

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Academic Standards Committee - Friday 20 April 2007

**Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment:
Responses to Recommendations arising from the Review of
Biomedical and Life Sciences held on 2 and 3 March 2005**

Dr Jack Aitken, Director, Senate Office

1. Background

Responses and update on the recommendations from the DPTLA of the Faculty of Biomedical & Life Sciences.

Subsequent to the DPTLA, the convener of the review, Professor Holmes, demitted office. The responses to the report have consequently been discussed with Professor Coggins, now Territorial Vice-Principal, Professor McKillop, Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Professor Hagan, Dean of FBLS, and Professor Downie, Director of the Undergraduate School, FBLS.

The responses to the report and recommendations provided below are considered appropriate and adequate.

The Faculty welcomed the very positive overall findings of the review, and the helpful suggestions made in the recommendations section. Although preparation for the review involved a considerable amount of work, Faculty found it valuable to consider freshly many aspects of teaching and, particularly, to obtain focused feedback from students.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that the Faculty bears in mind the need to continue to monitor the financial viability of Honours options that attract relatively few students.

Response

It is our policy to dissuade colleagues from running options with less than 5 students. An option that fails to run three times in succession is normally deleted from our programme. There is a problem, however, if a degree course at Level-4 contains a small number of students and a particular option is the most appropriate one for them.

We have carried out a brief review of our options provision this session: several are being discontinued for a variety of reasons (such as staff departures) and several new ones are to be introduced. The review affirmed the sound-ness of the option system as a whole.

2.2 It is recommended that the Faculty continually monitors to ensure it is maintaining only the minimum number of committees necessary for the management of its provision.

Response

Although we have a large number of teaching committees on paper, those at single course level need only meet when they have business to conduct such as a course

review. Our most important committees are these for degree groups and the overarching committees such as Undergraduate Education, and Higher Degrees. With all the staff changes and course review work currently in train, these have vital work to do. We have generally deleted the formal requirement to meet a certain number of times per year. This has, we think, been helpful in ensuring that committees only meet when there is real business to conduct.

2.3 It is recommended that means are developed to provide feedback for demonstrators from staff and students, at the end of laboratories and of the relevant courses. It is further recommended that means be identified to permit GTAs to contribute to course development.

Response

At Level-1, we have piloted a demonstrator feedback form, to allow demonstrators to comment on the success or otherwise of the practical classes they have worked in. After analysis of the results of this pilot, we will decide whether to extend to other courses.

We do obtain generalised feedback from students at Level-1 on the performance of GTAs, but it is not resolved to the level of individuals. At higher levels, course structure means that students will meet a wide variety of GTAs, often only for a single time: obtaining feedback on their individual performance would be very difficult.

2.4 It is recommended that the Teaching & Learning Service gives further consideration to concerns expressed by probationary staff on the New Lecturer Programme. A separate note of detailed comments will be provided for TLS.

Response

This has been done; the NLP has since been reviewed.

2.5 It is recommended that the Faculty seeks to identify means to permit and facilitate the further engagement of Teaching Assistants in scholarly activity.

Response

During session 2004-05, most IBLS Faculty Teaching Assistants were translated to probationer University Teacher appointments, and were set probation targets that included scholarship activities. These vary according to the individual's interests. In several cases, they involve the development and testing of new courses and course materials. In others, they involve discipline-based research where that is compatible with teaching commitments. Two Faculty Teaching Assistants retain that title, but will apply for translation in time. Both are undertaking scholarly activities (course development and part-time research respectively).

It is our view that the University has not yet fully defined what scholarly activity means for 'teaching-only' staff and we note that a Learning and Teaching Development Fund project aims to clarify this.

2.6 It is recommended that the Faculty gives consideration to the development and introduction of means to promote a greater sense of group and discipline identity in the various student cohorts.

Response

As the report acknowledges, development of group identity is made difficult by the shortage of communal space, and this is unlikely to improve under a financial regime that includes space charging.

Group identity is very good, we feel, in these programmes that include field courses and residential discussion weekends. Zoology/Aquatic Bioscience benefit both from

these and from one of our better pieces of communal space, the Zoology Museum (Hunterian Museum Space).

