There was an online meeting of the Biological Sciences Committee at 2 pm on Wednesday 16 March 2022

MINUTES

There were present:
Dr Sandra Fulton (Chair, SBS), Dr Holly Canuto (Director of Education, MVST), Dr Nik Cunniffe (Plant Sciences), Dr Steve Edgley (PDN), Paul Elliot (College admissions), Dr Gillian Fraser (Pathology), Jess Gwynne (Physical Sciences), Dr Mairi Kilkenny (Biochemistry), 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 Rik van Veen (Pharmacology), Dr Tim Weil (Deputy Head of School, Undergraduate Strategy), Professor Alun Williams (Veterinary Medicine), Mrs Leanne Wilson (NST Administrator), Dr Chad Pillinger (secretary).

918. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE
Dr Nick Mundy (Zoology).

919. MEMBERSHIP
Vianca Shah joined the Committee as the Faculty student representative.

920. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
There were none.

921. MINUTES
Minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2021 were circulated and approved.

922. MATTERS ARISING
922.1. Proposal for new IB subject – Mathematical and Computational Biology (920.1)
ASEC had considered the Mathematical and Computational Biology proposal at their meeting on 26 January. The formal minutes had not been written at the time of this meeting but it was understood that no objections to the new subject had been raised.

922.2. Admissions (920.2)
Data was available for successful applications. Of these 83% had four A* A level results. One thing to flag up was the possibility of requiring A level
mathematics for admission to NST biology. Around 75% of DoS supported this. College data showed that very few students were being admitted to biology without A level maths – around 2-3 per year. A meeting of DoS would discuss and hold a vote on the requirement for A level mathematics soon, a decision was expected by May and the meeting was already organised.

The Committee noted that if this requirement were put in place, prospective students with an A level combination of Chemistry, Physics and Biology could no longer be admitted. However, this might formalise what already happened in practice, where most colleges admitted students to NST biology who had A level mathematics. Thus specifying a requirement could be considered a more honest approach to advertising the course. It might be possible to admit students without A level mathematics, but the wording in any course literature/advertisements would have to be done very carefully.

**ACTION:** Departmental representatives to forward to the Chair comments on the proposal to require A level mathematics for entry to NST biology.

922.3. Course Organiser and Senior Examiner meetings (920.3)

It was proposed to run a session for newly-appointed Senior Examiners in mid-Michaelmas, and a session for current or soon-to-be Course Organisers in mid-April. Both would be run by a suitably experienced/senior academic and aimed at the Part I subjects – suggestions/volunteers for these roles would be welcomed.

The representative for PDN noted that theirs was a large department with responsibility for a lot of examinations. Training of new examiners was done mostly via peer-to-peer contact which were quite specific to the subjects being examined, and it was doubtful if a generic training session would be of much additional use to Examiners. However it was noted that the extra meetings held in 2020-21 were found to be useful to Examiners, even though these were more general in nature. Perhaps Chairs of Examiners could be asked to run these meetings – they should also involve Examiners for medics and vets too.

For Course Organisers it was proposed to hold meetings in mid-April, a theme for this year might be blended learning. The issue of Course Organiser and Senior Examiner rotations was raised – currently there were some gaps in these. Decisions needed to be made but these would need to be brought to the July meeting. It was queried whether the BSC should take a role in setting the rotations; this would require flexibility and some negotiation with departments.

**ACTION:** Chair to consider whether BSC should set subject rotas for Course Organisers and Examiners
923. DIGITAL TEACHING AND EXAMINATIONS

Dr Scadden reported that medics and vets were to use the Inspera online examination platform for the first time to have their end of Lent term examinations. The examinations would be held in the Sidgwick lecture rooms. Some late issues with the venue had been identified, mainly the location of sockets for candidates to charge their laptops if needed. School funds were also being used to provide spare laptops should candidate’s devices fail on the day.

For the Easter examinations a deadline of 1 April had been set for submission of examination papers. An administrator to assist with the set up and running of Inspera was being recruited, the two Learning Technologists were working well to deal with queries.

There were some departments with spaces that might be suitable for hosting online examinations. Departmental were asked to let Dr Scadden know if they had any suitable spaces that they were prepared to offer for the Easter examinations.

Assurances had been given that the Sidgwick lecture rooms had enough electric points for all candidates. However on visiting the venue this proved not to be the case. This was a general problem with the University not having the infrastructure to support alternative types of assessment. This affected teaching as well as examinations.

**ACTION:** Departments to contact Dr Scadden if they know of any spaces in their departments that could accommodate online examinations.

924. PART II PROJECTS FOR 2022-23

It was anticipated that there would be extra pressure on Part II project places due to the extraordinary large intake of students from 2020-21. Options that could be considered are for departments to increase their numbers of Part II project places, or to reach out to other Schools (e.g. School of Clinical Medicine) who could offer projects. The latter approach would need some urgent contacts with relevant departments. The Department of Pathology already had many contacts with the School of Clinical Medicine and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine for its Part II students.

