

FACULTY BOARD OF BIOLOGY - BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES COMMITTEE

There was an online meeting of the Biological Sciences Committee at **2 pm on Wednesday 1 December 2021**

MINUTES

There were present:

Dr Sandra Fulton (Chair, Director of Education NST Biology), Dr Holly Canuto (Director of Education, MVST), Dr Nik Cunniffe (Plant Sciences), Dr Steve Edgley (PDN), Paul Elliot (College admissions), Dr Gillian Fraser (Pathology), Dr Jess Gwynne (Physical Sciences), Dr Mairi Kilkenny (Biochemistry), Dr Nick Mundy (Zoology), Catherine Ngai (Student representative), Dr Kate Plaisted-Grant (Psychology), Dr Stuart Sage (BBS, PDN), Dr Dee Scadden (online learning, Biochemistry), Dr David Summers (Genetics, Chair of the Faculty Board of Biology), Dr Tim Weil (Deputy Head of School, Undergraduate Strategy), Leanne Wilson (NST Administrator), Dr Chad Pillinger (secretary).

918. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Dr Rik van Veen (Pharmacology), Professor Alun Williams (Veterinary Medicine).

919. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2021 were circulated and approved.

920. MATTERS ARISING

920.1. Proposal for new IB Course –Mathematical and Computational Biology (905.1)

The NST Management Committee and the Faculty Board of Biology had both approved the course proposal at their October meetings. The proposal has now been forwarded to the Academic Standards Enhancement Committee (ASEC) for their consideration.

920.2. Admissions (916.2)

Paul Elliot reported there were 1129 applications for NST in 2021-22, compared with 1272 in the previous year. The numbers had dropped to levels seen a few years ago.

It was suggested that a working group be put together to look at why there was a drop and what could be done to reverse this. The issue could perhaps be discussed at the Directors of Studies for Biological Sciences (DoBS).

Applications for PBS were up. The resources of the Department of Psychology would be able to deal with current increased numbers, college resources

however were more limited. There had not been a formal review of college resources, but potential issues such as availability of supervisors needed flagging. Discussion was underway with the director of admissions of the Cambridge Colleges as to whether PBS should become a numbers managed subject.

Paul Elliot told the Committee that he would be on sabbatical in the next academic year, but would like to be involved in biology recruitment.

ACTION: Chair and Paul Elliot to set up a working group to consider NST biology admissions.

920.3. Course Organiser and Senior Examiner meetings (910)

The Chair and secretary would look into arranging meetings in the new year.

921. PROPOSAL FOR CHANGES TO EXAMINATION FOR PBS MODULE 7 (ADVANCED TOPICS IN SOCIAL AND APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY)

The Department of Psychology wished to change the assessment for module PBS7 which is offered to several NST Part II subjects including BBS and Part II Psychology. Papers circulated were **BSC.21.20a** (Minor course modification form), **BSC.21.20b** (Proposal document), **BSC.21.20c** (HSPS Management Committee approval) and **BSC.21.20d** (PBS Management Committee approval). Dr Kate Plaisted-Grant spoke to the proposal on behalf of the Department of Psychology, noting that the department was responding to the university requirement to diversify assessment when reviewing courses.

The NST Management Committee had looked at this proposal and had requested further information and discussion from the BSC.

The Committee regarded the proposal as interesting. Concerns were raised that the new format might advantage more confident students and put less confident students at a disadvantage. There were also concerns that students with certain conditions e.g., speech impediments might struggle with the format.

The department proposed to correlate candidate performance across modules comparing the oral assessment format with the written paper format in other modules. With respect to the possibility of a 50/50 written/oral assessment structure, this would make such a comparison more difficult.

Pre-recording of presentations would help those students who were less comfortable with the format. Training would also be offered to students throughout the academic year which would reduce the disparities between students with differing levels of confidence.

The Department of Physiology, Development and Neurosciences (PDN) were supportive of this proposal. Perhaps in the first couple of years the External Examiner could see the presentations to check that they were being run appropriately. It was also suggested that the Q&A session be recorded so the External Examiner could review in their own time.

