertaken. This included taking a view on things that should routinely be provided by institutions under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act and those that students could legitimately be expected to pay for on an individual basis.
- Travel expenses – a wider review would now be carried out in 2007/2008 to look at the general availability of travel subsidies for young people.
- Recruitment – for the first time, the Agency was recruiting staff at its own hand. Experience to date was that doing so was both faster and cheaper than the service traditionally provided by central SE HR.
- CD-ROMs – As a result of feedback from institutions, the Agency would gradually substitute CD-Roms for printed guidance documents and application forms over the next few years. This should improve the quality of guidance to students and encourage greater take up of on-line applications.
- SAAS pay loans – external consultants (Logica) had carried out a study of the pay loans project and why it had stalled. A report was due in the next week. John Rigg, Graham and David were due to meet the SLC's Chief Executive on Friday to discuss the report's main findings.
- CDL – work to devise a Scottish successor to the national CDL scheme was continuing but it seemed unlikely that any new arrangements could be implemented until 2007/2008. DfES position remained unclear but it was possible that advice for 2006/2007 would have to be provided by FfL (it being too late to alter SAAS guidance for the coming year).

- SHAW – the Agency had now achieved the SHAW silver award.
- Quality Scotland Award – An Assessment team were due to visit the agency tomorrow. If the Agency did not win an award they could still achieve a credit rating in terms of performance management under the new Quality Scotland investors in Excellence scheme.

Quarterly Report

CSU

4. It was noted that while this report mainly covered the period October to December it also included up to date information where possible.

5. In response to previous Board comments, a group had been set up to re-examine targets and the measurement of Agency performance. The present arrangements led to performance being under – reported. Figures recently produced by SAAS's statistician showed that the Agency had, on average, processed applications within 11 calendar days over the session. This compared to an average of around eight and a half weeks in England. DfES consultants were due to visit the Agency on 3 March to compare processes North and South of the Border.

6. Processing targets – October had been an extremely busy month but backlogs had been avoided. For the first time, the processing season had been virtually completed by November leaving teams free to concentrate on travel and preparation for 2006/07.

7. The new telephony statistical package was not yet available but should be by the start of next session. The ability to record calls was already proving beneficial in terms of complaint resolution and would also help inform further training.

8. ILA processing was now part of CSU and the transfer had gone smoothly.

9. It was noted that Agency staff had given evidence about the administration of the Disabled Students Allowance to the Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunity Committee earlier in the week.

10. It was noted that last year, Universities Scotland had been unable to arrange the annual seminar for administrators that had proved useful in previous years. Instead, SAAS had invited staff from institutions to two open days in Gyleview House. Martin volunteered to approach US to see what could be done for 2006/07.

Finance

11. Savings on staff costs had resulted from having to carry an unacceptably high level of vacancies within CSU. Some of these had been used to meet the early retirement costs of the former Head of Finance and Personnel whose post had been given up. The agency were not expecting any significant overspends on DRCs and capital expenditure should also be on budget.

12. The Agency's current recruitment campaign was intended to fill vacancies in sufficient time for staff to be appointed and trained before the start of the next season. It was noted that many of the vacancies had been created by staff moving elsewhere in the SE on promotion.

13. At a previous Board meeting Pauline had suggested carrying out a cost benefit analysis of debt recovery and this was something that would be followed up. However, it was also noted that the Agency had a duty in terms of Government Accounting. There was already a write off policy for minor debt which was kept under regular review.

14. Finance were still awaiting information on the VAT repayment incurred by SLC which might have to be accrued. Outwith DEL it was noted that the SLC were not requesting as much funding as expected for this month which might lead to an underspend on loans.

15. Graduate Endowment – over 6,800 letters had been issued in January 2006. Of those, 57% had returned options letters and around 2,500 had yet to respond. A number of complaints had been received about the tone of the letters issued but the wording had been agreed with solicitors and it was felt that the Agency had nothing to apologise for. The Audit Committee had discussed GE at a meeting on 7 February and it was accepted that the Agency had to pursue debt recovery vigorously. The Finance Team would have difficulty pursuing EU debtors and might have to tap into the SLC's franchises abroad in order to do so.

