

FACULTY BOARD OF BIOLOGY - BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES COMMITTEE

There was an online meeting of the Biological Sciences Committee at **2 pm on Wednesday 6 March 2024**

MINUTES

There were present:

Dr Sandra Fulton (Chair, SBS), Mr James Bainham (Student Representative), Dr Holly Canuto (Director of Education, MVST), Mr Will Cassie (Fac Bd student rep), Prof Nik Cuniffe (Plant Sciences), Prof Steve Edgley (PDN), Dr Paul Elliot (College admissions), Dr Christine Farr (Genetics), Prof Jess Gwynne (Physical Sciences), Dr Matthew Harper (Pharmacology), Prof Uta Paszkowski (Plant Sciences, BBS), Prof Dee Scadden (online learning, Biochemistry), Prof Ed Turner (Zoology), Prof Suzanne Turner (Pathology), Prof Tim Weil (Deputy Head of School, Undergraduate Strategy), Mrs Leanne Wilson (NST Administrator), Dr Chad Pillinger (Faculty of Biology, secretary).

In attendance: Dr Claire Michel (Faculty Office), Prof Jeff Dalley (Psychology).

1050. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Dr Lee De Wit (Psychology), Dr Mairi Kilkenny (Biochemistry).

1051. MEMBERSHIP

Mr Will Cassie (IA, Sidney Sussex) and Mr James Bainham (IA, Queens') replaced Mr Yusuf Adia as Faculty Board NST student representatives. Note that the student representation has been increased from 2023.

Prof Anna Philpott joined the meeting for item 1057.

1052. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

1053. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2023 were circulated and approved.

1054. MATTERS ARISING

1054.1. *Formats of Examinations (1038)*

It was noted that the Education Quality Policy Office (EQPO) had confirmed that *viva voce* examinations were not included in the framework for assessment and should remain in the ordinances for NST Part II. The NST

Management Committee had agreed to adopt the new regulation formats for examinations.

1054.2. *Classing at Parts IA, IB and II (1045)*

Prof Nik Cuniffe had completed a comparison of classing at Parts IA, IB and Part II over the last 7-8 years and included data from all subjects including biological and physical sciences. These were circulated as **BSC.24.01** and **BSC.24.02**.

The Committee thanked Prof Cuniffe for his work.

The most significant change in grades over the time period was at Part II. There was a disconnect in grading between Part IA and Part II – was this sustainable? Results at IA and IB had implications for students, for instance when writing references based on IB results.

One of the graphs Prof Cuniffe presented showed an inverse relationship between grades at IB and improvement at Part II, although there was more correlation for Physical Sciences subjects. The Committee was asked to consider whether class proportions at Part II were appropriate, and whether the way classing was done at Parts IA and IB should be changed. There was an extensive discussion on the paper with points listed below raised that the committee wished the NSTMC to consider in its working group on the topic.

Grade inflation was a concern but students entering Part IB were high quality, and it would not be unreasonable for the vast majority of them to obtain an upper second. Having a starred first might be useful as a further discriminator.

Part IB grades were tightly correlated to those obtained at Part IA so it may be needed to change the way these are graded.

The overall NST class came solely from the Part II results. However, although Part IA and IB results did not contribute to the overall NST mark/grade, employers could still see them on a student's transcript and affect their perception of an applicant compared to those with results from elsewhere. Should the boundaries for IA and IB be amended?

The NST Management Committee may also look at marking and classing guidance.

It may also be useful to consider how classing for NST compares with classing for the Medical Sciences Tripos and the Veterinary Sciences Tripos, where both of the latter had significant numbers of students entering Part II NST subjects.

1054.3. *Examination data retention (1039)*

The NST Management Committee had agreed a process to accommodate the University's requirement for sample scripts to be kept for five years following the examination.

The process was circulated as **BSC.24.03** and **BSC.24.04**. A similar policy would be proposed for adoption by MedST and VetST examinations.

The Committee noted that this process would have to be followed for examinations held in 2023-24, and information regarding the process had been sent out to Senior Examiners and Teaching Administrators. The NST Administrator would send a reminder to departments closer to the main examination period.

1055. **EDUCATION SPACE AND EXAMINATIONS**

For information and discussion, paper **BSC.24.05** was circulated with an overview of examinations space at Cambridge.

The Committee were supportive of the recommendations contained in the report. It was noted that extra spaces would be useful for other activities outside of examination periods. Students now habitually took laptops into lectures and so it would be good to have adequate wifi coverage in all teaching and examination spaces.

Comments were to be directed to Fiona Russell (fjr22@cam.ac.uk).

