

FACULTY BOARD OF BIOLOGY - BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES COMMITTEE

There was an online meeting of the Biological Sciences Committee at **2 pm on Wednesday 21 July 2021**

MINUTES

There were present:

Dr Holly Canuto (Director of Education, MVST), Dr Nik Cunniffe, Dr Steve Edgley, Paul Elliot, Dr Gillian Fraser, Dr Sandra Fulton (Chair), Dr Mairi Kilkenny, Dr Deborah Longbottom (Physical Sciences), Dr Nick Mundy, Catherine Ngai (student representative), Dr Stuart Sage, Dr David Summers (Genetics), Dr Rik van Veen, Dr Tim Weil, Professor Alun Williams (Veterinary Medicine).

886. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Dr Kate Plaisted-Grant, Dr Dee Scadden

887. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 10 March 2021 were circulated and approved.

888. MATTERS ARISING

888.1. Proposal for new IB Course –Mathematical and Computational Biology (876.1)

A document addressing the concerns raised at the December meeting was circulated as **BSC.21.05**. Prof Durbin and Dr Salje attended the meeting to talk to the paper and take any questions.

The entry requirements were now advisory, and the limits in numbers had been removed. To accommodate the latter some of the practical classes would be held online, with priority for attendance at in-person practicals given to students who did not own their own laptop. An examiner's rota had been agreed confirming the first four Senior Examiners.

The responsibility for replacing teaching staff would be with the Course Management Committee. It was recognised that this course was accounted for in the review of NSTIB biology teaching currently being run.

It was hoped that lectures would be held in the same location – the Department of Genetics would carry out all room bookings.

On a general note the possibility of requiring all students admitted to Cambridge to have a computer was discussed. The proposers of the new course supported this and asked the BSC to see if this could be pushed forward to NST/University level – there was support from the School of Physical Sciences. The specifications of the computer would not need to be very high. The Committee were aware that this could have access issues, but

support could be offered to students who were unable to afford their own computer. It was noted that the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine strongly recommended that all students have their own computer.

The BSC approved the proposal to go forward to the Faculty Board of Biology and the NST Management Committee.

ACTION: secretary to forward proposal to NST Management Committee and Faculty Board of Biology.

ACTION: Chair to raise possibility of requiring all students to have their own computer.

889. EDUCATION MONITORING

The Academic Standards and Enhancement Committee (ASEC) had proposed an amended system of monitoring the quality of courses, to replace the Learning and Teaching Reviews (LTRs). Relevant documents were circulated as **BSC.21.06**.

Members were invited to discuss how these might be implemented across courses offered by the Faculty of Biology. Should interdepartmental courses be looked at as an element independent of a particular department, and could Part II courses be considered to be organised principally at department-level?

ASEC were keen to have buy-in from the Schools for the new system. If Schools inputted into development, then ASEC could be more confident that the system was an appropriate tool. The system was intended to be data driven, using existing easily accessible data. The NST would need to be kept separate – possibly as IA/IB (which crossed over Schools and departments) and II/III (which tended to be associated with a single department).

The NST needed to be treated as a whole rather than individual courses. Also a lot of data that was being requested was held by the Cambridge Admissions Office (CAO) – this data was usually inaccessible, but there would need to be some agreement on making it available for the purposes of course monitoring.

It was acknowledged that there would probably be a lot of work involved, but hopefully not as much as the previous LTR system. There hopefully wouldn't be too much overlap and the new system would allow shared courses to be reviewed.

With respect to admissions – courses didn't have control over this and wouldn't be able to act on any recommendations, but would at least be able to monitor progression.

It would be good to have a lower frequency of monitoring, but the School will need to continue to engage with ASEC to ensure the final version is appropriate for the course. Perhaps once every three years. However, if it could be arranged such that data could be provided at the end of the academic year a summary could be more frequent. It would be useful to have a pro-forma that could be sent to each Management Committee to fill out.

The BSC was happy for the Part II and III courses to be dealt with by the relevant departments. Management Committees would probably need to provide much of the requested data.

It was noted that clinical courses have accreditation visits – the data from the ASEC monitoring exercises may be useful for this, and similarly data from accreditation visits could be used for ASEC reporting.

