

FACULTY BOARD OF BIOLOGY - BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES COMMITTEE

There was an online meeting of the Biological Sciences Committee at **2 pm on Wednesday 10 July 2024**

MINUTES

There were present:

Dr Sandra Fulton (Chair, SBS), Mr James Bainham (Student Representative), Dr Holly Canuto (Director of Education, MVST), Dr Lee De Wit (Psychology), Dr Steve Edgley (PDN), Dr Paul Elliot (College admissions), Dr Christine Farr (Genetics), Dr Jess Gwynne (Physical Sciences), Dr Dee Scadden (online learning, Biochemistry), Prof Suzanne Turner (Pathology), Dr Ed Turner (Zoology) and Dr Chad Pillinger (Faculty of Biology, secretary).

In attendance: Dr Claire Michel, Mrs Leanne Wilson (NST Administrator), Dr Sonja Dunbar (Plant Sciences), Dr Melissa Rielly.

1066. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Dr Nik Cunniffe (Plant Sciences), Dr Matthew Harper (Pharmacology), Dr Uta Paszkowski (Plant Sciences, BBS), Dr Tim Weil (Deputy Head of School, Undergraduate Strategy).

1067. TEACHING REVIEWS

Melissa Rielly attended the meeting to talk about the recent Teaching Review. The review had been commissioned in 2023 and was expected to be completed by Lent 2025.

The principal issues identified so far were around student workload and college supervision. The review intended to identify the underlying issues and some possible solutions. The possible solutions would then be considered for positive and negative aspects along with associated risks.

A full list of problems and aims was intended to be released a week after this meeting. There would be descriptors of experiences and perceptions along with a desired future state/direction of travel. 'Tripos teams' would be asked to review the lists over Michaelmas 2024.

There were 14 themes in the review, the ones considered most important were:

- Fragmentation
- Clarity
- Purpose

- Communications
- Scheduling
- Supervisions

There were 11 initial recommendations, the four principal of which were:

- Extended reflection on the problems and aims identified.
- Revitalisation of the DoS Committees.
- Increasing support for supervisions.
- To set appropriate boundaries for teaching activities.

It was anticipated that the final recommendations would be published in Lent 2025.

‘Tripos teams’ meant all involved in a Tripos from start to finish of the course. It was necessarily loosely defined due to the variable management structures in different Triposes. The BSC would be involved in any proposals.

The Committee thanked Dr Rielly for her briefing.

1068. MEMBERSHIP

Nothing to report.

1069. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

1070. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 6 March 2024 were circulated and approved.

1071. MATTERS ARISING

1071.1. *Part II projects working group*

The Part II projects working group met on 20 May. The Chair reported that a concept of having some ‘baseline’ requirements for projects would help ensure consistency across departments and provide a minimum set of expectations for students. There should also be a definition of the differences between a project and a dissertation, and some indication of the minimum/maximum amount of time a student could expect to spend on a project – perhaps based on the weighting of the project mark. It needed to be borne in mind the link to outcomes. A detailed proposal will come to a future meeting.

1071.2. *Availability of past/example papers (1056)*

Course Organisers would be contacted over the long vacation.

1071.3. *Deadline for BBS dissertation outlines (1060.1)*

A process would be put in place over the long vacation.

1071.4. *Report of a Faculty Board discussion of BNSCR proposals (1057)*

The Chair of the Faculty Board reported on a discussion of BNSCR proposals at the 10 June meeting of the Faculty Board. A minute of the discussion of BNSCR proposals at the Faculty Board meeting on 10 June was circulated as **BSC.24.13**.

The discussion at the Faculty Board focused on Parts IA and IB – it was thought that some pathway was needed through these. There would be a consultation across the School with HoDs suggesting who from their departments should be involved. The steering group would be dissolved as the BSC would be able to perform its functions going forward.

Some kind of ground rules would be useful for departments, such as where there was overlap between currently offered subjects how should this be addressed? There would be some modelling work done in what new/reformed subjects would look like followed by consultation. Other considerations may also come up.

Further consideration by the Committee would probably not be needed until late Michaelmas, depending on the length of the consultation and how quickly the teaching proposal can be developed. Student consultation would also need to be carried out.