It was noted that approaching external project supervisors was sometimes tricky as there wasn’t a great deal of leverage when asking them to provide projects for Part II students. Only small sums could be offered to cover consumables and this did not cover any of the supervisor’s time.
Data on project places offered from 2017-2022 were circulated as BSC.22.01; the figures for 2022 may be updated. These had previously been circulated to the NST Management Committee for planning purposes.

The Department of PDN may have to reduce the numbers of projects that were offered. Cost and time associated with regulations around research projects involving animals meant these were no longer feasible to run, so numbers of projects offered needed to be reduced from 64 places to around 50. More BBS will be offered.

There was a possible critical situation for the teaching of neuroscience, as there were many retirements coming up with no replacements due. This was in spite of the fact that neuroscience modules were very popular with students. The shortage of teaching staff in neuroscience would impact the PDN and PNB Part II subjects. The new Neurobiology Centre had been considered for providing projects and could perhaps be approached, although many of the leaving PDN staff were taking up posts in this facility.

The review of pre-clinical medical and veterinary education was considering a Part II that medics and vets could take as an option, which might alleviate the pressure on project places for NST students.

There needed to be further consideration on what projects were for at Part II – developing skills in experimental design, analysis and interpretation of data.

The Faculty was urged to think about how to address these issues.

**ACTION: Faculty level discussions and decisions about provision of Part II projects.**

**925. EXAMINATION DATA RETENTION**

The Faculty Board had recently approved a new data retention policy that was to apply to all NST biology subjects. The policy was put in place in response to a University-wide change in its data retention policy.

One of the changes is to require individual question data to be retained for one year following publication of the examination results. Students would be able to request their data, and the Committee was asked how best to disseminate this information – should it be released upon individual request, or should it be released along with other marks to all students?

A copy of the policy was circulated as BSC.22.02.
Considering examiner’s comments, there was a distinction between those made for the use of other examiners, and those commenting on the performance of candidates.

The policy applied to the Psychological and Behavioural Sciences (PBS) Tripos as well as the NST biology subjects.

With respect to release of individual question data, it would be up to individual subjects to decide how this should be handled. Experience this year may inform further discussion following the examination period. The Committee felt that some kind of automated central system to gather and release individual question data would relieve the departments of many of the burdens of holding and releasing confidential data.

926. REQUESTS FOR ONLINE TEACHING IN 2022-23

It was noted that the University expected all teaching to be given in-person for the academic year 2022-23, with the option to record in-person teaching sessions. Requests to offer online-only teaching need to be approved by this Committee, the NST Management Committee, the Faculty Board of Biology, the General Board’s Education Committee and the Academic Standards Enhancement Committee.

Any such requests should use the ‘Minor Course Modifications’ form available from:

https://www.educationalpolicy.admin.cam.ac.uk/curricula-and-assessment/changes-existing-courses

Such requests only needed to be made if online teaching offered was replacing what in normal times would be delivered as in-person teaching. This requirement did not apply to new online material that augmented what was already being taught.

927. CHAIRS OF NST EXAMINERS FROM 2022-23

The NST Management Committee recently agreed that there should be separate Chairs of Examiners for Part IB and Part II/III. Currently these Parts have the same Chair. The NST Management Committee had discussed the principles on which to base a rotation at their meeting on 15 March, this discussion was ongoing.

928. SENIOR EXAMINERS REPORTS 2020-21

A summary of NST biology Senior Examiner reports was circulated as BSC.22.03. The Committee requested that the Examiners be thanked for what
was a very difficult year for delivery of examinations. In particular there seemed to be an increased prevalence of cases being flagged for plagiarism.

**ACTION:** secretary to forward thanks of the Committee to Examiners.

929. PART II BBS
929.1. Student Consultative Committee

A meeting had been held on 15 March. Dr Sage, the BBS Course Organiser reported that no major issues had been raised. A query had been received regarding intermitted students and whether they would be permitted to take their examinations in the same format as the previous year instead of the format of the year of their return from intermission. This query was forwarded to the Student Registry.

The students welcomed the return to in-person teaching, but would prefer if online recordings could still be made.

*Post meeting note:* examinations have to be taken in the format for the year in which the examination is sat.

929.2. BBS Handbook for 2022-23

For information a copy of the BBS handbook for 2022-23 was circulated as BSC.22.04. Unfortunately three minor subjects had dropped out due to staffing issues: ‘Neural Degeneration and Regeneration’, ‘Research Methods in Medical Law and Ethics’ and ‘Applied Clinical Research’. It was possible that the latter two could return in following years, but it was not known at this point whether the Neural Degeneration and Regeneration subject would return.

930. UNIVERSITY OPEN DAYS

The University planned to offer limited in-person open days in early July 2022, plans were circulated as BSC.22.04 (Key dates) and BSC.22.05 (outline). For NST there would be an in-person information stand staffed by the NST Coordinator – Committee members were urged to consider attending the stand for an hour or so, or to encourage members from their departments to do so. The NST stand would be located in the Student Services Centre.