'Light touch' annual reports could be useful to courses/Faculties/Schools as long as there was not too much administrative load.

For the 'admissions gap' a review of this could be useful to cover the gap between colleges and departments. Some reflection on this from the central University might be useful.

890. DIGITAL TEACHING

Dee Scadden was offering a demo of the Inspira examination software which the School was hoping to pilot for NST IA and IB in Easter 2022. Currently it was not intended to look at alternatives. The Inspira software would be used in a pilot; there was too much time pressure to consider alternatives at this point. The examination software being used by the School of Clinical Medicine (NOWCE) could be looked at in a review to consider what to use for 2021-22. Other systems would be borne in mind. Inspira had more options than Proctor Exam, and also avoided the need to download scripts.

Inspira were an established company whose system was being used in other Universities including Oxford.

For consistency all departments across the NST should use Inspira, so that students were not disorientated by having to switch between different examination systems.

There had been some debate about how the NST admissions assessments were carried out. They were considering going online, which offered the opportunity for some synergy across the University. Perhaps the question of online examination platforms should be considered more broadly, but for now individual Schools/Faculties had discretion to introduce their own systems.

Admissions assessments involved higher numbers of candidates than examinations and this would lead to higher costs.

Therefore across the University it was likely that in 2021-22 there would be a variety of online examination platforms in use. Ideally there might have been more central grip on the systems used to allow for a more consistent approach but the variety of what were essentially pilots would allow them to be compared in the medium term.

891. EASTER EXAMINATIONS 2021

A list of issues identified by the Faculty Office was circulated as **BSC.21.07**. The Committee had no further comment on these. However, it was felt that the examination timetable needed streamlining to reduce the overall period over which the examinations were held. It might be possible to move the examination period earlier, but this would require a change to regulations and consideration of how much revision time students would have.

892. FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSMENT 2021-22

The Assessment Framework (**BSC.21.08**) had been published by the University. This was presented to the Faculty Board and departments urged to liaise within their departments and with departments they share courses with to provide details of their planned assessments for 2021-2022 through the annual course information exercise run by the Exams Office, which is open throughout July–August 2021.

A shared file was made available for departments to propose their assessment plans for 2021-22. The secretary was asked to re-send the email of 14 June to all departments asking them for their assessment plans.

A meeting was held on 7 July to discuss possible approaches to NST examinations in 2021-22 with a view to having some consistency across the courses. The five-hour examination was now an option available and GBEC were also open to other proposals, but they would need discussion and good arguments. The 24 hour examinations had been too stressful for students and would not be requested for 2022.

The option for online in-person invigilated examinations was not widely available due to capacity issues, but had been approved for pre-clinical medical and veterinary examinations. In an ideal world the University would be able to get hold of sufficient facilities to hold all examinations as in-person online with invigilation, but that was not likely to happen anytime soon.

The Faculty marking guidelines may have to be revised for open book examinations, they may indeed need their own guidelines separate from those

for closed book examinations. In addition new guidance may need to be issued on how to answer open book examinations – previous papers used for closed book examinations might not be of as much use here, so example papers/questions may need to be produced. Supervision essays were open-book and might provide a useful starting point.

There were some differences between departments on the expectations for citations in examination answers – ideally these should be ironed out for a consistent approach before the examination started so students could be clear on what was expected of them.

ACTION: secretary to resend email of 14 June asking departments for their plans.

ACTION: all members to consider providing sample papers/questions for open book examinations.

ACTION: further discussion needed on what is expected re: citations.

893. PART II BBS

893.1. Student Consultative Committee

A meeting had been held at the end of the Easter term. Dr Sage updated the Committee. The student representatives had been quite vociferous but constructive. They felt that the 24 hour examinations were too much and put too much pressure and stress on candidates. On the course itself the students felt that more weight should be given to the dissertation, and they would like more information on the minor subjects before they were required to make a choice.

893.2. BBS student feedback

Feedback received from BBS students for the 2021-22 academic year were circulated as **BSC.21.09** (all feedback), **BSC.21.09a** (numbers of medics/vets and NST students choosing BBS as a first choice) and **BSC.21.10** (summary).

The feedback was mostly positive. There was some discontent that examination marks were handled differently by different departments, however it was noted by the Committee that this was the case for single subject courses that borrowed/shared papers with more than one department. Nonetheless, this needed consideration for following years.

