

## **FACULTY BOARD OF BIOLOGY - BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES COMMITTEE**

There was an online meeting of the Biological Sciences Committee at **2 pm on Wednesday 29 November 2023**

### **MINUTES**

#### **There were present:**

Dr Matthew Harper (Chair, Pharmacology), Dr Lee De Wit (Psychology), Dr Steve Edgley (PDN), Dr Christine Farr (Genetics), Dr Sandra Fulton (SBS), Dr Jess Gwynne (Physical Sciences), Dr Ed Turner (Zoology), Prof Tim Weil (Deputy Head of School, Undergraduate Strategy), Mrs Leanne Wilson (NST Administrator), Dr Chad Pillinger (secretary, Faculty Office).

**In attendance:** Dr Claire Michele (Faculty Office), Dr Colin Crump (Pathology).

#### **1037. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Dr Holly Canuto (Director of Education, MVST), Dr Nik Cunniffe (Plant Sciences), Dr Mairi Kilkenny (Biochemistry), Prof Uta Paszkowski (Plant Sciences, BBS), Prof Dee Scadden (online learning, Biochemistry), Prof Suzanne Turner.

#### **1038. MEMBERSHIP**

No issues were raised.

*Post meeting note: Dr Harper completes his term as acting Chair; Dr Sandra Fulton would be returning as Chair from January 2025. Mr Yusuf Adia completes his term as Faculty student representative for NST biology and will be replaced by Mr Will Cassie.*

#### **1039. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were none.

#### **1040. MINUTES**

Minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2023 were circulated and approved with a minor correction to Dr Dee Scadden's name under item 1045.

#### **1041. MATTERS ARISING**

There were none.

### 1037. NEW MODULE FOR PART II PDN

A proposal for a new module in Part II PDN was circulated as **BSC.23.23**.

This module would be compulsory for all students taking the 'neuroscience stream' in Part II PDN and BBS students taking PDN as a major subject, and involved amalgamating several pre-existing informal workshops into a more formal module structure. It was not intended for, and would not be offered to, PDN students taking non-neuroscience modules, or shared with other departments or offered as a BBS minor subject.

The intention was that all students doing the 'neuroscience stream' could take the new module, which was in contrast to the 30 student limit stated in the paper. Dr Edgley would check back with colleagues in PDN and resubmit a document to the Committee for approval via circulation.

The Committee agreed that the proposed module would allow 'neuroscience stream' students to achieve a better understanding of neuroscience techniques, their limitations and possibilities.

The Committee was reassured to hear that Part II PDN students taking just a single neuroscience module would not be disadvantaged by not being able to take the new module. The Committee requested that examination questions on neuroscience papers were structured with this in mind.

***ACTION: Dr Edgley to check with departmental colleagues and submit an amended paper for approval by circulation.***

### 1038. FORMATS OF EXAMINATIONS

The 14 June edition of the Reporter (<https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2022-23/weekly/6704/6704.pdf>) gave details of a new process for regulation of methods and modes of assessment. Drafts of a new regulation format for the NST were circulated as **BSC.23.28**. It would need to be decided whether to stick with the older more detailed regulations, or move to the newer more flexible ones. The final versions of regulations would be implemented in October 2025.

The NST Management Committee had discussed the proposals at its recent meeting and it had been agreed it would be useful to have a single location for subject examination formats across the Tripos.

The Committee felt that having too many changes in a year needed to be avoided, especially changes that were too close to the examination period. The NST Management Committee had proposed that any changes to examinations would have to be reported by the Easter term preceding the examinations for Parts IA and IB, and the Michaelmas term preceding the examinations for Part II. The BSC felt it should be kept informed of any

changes for biological subjects, and it was suggested that a deadline of its July meeting be given for this.

The Psychological and Behavioural Sciences Tripos would aim to have approvals for examination changes done by Easter term.

It was queried what category of assessment viva voce examinations would be considered as under the assessment framework. The secretary would seek clarification on this.

It was noted that wet-lab practicals were not included in the framework for assessment and these would require the old-style regulations to be retained.