1072. PAYMENT FOR PROJECT SUPERVISIONS

Committee members were invited to discuss the current payment system from colleges for Part II project supervision. The current system seemed to be a sort of ‘gentleman’s agreement’ with colleges to allow them feedback on projects. It did not account for the actual time spent but instead paid for the equivalent of one hour’s supervision per week. The colleges benefitted by receiving a report from the supervisor so that progress of their students could be monitored by them.

The question was whether departments should also contribute to paying their non- UTO project supervisors. This topic will need further discussion.

The nomenclature is confusing. Supervising Part II projects is departmental teaching and so is different to the college arrangements for supervising Part IA and IB subjects.

In addition advice for project supervisors seemed to be inconsistent and in some cases contradictory. There was also variation in how much time

supervisors spent on the projects, and in the definitions of the responsibilities of a project supervisor.

If a project supervisor did not claim payment, the colleges might not receive a report which was not a good state of affairs. Many postdocs felt that they did not get paid enough for supervising projects. For some field trips student helpers were paid for weekend work but not work in weekdays – the latter were considered part of the overall group contribution to departmental teaching. There were many other activities in departments for Part II teaching, for example seminars, which it is also difficult to attribute costs.

ACTION: The Part II project working group will also look at this issue.

1073. PENALTIES FOR EXCEEDING SUBMITTED WORK WORD LIMITS

The Faculty of Biology has agreed to follow the usual practice to mark the work up to the word limit, as outlined in the Framework of Assessment (<https://www.educationalpolicy.admin.cam.ac.uk/policy-index/assessment>). Any material over the word limit will not be marked.

This applies to all modes of assessment used by the Faculty where a word limit was set. Departments should make clear to students in course literature the penalties for exceeding word limits. It was clarified that there should be no word limits for unseen written examination questions.

ACTION: departments to issue clear guidance to students on policy for marking and word limits.

1074. CHANGES TO EXAMINATIONS FOR MATHEMATICAL AND COMPUTATIONAL BIOLOGY

Paper **BSC.24.14** was circulated with a proposal to change the assessment for Part IB Mathematical and Computational Biology.

The proposal was to move away from a computational examination to two theoretical papers and an expansion of the project contribution. This change would potentially allow more students to take the course as the current computation examination could only be held in the Craik-Marshall building which could accommodate only a maximum of 60 candidates.

The examinations would be handwritten as it was found to be easier for candidates to write equations on paper than on computer e.g. Inspira. The downside was that Inspira allowed fast dissemination of scripts and acted as an online record where script materials could be recovered if needed.

The infrastructure for handwriting examination answers online was being looked at – Oxford, for example, were using Chrome notebooks. Some students were uncomfortable writing digitally and there were some that were confused by filling out boxes indicating which questions had been answered on scannable paper. The latter process could be time consuming for some students, but Inspira and other online examination platforms were looking into making this smoother.

The Committee approved the change to examinations for IB Mathematical and Computational Biology.

1075. CODING OF SHARED AND BORROWED PAPERS

Prof Scadden introduced this item, paper **BSC.24.15** with supporting information was circulated.

Currently the same examination paper that was borrowed by other departments/subjects might have several examination paper codes associated with it. This led to some problems, not least that where there were small cohorts of students taking borrowed papers, Examiners would be more likely to identify particular candidates and so could allow the perception of suspicions of bias when marking certain cohorts.

Prof Scadden proposed moving to a single code for each paper, and for this code to be maintained even if being borrowed by another department. Different cohorts would still need to be separated out so that marks could be reported to the borrowing department, but this could still be done on the basis of blind grade numbers (BGN). This would also work for shared papers which were ‘owned’ by more than one department. However, the very fact that a particular cohort of students could be identified by their BGNs was a cause for concern – this was being looked at but progress was expected to be slow.

ACTION: The Committee supported the idea of having common paper codes for shared and borrowed papers across subjects and requested it be taken forward.

1076. DIGITAL TEACHING AND EXAMINATIONS

Prof Dee Scadden reported. There were some significant issues in the Easter 2024 examinations with papers administered by ExamOps at the Student Registry, which ran using Inspira. Unfortunately there was no information available yet on how the system will be managed next year. The handling of scanned scripts was a particular concern with significant delays in material being delivered for marking. It was proposed by some at the meeting that the scanning process be brought back into the Faculty, with the appropriate resource; the Committee supported this idea.

It was not yet known whether Inspira would be retained as the online examination platform, this was being put out to tender. For 2024-25 it was most likely that Inspira would be retained.