Course presentations and sample lectures were suggested as being run online. In-person departmental tours (guided or self-guided) have been suggested by the University – individual departments will need to decide whether these can be accommodated.

Leanne Wilson was co-ordinating the NST open day stand and should be contacted if departments were considering offering activities for the open day.
**ACTION:** Departments to contact Leanne Wilson if they wanted to put on open day activities or attend the NST stand.

931. **NST MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE**
The Committee noted minutes for a meeting held on 23 November 2021 circulated as **BSC.21.06**, and the draft minutes for a meeting held on 1 February 2022 circulated as **BSC.22.07**.

932. **PNB MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE**
There was a meeting of the PNB Management Committee on 17 January 2022; draft minutes are circulated as **BSC.21.08**. No mention was made of the changes to Part II numbers but this would be corrected.

933. **DOBS COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES**
Admissions had been discussed under item 922.2.

934. **PBS MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE**
The PBS Management Committee had reported problems with equipment in lecture theatres and wished to bring this to the attention of the BSC and the NST Management Committee. In particular it was noted that there were inconsistent processes for lecture capture across the different facilities used for delivering lectures. Therefore a lecturer had to familiarise themselves with multiple types of process which sometimes led to lectures not being recorded or being recorded in the wrong way. In addition technical assistance was not available at all locations, and in some cases even the telephones were not connected.

It was queried to whom this issue should be raised? There must be a central body with some responsibility for this, although it was likely a lot of the process had been devolved to departments, it should not apply to centrally managed facilities.

It was noted that Graham Virgo was looking at the feasibility of using a uniform process but it could only proceed slowly. Previously departments developed their own processes independently and it may be difficult to now ask departments to follow new central processes.

Course Organisers might be able to mitigate by informing their lecturers of what they might encounter in the various lecture rooms used for their subjects, but it was not known if this information was readily to hand. Alternatively lecturers might be able to find out ahead of time what the lecture capture process was for the rooms they were giving their lectures in.
It was requested that the infrastructure group should be contacted with feedback.

**ACTION:** *Chair and secretary to formulate a communication to send to the Infrastructure group.*

### 935. REPORTED BUSINESS

#### 935.1. Adjustments to the Part II Psychology examinations

The Department of Psychology reported the following adjustments to some of their Part II papers, which the Committee noted:

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A change has been made to one of the Part II Psychology papers, with these changes reflected in modifications to the standard rubric.

The “Paper 1” has, for the past 2 years, only had 2 questions (Research Design, and Conceptual and Historical Issues). It used to have a statistics (calculation) question, too, but this doesn’t sit well with long, on-line assessments. At the start of the year students were informed that this paper would assess all three components this year, but after discussion, the examiners agreed to keep to the 2-question format and to use the Design and Conceptual questions to probe statistical understanding. Students have already been advised that their answer to the research design question should include a discussion of the analysis plan, and the Department of Psychology thinks that this provides a better test of conceptual understanding than the relatively straightforward calculations that were used pre-2020 – which in any case didn’t hold up in 5-hour online assessments where people can readily share answers. Some additional teaching will be run next term to support them in answering these questions, and no problems are envisaged.

In addition, the rubric for this paper will state a word limit of 2000 words rather than 1500 words per essay, such that students have the space to produce full, detailed answers to the two questions (roughly equal to the total word count of a standard 3-essay paper with 1500 words per essay.

Students will be notified of the final format of the exams as soon as possible following confirmation of the move to 5-hours.

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#### 935.2. STEM SMART

Confirmation had been received that the School would part-fund a post to support STEM SMART. An advert for the post would be going out soon. Committee members were asked to contact Dr Tim Weil if they were aware of any postdocs or graduates who might be interested.
ACTION: Members to contact Dr Weil if they knew of anyone who would be interested in the STEM SMART support post.

935.3. CCTL events
It was reported that the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning was running its annual Diversifying Assessment Forum as an online event on 21 March from 2pm to 5pm. Registration was via the site at https://www.training.cam.ac.uk/event/4177569.

There would also be the annual Teaching Forum on 21 April from 10am to 4:30pm; this is an in-person event at the Student Services Centre but there is also the option to attend online. Places could be booked at https://www.training.cam.ac.uk/cctl/event/4177576.

936. A.O.B.
936.1. Framework for Assessment 2022-23
The University had recently sent a communication asking Faculties to begin considering options for assessment in 2022-23. The Faculty of Biology would not be able to finalise what its plans were until after the Easter 2022 examinations in order to assess how the current examination formats ran. However departments should be mindful that GBEC would request information on assessment plans for 2022-23 in late August.

937. DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS
The final meeting of the 2021-22 academic year was scheduled for 2pm on Wednesday 6 July 2022.