***ACTION: secretary to clarify with EQPO.***

### **1039. EXAMINATION DATA RETENTION**

The University had recently introduced a new data retention policy for examination data (circulated as **BSC.23.24**). The most relevant update was:

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**5.7 \*\*New Office for Students' guidance for October 2023\*\*** In order to meet OfS registration conditions, providers are now required to retain 'appropriate records' of student work for five years after the end date of the course. Therefore, from October 2023, Chairs of/ Senior Examiners should ensure a range of coursework and examination scripts for this time period **for all taught courses** is retained. The range should include at least one example of each class.

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The Committee felt that the term 'course' was ill-defined in the context of the NST Course should this refer to individual subjects within the NST, or the course as a whole?

It was noted that the Department of Engineering had a process in place for gathering and retaining certain 'sample' scripts and they had indicated they would be happy to share details of this process with others. Demographic characteristics such as race or gender were not collected as part of the Department of Engineering process.

There was a feeling at the Committee that this type of information should be gathered centrally. It was queried whether the scripts should be anonymised, what format the scripts should be held in and where they should be stored and with whom.

The Committee were frustrated that there had been no consultation with departments on this new requirement.

***ACTION: secretary and NST Management Committee Secretary to raise query with EQPO.***

#### **1040. BNSCR REPORT**

Dr Claire Michel reported.

**BSC.23.29** was circulating describing 'Aims of Tripos for those graduating with NST Biology Part II'. It had been suggested (outside of this meeting) that PBS could also adopt these aims but following discussion it was agreed that they did not quite fit. The MedST and VetST courses might be able to adopt these aims, but for the current meeting the Committee was asked just to approve for NST biology.

**The Committee approved the 'Aims of Tripos for those graduating with NST Biology Part II'.**

#### **1041. DIGITAL TEACHING AND EXAMINATIONS**

Dr Dee Scadden could not attend the meeting and would be asked to report at the next meeting. The Committee requested that if Dr Scadden was not able to make the next meeting that a written report be submitted.

#### **1042. PART II BBS**

##### **1042.1. Changes to SaRA lectures**

A proposal to increase the number of SaRA lectures was circulated as **BSC.23.25**. It was noted that the increase did not result in the overall contact hours going above what other Part II modules had.

**The Committee approved this proposal.**

***ACTION: secretary to inform relevant Course Organisers.***

##### **1042.2. Clashes with lectures**

Heads of Teaching were asked to remind their Part II Course Organisers that changes to timetables needed to account for minor subjects that BBS might be taking. Ideally they should contact Jess Joseph ([FacBiol@admin.cam.ac.uk](mailto:FacBiol@admin.cam.ac.uk)) to check that there are no clashes with any proposed changes.

***ACTION: Heads of Teaching to remind Pt II Course Organisers to contact Faculty Office if timetable changes are being considered.***

#### **1043. CHANGE TO REGULATIONS FOR PART II PDN**

Requested changes to regulations for Part II PDN were circulated as **BSC.23.27**. The request was to remove reference to the publication date of the project list.

**The Committee agreed to this proposal.**

***ACTION: secretary to inform department, Faculty Board and EQPO.***

#### **1044. COURSE CHANGES FOR PART II GENETICS**

Documents **BSC.23.31** and **BSC.23.32** were circulated with details of a proposal to introduce an additional module for Part II Genetics called 'Mathematical Genetics'.

The new module would be available to projects students and BBS students taking Genetics as their major subject. It would not be available as a BBS minor subject.

Medics and vets would need to be considered on a case by case basis to take this module, as they may not have the mathematical skills necessary to study the subject. It would be made clear in module literature and promotional material that a minimum level of mathematical competence would be required before taking the module. It was anticipated that not too many medics and vets would be interested in this subject, but the Department of Genetics would be happy to take those that were as long as they had suitable mathematical skills.

Students interested in taking the module would be given access to the Part IB Mathematical and Computational Biology Moodle site to give them an opportunity to catch up if required.

**The Committee approved the new module.**

***ACTION: secretary to forward documentation to EQPO.***

#### **1045. NST MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE**

Draft minutes for a meeting held on 10 October were circulated as **BSC.23.26**. The latest meeting had been held on 21 November.

This latter meeting had discussed looking at the percentages of students allocated a particular class in Part IA and IB. There were different views between Biology and Physical Sciences; students taking biology subjects tended to do less well at Parts IA and IB than at Part II. There used to be big discrepancies between Part I performance and performance in Part II PDN.