The Committee felt that where possible it would be better to have candidates that had approval to sit examinations outside the main examination location to sit their papers in central facilities, such as the low-density rooms that had been used this year.

1077. PART II BBS

1077.1. BBS feedback report

The BBS student feedback report for 2023-24 was circulated as **BSC.24.16** for information and discussion. There were 28 responses out of a cohort size of 142. The feedback indicated that students would like to be included on more sessions on being a scientist. Departments are asked to consider how to implement this for their subject or not already part of BBS course.

There was also a request for each dissertation to have two supervisors. The Committee agreed that there would be pedagogical and logistical problems with this and turned it down. It was agreed that departments should request from students an outline plan of their dissertation with a deadline of the end of Michaelmas term.

ACTION: Amend project guidelines to include date for submission of an outline plan.

1077.2. Bioinformatics

It was queried whether the Bioinformatics module was still working well. Currently this was available to NST students, medics and vets, and a further differentiation of incoming students was whether they had taken Part IB Mathematical and Computational Biology (MCB). All these different cohorts entered the subject with differing levels of experience and competence and there was a danger that in accommodating students with lower levels of these may lead to a subject that was unsatisfactory for students with more experience and ability.

The Course Organisers were looking to see if it would be possible to have different streams in the subject that might suit students with different backgrounds. An alternative would be to exclude students who had taken Part IB MCB, but this seemed a little unfair on students with interests in mathematics and biology.

The Committee was thanked for discussing the subject, the Course Organisers and the Department of Genetics would consider further.

1078. NST MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Draft minutes for a meeting held on 12 March and 7 May were circulated as **BSC.24.17** and **BSC.24.18**.

The aims agreed as part of the Biological Natural Sciences Curriculum Review (BNSCR) had been approved to be applied across all NST subjects.

An NST-wide survey had been carried out and the results of its analysis would be available to this Committee soon. Amarissa Ostmo was thanked by the Committee for her work in analysing the data. Suggestions for other/amended questions would be welcomed.

The item on Part IB selections and permitted combinations needed to be considered with Directors of Studies.

The Physical Sciences DoS Committee was being re-established.

Marking and class distribution in Parts IA and IB were being looked at.

1079. DOBS COMMITTEE MEETING

Notes from a meeting held on 6 June were circulated as **BSC.24.19**.

The Committee was more active now, and had secretarial support from the NST Coordinator (Leanne Wilson).

It was hoped that some terms of reference would be made available soon via the Education Quality and Policy Office (EQPO). It might be useful to record attendance to encourage members to turn up – it might also offer further encouragement if Senior Tutors were informed if their DoS were not regularly attending.

1080. ITEMS FOR REPORT

1080.1. National student survey (NSS) 2024

120 responses out of 190 students had been received, which is above the threshold for reporting. Therefore, it was likely that the Committee would need to consider NSS feedback at a future meeting.

1081. A.O.B.

1081.1. Biology of Cells (BoC) departmental responsibility rotation

It was requested that deadlines for nominating Examiners be extended, but these deadlines were set by the University. Similarly the publication date for results could not be amended for 2024-25 as it was set centrally.

It was hoped that the ExamOps issues experienced this year which led to marking delays would be resolved and therefore less stressful for Examiners.

It was queried whether the BoC marking burden was greater than for other subjects – this was really quite difficult to quantify when taking into account various factors that affected subjects differently.

1081.2. Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The PBS course would, for 2024-25, advise students that they would be permitted to use AI in support of writing up their projects. Guidance would be given for staff and students setting the boundaries on use and when/where it was acceptable to use AI generated materials.

AI guidance was available at the University level and ideally there would be some consistency across departments of the Faculty. The STEM librarian, Sarah Crudge, would be happy to discuss use of AI with any departments.

1081.3. Mathematical Biology

A late paper was circulated as **BSC.24.20** with a proposal to amend the assessment of Mathematical Biology. There was not sufficient time for the Committee to consider this and it was agreed the proposal would be considered via circulation over the Long Vacation.

1082. **DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS**

The meeting dates for the 2024-25 academic year were:

9 October 2024
27 November 2024
19 March 2025
9 July 2025

All at 2pm. Members were asked to note that the Michaelmas dates were moved earlier to before the Faculty Board meetings so BSC discussions can inform the Faculty Board.

Members were asked to send the Chair and secretary their views on whether meetings should be conducted in-person or online.