

Science Studies Committee
6 November 2013
12.15 The Boardroom, 58 Prince's Gate
South Kensington Campus

Minutes

Present: Professor R Thompson (Chair), Professor A Parry, Professor D Wright, Dr S Archer, Professor S Curry, Professor A MacKinnon, Professor J Mestel, Dr E Price-Davies, Dr B Duncombe, Miss N Kempston, Miss M de Souza

In Attendance: Miss H Kopecka (Secretary), Mr C MacLeod (Management trainee)

1 Apologies for Absence

1.1 Received: Professor D Humphris, Mr C Love, Ms L Richardson

2 Minutes

2.1 Approved: Minutes of the previous meeting held on the 15 May 2013 (**Paper 1**).

3 Matters Arising

3.1 Received and Noted: A list of actions from previous meetings of the Committee and progress made so far to address these (**Paper 2**).
Mr C Love was not present, but Professor S Curry reported that the current algorithm criteria might need looking at. This will be reviewed and discussed at the February 2014 meeting of the Committee.

4 Constitution, Terms of Reference and Membership

4.1 Approved: The Constitution, Terms of Reference and Membership of the Committee for the 2013-14 session (**Paper 3**).

4.2 Agreed: That the Vice Chairman of the Committee, for the 2013-14 session, would be Professor A Parry.

5 Senate Summary Report

5.1 Received and Noted: The summary report from the meeting of the Senate held on the 19 June 2013 (**Paper 4**).

6 Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee Summary Report

6.1 Received: A Summary report covering the July and October 2013 meetings of QAEC (**Paper 5**).

6.2 Noted: The committee discussed the standardisation of the pass mark for Level 7 qualifications in FoNS. There has been some confusion over when the arrangements should come to effect. An email clarification has been sent to the Committee members, post meeting, confirming that the standard pass mark of 50% for all Level 7 material will be applicable for students entering Year 1 from 2014-15 session onwards.

7 Engineering Studies Committee Summary Report

7.1 Received and Noted: The summary report of the meeting of the Engineering Studies Committee held on the 22 May 2013 (**Paper 6**).

8 Medical Studies Committee Summary Report

8.1 Received and Noted: The summary report of the meeting of the Medical Studies Committee held on the 4 June 2013 (**Paper 7**).

9 Appointment of External Examiners

9.1 Approved: The re-appointment of existing undergraduate external examiners and appointment of new external examiners for the Faculty of Natural Sciences and the Business School for the 2013-14 session (**Paper 8**).

9.2 Noted: New external examiners for the Department of Mathematics and ICBS are from the same institution as existing external examiners. The committee approved the appointments, as they are not from the same department, but it should be noted that such nominations should be avoided, where possible, in the future.

9.3 Noted: Nominations for the Department of Physics are yet to be finalized, and will be approved by Chair's action once available.

9.4 Noted: A number of Departments appoint two or more external examiners in the same session. It was suggested, to ensure continuity, extending the appointment of one external examiner by one year, where possible.

10 Student Surveys

10.1 Received: The results of spring SOLE 2013 (**Paper 9**).

10.2 Reported: Participation rate for all Departments in FoNS has improved; it was nearly doubled in the Department of Chemistry.

10.3 Reported: Overall there was good satisfaction with assessment arrangements and marking. The Department of Physics had the least satisfaction in terms of the above; steps are being taken to address this.

10.4 Reported: There is still some way to go in terms of feedback satisfaction rates. The department of Life Sciences had the least satisfaction in terms of the above. This was acknowledged as an issue which is being addressed. There are number of contributing factors. It is not straight forward to provide feedback where students are required to present an argument. Two-week feedback deadline does not account for the size of the coursework. Staff-student ratio is not as high as in Faculty of Engineering.

10.5 Reported: The Deputy President (Education) highlighted the importance of the timing of submission deadlines and feedback, so that students are able to act on the feedback received.

10.6 Reported: The importance of SOLE results being widely distributed and acted upon was highlighted. Departments are taking steps to ensure this. The RCSU Academic Affairs Officer stated that student representatives are aware of the SOLE results, but these are not always distributed to the wider student population. This is partly due to data not being available in the required and user friendly format.

11 Undergraduate Annual Monitoring 2012-13

11.1 Received: The undergraduate annual monitoring form for the Department of Life Sciences - Biochemistry and Biotechnology for the 2012-13 session (**Paper 10a**).

