

SAAS Quarterly Review Meeting – Wednesday 7th March 2007 at 10.00am

Attending: Mark Batho (Chair)
Chris McCrone, ETLLED Finance
David Stephen, SAAS
Graham Gunn, SAAS
Stephen Blyth, SAAS
Audrey Heatlie, SAAS
Tracy Richardson, SAAS
Carolyn Wilson, SAAS
Linda Pender, SAAS (Secretary)

Minutes of the previous meeting

1. The minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2006 were agreed.

Matters Arising/Updates

- Carolyn Wilson provided a progress report on discussions with Universities Scotland on attendance data. The Working Group that had been set up would meet again in May to consider a technical solution. Several universities were investing in new software without taking up the offer that had been made of financial assistance. However a more pressing problem that had been identified was that the Agency were not receiving all attendance data held by SLC. A meeting had been arranged with the Company to discuss this issue.
- **ILAs** – Audrey agreed to speak to Laura Barjonas about the breakdown of information required.
Action: Audrey
- **Estimates of student numbers** – Andy Murray was working to produce updated statistics before his move to a new post. Once these were available a meeting would be arranged to discuss the way forward. A successor for Andy had been identified and would take up post in April in time to participate in GRASS training that would be going on then. SAAS's new Management Accountant would be taking up post on 12th March. **Action** : Stephen
- **Quigley** – The scheme would end in 2006/07 but SAAS would have to continue to make payments to existing students until 2008/09.
- **Loans** – Andy Murray was working to update statistics as the number of students applying for loans appeared to be declining year on year.
- **Monthly payment system** – Chris had arranged for account codes to be opened and was awaiting information from SAAS Finance Team on how expenditure would be reconciled in SEAS
Action: Stephen.

Quarterly Report

2. The report covered the period from October to the end of December. CSU had been very busy due to a larger than usual number of last minute applications and a significant rise in e-mail traffic. Performance against targets was shown at Annex A of the report. It was noted that average processing performance had improved compared to the same quarter last year and that this would probably be the preferred performance measure for the future. All targets and KPIs would be reviewed by the new Management Accountant in the move to introducing a Balanced Scorecard.

3. It was hoped that the upgraded telephony system would be available around Easter although there might be some slippage due to ISIS having changed a number of addresses. The new system would increase the number of telephone lines available and encourage more use of our automated services.

4. The Personnel Team had recruited new staff in time for them to take up post and be trained before the start of the next session. The recent customer survey had reported delays in call handling and e-mails. Additional staff would be recruited for GEU to improve these customer services. It was probable that the target for replying to e-mails would have to be relaxed due to volumes having increased and e-mails being used by students to make complex queries that in the past would have arrived by letter. There was a strong case for the e-mail target to be the same as that for other correspondence.

5. CSU were currently processing travel claims and nursing bursary applications and working with the Policy Team and the BSU to prepare for the new session.

Finance

6. Annex A showed that the Agency expected DRC spend to come in on budget. An estimated £87k underspend on capital expenditure was due to a delay in an ILAS project. HELS had been informed and were aware that they would need to find funding in 2007/08.

7. It was agreed to show all legal costs, including solicitor's expenses, under DRC administration costs rather than the current split between DRC and programme. If the Agency had difficulties meeting these costs from DRCs additional funding could be moved from programme. We would also need to review the manner in which unit costs were calculated. **Action:** Stephen

8. Programme Expenditure – The following points were discussed:-

- SLC overspend was nearly all due to VAT and the settlement with Honours Ltd.
- Repayment of awards should be shown as income/ debtors rather than on a cash basis.
- Fee Loans – any discrepancy in expenditure shown in Annex A should be resolved in later SEAS prints.

GE Report

9. The GE Report showed £16m repaid but this did not agree with figures in the annex. However these were based on December SEAS prints. Stephen agreed to check figures for April 2005 as numbers who had decided to pay in full had increased by 2. He would also provide Chris and Mark with details of debt written off for 9 students. A footnote would be added to the GE table to clarify that students who had not responded may not all be liable to pay the GE. It was agreed it was best not to overestimate the GE repayment figure as additional funding would need to be found from other sources if the money was not repaid. **Action:** Stephen.

10. It was agreed to review the current procedure of issuing liability letters to students before they were actually liable to pay the GE after the forthcoming election. **Action:** David

Personnel

11. Tracy had joined the Cabinet Office HR Forum which considered staff surpluses and vacancies in OGDs. Cabinet Office were keen to use group to deal with staff surpluses and this could help SAAS fill future vacancies.

12. It was noted that some OGDs paid more than SE at some grades and Cabinet Office were looking at how to deal with this if staff transferred departments. However, SAAS could offer other benefits such as flexible working.

13. The option of staff working from home would be raised at a forthcoming meeting with PCS. Other public sector bodies were already introducing home working since it offered benefits to both staff and management in terms of reduced commuting, better life/work balance and reductions in the amount of office space required. Staff could also be recruited from a much wider area without the Agency having to relocate physically.

14. Mystery Shopping was already used by SUFI and could be a useful quality check for SAAS services. This too would be raised at the meeting with PCS.

15. The Personnel Team were involved with SE Groups looking at workforce planning and the E-HR rollout. It was noted that the revised SE performance management system for 2007/08 would operate from 1 April.

Information systems and Operational Policy

16. SEAS Interface – this was now live and testing had been completed...

17. GRASS was now 10 years old and had had to be extended and developed to cope with policy changes in virtually every year since it had been introduced. Due to advances in technology and further policy changes being planned, there were good arguments for replacing the system. SAAS's intention was to rewrite GRASS in-house and in phases beginning with development that would be necessary to cope with changes to the means test planned for 2008/09. Such an approach would reduce both risk and cost.

18. It was agreed that GRASS had to be replaced and that the proposed way forward seemed to offer best VFM. It was also agreed that in designing a new system a greater capability to generate MI should be built in. Discussions with HELS would be required on timescales for future policy changes and costs.

19. It was agreed to look at opportunities for working in partnership with UCAS. A recent meeting between SAAS and UCAS staff had identified a number of ways in which the two organisations could collaborate to mutual advantage.

20. Dental bursary Scheme – The new scheme had been very successful and the Agency had now been asked to work with Health Department colleagues on a further two bursary schemes.

Chief Executive's Office

21. Staff awaydays would be held on 22nd and 23rd March.

22. SHAW scheme – The team were due to meet the SHAW co-ordinator on 7 March to discuss new criteria for healthy working lives and the SHAW gold award.

Personnel Report

23. The Personnel Report was noted.

Customer Survey Results

24. Customer survey results had been circulated for information. It had been agreed to publish a response to the main issues raised on the SAAS website and highlight improvements to be made to our services for the next session.

Date of the Next Meeting

25. The next meeting would be held on Wednesday 30 May at 10am