Some courses do well with student societies, especially where a member of staff takes a liaison and continuity role. The Undergraduate School provides some funding to help with student societies, but it has not been taken up across the board in recent years. We will review student society provision and try to improve it. A useful feature of our better student societies is that they are open to Level-1 and 2 students and therefore allow them to develop a sense of identity prior to entering the coherence of the honours classes.

2.7 It is recommended that the Faculty continues the expeditious production of Programme Specifications.

Response

Programme Specifications (total c. 150) have been prepared for undergraduate programmes and are progressing through the approval process; specifications for TPG programmes are being prepared also.

2.8 It is recommended that Faculty considers the broader introduction of good assessment practices identified in Genetics where, for example, students are asked to 'mark' the work of previous students.

Response

The panel had noted one example of peer assessment in Genetics, and recommended that we consider dissemination across the Faculty. In fact, peer assessment in various forms is already widely used both for formative and summative purposes. Where peer assessment is used summatively, there is always a quality check, or the peer component is only part of the assessment procedure eg to assess the contributions of peers to a group project. We have published the results of one of our peer assessment procedures in a HEA Biosciences booklet (Cogdell *et al* in Orsmond. *Self and Peer-Assessment*, 2004).

2.9 It is recommended that the Faculty monitors closely variations in assessment practice to ensure that there is no inappropriate inconsistency. Specifically noted are: double marking, different weightings for the same types of assessment in honours options, variations in the level of feedback (it is noted that there is no feedback provided on MCQ assessments), credit ratings, and the carrying forward of Level 3 grades into Level 4. In considering these matters, it is further recommended that the Faculty reflects on the role of the individual degree teams, and whether the balance between the level of autonomy and need for overall control is appropriate.

Response

We are aware of the differences in the weighting of different components in Honours examinations across the Faculty. External Examiners have occasionally drawn attention to this and the UGS has reviewed the situation, with the intention of moving towards a higher degree of commonality. Course change proposals passed at IBLs Undergraduate Education Committee (December 2005) will have the effect of increasing commonality within degree groups, where students are most likely to be concerned by differences. However, course teams continue to defend assessment differences based on different teaching strategies related to academic differences between subjects, and it is not our intention to over-ride these differences. Good teaching ideas tend to emerge from individual groups of teachers.

We keep all aspects of assessment under review and encourage the development of new practice as appropriate.

2.10 *It is recommended that the Faculty pays due regard to the implications of the change in assessment methods experienced by students entering Level 3, where the use of essays relatively increases and that of MCQs correspondingly decreases as compared with earlier years of the programmes.*

Response

At Level-2, across the range of our courses, there is a wide variety of assessment methods used. As well as MCQs, there are essays, short notes, lab and field reports, problems and longer assignments.

Depending on the Level-2 courses selected, students will therefore have experienced a variety of assessment procedures. However, it is certainly true that there is a change of emphasis at Level-3. In several of our degree groups, the Level-3 tutorial programme has the improvement of science writing skills as a major aim. This is, of course, an important aspect of learning to be a scientist, but it also helps prepare for more essay-based assessments. As tutorial programmes expand across our degree groups, we intend that all will have this aim of improvement in writing skills, including writing under examination conditions.

2.11 *It is recommended that the Faculty keeps under review the phasing of assessments to ensure that students do not experience periods where there was an undue concentration.*

Response

We do what we can over this where it is in our control, but the flexibility of the Glasgow course system limits room of manoeuvre. At Level-1 students can opt for a wide range of courses in addition to Biology and there is little we can do to ensure that no student is ever under high pressure over assessments. The same is true of Level-2. Within Levels-3 and 4, course teams do try to ensure that assessments are spread out. The University's two semester system at Levels-1 and 2, with a short examination break between, inevitably means that students experience a high number of examinations over a short period.

In general, our view is that as long as the timing of assessments is well advertised in advance, (in CIDs), then preparation for these is part of the time management skill we believe all students need to attain.

2.12 *It is recommended that the Faculty monitors the overall volume of assessments to ensure its appropriateness.*

Response

Minor changes in number and timing of assessments is a common feature of the review work of our course teams. It is not necessary, in our view, to issue any stronger advice/guidelines than we already have.