11.1.1 Reported: Reports of External Examiners

The overall tone of the reports from the External Examiners is positive, both with respect to the rigour of the assessment procedures and the standards for the final degree classifications. They indicate that any previous issues relating to these points have been successfully addressed and they highlighted the quality of the annotation of the examination scripts. The only general issues raised in the reports relate to the final year. Two of the Examiners have raised the possibility that there should be an element of common curriculum for all students in the final year, and one suggested that it might be preferable to move the final year project so that it takes place earlier in the year.

Due to the large number of changes introduced into the curriculum over the past two years, the Department would prefer to keep this matter under review until the full impact of the changes already made has become evident in the final cohort of students and not rush to introduce still more changes. With regards to timing of the final year project, the recent review of teaching in the Department of Life Sciences included extensive consideration of the logistically feasible options for moving the project earlier. Based on a combination of space issues in laboratories during the Autumn term, the needs of students undertaking fieldwork and the perception that many students do not like returning to formal coursework after the project, it was decided to keep the project at the end of the course.

11.1.2 Reported: NSS summary

Satisfaction rate is down in many categories, and there is a clear division between Biochemistry and Biotechnology & Biology where satisfaction rates improved overall. This could be down to the fact that students are not clear on what to expect, and sometimes only consider Biochemistry degree when unsuccessful in their MBBS application. There are also more optional courses available to Biology students.

The Department is working hard to improve relationship with students, a new liaison officer has recently been appointed, and historical infrastructure problems are being addressed.

11.2 Received: The undergraduate annual monitoring form for the Department of Life Sciences - Biology for the 2012-13 session (**Paper 10b**).

11.2.1 Reported: Major issues raised by the student body

Major issues raised were with the 2nd year mini-projects which ran at the end of the Summer term. In response to this the Department has decided to make the mini-projects optional this year, after discussion at a Departmental teaching committee meeting (**Paper 11**). There were also some problems with one of the 2nd year course Global Change Biology, which lost its convenor two months before the course started. It is now intended to run the course in the 3rd year with a new convenor starting next year. Both these issues have been discussed with the students and are in the process of being resolved.

11.2.2 Reported: Reports of External Examiners

The External Examiners were generally very happy with the way the examinations were conducted, there were no major issues. There is an algorithm in place for borderline candidates, no viva voce examinations. External Examiners meet students to discuss their course. These discussions generate some very useful information.

11.2.3 Reported: NSS summary

Satisfaction rate is up in all categories.

- 11.3** Received: The undergraduate annual monitoring form for the Department of Chemistry for the 2012-13 session (**Paper 10c**).
- 11.3.1** Reported: Major changes made to the Department's Undergraduate programme structure
- A major review of all UG coursework deadlines has been conducted resulting in improved timing of many workshops and submission deadlines to spread the workload. Students were provided with a document summarising all their coursework deadlines to allow them to manage their time better.
- All exam questions have been standardised, and a new marking system has been put in place.
- 11.3.2** Reported: Reports of External Examiners
- External Examiners highlighted robust and exemplary double marking processes as well as the research proposal and project marking. Some concern was given about some courses having high failure rates; action is already being taken to address this.
- It was also noted that students are able to opt to take no physical chemistry in their final year. The Department has already addressed this, and from 2013-14 session it will not be possible for any student on any programme to avoid physical chemistry in their final year.
- 11.3.3** Reported: NSS summary
- Satisfaction rate is up in all categories.
- 11.4** Received: The undergraduate annual monitoring form for the Department of Mathematics for the 2012-13 session (**Paper 10d**).
- 11.4.1** Reported: Major changes made to the Department's Undergraduate programme structure
- A Mastery Examination for 4th year students was introduced, to replace the old enhanced coursework. Each course module set a Masters level question for all 4th year or MSc students attending the module. These questions were all seen by the External Examiners. Each student sat an extra custom-made exam containing a question pertaining to the student's choice of courses. The examination proceeded smoothly and the External Examiners were positive about it, although they recommend that this year a greater uniformity of approach towards the Mastery question is applied. This will be reviewed.
- 11.4.2** Reported: Reports of External Examiners
- The External Examiners are very impressed by the breadth and standard of the programme, and by the 4th year projects. They commented favourably on the lengths the Department go to ensure comparability between the various options, and resultant fairness for all students. They all commented on the difficulties presented when a "year-abroad" student obtains vastly different marks abroad than at home. They were happy that all such cases have been dealt with fairly, and wished to continue to see the paperwork for like cases in future.
- Four of the six External Examiners were new, which led to limited continuity with previous years. The new ones naturally found departmental processes unfamiliar, and requested more documentation and guidance in future, which will be supplied. They have requested further clarification about the criteria used to provide recommendations for the class borderlines. After their first years, External Examiners historically tend to become more at ease with departmental processes and the relations with the Mathematics marks scale.
- 11.4.3** Reported: NSS summary
- Satisfaction rate is up in all categories.