The Committee noted that the PBS7 course was optional, and therefore not all Part II PBS students would benefit from the presentation skills taught by it. The Department of Psychology felt it was better at this stage to see how a specific course with oral-only assessment could be run over a number of years. The advantage of it being optional module was that students who were very anxious about presentations could avoid this mode of assessment.

For recording of presentations and Q&A sessions appropriate permissions would need to be sought from students and staff – the PBS Management Committee were advised to consult with the relevant University body to ensure they were carrying things out appropriately.

If the changes were approved, the PBS course would start to offer training and formative assessment in communication skills from the first year, alongside other transferable skills. This should prepare students for testing and examination that would take place in the third year. The PBS7 course would serve as a useful pilot for other courses.

Lists of BBS students taking PBS7 should be sent to the Department of Psychology as soon as possible so they could be invited to the induction event explaining the assessment

ACTION: secretary to feedback BSC discussion to the NST Management Committee.

The Committee were happy for the PBS7 assessment proposal to be taken forward, bearing in mind the comments above.

922. DIGITAL TEACHING

Dr Scadden reported to the Committee.

Training for using the Inspira software for examination had been undertaken by Dr Scadden, Dr Weil and the School's Learning Technologists, Stuart Humphries and Hamish Adams. A 'super-user' group has made a demonstration examination with accompanying frequently asked questions – this would be sent out to students before the end of term. The demonstration would familiarise students with the structure and format of Inspira.

Some students had expressed concern about the arrangements for proctoring – they were reassured once an explanation was offered. The level of proctoring could be adjusted depending on the requirements for individual papers.

The super-user group consisted of Dee Scadden, Tim Weil, Sonja Brignell, Stuart Humphries and Hamish Adams. An administrator ('Operational Manager') would also be recruited to supervise the use of Inspera. The role was seen as a short-term one for now, but could be lengthened depending on how the examinations ran.

Inspira could be rolled out further across the University depending on performance.

Training for examiners and others involved in the examinations process would be offered in mid-January. Training sessions had been recorded and a mock examination set from the Part IA MedST/VetST Foundations of Evidence-Based Practice (FEBP). This mock exam would be made available to students in January. Medic and vet students had priority as they would be taking examinations at the end of the Lent term.

It was acknowledged that different NST examinations had different examination formats/styles, but these could be accommodated by Inspera. Surveys would be sent out soon with the purpose of finding out about pipelines.

There were no other queries from students at this point, although it was noted that practice examinations for NST students needed to be made available at some point. The Committee was reminded that any changes to examination formats needed to be communicated to students. Most examinations were in the same format as the previous few years, the only difference would be that these would now be run on Inspera.

Inspira should be an improvement on previous systems. Upload and timing issues should not be a problem. Training of administrators involved in examinations would be offered at the same time as that for Examiners. The Operational Manager would have a role in this once appointed.

Hard copies of papers would still have to be produced to allow for approved adjustments for certain candidates. Administrators should hopefully have a reduced role in running the examinations as many processes would be automated e.g. marking of MCQ papers. There were some issues to iron out e.g. incorporation of marks into the final mark books but these should be resolvable. The system was fairly intuitive, but the super-user group would liaise with Inspera to see if the different scaling systems across MedST/VetST and NST could be incorporated. If there wasn't a system in place for scaling within Inspera itself for Easter 2022 then workarounds would have to be used

and the scaling incorporated later. Inspira were likely to be supportive of requests for changes/new functionality.

The Committee looked forward to departments receiving more information about Inspira.

923. CONSULTATION ON THE INTRODUCTION OF A READING WEEK

The University consulted on a proposal to include a mid-term reading week in Michaelmas and Lent terms. It was proposed to keep the same number of teaching days by bringing forward the start date for term and pushing back the end date. The proposal was circulated as **BSC.21.21**.

Responses were expected by 10 January. Departments were encouraged to respond, and the Faculty would be responding on behalf of the BSC and the MVST Part I Committee. The wording of the proposal implied that unless feedback was received it would be implemented, therefore it was important for departments to make their views known.

It was noted that the MVST Part I Committee had identified significant difficulties in accommodating a reading week, particularly with respect to CGC students' clinical placements and vets' EMS requirements which were usually done outside of term. For NST there was an issue with Saturday lectures – these could be removed if there were more large lecture theatres, but as things stood the timetable was impossible without Saturday lectures. Having 10 or 12 week terms would result in the same problems.