Dr Cunniffe offered to gather data to compare Part I and Part II performance. Previous data sets existed as part of an analysis comparing Part IB attainment in students entering project Part II subjects versus those entering BBS. The NST Management Committee also used to compile reports looking at cohort classes obtained at Part II compared to classes at Part IB covering all Part II NST subjects – Mrs Wilson would find the relevant data for this.

Depending on the outcomes of this data analysis the Committee might be asked for a view on whether the 1<sup>st</sup> class boundaries should be relaxed/amended.

It was noted that medics and vets used to get low percentages of firsts compared to the NST students since they did not have fixed percentages for each class. They then outperformed NST students when taking Part II subjects and this needed to be accounted for, or the consistency of classing across courses should be considered.

***ACTION: Dr Cunniffe to look at data for Part IB and Part II classing, Mrs Wilson to review NST datasets, Dr Michel to look at past Faculty datasets.***

#### **1046. DOBS COMMITTEE MEETING**

Members of the Committee reported business from the most recent meetings. It had been noted that increasing numbers of home students were being pooled. Dr Cunniffe had looked into the data but the data from the latest adminssions round would need to be looked at.

There were five colleges that had good levels of home applicants, but some colleges had very low numbers. Numbers of home applicants were dropping although overall applications (including overseas applications) were increasing.

The University of Oxford had increasing numbers of home applicants, the University of Cambridge seemed to be more attractive to overseas students.

An interview sharing scheme could allow more colleges to see a greater variety of home applicants. Other options were being discussed on how to attract more home applicants.

The change in numbers of home and overseas was perhaps due to the generally better grades that overseas had compared to home students. This might have encouraged some colleges to accept more overseas students. Perhaps the University open days could be considered as an area where home applications could be promoted.

If efforts to encourage more home applications were successful it would need to be ensure that there was more support there for them. Some home applicants needed more help to understand the structure of the course and what choices they would have.

There was a variety of information on college websites about NST biology – there should perhaps be more central sources of information. The NST Management Committee was exploring possibilities for outreach that was offered for the NST and how this would fit in with general communications, promotion and open day activities.

The curriculum review would look at the communications strategy, but there was currently not the resource for this in the School.

Whilst it would be useful to improve communications it would also need to be ensured that the course was fit for purpose. The reasons for the drop in home applicants needed to be identified – the Cambridge Admissions Office (CAO) did do surveys of sixth form colleges and perhaps this could be resourced to provide answers. It was also queried whether the name of the NST course might put off/fail to attract students. The Sutton Trust ran summer schools – Dr Elliot helped run these and could look into surveying students who were on these. However Dr Elliot noted that around 50% of students on these summer schools ended up applying for medicine, so results might not be representative.

It may also be useful in communications to let potential applicants know about graduate destinations, this would boost the attractiveness of the course and also help with widening participation, where outcomes were an important consideration. The Careers Service had good information on graduate outcomes via tableau. It was noted that PBS had an alumni profile page – perhaps this could be considered for the NST.

The DoBS Committee would be looking into this and members of the BSC would report back to the next meeting.

## **1047. ITEMS FOR REPORT**

### **1047.1. Subjects fairs**

It was noted that the subjects fairs for Part IB and Part II will be held on Tuesday 23 April and Wednesday 24 April in the Department of PDN.

*Prof Weil left the meeting.*

## **1048. A.O.B.**

### **1048.1. Rotation duties across departments**

Paper **BSC.23.30** was circulated by Dr Edgley putting forward the case that the Department of PDN took on many more responsibilities for Course Organiser and Examiner roles than other departments. It was pointed out to Dr Edgley that his paper did not account for numbers of UTOs in each department.

It was considered whether the numbers of students taking certain courses needed to be accounted for – more students meant more examiners to mark scripts.

Dr Weil had been working on a workload report that would look at each departments' UTO numbers and teaching hours. A draft of this had been circulated to Heads of Departments and following this some adjustments were being made prior to its final publication.

The Psychological and Behavioural Sciences Tripos also needed to be accounted for when establishing departmental loads. It was queried whether MPhil activities should be added, and that Part II administration was hidden as it was assumed that proportionately this was similar across all departments. Part IA Mathematical Biology should also be taken out of the calculations as all departments had agreed to teach on this module.

## **1049. DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS**

Further meeting dates for the 2023-24 academic year were noted as:

2pm on Wednesday 6 March 2024

2pm on Wednesday 10 July 2024