- 11.5** Received: The undergraduate annual monitoring form for the Department of Physics for the 2012-13 session (**Paper 10e**).
- 11.5.1** Reported: Examinations and evaluation of standards
- The department had been experiencing significant grade inflation up to the 2011-12 session, when it had found itself forced to use significant scaling to bring the results within an acceptable range.
- For 2012-13 session several changes were introduced:
- 1) There would be no choice of questions in core exams and choice would be significantly reduced in options.
 - 2) The marking scale for most exams was expanded from 60 to 100, with a minimum of 5 for any one part. This was aimed at giving examiners more discretion to adjust their marking in the light of results.
 - 3) Examiners were provided with an indication of the range within which the average mark should be expected to fall, given the previous record of the students concerned.
- The second of these changes proved difficult to sell to the students, many of whom arrive from school with a very fixed view of what is required for a mark. The changes proved an overwhelming success, with only a small fraction of exams requiring any scaling.
- 11.5.2** Reported: Reports of External Examiners
- The main issue raised by the External Examiners concerned the quality of preparation of the exam papers and model answers sent to them, and the failure of some colleagues to respond adequately to comments from the examiners. This matter was discussed thoroughly by a staff meeting in July and steps will be taken to tighten up the procedures.
- The examiners were complementary about the changes made to the assessment of MSci projects, with the introduction of a panel of which each member assesses around 12 projects. This system has now been extended to other projects. However, the members of the panel often felt ill qualified to assess projects outside their own area of expertise and expressed a lack of confidence in the system as implemented. Thus the details of the process will have to be kept under review. The main issue remains the comparability of assessment of projects from widely differing areas of physics.
- Examiners made mutually contradictory comments on the usefulness of viva voce examinations for deciding on degree borderlines. The department is reconsidering its procedures.
- 11.5.3** Reported: NSS summary
- Satisfaction rate is up in all categories apart from one.
- 11.6** Postponed: The undergraduate annual monitoring form for the ICBS for the 2012-13 session (**Paper 10f**).
- Mr C Love was not present, and consequently the Paper will be discussed at the next meeting of the Committee in February 2014.
- 12** **Modifications to Undergraduate Programmes of Study**
- 12.1** Approved: Changes to assessment of the Biology degree programme and change to the title of the BSc Biology with a Year in Europe (**Paper 11**).
- Withdrawal of mini-projects from the 2nd year of the biology degree. The mini-projects ran in June 2013 for the first time, being implemented as part of the teaching review in the Department of Life Sciences. They were run in the last two weeks of Summer term, immediately after the 2nd year examinations had been completed. Feedback from the students was generally quite negative. There were teething problems with the courses but the main complaint was its timing, very stressful in terms of workload and the hand in date

on the last day of term. The Biology teaching committee agreed, on reflection, that the idea for mini-project was not strong enough to warrant continuation. The committee has therefore decided to recommend withdrawal of the mini-projects as a compulsory module. The Department still intends to run the Jersey field course on a non-compulsory basis for extra credits, since this provides valuable field-work experience. The Department also intends to provide a number of bursaries to students wishing to gain research experience over the summer break between the second and third years. Plans for replacement of the 3 ECTS, the mini-projects were worth, are in place.

Course name change of the BSc Biology with a Year in Europe to BSc Biology with Research Abroad. This is for uniformity with the Biochemistry degrees and also to make allowance for any students doing a placement year outside of Europe.

12.2 Approved: Changes to the “bundling” of final year modules in Mathematics (**Paper 12**).

The Department is proposing to group all 1st term modules in a single bundle (examination element), and similarly all 2nd term courses in another. A necessary condition for graduating would be to attain a 40% average in each bundle. However, for those students who fail any module, but who do satisfy this minimum requirement, graduation would not be guaranteed, but would subject to an approval by the Board of Examiners.

12.3 Noted: Proposed change to MScs in Pure and Applied Mathematics (**Paper 13**).

13 **Good Practice Highlighted During Periodic Reviews 2012-13**

13.1 Noted: The examples of good practice highlighted within the individual reviews (**Paper 14**).

The Committee stressed the importance of College-wide student database. In the absence of this, mistakes are more likely to happen moving data from one source to another.

14 **Re-sit Examinations and Supplementary Qualifying Tests (SQTs)**

14.1 Noted: The policy guidelines (**Paper 15**).

15 **Date of Next Meeting**

Confirmed: The date of the next meeting of the Science Studies Committee:

- 12th February 2014 12.15pm – 3pm