16. The move to monthly payments in 2007 would reduce the overpayments that currently had to be recovered since students dropping out of courses would do so with less support having been paid to them.

Personnel

17. Following recommendations from a previous board meeting David had informed staff of special bonus awards made over the last year and explained the reasons for making these awards. The pilot scheme to allow time off would run for a further year since evaluation of year one had produced mixed messages.

IS & Operational Policy

18. Work was continuing for the change of session. EDM Control was now part of IS/Operational Policy Team

19. Shortened web applications – the web team now had the necessary expertise to write code in - house. System testing of what they produced would be carried out by BT.

20. SAAS pay loans/ loans for fees – The Agency now had agreement with SLC not to transfer fee loan data prior to SAAS beginning to pay all loans to Scottish students in 2007.

21. On-line signatures – work was progressing and students would no longer be required to sign a downloaded form separately when completing on-line applications. A flyer had been designed to alert students to these changes. This would be issued with CD ROMs and other Agency communications.

22. The new head of EDM was looking to reduce the time to get applications onto GRASS from 3 days at peak periods to 1 day. It was agreed that even a reduction to two days would be of significant benefit.

23. The Agency was continuing to look for opportunities to supply services to other parts of the SE but was finding that those approached had other pre-occupations that were preventing them from subscribing fully to the shared services agenda.

Chief Executive's Office

24. The Agency's annual awaydays would be held in March and NEBMs were welcome to attend. The afternoon sessions were being designed to encourage staff to pursue new types of physical activities in accordance with SHAW principles.

Committee Meetings - Minutes

25. Finance Committee minutes – The Committee were currently reviewing the number of meetings scheduled for 2006/07 and might increase their frequency.

26. Fraud Committee minutes – SE Solicitor had suggested simplifying SAS Regulations in general however this would be difficult in terms of the parliamentary time available before the next election. ILA Providers had provided feedback that the scheme was difficult to administer. This was acknowledged but additional security had had to be built in owing to the widespread fraud that had occurred under the previous scheme run by the private sector.

27. Health and Safety Committee – the minutes identified no causes for concern and were noted.

Quarterly Complaints Report

28. It was noted that there were no trends in the type of complaints received this quarter. Details of complaints received about GE would be provided at the next meeting.

Training Strategy

29. The training strategy was circulated for information. The strategy would need to be reviewed in 2006 as SE Corporate learning services no longer intended to meet the cost of external qualifications etc centrally and no resource transfer was expected. The Agency's total training budget was currently £68K but this did not reflect the costs of the two weeks training provided to all CSU entrants and refresher training for existing staff. Other training required by staff, such as for the new telephony system, was paid from project costs rather than the training budget. Outwith CSU, the aim was to provide each member of staff with 5 days training a year on average. An evaluation of training by Investors in People assessors would be taking place shortly.

Customer Survey Results

30. The customer survey results were tabled for information. It was noted that the satisfaction results for on-line applications was lower than might have been expected – probably due to the current requirement to send the Agency a signed declaration. It was hoped that the acceptance of electronic signatures would resolve this problem.

SE Staff Survey: SAAS Results

31. This paper on the Agency's results from the SE staff survey was tabled for information. The Agency would also be carrying out its own staff survey as normal which was based on EFQM later in the year.

32. Agencies, generally out performed SE and SAAS did particularly well compared with other agencies. However, there were still some issues to be discussed with staff and mid year review sessions could be used to obtain feedback. A general finance seminar had been arranged for staff in response to the ignorance of finance matters that had been evident in the survey. Martin had also agreed to deliver a lunchtime seminar on the work of the audit committee. Attendance at both would be voluntary but, depending on turnout, something mandatory might be required later in the year.

Governance Year Planner

33. An Audit Committee meeting should be arranged in early July. The planner should be reviewed if the number of Finance Committee meetings changed.

Date of Next Meeting

34. The next meeting of the Board would be held on 11 May at 10.30am.

Chief Executive's Office
23 February 2005