1056. **AVAILABILITY OF PAST/EXAMPLE EXAMINATION PAPERS**

The bound volume, which used to be circulated to colleges with all examination papers (except those with approval to be excluded) for use by colleges and students, has been discontinued since 2020. The Education Quality and Policy Office (EQPO) has now devolved responsibility for making past/example papers available to students to Faculties. Queries are being received from colleges and students requesting access to past/example papers. In discussion multiple suggestions were made for more detailed consideration including when, which and how many papers should be made available.

ACTION: secretary to approach Course Organisers with details of the BSC suggestions and invite suggestions for broad guidelines.

1057. **BIOLOGICAL NATURAL SCIENCES CURRICULUM REVIEW (BNSCR)**

Prof Anna Philpott attended for this part of the meeting.

At the Faculty Board meeting on 12 February a paper on principles for action from the review was approved. A version of this paper with some post-meeting amendments was circulated as **BSC.24.06**. Prof Anna Philpott, Head of the School of the Biological Sciences, attended this item of the agenda.

Although the principles had been agreed at the Faculty Board it was recognised that there was a need to identify any areas of concern and consider how to address these. Once this was done, full engagement would be needed with students across all years.

There were some questions:

What was driving the split between NST and MedST/VetST?

This was being done since there were different educational needs for medics/vets and NST students, and therefore educational content should be tailored accordingly. Also having medics, vets and NST students take the same activities meant the timetable was restricted more than if these were conducted separately. This reduced flexibility in developing course content for all of these Triposes. Support was being sought for a teaching hub and this would be helped if it could be demonstrated to the University that our courses were being run in a way that maximised the use of the estate.

There was some crossover between teaching for medics, vets and NST students – should this be recognised with shared teaching for core material?
There was no opposition to teaching medics, vets and NST students together *per se*, but this could not be done in a way that restricts the timetable.

Some students had concerns about the merging of IB subjects in that this would lead to a less diverse range of subjects.

At the moment the precise details of what a restructured IB course would look like are still being worked on. The aim was to reduce redundancy, rather than remove topics. Therefore criticism of this was premature, but its development would be consulted on. There was also anecdotal evidence that some students supported the proposed changes.

Although it was understandable that there would be concerns about changes to the course structure, it was important to review the course structure so its content could be rationalised, updated and the workload for students and staff reduced to a more manageable and appropriate level. A student focus group was being established that would give insights into the student perspective.

The terms in the principles gave the impression that the existing courses and its constituent subjects were not fit for purpose, and yet the NST subjects were consistently ranked as among the top courses in the world. More communication on why changes were being made would hopefully make it

clearer to departments on the benefits of these, reduce any anxieties and increase support.

It was noted that although the majority of the Faculty Board were supportive of the principles, it was not unanimous and some would like more consideration of the outcome.

Departments should bear in mind that the Faculty Board vote did not represent a final decision on the course structure and content, only agreement on some principles that could be debated further into the process. It should also be noted that a University-wide access and participation plan was going to be rolled out and that changes would have to take place to accommodate this whatever the wishes of departments. It was better for changes to be initiated within the Faculty than to have them imposed from the centre.

The timescales were not entirely clear at present, there was clearly going to be a need to understand and mitigate any departmental concerns. A paper detailing proposed timescales would be brought to the BNSCR and thence to the Faculty Board.

The proposed '6+1' structure was not set in stone, but whatever was agreed upon would have all subjects as inter-departmental. This should free up time for academics due to more efficient delivery of teaching, and allow them to carry out other activities such as teaching on masters courses or being involved in outreach. The masters courses had been successful so far but momentum must be maintained.

There will be much further discussion to address and resolve concerns and also on implement the aspects of the principles that have been positively received

Prof Philpott left the meeting.

At Part IB some degree of specialisation was required to prepare students for their Part II – this could be done in a restructured Part IB but in such a way that breadth and depth were retained whilst repetition was removed. Once ILOs were in place then this could inform what a possible structure might be.

With respect to student workload it was noted that currently some students made their choices based on non-academic reasons such as timetabling e.g. Saturday lectures.

The current Part II teaching would stay as is, so the teaching at Part IB would have to allow for progression to more than one Part II subject for a given student.

The STEM START programme was all about preparing students for study and it could have valuable lessons for understanding transition to university and creating Part IA intended learning outcomes (ILOs) – Lisa Jardine-Wright could be consulted about this. (Also relevant to core skills, minute 1058).