Post-qualification admissions may ameliorate some of the issues with the reading week. However it was not certain where this was in development terms – it was a government initiative.

Doubts were raised as to whether the change would result in the anticipated reduction in stress

While there was support among students for the reading week there was also acknowledgement by them that there were practical issues in accommodating this.

Overall while the Committee were sympathetic with students' desire for a reading week, they could not endorse the request.

ACTION: Departmental representatives to liaise with their Heads of Departments in drafting a response to the consultation by 10 January.

ACTION: Chair and secretary to draft a response on behalf of the BSC by 10 January.

924. SENIOR EXAMINERS REPORTS 2020-21

A summary of NST biology Senior Examiner reports would be circulated when this was ready.

925. PART II BBS

925.1. Student Consultative Committee

A meeting had been held on 29 November, Dr Sage reported to the Committee.

The later publication of Part IB results had delayed both the Part II allocation and the allocation of minor subjects

Some students were unaware that they could suggest their own dissertation titles. Departments were urged to check that they made this clear in the guidance on choosing a title they gave their BBS students.

It was noted that PDN were reviewing their modules to see if some should be withdrawn as minor subject options for BBS students. Dr Edgley, Dr Fulton and Dr Sage would meet to discuss this at a later date.

It was noted with regret that at the BBS Student Consultative Committee meeting only a very small number of Course Organisers turned up.

ACTION: Departments to review and update advice on choosing BBS dissertation titles.

ACTION: Departments to encourage Course Organisers to attend the BBS Student Consultative Committee meetings.

926. EXAMINATIONS – FORM AND CONDUCT NOTICES

A list of form and conduct notices for NST biology subjects was circulated as **BSC.21.22**. These had been considered and approved by the NST Management Committee at its meeting on 23 November.

It was noted that although there was no formal requirement to publish form and conduct notices this year it was useful to have a record of changes to examination formats. Any changes to examination formats/paper structures needed to be clearly communicated to students as soon as possible – this was the responsibility of the Course Organisers/Departmental Teaching Committees.

ACTION: Departments to ensure all changes to examinations are communicated to students

927. NST MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Minutes for a meeting held on 12 October were circulated as **BSC.21.23** and noted.

928. PNB MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

There was a meeting of the PNB Management Committee on 14 October 2021; draft minutes were circulated as **BSC.21.24**. With respect to the query on data retention it was clarified that these changes needed to be implemented as they were University policy and could not be opted out of. Questions could be directed to the GDPR advisor (James Knapton) or Kerri Gardener.

The PNB Management Committee had identified problems with student numbers. The Department of Physiology, Development and Neuroscience were expected to lose seven members of staff (one of whom was in the Department of Zoology) who taught on Neuroscience modules in the next three years. It may be necessary to slim down the numbers of students or to appoint more staff with the relevant skills and experience. However the latter was difficult as new appointments were expected to have a lighter teaching load to allow them to develop their research.

ACTION: secretary and Chair to communicate data retention requirements to PNB Management Committee.

Faculty Board to be made aware of concerns over Neuroscience teaching

929. DOBS COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Members of the Committee report that no major issues had arisen from the most recent meetings. It had been noted that the interview season was coming up and that online interviews were acknowledged as being more efficient.

930. REPORTED BUSINESS

There was none.

931. A.O.B.

931.1. Awarding gap

This was being worked on as part of the curriculum review.

931.2. Student representative

It was noted that this was Catherine Ngai's last meeting as student representative of the Committee. Miss Ngai was thanked for her valuable

contributions to the Committee over the last year and wished her all the best in her onward studies.

A replacement representative had yet to be elected – it was hoped that one would be in place in the new year.

931.3. Teaching at Part IA

The Committee queried when communications about teaching in the Lent 2022 term would be sent. It was anticipated that the teaching formats for most courses would stay as it was in the Michaelmas term i.e. online lectures for IA NST biology courses with in-person practicals wherever possible.

Updated government advice would be issued on 17 December, further communications to Course Organisers would await this. However an interim communication to Course Organisers would be sent around the end of term.

932. DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS

The next meetings were scheduled the following dates:

16 March 2022

6 July 2022