2.13 *It is recommended that consideration should be given to increasing the amount of formative feedback provided in Level 4. The Panel welcomed reports of recent developments in this regard, where work is submitted in draft form. It is noted that Level 4 students appreciate the practice where they are interviewed mid-session and provided with feedback on their progress. Whilst necessarily time-consuming, this did not add to the volume of assessment, and the Panel considers this measure worthy of consideration for adoption more widely.*

Response

We are happy to review current practice. It is general for students to receive feedback on drafts of project reports, and on dissertations when these are part of the course. Mid-session interviews are certainly carried out in some courses, and may well be a practice worth expanding.

2.14 *It is recommended that the Faculty undertakes detailed cohort analyses to try to identify reasons why students were are not progressing through to graduate. The same exercise should also be carried out for the courses provided by the Faculty of Medicine.*

Response

This is a matter of concern for all the general faculties. An analysis of the main drop-out points has been done, with various times during Levels 1 and 2 as the highest risk. We are developing student support procedures, one of whose aims is to improve retention. We also welcome the University-wide activity on retention, convened by Professor McColl.

Progression in the Immunology course was also raised in the external examiner's report last year. We responded to this to reassure the external examiner that there was no Faculty policy to dissuade students from doing Immunology, indeed quite the opposite we need students to do Immunology to help us deal with the demand. Numbers going into Immunology have risen again.

FBLS has moved to ensure adequate places in L4 options for Physiology and Sports Science students. Relatively few students are taking Sports Medicine's two options 19 in Exercise in Cardiac Disease, 16 in Exercise in Medical Conditions.

2.15 *It is recommended that the Faculty ensures that all reasonable steps are taken to ensure that students are aware of material differences in degree regulations as they progress from Level to Level.*

Response

We do already provide copious information (CIDs, Advisers of Studies, course websites, information sessions when students near the end of Levels-1 and 2, informal contacts via student societies): the problem is that not all students take full advantage of these sources. The Science Faculties Employability project includes involvement of higher Level students, and part of their role is to provide information about courses at Levels-3 and 4. This year, it has proved difficult to persuade Level-2 students to take part in the pilot of the project. We hope that this situation may improve as 'employability' expands into 'personal development planning'.

2.16 *It is recommended that, as a mechanism to aid students to choose their Honours programme, the Faculty gives consideration to using work produced by previous Honours cohorts, or asking current honours students to speak to those still to choose their degree path.*

Response

The response to 2.15 covers this too.

2.17 *It is recommended that student representatives do more to publicise their existence to other students.*

Response

There has been considerable activity across the University since the DPTLA regarding the profile and formalising of training of class representatives. The latter now includes input from sparqs, the national organisation established to promote the involvement of students in quality processes. While 180 representatives received such training in 2005-06, 549 representatives were trained in 2006-07.

2.18 *It is recommended that discussions take place, convened by the Territorial Vice-Principal and involving the Dean of FBLS and Executive Dean of Medicine, together with relevant colleagues, to consider how matters might be further improved concerning the degree programmes where there is Faculty of Medicine involvement.*

The outcome of these discussions might involve establishment of a joint group to deal with issues such as student progression into and through relevant Faculty of Medicine courses, and arrangements for shared resources.

Response

To improve communications, FBLS have appointed Rob Smith as Deputy Director (Deputy Associate Dean) of the FBLS Undergraduate School from August this year. Rob's main task will be responsibility for the FBLS engagement with medical teaching. Rob and Prof Ian McGrath have been contributing to the medical course curriculum review in the last year. In addition, from August, Dr Sarah Mackay will replace Dr Jocelyn Dow as Coordinator of Year 2 of the medical course. We are in the process of recruiting a Lecturer in Anatomy (succession planning for Professor John Shaw-Dunn).

There is no awareness of any ongoing issue regarding shared resources.

2.19 It was recommended that the Faculty of Medicine carry out a succession planning exercise with respect to the University's taught provision in Sports Medicine.

Response

The faculty of Medicine appointed a University Teacher last year. Further discussions have been taking place in the Faculty of Medicine.

Prepared by: Janet Fleming, Senate Office

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