1058. BNSCR CORE SKILLS REPORT

A paper detailing discussions at a recent meeting of the Core Skills Group was circulated as **BSC.24.06a**. Members were asked to comment on the recommendations with a view to equivalence of provision across subjects. There were no solutions proposed for this yet; any comments and suggestions should be made to the Chair.

ACTION: members to contact the Chair with comments and suggestions on the core skills paper.

1059. DIGITAL TEACHING AND EXAMINATIONS

Prof Dee Scadden reported. The online examinations process was now almost wholly with ExamOps, and the transfer from SBS had resulted in some communication issues and confusion. A meeting was being held with the Head of ExamOps on 7 March.

Bootcamps had been run for students and departmental staff. There was also a Moodle site with guidance set up by ExamOps, and another smaller Moodle site specifically for SBS staff.

Prof Scadden hoped to identify any gaps between ExamOps and SBS advice and operations of Inspira so the process ran smoother in following years.

Departments should contact Prof Scadden if they had any concerns, were experiencing any technical issues or had any feedback.

1060. PART II BBS

1060.1. BBS Student Consultative Committee

A meeting of the BBS Student Consultative Committee had been held on 29 February. Workload was a concern raised, relating to the numbers of papers.

It was also suggested that students have two supervisors for their dissertations. While the Committee recognised why students might wish this it had concerns over dangers on how responsibilities could be divided between supervisors and also finding two suitably qualified supervisors for every topic. It was noted that most dissertations were largely written in the Lent term. In some departments poster presentations were an opportunity to offer feedback before submission. Any concerns a student had about their

supervisor could be raised with the relevant subject Course Organiser or the overall BBS Course Organiser.

It was proposed that a deadline should be set for BBS students to produce an outline plan for their dissertation at the end of the Michaelmas term to spread workload and increase time to respond to supervisor suggestions.

Student representatives indicated it would be good to have more Course Organisers at the welcome event held at the start of the academic year.

ACTION: secretary to arrange for submission of outline plans for 2024-25.

1060.2. BBS handbook

The draft BBS handbook for 2024-25 was circulated as **BSC.24.07**. This had previously been circulated to departments for comment. Any further comments should be directed to FacBiol@admin.cam.ac.uk.

1061. NST MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Draft minutes for meetings held on 21 November and 30 January were circulated as **BSC.24.08** and **BSC.24.09**.

It was noted that the Student Union had suspended its boycott of the National Student Survey (NSS). Currently only 12 more students needed to fill out the feedback for a return to be reportable to the Faculty of Biology.

The IA PBS module that will be lent to the NST will be named 'Introduction to Experimental Psychology: From Brain to Cognition' agreed by the Department of Psychology and the Department of Physiology, Development and Neuroscience. The previously proposed name would need to be retained for the PBS course for one year, due to its inclusion in the PBS prospectus entry.

An NST-wide student survey had been carried out; a report would be made available when ready.

1062. DOBS COMMITTEE MEETING

A review of admissions numbers was ongoing – Currently offers were on target for this stage of the process - 290 against a target for admission of 248. There had been a significant amount of deselection taking place among a subset of colleges who had had a large number of applicants, so preventing other colleges looking at these deselected applicants in the winter pool. One college with many applicants had pooled and interviewed most of their applicants and made offers or pooled many of them. It would be seen if there were any

change in procedure across colleges that could be applied to address this variation.

Discussions were underway with Lisa Jardine-Wright on outreach for NST, with particular consideration to biology.

1063. ITEMS FOR REPORT

1063.1. New module for Part II PDN

It was noted that a revised proposal was considered and approved by the Faculty Board, this was circulated as **BSC.24.10**.

1063.2. Subject master classes

Details of subject masterclasses were circulated to departments in mid-February, those interested in taking part should fill out the SharePoint form [here](#) (ideally by 28 February):

Template briefing documents were circulated as **BSC.24.11** (for online classes) and **BSC.24.12** (for in-person classes). Queries should be directed to masterclasses@admin.cam.ac.uk.

1063.3. Aims of Tripos (1040)

These were approved at the Faculty Board.

1063.4. Part II projects working group

This would be restarted soon, anyone who would like to be involved should inform the Chair or the secretary.

1064. A.O.B.

1064.1. Teaching review

The Education Quality and Policy Office (EQPO) had sent round a survey with questions that largely mirrored those given in the Education Monitoring Review (EMR). The Faculty would return a response by 19 April.

1064.2. Part III Biochemistry

A paper would come to the next meeting but views from the Committee may be sought before this via circulation. The Committee were happy to do this.

1065. DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS

The final meeting date for the 2023-24 academic year would be at 2pm on Wednesday 10 July 2024.