It was noted that very few academics attended these Student Consultative Committee meetings which was disappointing – students would be more reassured that they were being taken seriously if there were more academics present.

ACTION: Committee to consider examination consistency across BBS courses.

894. NST MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Minutes of meetings held on 26 January, 23 February and 11 May 2021 were circulated as **BSC.21.11**, **BSC.21.12** and **BSC.21.13** respectively. The July meeting had been cancelled.

Of note was the proposal for a IB course called 'Quantitative Environmental Science' – it was noted that this is proposed to be timetabled against Ecology, Evolution and Diversity. The Committee was asked to consider if there would be a better slot for this course to be timetabled against, and if so, let the Chair know.

The STEM START programme was looking into how to fit biology in. Biology students should have access to these types of resources, and these had already been agreed on. It would be good if there was more involvement from and consultation with biologists. Members were asked if they would be interested in looking at the biological component of the STEM START programme – if so, they should contact the Chair.

It was clarified that STEM START was a different programme to STEM SMART – the former involved a biology component.

ACTION: members to contact the Chair if they are interested in contributing to the STEM START biology strand/strands.

895. NOTE OF THANKS – JANE CLARE

Jane Clare was moving to a new position within the University. The Chair suggested that the Committee express its thanks to Ms Clare for all her hard and skilful work in helping to deliver the NST course. The Committee agreed to this and suggested that a letter be drafted to Jane Clare.

ACTION: secretary to draft letter of thanks to Jane Clare.

896. PNB MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Minutes of the PNB Management Committee meeting held on 26 April 2021 were circulated as **BSC.21.14**. It was agreed to pass on the comments on scaling of marks.

897. DOBS COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

No minutes further to those circulated for a meeting on 18 February were yet available. No major issues had been raised other than some concern about students moving between year groups – these will need lots of support.

898. REPORTED BUSINESS

898.1. Form and Conduct Notices

Form and conduct notice approved by circulation in March for the Easter 2021 examinations are circulated as **BSC.21.16** and noted.

898.2. BBS dissertation database (879.1)

It was noted that the BSC approved by circulation a process for establishing a database of BBS dissertations. For information, the final wording of the process is circulated as **BSC.21.17**.

899. A.O.B.

899.1. Support programmes

Support programmes such as STEM SMART could be hard to organise/coordinate. There could be money for this, but it was not clear who should be approached. At the School level interest has been expressed and it could be organised at this level, perhaps referencing someone who had done some teaching in relevant areas and was willing to be involved. The BSC supported this approach, but it would be useful to have some wording from STEM SMART on the nature of the role. Paul Elliot agreed to request this.

ACTION: Paul Elliot to obtain some wording from STEM SMART.

899.2. Resumption of face to face teaching

It was expected that there would be a message sent out shortly after this meeting setting out the vision for teaching in 2021-22. It was likely that many of the proposals may be difficult to implement at departmental level, however departments were encouraged to ensure they had booked all necessary teaching spaces as if it were a normal year, so they would at least be prepared in this way.

Practical classes were much more difficult to plan for. The default was that the timetable for these must remain as in normal years (at least for IA and IB), but local adjustments to frequency and numbers attending individual classes could be left to individual departments following their risk assessments. However these were run students must be kept up to date and communication clear.

There was some allowance for online teaching, but at present it was expected that this should only be offered for clear pedagogical reasons and not for logistical reasons. Concerns could be fed back to GBEC, but it was unclear how much they would be willing to compromise at this point.

More information was expected on 22 July, the Head of School sat on GBEC and could relay any concerns of this Committee to them.

Some on the Committee felt that information was being sent out slowly and in some cases to the wrong contacts. Better communication would allow quicker and more appropriate action. For example considering social distancing – the Safety Office had no definition for this, only that a risk assessment had to be made at the department level. The School Education Committee was meeting soon and could raise some issues with the Safety Office.

It was noted that running in-person lectures for just a proportion of students would be difficult, as the students asked to attend online-only could feel aggrieved.

ACTION: further communications to be sent by the School/Faculty as the University position becomes clearer.

900. DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS

The next meeting would be scheduled for 13 October at 2pm.